IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

MASTER'S THESIS

WESTERN SAHARA AND THE SADR: A BIDDING WAR FOR INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION IN A TRANSITIONAL WORLD ORDER

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ISTANBUL, 2025

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by
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A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Political Science and International Relations

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ÖZ

BATI SAHRA VE SADC: GEÇİŞ DÖNEMİNDEKİ DÜNYA DÜZENİNDE ULUSLARARASI TANINMA İÇİN BİR REKABET

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1973 yılında kurulduğundan bu yana, Polisario Cephesi Batı Sahra'nın "kurtuluşu" ve bölgede bağımsız bir Sahraoui devleti kurulması çağrısında bulunmaktadır. Ancak bu misyon, Ekim 1975'te bölgenin yaklaşık %80'ini fiili bir durum yaratarak talep eden Fas'ın sert muhalefetiyle karşılaştı. Buna rağmen, Cephe, birkaç ay sonra, Cezayir'in desteğiyle, kontrol ettiği bölgede bir devletin kurulduğunu ilan etti. Başından itibaren, Sahraoui Arap Demokratik Cumhuriyeti (SADC) dünya genelinde çeşitli ülkelerden uluslararası tanınma elde etmeyi başardı ve zirvede 84 devlete kadar tanınma sağladı. Ancak bu tanınma, 40'tan az ülkenin SADC'yi hâlâ kesin bir şekilde tanıdığı bir durgunluk noktasına ulaştı. SADC'nin uluslararası tanınırlığı, 1990'ların ortalarından itibaren ve özellikle 2000'li yıllardan itibaren düşüşe geçti. Çeşitli ülkelerin ya tanınmayı geri çekmesi ya da dondurması sonucunda, ilan edilen devlet, bir zamanlar sahip olduğu uluslararası tanınmanın sadece küçük bir kısmını koruyabilmektedir. Bu tez, Uluslararası İlişkilerde Tanıma kavramını ve pratiğini, SADC'nin özel durumu üzerinden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Fas'ın bölge üzerindeki karşı iddialarını ve Polisario'nun çabalarını engellemek için gösterdiği titiz çalışmaları göz önünde bulundurmak, SADC'nin tanınma düşüşünün nedenlerini ortaya çıkarmanın önemini daha da vurgulamakta ve bu durumun neden böyle olduğuna dair soruyu daha ısrarcı hale getirmektedir. Tarafların kendi hedeflerine ulaşmadaki başarıları, büyük ölçüde uluslararası arenadaki üyeleri kendi iddialarına ikna etmelerine bağlıdır ve bu da uluslararası sistemin değişen dinamiklerine tabidir. SADC vakası incelenerek, bu

araştırma, Tanıma kavramını uluslararası sistemin güç dengelerine bağlı maddi bir birim-düzeyi faktör olarak sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Nitel literatür incelemesi ve ilgili verilerin içerik analizi gibi nitel yöntemlere dayanan bu tez, tanımanın son derece politize edilmiş bir uygulama olduğunu ve uluslararası hukuk ile ideolojinin bir rol oynayabileceğini, ancak saf çıkarların tanınmanın geri çekilmesi, askıya alınması veya iptal edilmesinde daha baskın hale geldiğini ortaya koyacaktır. Bu durum, özellikle bugünkü gibi geçiş dönemindeki bir dünya düzeninde daha da önem kazanmakta ve uluslararası tanınmayı bir pazarlık kozu haline getirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Batı Sahra; Dış Politika; Fas; SADR; Tartışmalı egemenlik; Uluslararası Tanınma.

ABSTRACT

WESTERN SAHARA AND THE SADR: A BIDDING WAR FOR INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION IN A TRANSITIONAL WORLD ORDER

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Since its foundation in 1973, the Polisario Front has been calling for the "liberation" of Western Sahara and the establishment of an independent Sahrawi state in the region. While this was faced with unyielding opposition from Morocco, which laid a fait-accompli claim over approximately 80% of the territory in October 1975, the Front proceeded -with the help of Algeria- to declare the establishment of a state in its controlled part of the territory. From the outset, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic successfully garnered international recognition , accumulating up to 84 states at its peak. This recognition reached a standstill with less than 40 states still firmly recognizing the SADR. International recognition of the entity started noticeably declining in the 2000s. With various countries either withdrawing or freezing their recognition, the proclaimed state only maintains a fraction of the international recognition it once enjoyed. This dissertation aims to examine the practice of Recognition in International Relations by studying the peculiar case of the SADR. Accounting for Morocco's counterclaims over the territory and its studious work towards thwarting Polisario's efforts only emphasizes the importance of uncovering the causes of the derecognition of the SADR. The success of either party to achieve their goals relies on convincing members of the international arena of their claims, which are subsequently subject to changing tides of the international system. This research aims to submit Recognition as a material unit-level factor contingent on power balances of the international system. Using a qualitative method based on

literature review and content analysis, this thesis will uncover narratives and patterns that reveal how recognition is a highly politicized practice and that pure interests gain more supremacy when withdrawing, suspending, or revoking recognition. This is even more paramount in a transitional world order in which international recognition becomes a bargaining chip.

Keywords: Contested Sovereignty; Foreign Policy; International Recognition; Morocco; SADR; Western Sahara.

DEDICATION

To my Mom and Dad, whose dreams and aspirations for their girls have always exceeded their material abilities and worldly possessions. And to my beautiful and lively nieces and nephews, you have always been the light of my life.

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Wow, I'm finally here. So many times, along the way, I did not think I was going to make it to the finish line, and for this and so many other blessings, I am first and foremost grateful to God the Almighty for his mercy and guidance in the hardest of times. Submitting to his will and genuinely believing in his ability to make the impossible possible was the ultimate push to break the vicious cycle of self-doubt and motivation to keep going.

My utmost appreciation to my valuable advisor, Assoc. Prof Ali Aslan, who guided me in this research and helped me overcome my difficulties with his knowledge, experience, and insights. I also want to thank all my valuable lecturers in the Department of Political Science and International Relations, most notably, Prof. Dr. Burhanettin Duran, Assist. Prof. Abdullah Enes Tüzgen, and Prof. Dr. Yaşar Sarı. They have all contributed immensely to the knowledge I've gained throughout my MA studies at Ibn Haldun University.

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İSTANBUL, 2025

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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Polisario/Polisario Front	Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro
SADR	Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic
Morocco	Kingdom of Morocco
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
OAU	Organization of African Unity
AU	African Union
US/USA	United States of America
MINURSO	United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara
EU	European Union
ICJ	International Court of Justice
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
MAP	Moroccan News Agency (Maghreb Agence Presse)

CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND

1.1. Introduction

The Western Sahara conflict is deeply rooted in the history of the region. Its causes are interwoven with the colonial history of the African continent and can be traced back to the beginning of the nineteenth century with the Spanish colonialism of Morocco. With the beginning of the disintegration of the colonial project in Africa in the second half of the 20th century, the abrupt end of the Spanish rule in Morocco sparked a series of events that led to one of the long-lasting conflicts in the region. Taking advantage of the momentum of the long-awaited moment of Spanish withdrawal from Morocco[1] and after futile rounds of secret negotiations with the Franco government[2] -to guarantee that Spain would abstain from granting autonomy to the Sahara unilaterally- (Laurent,1993, pp. 111-119), that only resulted in Spain's announcement of permitting self-government of 'Spanish Sahara' and implementation of a new autonomy policy in its overseas province[3], King Hassan II of Morocco seized the opportunity of the issue of the ICJ ruling on Western Sahara on the 16th of October 1975 to announce on the evening of the same day the organization of a mass demonstration towards the Sahara. This demonstration, dubbed a 'Green March' was a strategic move by the Moroccan King to lay claim to the territory and join "his people in the Sahara"[4]. While achieving Moroccan goals in reclaiming a territory that has

[1] Spanish withdrawal from Morocco started upon its independence from France, only a month after the Franco-Moroccan declaration of independence on 2 March 1956, Rabat signed a joint declaration and protocol with Madrid in April 1956, upon which Spain relinquished control over its protectorate zones in the North of Morocco and the south (Tarfaya was ceded back to Moroccan control in 1958, while Ifni was returned in 1969)

[2] These secret negotiations between Morocco and the Spanish government about the fate of the "Spanish Sahara" among other zones of Spanish control in Morocco, was confirmed by King Hassan II in his sit down memoire interviews with French journalist Éric Laurent in his 1993 book "Memoire of a King".

[3] This information was derived from an intelligence memorandum about the foreign relations of United states between 1969 and 1976, titled "Spanish Sahara: Pawn of NorthWest Africa" and published by the office of the historian, and it was also corroborated by accounts of King Hassan II in his Memoire explaining the events that led to his decision to launch the "Green March".

[4] Both is his royal speeches on October 10th 1975 to declare the launching of the Green March and on November 5th 1975, one day before the march was set to take place, King Hassan II used language

always been viewed as part of the historical domain of the North African kingdom since the pre-colonial era, this mass demonstration may have inadvertently led to the declaration of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.

Rejecting Morocco's overnight de facto authority in the territory, which conflicts with its claims, of not only "representing the Sahrawi people" but also demanding adherence to the international principle of self-determination in settling the fate of the territory[5], the Polisario Front, which was already engaged in military skirmishes with both Spain and Morocco, made a forward maneuver to circumvent Morocco's strategy by declaring the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in February 1976. Emboldened by the support of Algeria, which was still bruised from its military conflict with Morocco over a border dispute in 1963, the front's declaration, while being a shrewd gambit to throw a wrench in the works for Morocco, was not sufficient to halt the kingdom's irredentist endeavors. Yet, despite Morocco's success in asserting its claim and forcing Spain to "definitively terminate its presence in the territory of the Sahara"[6]The conflict was by no means settled, and the Polisario Front managed to rally significant support for its self-proclaimed state, the SADR.

Amidst anti-colonial sentiments sweeping the Global South by the end of WWII, riding the tide of the decolonization movement that reached its crescendo in Africa by the end of the 1960s proved to be a shrewd move by the Polisario Front. By declaring the establishment of the SADR one day after the formal withdrawal of Spain from the territory and realizing the commitments of the Madrid accord, the Front was ultimately hoping to join the cohort of the newly established states that achieved membership of the United Nations[7]. While that goal is yet to be seen in the light of day, the Polisario Front successfully leveraged its legal status to push for increasing recognition of its self-proclaimed state as a manifestation of the UN's principle of self-determination. Through a mixed strategy of guerilla war tactics and a persistent public relations

emphasizing Moroccan claim over the territory, referring to the Sahara as "our land" and its population as "my people".

[5] The UN admitted Western Sahara to the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories in 1963 and subsequently recognized the Polisario Front as the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi People.

[6] Excerpt from Spain's permanent representative to the UN's letter to the Secretary General on February 26th 1976, informing of the termination of Spanish presence in the Sahara

[7] After having only 35 member states in the United Nations in 1946, the number soared to 127 by 1970 after a growing number of newly independent nations during the 1950s and 1960s joined the international organization.

campaign that aimed at using international media to amass sympathy for the plight of the Sahrawi refugees in the Algerian camps, the SADR was increasingly gaining the recognition of many countries around the world, but mainly in Africa and Latin America.

For a newly self-proclaimed state, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic was immediately successful in securing the recognition of 10 states one year after its proclamation, this initial wave of recognition will only gain more momentum in the following two decades, reaching a record high number of 84 UN member states recognizing the SADR at one point. Combined with admitting the territory in August 1963 to the UN's list of Non-Self Governing Territories and recognizing the Polisario Front as a "representative of the Sahrawi people", as well as the admission of the SADR into the Organization of the African Unity in February 1982, it is undeniable that the Polisario Front was successful for a long time in making a case for its claims. Achieving these recognitions is highly significant not only because they provide international legitimacy for both the Polisario Front and the SADR, but also because their subsequent loss is indicative of a decline in that legitimacy and a possible shift in the dynamics of the long-lasting conflict. Beyond its real-life consequences, the decline in SADR recognition is significantly relevant to scholarly debates and codification efforts surrounding concepts of Statehood, Sovereignty, Secession, and Self-determination moving forward.

As Gezim Visoka, Edward Newman, and John Doyle (2019) affirm, world politics is greatly influenced by the establishment of new states and the ensuing recognition they gain from other states. It is a significant process in regards to the various pathways to independent statehood that exist in world politics and the legal and political considerations states have to contend with before admitting newcomers to the international fold. While the Polisario Front chose to take the path of self-determination through a referendum to achieve statehood and gain international recognition, it is a pathway that may have been straightforward six or seven decades ago but is currently riddled with obstacles; not only because Morocco counterclaims territorial integrity and anti-Secessionist efforts it is engaged in, but also because of current hostility towards state formation on a global scale (Visoka et al, 2019) and the

constant normative evolvement of various concepts related to Statehood and Sovereignty.

1.2. Research Problem

Whether at a unit-level of analysis or a structural-level analysis, the majority of the literature on Western Sahara has focused on three major areas of research; historical description of the conflict and how it came to be, defining and identifying the SADR as a political entity, or making the case for the legitimacy of the Polisario Front and the SADR, and their territorial claims to Western Sahara. Given that the question of Western Sahara and both the SADR and Morocco's claims over the territory are directly influenced by the question of international recognition, and considering that state recognition remains to be a very fragmented and under-researched study area in world politics (Visoka et al, 2019), incidentally the question of recognition of the SADR as a political entity is implied rather than directly addressed in most of the literature. What is even less researched and practically lacking in the literature is engaging with the question of derecognition of the SADR. While this gap in the literature is perplexing given that the decline in the entity's recognition is not a new occurrence but rather a trend that has been steadily increasing in the last four decades, it becomes easier to comprehend if we consider that in theory, derecognition, or recognition revocability is appraised as being impossible (Visoka et al, 2019).

Acknowledging that a structural-level analysis is better suited to provide results that would help achieve a satisfactory level of generalizability, which is mostly needed at this early stage of trying to fill this research gap. And while this approach might be better apt to uncover the broader picture of how recognition withdrawal of the SADR correlates with systemic factors, and how changes in power dynamics within the international system impact states' policy changes, a unit-level analysis on the other hand is better suited in lending more accurate results and providing a comprehensive idea about the driving factors behind the revocation of international recognition of the SADR by identifying patterns of individual state behavior through the examination of various domestic changes that influence states to revoke their recognition. A unit-level analysis is also better structured in considering the role of Morocco in driving this derecognition campaign against the SADR.

The practical limitations of this research also play an important role in choosing this approach. Both time and access pose real constraints on opting not to engage in a structural-level analysis of this research question. The rapid changes and fluidity of the issue of recognition decline of the SADR and information warfare that both Morocco and the Polisario Front engage in against each other make it almost impossible, with available resources, to keep track of the constant developments of how structural factors influence individual states' recognition withdrawal of the SADR occurring. The sum of these limitations would jeopardize the internal validity of the research if the research questions were to be approached from a structural-level analysis. Examining the correlation between national interests of derecognizing states and Morocco's foreign policy and how they are influenced by changes in the international system, guarantees that the internal validity of the totality of the research is better accounted for, and helps produce results that exceed answering the research question into considering different scenarios to the future prospects of the conflict as a whole.

1.3. Research Questions and Variables

When engaging with the question of international recognition in relevant literature, two major theories emerge: constitutive and declaratory. The main difference between the two theories has to do with the significance and weight of recognition in constituting statehood. The quarrel is basically between international law and international politics. But ultimately, derecognition is concluded to be theoretically impossible unless a loss of statehood capacity occurs, or recognition of an entity is extended or reassigned to another entity (Visoka 2019, p. 316). This conclusion is challenged by real-life examples of polities that have faced and are actively facing an increasing trend of derecognition[8]. In the case of the SADR, the historical context of decolonization and the initial wave of international recognition that grew with time should've consequently led to confirmed statehood for the polity, yet the opposite started taking place since the mid-1990s.

[8] Some of the polities facing an increasing decline in international recognition are Kosovo and Taiwan.

This thesis thus seeks to add to existing literature by investigating the question of derecognition in the specific case of Western Sahara and the SADR. To achieve this, one core question will lead my research: why is the SADR losing international recognition?

In order to uncover the various factors contributing to this trend, additional sub-questions are ought to be investigated:

- What role does Morocco have in driving this trend? And how is it orchestrating a derecognition campaign against the SADR?
- Why are the derecognizing states positively responding to Morocco's campaign and withdrawing their recognition of the SADR?
- In what way are the structural factors of the transitioning world order impacting the trajectory of this decline?

These questions are based on the observations pertaining to the trend of increasing recognition decline of the SADR and the assumption that Morocco, as a direct party to the conflict, is highly motivated to not only encourage this decline but actively drive it. The logic behind these research questions (both main and auxiliary) rests with the hypothesis that Morocco is engaged in an aggressive foreign policy against the SADR, utilizing economic and diplomatic tools to buy out the derecognition of the polity and prevent it from achieving affirmed statehood.

1.3.1. Variables

The investigation and deconstruction of the research hypothesis and research questions requires clearly defined variables to establish the causality or correlations that are sought out within the scope of a case study. For this thesis, they are defined as follows:

Dependent Variable: The decline in recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, defined in terms of occurrences of states suspending or revoking their recognition of the polity. This variable thus represents the increasing patterns or observable trend of the SADR derecognition that this thesis seeks to unpack and explain.

Independent Variable: A derecognition campaign by Morocco and "rental recognition" derecognizing states engage in are defined as two distinct but interrelated independent variables. The two variables are presumed to simultaneously influence each other as well as impact the dependent variable. The first variable is operationalized in terms of the combined economic pressures/incentives and diplomatic outreach Morocco engages in to drive the decline in recognition of the SADR. While the second variable represents the use of recognition as a bargaining tool by derecognizing states to benefit from said incentives, and rent it out to the highest bidder.

Intervening Variable: The transitional state of the current world order is defined as the intervening variable that explains the circumstances in which the two independent variables of Morocco's derecognizing campaign and "rental recognition" of derecognizing states influence the dependent variable of the decline in recognition of the SADR. With the increasing tension between the US and China on the world stage and the retreat of traditional powers from Africa, the state of instability of the power balance in the continent creates an environment of uncertainty that is optimal for an aggressive derecognition campaign by Morocco and flip flopping on the issue of recognition by the derecognizing states leading to an increase in the derecognition of the SADR.

1.4. Aims and Objectives

Identifying the puzzling trend of recognition decline of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, as well as the research gap in the literature pertaining to the issue of Western Sahara, and acknowledging that state derecognition is amongst the most understudied areas of world politics, while contradictorily, state recognition is one of the most extensively researched study areas in the discipline, consequently led to focusing on examining this decline in recognition as the primary objective of this thesis, with an emphasis on the role that Morocco's foreign policy played in the derecognition process. This study aims to understand how "rental recognition" practices and Morocco's diplomatic and economic strategies have caused states to either suspend or withdraw their recognition of the SADR. Additionally, this study aims to explore and investigate the broader structural factors that are influencing and driving this trend, particularly

the transitory world order marked by the emergence of new global and regional actors, and the disengagement of traditional powers from Africa.

Based on the assumption of an interplay between these factors, this study aims to achieve the following:

- To probe the strategies and tactics employed by Morocco to execute a derecognition campaign against the SADR.
- To examine the factors and motivations leading states to positively respond to Morocco's campaign and withdraw their recognition of the polity.
- To investigate how the ongoing shifts in the global power structure and the changing geopolitical environment in Africa have impacted the trajectory of the SADR's international recognition.
- To contribute to the broader scholarly research on states' derecognition, and the impact of targeted diplomatic efforts on the process, as well as that of systemic changes in the international order
- To produce research-based policy insights into the ongoing conflict of Western Sahara, aimed at promoting a lasting peaceful resolution to the conflict and cultivating stability and regional integration.

1.5. Significance of the Study

By investigating the crucial yet significantly under-researched aspect of derecognition within the scope of the Western Sahara conflict, this study has substantial scholarly and policy significance. Focusing on Morocco's derecognition campaign and the concept of "rental recognition," the study contributes to the still scarce literature of derecognition through shedding light on the practical diplomatic strategies and tactics that influence state recognition in conflicts over contested sovereignty. This will be particularly helpful to academics studying international relations, diplomacy, and conflict resolution.

In addition, unpacking the factors behind the decline in international recognition of the SADR is crucial to understanding the expected trajectory of the conflict. By examining the components of the decision-making processes that contribute to states freezing or withdrawing their recognition of the SADR, we gain more insights into possible outcomes of the conflict as well as their consequences on regional alignments and integration, and the geopolitical interests of world powers in North Africa and the continent at large. Understanding the role that Recognition revocation plays in these

processes within this case study will provide much-needed insights into the mechanisms that impact alliance formation strategies in that part of the world. Succeeding in accomplishing this task serves to fulfill the broader objective of this dissertation, of contributing to the scholarship surrounding the question of Western Sahara and the limited literature on Recognition Revocation/Derecognition.

Furthermore, by situating the investigation within the context of a shifting global order, the study provides a nuanced explanation of how global power transitions affect regional conflicts and recognition politics. By emphasizing the interplay between systemic international pressures and state-level agency, it offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing similar cases of contested statehood and sovereignty.

Finally, the findings of this study can inform regional and international actors, as well as policymakers formulate strategies to address the issue of Western Sahara and contribute to the debates on legitimacy, sovereignty, and the role of emerging powers in Africa. Ultimately, this study will advance the discussion of international recognition/derecognition as a dynamic, contentious, and controversial process that is impacted by both diplomatic efforts and broader geopolitical changes.

1.6. Scope and Organization of the Study

This research will be conducted over five main chapters. In addition to this introductory chapter, which includes a brief historical background, research problem, and research question, as well as the objectives and significance of the study. The question of "Recognition Decline of the SADR" will be explored in four further chapters. The literature review is presented in the second chapter. This chapter sets out to position State recognition within IR theory and engages with concepts of Statehood and Sovereignty that are crucial to the questions under study. The third chapter introduces the methodology employed in this research and the chosen method for Data collection and analysis. The fourth chapter presents the collected data and probes the concept of "Rental Recognition" in a transitional world order, and how the Derecognition diplomacy of Morocco as a parent state and the national interests of derecognizing states led to the decline in the recognition of the SADR. The fifth and final chapter will be a concluding chapter.

CHAPTER II

CONTESTED SOVEREIGNTY AND RECOGNITION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

2.1. Introduction

Unpacking the question of Western Sahara requires a holistic approach that investigates the positions of all concerned parties to understand the various positions and viewpoints. As a key party to the conflict, it is important to understand the Moroccan perspective and the driving factors for its foreign policy regarding the issue of Western Sahara. This requires a deep dive into the issue's historical background to understand the conflict's varying aspects and how history, foreign interests, regional rivalries, and international law are all tangled up to create a web of a complicated situation that appears to defy a lasting resolution.

2.1.1. History Matters for Moroccan Claims Over the Territory

Way before "The Scramble for Africa", Morocco had long been a target of foreign expansionist ambitions. Geographically situated at the mouth of the Mediterranean in the North-West of Africa, and with direct access to the Atlantic Ocean with hundreds of kilometers of long uninterrupted shores, the country's strategic location as a crossroad between Africa, the Levant, and Europe drew renewed interest from various empires throughout history. In his record of the history of the far West, Ahmed Nassiri Slawi (2001) accounts how from the Ottoman Empire to the Portuguese Empire, and multiple Iberian and English Kingdoms, Morocco has fended off encroachment efforts of different world powers at least since the beginning of the 11th century before it successfully established "The Sharifian Empire" in the early 1500s which the current ruling Alawi dynasty is an extension of. He explains how throughout this history, "The Moroccan State," which was founded in 789 by Sultan *Moulay Idriss I*, spanned its geographical borders sporadically between Al-Andalus in the Iberian peninsula in the

North, Algiers and Tlemcen in the East, and Timbuktu and the Senegal River in the South.

Following the loss of the Battle of Isli in 1844 against the French, which forced Morocco to accept harsh conditions under the treaties of Tangiers (October 1844) and *Lalla Maghnia* (March 1845), and cost the country parts of its Eastern territories. The ultimate cost of the loss, though, was losing the standing as a regional power to be reckoned with, which was long established during the battle of *Wadi al-Makhazin* (the battle of the Three Kings) in 1578 against the Portuguese (Slawi, 2001). Spain was also striving to gain more standing in the North African kingdom, especially with the victory in the Tetouan War in 1860 bringing "wind to their sails" (Hodges, 1983) and signing the treaty of *Oud Ras* with Morocco in April 1860. What the loss of the battle of Isli resulted in was opening the "Sharifian Empire" widely to European incursions.

In the period leading up to the Berlin Conference in 1884 by the end of the 19th century, imperialist powers were actively intensifying their efforts to ensure carving a piece of the "Sharifian empire" and guarantee a sustainable existence for their empires to exploit the country's resources. Being the weakest European state at the time, Spain rushed to encroach on the coast opposite the Canary Islands in an effort to both safeguard its fishing economy in the region and cut the path for the British or the French from claiming the area for themselves, establishing a colony in *Wadi ad-Dahab* or the Rio de Oro (Hodges, 1983). Spain had to sign a treaty with France in November 1912 to divide the sphere of influence between the two colonial powers of the North African kingdom, acknowledging the de facto control of Spain and establishing a de jure Spanish zone of influence[9] in the North and South of the country, and consequently constructing the "Spanish Sahara".

Even historians and analysts on the opposing side of the Moroccan position don't refute the majority of the historical facts of the country's deep ties to the region. In his narration of historical events in the region in his book "Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War", Tony Hodges (1983) acknowledges the existence of Moroccan authority in the Sahara throughout different dynasties that ruled the kingdom referring

[9] Being the only occupying power to sign the "Treaty of Fes" with Morocco on 30 March 1912, France gained the status of the protecting power in the country.

to some of the earliest sultans of the Saadian dynasty that "played active roles in the Sahara", especially highlighting the role of Sultan *Ahmed Almansour* (The victorious), who was reported to "pursue the most vigorous Saharan policy". These ties existed even with the current ruling Alawite dynasty that succeeded during the reign of Moulay Ismail (1672-1727) to "establish an iron grip over most of Morocco by 1677". Hodges concedes that the Alawite Sultan was successful during this period in "Keeping the Turks at bay and Morocco's Atlantic coastline was almost entirely free of Christian enclaves". What Hodges contests is the continuity and strength of that authority, asserting that it was based on a loosely binding system of allegiance (*Bay'a*) since Morocco was not a nation-state at the time.

2.1.2. The First National Cause and the Dream of a Greater Morocco

Understanding the importance of the issue of the Sahara for Moroccans and its significance for the state's policies, as well as the collective psyche of the nation starts by considering the historical context of the country and how the "Sharifian Empire" was forced to succumb to imperialistic ambitions and was divided between different colonial powers. For both rulers and people of the kingdom, cities like Laayoune or Dakhla in the Sahara are as Moroccan as the capital city of Rabat or the historic capital cities of Fes and Marrakech. For them, the question of Western Sahara represents a continuity of those imperialistic ambitions and yet another attempt to carve out an even bigger part of the kingdom's territory. The conflict surrounding the southern provinces[10] is appraised in the North African kingdom as delusive and fabricated. Additionally, the struggle to permanently resolve it stems from the belief that it is a national cause that takes precedence over all others[11].

These convictions that shape the Moroccan people's collective understanding of the issue of the Sahara are also significant in influencing the decision-making processes of the *Makhzen*[12] and determining its policies[13]. They are also the same characteristics

[10] Southern provinces is the term used in Morocco in reference to the territory of Western Sahara
[11] The preceding is based on the author's observations and is deduced from an interpretive survey of socially constructed oral discourse as well as official and media narratives in the country.
[12] Makhzen refers in Morocco to the monarch and the ruling elite as a cohesive governing institution that is tasked with managing state affairs in accordance with and preservation of the traditional Moroccan and Islamic forms of governance.
[13] This conclusion was derived from biographical accounts of Moroccan political officials and bureaucrats that were privy to the inner workings and the decision-making process in the higher

that many historians and political scientists consider to be aspects of the persistent dream of a "greater Morocco" within the kingdom. The disagreement about the conceptualization and framework of this greater Morocco is prevalent in the literature among scholars on different sides of the issue. By providing numerous documentation from the royal archives that vary between *Dahir* (Royal decree) assigning *Caids* (governors) in the Sahara or letters from tribal leaders proclaiming Bay'a (allegiance) to the Sultan as well as international correspondence and treaties between the "Sharifian Empire" and Western rulers acknowledging the authority of the Moroccan sultan over the Sahara, and even maps and illustrations of the pre-colonial frontiers of the Sharifian empire that include not only Western Sahara but also parts of modern-day Algeria and Mauritania. When records of this nature are presented in Moroccan literature like the report issued by the Royal Institute of Strategic Studies in 2023, titled "The white book on the Moroccan Sahara", the purpose is to provide historical and legal evidence to emphasize the "Moroccaness of the Sahrawi tribes" and establish that based on the historical assertions that dynastic continuity is separate from state continuity, Morocco was a sovereign state with defined and recognized borders that included the Sahara in the pre-colonial era and was recognized by different world powers of the time. On the other side of the argument, though, these assertions by proponents of the Moroccan positions only serve to reveal features of what is described in the literature as the dream of a "Greater Morocco". This dream was first conveyed by Allal el-Fasi, the leader of the Istiqlal party, who had a map of this greater Morocco drawn up and showcased in the party headquarters. He has reportedly once declared in 1957:

> If Morocco is independent, it is not completely unified. The Moroccans will continue the struggle until Tangier, the Sahara from Tindouf to Colomb-Bechar, Touat, Kenadza, and Mauritania are liberated and unified. Our independence will only be complete with the Sahara. The frontiers of Morocco end in the South at Saint-Louis-du-Senegal[14].

While not taken very seriously at the beginning, Allal el-Fasi was able as one of the most influential leaders of the Moroccan National Movement for Independence, through eloquent pleas for renewed resistance to colonialism and idealized depiction

echelons of the palace and *Makhzen*, namely "*Nisf Qarn Fi Al Siyasa*" (Half a century in Politics) of former minister and royal advisor Abdelhadi Boutaleb, and "*Ahadith Fima Jaraa*" (Accounts of What once Happened) of former Moroccan prime minister Abderrahmane El Youssoufi.

[14] Excerpt from "the Roots of a Desert War" by Tony Hodges, p. 85

of the splendors and conquests of pre-colonial Morocco to rally people around his vision by actively advocating for it through his speeches and the party's newspapers and media pamphlets and eventually winning over Moroccan nationalists (Hodges, 1983, pp. 85-86).

With the powerful Istiqlal party officially adopting these territorial demands in its first post-independence conference in 1956, the monarchy was in no place politically to be left behind at a time when it was working hard to consolidate its hold over the country (Hodges, 1983). King Hassan II's accounts about the Pasha of Tindouf (Now part of Algerian territory) visiting his father Sultan Muhammed V two months before his exile to declare his *bay'a* (allegiance) and his description of the warm welcome he received himself from the Algerian people during his visit to the newly independent country in March 1963 as "Algerians not losing their memory" (Laurent, 1993, pp. 48-49) in reference to Morocco's historical territories in the east, it becomes clear that this dream of a greater Morocco was still alive and flourishing in the North African kingdom. With the creation of a governmental ministry for Mauritania and the Sahara, former minister and royal advisor Abdelhadi Boutaleb reveals how the *Makhzen* was engaged until the early 1960s in concerted efforts to "conclude its sovereignty over the entire territory of the kingdom within its historical borders" (Boutaleb & Batiwi, 2001, p. 154). With events like the establishment of the Organization of African Unity in May 1963, the Sand War with Algeria in September 1963, and the relative isolation the country began to face, Morocco was forced to reevaluate some of its policies in the region and give up on parts of this "Historic Frontiers Syndrome"[15].

This overview is crucial to understanding the roots of the Western Sahara conflict within the region's colonial history and comprehending the Moroccan perspective and the determinants of its position regarding the issue of Western Sahara. This perspective could be understood from a critical reading of the nation-state as a political system regarded as a lamppost for political organization in the modern international system. At a time when the nation-state proved to have become an effective structure to solve major political problems in Europe and the West, it has on the other hand produced

[15] The term was coined by the Moroccan journalist Ali Anouzla who was an outspoken critic of many of the Moroccan government's and palace's domestic policies in the 2000s and was imprisoned in 2013. See https://www.aljazeera.net/blogs/2016/12/28/المغرب-ومتلازمة-الحدود-التاريخية

deeper issues in other parts of the world, in which different systems have been in place for centuries before the nation-state as the sole acceptable political organization system has been practically imposed on them. This is even more prevalent in the Decolonization context as Dane Kennedy (2016) argues in his book "Decolonization: A Very Short Introduction". Acknowledging that "the nation-state was hardly the only option during the decolonization era" and various other extremely different understandings of sovereignty and citizenship were discussed and considered, it was ultimately the messiness and shortcomings of the state-building process and "the structural constraints of colonialism" that forced numerous newly independent countries to adopt the nation-state as a model, which in Kennedy's assertion resulted in a tragedy that manifested itself by exacerbating differences among "distinct communities within colonies". While a critique of the pros and cons of the nation-state is beyond the scope of this section or even this research study, it is worth pondering how the Western Sahara conflict would be better understood and approached from this perspective. What is evident, though, is that, due to various historical and political considerations, the issue of Western Sahara is an Inviolable one in Morocco. It is approached from the standpoint of maintaining the kingdom's territorial integrity, leading to the consistent challenge to the Polisario Front's and SADR's claims over the territory. Notwithstanding the legality of Morocco's submissions of territorial integrity, the Kingdom is directly involved as a party in the conflict, by seeking to convince the international community with its Autonomy plan for Western Sahara as a permanent solution to the conflict. The *Makhzen* understands that resolving the issue in any way that does not preserve the country's territorial sovereignty will endanger the unity and stability of the kingdom and put the regime in a precarious position.

2.2. The Polisario Front and the Ongoing Quest for Statehood and Sovereignty

The Polisario Front is the acronym for the Spanish *Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro* (Popular Front for the Liberation of *Saguia El Hamra* and *Oued Eddahab*)[16]. As the name suggests, it is an insurgence group that was

[16] Saguia El Hamra and Oued Eddahab is the Arabic name for the starting point of the disputed territory of Western Sahara, referred to in Morocco as "Sothern Provinces" or "Moroccan Sahara". The names translate to English as; The Red Saturater and The Valley of Gold, referring to the names of two rivers running through the region.

formally founded in 1973 to fight against Spanish colonization of Western Sahara[17] Led by El-Ouali Mustapha Sayed, it was initially composed of a group of Sahrawi Moroccan students and thousands of guerilla fighters a large part of fought within the Moroccan *Jaich at-Tahrir* (The Army of Liberation) to drive away Spanish colonialists from the region (Hodges,1983). There is no consensus in the literature about the exact reasons that led this group of people who were first part of the Moroccan struggle for independence to then turn and point their weapons towards Morocco (Hodges 1983; Laurent 1993; Chaanan 2007; Batiwi 2001), it is clear though that the intrinsically complex and messy process of state formation, especially in the context of decolonization, created a conflict that many thought would remain dormant but proved to sporadically erupt.

The emergence of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic as an indispensable component of this conflict and part of any future resolution is better understood in the context of the decolonization movement and the relentless pursuit of the Polisario Front for independence and later statehood and sovereignty. It is the "tragedy" (as per Dane Kennedy's conclusion) of the nation-state model in the decolonization era that emphasized a "certain distinctiveness" of the Sahrawis as "speakers of the *Hassaniya* dialect of Arabic", and with political and economic changes enacted by Spanish colonialism starting from 1958 that a distinguished Sahrawi nationalist character of the anti-colonial movement molded into the shape of the Polisario Front (Hodges, 1983). These nationalist tendencies were later nurtured by regional players and encouraged by the international consensus of self-determination as the ultimate realization of decolonization and independence, to be channeled into pursuing the cause of establishing Sahrawi statehood.

2.2.1. Decolonization and the Legal Claim to Self-Determination

With the acceleration of the decolonization process and the failure of transnational strategies in the face of the more compelling promises of nationalism (Kennedy, 2016), the SADR found the appropriate environment to seek legitimacy and recognition. It is in this environment which was riddled with heightened national self-interests resulting

[17] Definition provided by Wikipedia and Britannica. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polisario_Front and https://www.britannica.com/topic/Polisario-Front respectively.

from the dynamics of decolonization, and the nation-state model overtaking the dreams of Pan-Africanists who warned against reproducing the territorial boundaries arbitrarily created by the colonialists (Kennedy, 2016) that the Polisario Front was actively working with the backing of Algeria and Libya to mobilize support for the newly established SADR. With the symbolic significance of the newly born polity as a realization of the universal right to self-determination combined with political and ideological considerations, the efforts of the Polisario Front were met with considerable success in shoring up international support for the newly established entity in the first two decades of its inception.

With the adoption of UN resolution 1514 (XV) on the declaration on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples, and further entrenching the principle of Self-determination in international law and admitting the formerly Spanish Sahara into the UN list of Non-Self-Governing Territories in August 1963, the stage was set for the Polisario Front to emerge and tap into the liberation wave and anti-colonialist sentiments that were sweeping the region to create a distinctly Sahrawi national consciousness. But it was arguably Morocco's abandonment of its claim over Mauritania and recognition of the country in 1969 that might have encouraged the insurgent group to latch onto the precedent set by King Hassan II to claim rights of their own for statehood and sovereignty like those of which Mauritania was able to extract (Hodges, 1983). The ICJ advisory opinion on Western Sahara issued in October 1975, which was instrumental in King Hassan II's decision to launch the "Green March" establishing a fait accompli claim over Western Sahara, led the Polisario Front in February 1976 to declare the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic immediately after the irredentist Moroccan operation of the Green March and the withdrawal of the last Spanish soldier from the territory.

From a legal standpoint, the Front's unyielding reference to the right to Self-determination as the basis for their claim to Sahrawi statehood might seem like a sound choice, but it is proving to be an increasingly complicated one. Morocco is adamant about contesting this right by invoking the right to protect the country's territorial integrity and emphasizing -from the kingdom's point of view- the secessionist nature of the Front. It is a legal tag war based on the controversial development of the right to self-determination and elevating it from a political concept to a legal one

(Koskenniemi, 1994). The complication stems from the seemingly contradictory assertions of the legal text. While paragraph 2 of the provisions of U.N. General Assembly Resolution 1514 asserts that "all peoples have the right to self-determination…. And by virtue of that right, they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development", paragraph 6 of the same declaration confirms that "any attempt aimed at the partial or total disruption of the national unity and the territorial integrity of a country is incompatible with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations". The Badinter Arbitration Commission of 1991 and the Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) of 1975 both warned against secessionist implications of the exercise of the right to self-determination, emphasizing respectively that “the right to self-determination must not involve changes to existing frontiers”, and preservation of existing boundaries and respect for the territorial integrity of states. While this might seem like a supporting argument for Morocco’s claims of territorial integrity, it actually poses yet another obstacle for the country’s legal arguments based on the principle of respecting borders existing on the achievement of independence adopted by the OAU, which Morocco was a founding member of. This is further emphasized by the legal examination of “Self-determination Versus Territorial Integrity in Decolonization” conducted by S.K.N. Blay (1986) who points out that “in the decolonization process, the principle of self-determination nearly categorically preempts the principle of territorial integrity”, limiting as Blay argues the qualifying power of the principle of territorial integrity to the general right to self-determination. Nonetheless, what the overcoming of the Decolonization wave of the 1960s and 1970s and the move towards the end of the Cold War created, though, is the excessive use of nationalism as a basis for secession. Combined with the geopolitical stakes of the era, conflicts appeared to no longer be a clear-cut black-and-white affair but rather a range of messy greys (Koskenniemi, 1994).

In its reflections on the scope of the principle of Self-determination, the Badinter Arbitration Commission of 1991 acknowledged that despite the entrenchment of the principle of Self-determination to **all** peoples in various international treaties such as; the UN Charter and the International Covenants on Human Rights, International law at that stage of development fell short of precising the defining attributes of the word “people” and setting up the rules of how that right is to be exercised. That evaluation

might put into perspective the priorities of the Polisario Front at the beginning of its inception; by recruiting its members from Sahrawis across the region, amassing as substantial of a number amongst them as possible, and settling them in a specifically defined area (Tindouf camps in Algeria), as well as undertaking -with the backing of Algeria- "a program of indoctrination of the Saharan refugees… that was based on a mixture of Islamic, Marxist, and Pan-Arabist ideology"[18]. And channeling the Sahrawis' longing for freedom and engaging in an extensive process of politicization of the refugees, the Front was actively working towards not only constructing a distinct national identity for the Sahrawis and defining them as "People", but also creating the required conditions of statehood stipulated in international law.

The Polisario Front addressed the question of the means to exercise the right to Self-determination through a mixed strategy of guerrilla hit-and-run tactics combined with a relentless diplomatic and public relations campaign. The purpose of the military attacks devised by the Polisario leadership was to dislodge both Morocco and Mauritania from the territory. While Mauritania was forced to withdraw its claims and accept what it was able to achieve thus far from the tripartite partition agreement of 14 November 1975, Morocco proved to be a more determined and stubborn adversary. By adopting a more aggressive counterinsurgency strategy, Morocco succeeded in slowing down the Polisario attacks, and the war came to a stalemate by the mid-1980s (Hodges, 1983). A political solution was much needed, and the UN succeeded in brokering a ceasefire agreement between the two parties in 1991, which resulted in the establishment of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). At the time, this was a big win for the Polisario Front because it contributed to carving a clear path towards exercising the right to self-determination through referendum. The following decades proved that was not easily accomplished, with Morocco slowly but steadily changing the facts on the ground to steer clear from conducting a referendum and insisting on its proposed autonomy plan for Western Sahara as a "permanent and only political solution to the conflict" and Algeria obstructing population census in the refugee camps[19], realizing the right to self-

[18] Taken from US intelligence report made accessible for the public by the Office of the Historian. See https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v17p3/d221

[19] Despite both agreeing to the mandate of the MINURSO, numerous UN conducted reports at the time point out measures put forward by the two countries resulting in the inability to conduct any population census in the area.

determination is as good as vanished. This “Lack of enforceability” (Smith, 2010) proves the limitations of the right to self-determination as a practical basis for statehood. Yet it is undeniable that at the beginning of the conflict, it provided a strong basis for the Polisario Front to pursue recognition of the SADR, succeeding in gaining the support of a substantial number of countries, especially in Africa. With most of the continent and states within the global south struggling to put an end to the colonization era, recognizing the SADR as a sovereign state was a way of providing a helping hand for a cause that seemed more progressive and aligned with the political trend of the era. Thus, regardless of the strengths or weaknesses of the submissions of the Kingdom of Morocco for secession and invoking the preservation of the country’s territorial integrity as the legal basis for its claim over the territory, framing the quest for statehood within the principle of Self-determination was indeed instrumental in the SADR gaining international recognition not losing it. Not even the use of military force as part of its strategy hindered the SADR from gaining that coveted recognition from numerous countries around the globe.

2.2.2. Legal Sources of Statehood and Sovereignty for the SADR

With the idea of states’ right to the monopoly of force and power over their mutually recognized territories dating back to 1648 and the birth of what later will be known as the Westphalian Sovereignty or Westphalian State System, the questions of statehood and sovereignty have especially occupied the attention of legal scholars since the beginning of the 20th century (Oppenheim 1912; Kelsen 1944; Lauterpacht 1944; Raicˇ 2002; Talmon 2005; Borgen 2010). While the differences persist in what constitutes a state and provide any given political entity with sufficient statehood criteria that allow it to enjoy recognition and admittance into the “Family of Nations”. It is more commonly agreed upon by scholars of international law that this debate was settled by a multitude of legal texts defining the parameters of statehood. The classic Montevideo Convention of 1933 asserts four fundamental qualifications of statehood: 1- A permanent population. 2- A defined territory. 3- A government. And 4- The capacity to enter into relations with the other states. Opinion one of the Badinter Commission of 1991 also postulates that an entity meets the requirements of statehood when “a community which consists of a territory and a population is subject to an organized political authority” and that “such a state is characterized by sovereignty”.

So at least from the legal perspective of international law, the criteria for statehood and sovereignty are rather straightforward. This then calls forth the question of why an increasing number of polities' claims to statehood and sovereignty are being contested and unrecognized in today's world order? According to the Routledge Handbook of State Recognition, "the emergence of new states has historically been met with considerable resistance" that has morphed into "international hostility towards state creation" leading various entities to declare independent statehood without the approval of the base state and strongly push for international support and recognition (Visoka et al, 2019, pp. 1, 10).

Applying the legal parameters of statehood put forth by the Montevideo convention and the Badinter Arbitration Commission to the case of the SADR, it is easily deduced that the entity meets at least three requirements for statehood, yet its sovereignty is far from unanimously recognized internationally. The legitimacy and legality of the territorial claims of the Polisario Front over Western Sahara have been studied extensively (Chapaux 2010; Smith 2010; Gresham 2013; Meydan 2018; Fernández-Molina, Porges 2020). Reference to the principle of Self-determination as the legal basis for those claims is concurred upon among all scholars, and the ICJ advisory opinion in 1975 is often indicated as another source of legitimacy for the SADR claims. The problem is that Morocco also presents the ICJ ruling as one of the legal bases for its counter-claims. It was after all the moment of the issue of the ruling that the kingdom chose to use as the catalyst to launch the final act of its irredentist efforts (Green March). In its conclusion, the court asserted that while there existed "legal ties of allegiance between the Sultan of Morocco and some of the tribes living in the territory of Western Sahara', these 'did not establish any tie of territorial sovereignty' which would overrule 'the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the people" (International Court of Justice, 1975, p. 60). While the Polisario Front highlights the last part of this conclusion as part of its legal argument, Morocco chooses to emphasize the first part acknowledging the existence of legal ties of allegiance between the rulers of the kingdom and the people of Western Sahara, submitting that "according to public Islamic law, the Moroccan political system is based both in the past as in the present on the *bay'a* (allegiance) to the Sultan… the frontiers of the country are not set based on the territory as a geographical

location but rather through the oath of *bay'a* performed by the tribal elders and leaders to the Sultan" (The White Book on Western Sahara, 2023, p. 6).

The contention surrounding the SADR's statehood and sovereignty is based on the legal interpretations not only of the debate around constituting statehood between the past and present and the legal weight of Morocco's insistence on the *bay'a* as having sufficient legal ties to the territory according to international law but also due to the question of efficiency that is related in return to the theoretical debate between proponents of "The Declaratory theory defended mainly by international lawyers, and the constitutive theory defended and developed in the contemporary debate by constructivist IR theorists" (Erman, 2013, p. 130). The topic of a state's efficiency is connected to three primary domains of bureaucratic apparatus, legitimacy, and recognition. A state is deemed efficient if it can maintain law and order, manage and deliver public services, and keep a stable economy (Crawford 2007; DeCanio 2021). The consent of the governed and meeting the diverse needs of the populace is necessary for achieving legitimate rule (DeCanio, 2021). Lastly, it is difficult to bypass international recognition if a state is searching for external sources of legitimacy. International recognition significantly improves a state's ability to trade, cooperate, and engage in diplomacy, all of which boost its efficiency (Nicholson, 2019). Understandably, this theoretical debate might seem like an intellectual pastime or a fool's errand, but these intricate details and nuances are crucial for a proper framing of the issue. In the case of the SADR, this theoretical debate of constituting statehood and sovereignty is significant for understanding the positioning and standing of the SADR as a polity in the international arena but even more importantly, it is critical for understanding how that positioning affects its interaction with regional and global actors and in what way that influences the decline of its of recognition since the mid-1990s. Clearly the polity, as per international law, meets most, if not all statehood prerequisites negating the argument that the decline in its recognition is based on its inability to meet those criteria.

2.3. International Recognition of Contested States and the Role of Regional Rivalries and International Interests

In the realm of world politics, Recognition is fundamentally a question of foreign policy and alliance formation. As simply put by Thomas D. Grant (1999), Recognition refers to the formal acknowledgment of a state that another entity is also a state and is entitled to participate as a legitimate actor in the international community. A state's decision to recognize or withhold recognition of an entity in the international arena must fit within its overall foreign policy and serve its alliance formation strategy. It is an act that is primarily political (Šabič ve Huang, 2021). These assertions consequently lead us to explore not only the literature on International Recognition but also the literature on Foreign Policy. In the case of Morocco, as a small African state that is part of what is commonly known as "The Third World", Steven R. David's Omnibalancing theory provides an appropriate analytical framework to understand the importance of this conflict for the regime security and stability of the kingdom, and how that situates the question of Western Sahara at the center of the country's foreign policy and informs its alliance formation strategy. This leaves us with the matter of the SADR as the other key party to the conflict, unpacking its derecognition factors necessarily entails understanding how it functions on the world stage, and its relationality in the region and the world at large. As a direct party to the conflict over Western Sahara, Morocco is firm in its approach to the issue as being fabricated, regarding the Polisario Front as a "Separatist movement", and the SADR as a "Fictitious entity"[20]. This is hardly shocking considering the country's position is based on an irredentist perspective that invokes arguments of secession and territorial integrity to support its claims. While this narrative might be effective for domestic consumption and consolidating a nationally unified stance toward the issue, it is hardly helpful in understanding the geopolitical implications of the conflict and the future ramifications of different projections it might take. One of the key conclusions Steven R. David's Omnibalancing theory helps us achieve is understanding the link between the status and regime type of a state and its foreign policy, and how they influence each other. This suggests that to understand how a state functions in the world, the

[20] These descriptions and assertions dominate the conversations surrounding the issue of Western Sahara in the public sphere in Morocco and are heavily present both in the official and media narratives of the kingdom.

starting point is concurring its status. If Morocco's status as a sovereign state of the third world is a confirmed fact. That is hardly the case for the SADR, whose status and sovereignty are yet to be confirmed. The question that needs to be asked then is what type of entity is the SADR? And how does that status affect its interactions in the region and the world?

2.3.1. Ontological Liminality and Political Hybridity of the SADR

The composition of the political fabric of the world of states that are members of the United Nations makes admission to the international organization one of the most consequential acts to solidify the legitimacy, and most importantly, the sovereignty of a state. As Visoka et al (2019) point out, "The number of sovereign states has come to be associated with the number of UN member states". This suggests that recognizing the De jure status of a state is contingent on its membership in the UN. This creates an anomalous situation in the international system with the existence of a number of polities that are either non-self-governing or independent territories and are not members of the UN. A common feature between these polities is their lack of unanimous international recognition. This affirms that, at least in practice, statehood and sovereignty are dependent on recognition in spite of legal debates to the contrary.

In the case of the SADR, it is neither a UN member state nor a UN observer state, but Western Sahara (the two names are used interchangeably in this case) is listed by the international body as a non-self-governing territory that has yet to be 'decolonized' and has the potential of becoming an independent sovereign state (Visoka et al, 2019). On the other hand, the SADR is a member state of the African Union, which in turn is recognized by the UN. These contradicting sources of external legitimacy based on the recognition and (non)recognition of regional and international organizations further emphasize the paradoxical nature of the SADR as a polity, but even more significantly highlight the role of regional and international actors in the conflict and how that affects the gains or losses of international recognition by the self-proclaimed state.

Polities like that of the SADR, which fulfill requirements of declaratory statehood but don't enjoy widespread international recognition, which practically bars their admittance to the UN, generally fall under the category of unrecognized or contested

states. The scholarship on these types of states and their position and role in world politics remains small compared to that of the more conventional state structures in the international system (Pegg 1998; Lynch 2004; Geldenhuys 2009). The literature does not provide an agreed-upon terminology and definition of these polities. Sometimes they are referred to as "Pseudo-states", "Quasi-states", "Unrecognized states", and "Parastates" (Kolstø 2006; Caspersen and Stansfield 2011; Caspersen 2013; Fernández-Molina, Ojeda-Garcia 2020). One of the most commonly used concepts to describe these entities is "de facto states" (Pegg 1998; Caspersen 2009; Berg and Toomla 2009; Toomla 2013; Fernández Molina and Porges 2019). The latter pulls onto focus the de facto status of these entities and therefore their lack of de jure status. While sharing many similarities that mainly have to do with their aspirations for statehood and possessing some level of operational governance, as well as their contested sovereignty and lack of full international recognition, there exist considerable differences between these concepts in regard to the legitimacy of their claims to statehood, level of control and autonomy they have over their territory, and their ability to engage in diplomatic relations with their regional and international environment. One of the all-encompassing concepts to describe these entities is that of "contested states" proposed by Deon Geldenhuys in his book Contested States in World Politics (2009). In his conceptualization of these entities, Geldenhuys identifies distinctive attributes of 'contested statehood' in contrast with 'confirmed statehood', highlighting along with other characteristics provided by different theoretical frameworks, that contested states are typically conceived out of conflict and their survival relies on achieving recognition and affirming statehood and sovereignty.

The variations in the conceptual framework of these polities often make it hard to ascribe one term per case persistently. The SADR, for example, is sometimes described as a "Parastate", or a "de facto state", and sometimes it is a "state in exile" (Fernández-Molina and Ojeda-Garcia 2020; Toomla 2013; Fernández Molina and Porges 2019; Sibiya 2021; Mormul and Klosowicz 2024). With a substantial body of work on the question of recognition and unrecognized states and as a scholar who is interested in the Maghreb region and studied the case of the SADR closely, Irene Fernández-Molina has used more than one concept over time to describe the entity before settling more recently on the use of the terms "de facto state" and "state-in-exile" (Fernández-Molina, Porges 2019). What Molina was contending with is the

ontological liminality of these entities (and the SADR in particular), which in turn produces a political hybridity that defies the Westphalian state system (Fernández-Molina, Ojeda-Garcia 2018). Consequently, this liminality and political ambiguity create a hybridity of diplomatic practices by these entities to navigate the more binary and constraining nature of the international legal framework in their quest for recognition (Bouris and Fernández-Molina, 2018). Thus, suggesting that these entities are poised for the use of mixed strategies (not excluding the use of force) and are more susceptible to external influences to achieve their ultimate goal of unanimous international recognition and admittance to the UN as full-fledged sovereign states.

2.3.2. Recognition and Use of Force by the SADR as a Contested State

Whether the SADR is born out of secession, as Morocco argues, or out of denial of self-determination, as the Polisario Front submits, what is not in contention is the need of both parties for international recognition of their claims. While Morocco is holding firm on its proposed initiative for an autonomy plan of Western Sahara as the basis of any permanent political solution, the Polisario Front is still holding on to the goal of full independence and recognition of the SADR as a sovereign state. This dynamic emphasizes the need of both parties for external support. Again, regardless of the legal justifications of the issue, what is clear is that the inception of the SADR occurred in a conflict-riddled environment. This is bound to influence the tactics used by the two parties to achieve their goals. As demonstrated in earlier sections of this study, Morocco relies strongly on its foreign policy, which is driven in a substantial part by the question of Western Sahara and territorial integrity, as an instrument for maintaining regime security, leading to the recalibration of the kingdom's alliance formation. The Polisario Front, on the other hand, adopted a mixed strategy of hit-and-run military tactics and a tenacious public relations and diplomatic campaign to shore up support for the SADR's claims of statehood.

Regardless of the foundational origins of contested statehood (Foreign aggression, secession, denial of self-determination, etc...), what the international community does in those instances, Deon Geldenhuys (2009) argues is "collectively refusing to recognize the products of illegal acts, hence condemning the putative states to the periphery of international existence". This might be understood from a legal standpoint

due to the rejection by international law of the use of force as a means of achieving statehood, and the encouragement of diplomacy and peaceful means of agreement. The Montevideo Convention asserts in article 10 that "The primary interest of states is the conservation of peace. Differences of any nature which arise between them should be settled by recognized pacific methods". The Badinter Arbitration Commission of 1991 concurred that "Although States are prohibited from acquiring a territory by force, they might freely decide, as the Committee made clear, to a modification of their frontiers 'by agreement", concluding that "According to a well-established principle of international law the alteration of existing frontiers or boundaries by force is not capable of producing any legal effect". Based on these legal assertions, we can infer that the use of force as a means of achieving statehood leads to the rejection of the concerned polity and withholding recognition by the international community. The reaction of the international community to Russia's annexation of Crimea, parts of Georgia, and the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces in Ukraine, as well as the rejection of Hamas's military strategy as a path to achieving Palestinian statehood, are clear examples of the application of this rule. This legal argument does not stand scrutiny though, when applied to the question of Western Sahara. At a time when Morocco successfully avoided falling into this legal trap, the Polisario Front was not as cognizant or prudent. Considering the kingdom's toughest critics' characterizations of its de facto claim over the majority of the territory as illegal and a result of high-handed tactics, King Hassan II was resolved in his decision not to use force in his irredentist endeavors, maintaining the peaceful aspect of the Green March[21]. The SADR, on the other hand, came into being as a result of a mixed strategy of both military and diplomatic campaigns.

Based on the legal assertions and Geldenhuys's argument presented above, the response of the international community to the declaration of the SADR as a sovereign independent state was expected to be "International isolation" and a "deliberate and orchestrated international ostracism of the contested state" (Geldenhuys, 2009, p. 47). By examining the evidence, it is clear this does not apply to the case of the SADR. In

[21] In both of his speeches announcing the launching of the Green March on 16 October 1975 and addressing the participants gathered in the city of Tarfaya on their way to Saguia El Hamra and Oued Eddahab on 6 November 1975, King Hassan II emphatically stated that the March was to remain peaceful, with no use of weapons and holding the Quran as the only mean of protection.

their pursuit of Sahrawi statehood, the Polisario Front was very open, especially at the beginning, about using military force to achieve its objectives, first against Spain and later against Mauritania and Morocco (Naylor, 1987). Yet while this may have caused temporary setbacks to the Front[22], it did not impede its diplomatic achievements in the first two decades of the proclamation of the entity. Contrary to Geldenhuys's argument, the SADR successfully obtained recognition from 11 sovereign states when first proclaimed, despite its use of military force[23]. That number only grew over time to reach 84 UN member states recognizing the SADR, and the *Grand Prix* for the polity occurred when it was recognized back in 1982 by the OAU as a sovereign state and was admitted as a member state to the regional organization. These historical facts refute the submission that violence and the use of military force explain the decline in recognition of the SADR, since apparently, various members of the international community were comfortable recognizing the entity's claim to statehood in spite of its military tactics. This conclusion requires further investigation to identify the confounding variable that distorts the expected outcomes of Geldenhuys's argument in the case of the SADR.

2.3.3. Recognition and the Infinite Cycle of Dependence and Influence between Contested States and Patron States

In identifying the main category of actors in his inquiry of contested states, Geldenhuys underscores, apart from the contested states, three other significant actors in what he calls 'the international politics of contested states'. He divides these actors into three categories that consist of; "the confirmed states constituting the international community", "the creator, patron or protector states of each contested state", and "the Veto state, usually the entity from which the contested state has seceded". It is important to note here that both the "Veto state" and "Creator, patron or protector states" are "Confirmed states" that enjoy sovereignty. Notwithstanding the legal nuances of the inception of the SADR as a contested state based on secession or denial

[22] Following a September 1985 incident in which a fisherman was attacked while aboard a Spanish fishing vessel flying the Moroccan flag in SADR waters. Madrid responded by expelling Ahmed Boudkhari, the director of the Polisario's European bureau at the time.

[23] The exact number of recognizing states during the first year of the establishment of the SADR was retrieved from a US intelligence report made accessible to the public by the Office of the Historian. See https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v17p3/d221

of self-determination, Geldenhuys identifies Morocco and Algeria as "Veto State" and "Patron State" respectively. In this context, the "Veto state" only refers to the *ancien régime*, from which the contested state unilaterally separated itself, or the main adversary intending on thwarting and obstructing the contested state from being internationally recognized as a sovereign state. Its Veto role is not comparable to that of the UN Security Council member states' Veto power. These Veto states are sometimes referred to as "parent states" to describe their position as sovereign states that refuse to offer consent to the creation of de facto entities through secession (Meydan, 2018). A patron or protector state, on the other hand, is "vital to the survival of the pretender state" (Geldenhuys, 2009, p. 28). The role and mere presence of a patron state, either as a creator or protector of the newly established contested state, indicates that the former has its own geopolitical interests it wishes to advance. Its role as a patron state of a contested state that seeks to separate from the "parent state" shows that conflict between the two is inevitable since the territorial integrity of the parent state is at stake (Meydan, 2018). Offering support to the aspiring contested state to transition into a de jure status is the ultimate *raison d'être* for a patron state and its role in this context. And while most confirmed states would steer clear of direct military ties with a contested state, not least out of concern of provoking the original state, the main exception to that is obviously the contested polity's patron state (Geldenhuys, 2009).

The relationship between Algeria and the SADR is crucial to understanding the determinants of international recognition of the latter. The ingrained aversion of the international community to contested states drives the contested states to rely heavily on their creator or patron states for security and economic survival (Geldenhuys, 2009). This suggests that the patron state would naturally have significant influence over the contested state in return for the rendered support. While possessing some of the legal attributes of statehood, de facto states lack the capacity to "provide basic services to their people on their own", and their economic structures and systemic infrastructures usually have "a fragile and weak character", which explains their willingness to pay the price for the support of their patron state due to their inability to sustain their statehood in the absence of external sources (Meydan, 2018, p. 2). These aspects are clearly present in the dynamics between the SADR and Algeria. In examining the latter's role as a patron state to the SADR, we can identify its areas of

support and spheres of influence. From political and diplomatic support to financial and military assistance, since the earlier days of the conflict, Algeria made sure to lend support to the Polisario Front and advance its objectives. Despite the country's constant denial of being part of the conflict or having claims of its own and only being motivated by the belief of "the Saharan people's right to the principle of self-determination" (CNN Arabic, 2016) Algeria has been instrumental in allocating military assistance to the Polisario Front and helping the insurgent group in its attacks on Morocco (Office of the Historian, n.d.). Declassified intelligence reports from the period during the height of the military conflict with Morocco in the 1970s reveal that Algeria provided bases for the Polisario Front to wage its guerrilla campaigns against Morocco, supplying the insurgent group with arms, logistical support, and training[24]. Algerian advisers used to "accompany the Polisario guerillas on their military missions and many of them commanded various Polisario units"[25]. So contrary to the official rhetoric of the North African country, Algeria was directly involved in the conflict.

2.3.4. The SADR in the Context of Regional Rivalry and International Incursion

Apart from providing sanctuary for the Polisario Front in Tindouf and in addition to the military and financial support allocated to the Front, With the full weight of its political and diplomatic apparatus, and by utilizing the anti-colonial sentiments of the era and aligning with countries that share Algeria's leftist ideology, Algeria significantly contributed to the range of international recognition the SADR achieved in the first two decades following its establishment. By 1979 the Self-proclaimed state received the recognition of 53 states, and by 1982 the SADR was admitted to the OAU as a sovereign member state (African Union, n.d.). These achievements were, in great part, due to Algeria's unwavering support. At the same time, Morocco found itself steadily losing political and diplomatic ground; with Western allies that chose an approach of parity, neutrality, and adherence to international law, and the decision to leave the regional organization (OAU) in protest to the recognition of the body of the contested SADR. Given its position as its only geopolitical competitor in the Maghreb

[24] See report titled "The Polisario front: the Fourth Element in The Sahara Equation" prepared by the US Bureau of Intelligence and research, provided to the public by the Office of the historian through https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v17p3/d221
25 Ibid

region, Algeria clearly used the Polisario Front to cripple Morocco (Office of the Historian, n.d.). Algeria's support of the Polisario Front/SADR and involvement in the conflict, while partly based on ideological alignment, is deeply-seated in the regional rivalry with Morocco. With the two countries gaining their independence from France, they were left with disagreements over border demarcations that developed into an outright war in 1963. The beginning of the relationship between the two North African countries on the heels of the end of French colonialism in the region started with one party's conviction it was robbed of something, and the other party's insistence not to give up anything and "rigidly holding on to the principle of respecting of the borders existing on the achievement of national independence" (Laurent, 1993, p. 52). Despite the ebbs and flows of the relationship between the two neighbors throughout the years, adversity and conflict seem to be the distinctive features of the dynamic. A story told by King Hassan II of Morocco of a conversation he once had with Algerian president Houari Boumédiène reveals this dynamic; "President Boumedien was aiming to impose his hegemony over the region… he used to tell me all the time 'I want a stable and prosperous Morocco', what he ignored to add was 'provided it does not encroach on Algeria'. I was not striving to encroach on Algeria, but I would've never accepted it encroaching on me"[26]. This quote serves as a good illustration of the fact that while both parties accuse each other of inciting discord, the rivalry is indeed a two-way street between them. This dynamic is nowhere near being a matter of the past. Algerian support of the Polisario Front and SADR is not showing any signs of waning or slowing down, and both the animosity and rivalry between the two North African countries are still ongoing and even worsening over time. With both countries seeking to assert their hegemony and the increasing security interdependence between the Maghreb and Sahel, the rivalry between the two neighbors is spreading to the Sahel and other parts of the continent (De larramendi, 2018), and a frenetic arms race between the two is underway, threatening the stability of the whole region[27].

[26] Ibid

[27] Numerous reports showcase the increasing appetite of both countries for procuring arms from various sources. See the reports of Grey Dynamics in 2022 https://greydynamics.com/the-arms-race-between-morocco-and-algeria-a-strategic-assessment/ - The Arab Center of Washington DC in 2021 https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-arms-trade-in-the-mena-region-drivers-and-dangers/ and The NATO Foundation's in 2023 https://www.natofoundation.org/maghreb/renewed-tensions-drive-arms-race-in-the-maghreb/

Obviously, with countries like France and the United States and more recently Russia and China, with varying degrees, having their own geopolitical interests in the region, the question of Western Sahara is not just a regional one. It is far from being a bilateral issue that can directly be resolved among the involved parties. With old colonial powers clinging to their once unchecked power and influence in the continent, and the political and ideological remnants of the Cold War, Western Sahara/SADR has shaped up to become yet another issue directly influenced by various world powers and their involvement. While what is often referred to as Soviet (and later Russian) 'neutrality' towards the question of Western Sahara prevented the conflict from becoming an area of direct confrontation between Eastern and Western powers during the Cold War[28], and despite both Morocco and Algeria being member states of the Non-Aligned Movement, whose purpose centered around steering clear from "the East-West ideological confrontation"[29] both countries ended up -one way or another- band wagoning with opposing sides of the standoff. Considering the left-leaning ideology of the Polisario Front and its political and ideological alliance with Algeria, which has increasingly become affiliated with the Eastern bloc, Western powers have since the beginning of the conflict, been weary of the SADR turning out to become a symbol of the Soviet Union's success in penetrating the African continent. The US position had further been complicated by conflicting commitments, to the "general support of the concept of national self-determination" and "Decolonization"[30] on the one hand, and strong strategic ties within NATO to former European imperial powers refusing to abandon their economic and military strengths provided to them by their colonial possessions, and on the other hand "concern over communist expansion and Soviet strategic ambitions"[31]. These geopolitical concerns and considerations have only become more convoluted during the 21st century following events like the 9/11 attacks on the US and the ensuing so-called 'war on terror', and the 'Arab Spring' upheavals since 2011. These events resulted in ascribing new aspects to the issue of Western Sahara transcending the ideological considerations of the Cold War era to that of

28 Derived from the US Intelligence report titled "The Western Sahara Issue" made public by US Department of State's Office of the Historian https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve09p1/d116

29 See the Non-Aligned Movement online portal https://nam.go.ug/history and https://nam.go.ug/member-states/africa

30 Direct quote from the archival report on "Decolonization of Asia and Africa, 1954-1960" provided by the Office of the Historian on https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/asia-and-africa

31 Ibid

security concerns. With the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat in Algeria joining forces with Al-Qaeda in 2006 and creating a branch for the group in the Maghreb region (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), and increasing reports regarding the involvement of the Polisario Front in criminal and terrorist activities[32] leading to the fears by global powers of the radicalizations of Sahrawis in the Algerian camps and the convergence of that with "the increase of instability in the Maghreb and Sahel regions" (Guindo & Bueno, 2017). The combination of all these factors with the incoming of new state and non-state actors to the continent resulted in renewing the interest of international players in the conflict, if only to the extent of preventing it from overspilling to the Sahel and other parts of the region (Mundy, 2021). Given the renewal of military activities in 2020 after a long-lasting ceasefire and the changing political landscape in the continent putting the interests of traditional powers at risk, more world powers are coming to the realization that -as the saying goes- 'something has got to give'. While the determinants for the involvement of world powers generally differ in Africa between preserving economic, military, and or political interests, and their level of engagement is not monolithic throughout the continent, their role vis à vis the question of Western Sahara and the prospects of the SADR is crucial due to the significant weight their attitude toward the polity leads to influencing that of other states, whether allies or in their sphere of geopolitical influence. This is important for the future of the conflict, based on which side these powers choose to support. The importance of recognition lent by major powers has long been an area of study with an emphasis on both the important diplomatic weight recognition by these powers carries in comparison to that of other states (Fabry, 2010), the significance of great powers' support in determining the fate of an emerging state (Coggins, 2014), and the highly political and self-interest driven nature of the decision by those powers to either grant or withhold recognition (Sterio, 2019). This aspect of state recognition is playing center-stage in the case of the SADR, with the snowballing effects of American recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2020[33] and the overarching influence of that decision over the conflict as a whole and the prospects

[32] See "The Polisario Front and the Development of Terrorism in the Sahel" issued by The European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center.

[33] See the "Proclamation on Recognizing The Sovereignty Of The Kingdom Of Morocco Over The Western Sahara" issued on 10 December 2020 in https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-recognizing-sovereignty-kingdom-morocco-western-sahara/#:~:text=Therefore%2C%20as%20of%20today%2C%20the,over%20the%20Western%20Sahara%20territory.

of the contested state of the SADR. Yet that influence is nevertheless curbed by the interests of other world powers present in the continent, especially those competing against American hegemony and part of the struggle in this transitional phase for a multipolar world order.

2.4. The Politics of Recognition in International Relations

With major events like two world wars, decolonization, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the dismantlement of the Soviet Union, it is hardly surprising that the world saw the establishment of more than 150 states during the 20th century. Interestingly enough, the emergence of new states has not been welcomed historically by the existing nations of states. This is due to the challenges the process of establishing new states poses to existing states' territorial integrity and its destabilization consequences on international politics (Visoka et al, 2019). While theorists and legal experts may argue the fine details and different sources of legitimacy for establishing a state, it is hard to argue the significance of recognition in constituting statehood from a practical perspective. While proponents of the legal-administrative framework of establishing statehood would like to dismiss recognition as a defining factor, it is hardly logical for states to function in the world without the recognition and interaction with their counterparts; it is a null existence that is bound to lead to the disappearance of the putative state. Gaining more scholarly attention through the years, the question of recognition has been theoretically contended with in international relations, less so the question of De-recognition. Unpacking the defining factors affecting the decline in recognition of the SADR requires exploring the theories of recognition in order to make case-specific inferences.

With multiple meanings in social sciences, recognition as a term is associated with concepts of status, relationality, and human agency in philosophy and political theory; rights, justice, and freedom in social and normative theory, and has steadily been studied in the field of world politics. In IR theory, it refers to the recognition of states and is conjoined with self-determination, sovereignty, diplomatic relations, and legal entitlement within the international system (Visoka et al, 2019). With a narrow meaning that is mainly interested in studying the practice of sovereign states bestowing recognition on newly established states and welcoming them into the international

community as equal members that enjoy the same rights and responsibilities, it is rather a very consequential practice that is highly political. It is indeed a gift bestowed, further emphasizing the significance of the practice. Granting or withholding recognition of newcomers, especially if they are contested polities, provides existing states with tremendous power and leverage to use recognition as a negotiating tool. Acknowledging the obvious differences between the following cases with that of the SADR, we can identify the power of this tool in the case of Türkiye withholding its vote to admit Sweden -and to some extent Finland- to NATO to seek "military and political concessions" from both countries and the US[34], as well as the case of the EU's push for judicial reforms in Türkiye as part of the organization's political conditionality to grant Türkiye EU membership (Müftüler-Baç, 2016). Considering that admission to the UN is the ultimate goal of contested self-proclaimed de facto states, and given that admission to the international organization requires the recommendation of a UNSC member state and the approval of two-thirds of the UN General Assembly member states (United Nations, n.d.). What the previous two examples showcase is the political and diplomatic power recognition provides as a tool, both to small states and world powers. This is par for the course in the case of the SADR, as will be demonstrated.

2.4.1. Theoretical Framework of International Recognition

Thomas D. Grant's (1999) definition of recognition in the context of IR as the formal acknowledgment of a state that another entity is also a state, and is entitled to participate as a legitimate actor in the international community, clearly shows the relationship between recognition and statehood. This explains why the conceptual structure of recognition starts from the same one as that of statehood, with three major theories that frame the scholarly debate and normative perspectives of the practice. In the following section, I will present a brief overview of the three approaches and their differences.

[34] See "Why is Turkey blocking Sweden from joining NATO?" published by The Economist on 10/07/2023 through https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2023/07/10/why-is-turkey-blocking-sweden-from-joining-nato?

a- Declaratory

The declaratory theory is rooted in international law and the legal-administrative framework of statehood. From the statehood prerequisites constituted in the Montevideo convention and the assertions in article 3 and article 6 respectively that "the political existence of a state is independent of recognition by the other states", and that "the recognition of a state merely signifies that the state which recognizes it accepts the personality of the other with all rights and duties determined by international law". Similar pronouncements are concurred by the US Restatement of the Foreign Relations Law stating that granting recognition "is not required" and that other states treating in practice an entity that meets the criteria of statehood "as a state" notwithstanding "formal recognition" is what is legally required (American Law Institute 1987: pt.202). The Badinter Arbitration Commission of 1991 (Opinion 1) also affirms that "the existence or disappearance of the state is a question of fact" and "the effects of recognition by other states are purely declaratory". Based on these legal assertions, the declaratory theory argues that establishing statehood occurs by meeting specific objective criteria, separate from other states' recognition. The emphasis is based solely on fulfilling the criteria of effectiveness for an entity to become a state under international law. Further proposing that a declared state is entitled to the same rights of confirmed states guaranteed by international law without having to be first internationally recognized, "Even before recognition, the state has the right to defend its integrity and independence" ((Montevideo Convention 1933: art. 3). Thus, Recognition according to declaratory theory is not considered a constitutive element of statehood but rather a complementary one, and only a confirmation of an already existing and established fact.

b- Constitutive

Recognition per the Constitutive theory is essential to achieving statehood. In its purest form, the constitutive theory posits that, irrespective of international law and legal prerequisites of statehood, it is indeed recognition that provides an entity with the status of becoming an "international person". Scholars like James Lorimer (1880) and Lassa Oppenheim (1905) argue respectively that; every recognizing state has the right not only to say whether "a given community fulfills the requirements of international existence, but is, moreover, left to determine what these requirements are", and that a "State is and becomes an International Person through recognition only and

exclusively". In other words, confirmed states are at absolute liberty to consider statehood criteria or completely disregard them when recognizing an entity. It is the act of recognition that grants polities their legal status, not the reverse. So, adhering to the rules and regulations of international law ought to be based on the free will of states agreeing to it. Recognition is then a contractual agreement between polities that obtain their legal status, given that they exist in a factual or political form, exclusively as a result of that agreement (Redslob, 1934). These assertions have implications not only on constituting statehood but more broadly the international law as a system.

- **The Antithesis (What is missing?)**

Addressing the determinants and features of hybrid approaches to recognition requires engaging with the core concepts of the previous traditional ones. The antithesis of both theories will be examined first, highlighting the limitations and inconsistencies and exploring their overlaps or divergence between the two. As is clearly showcased in the above overview, both theories are at opposite extremes. While the declaratory theory considers fulfilling the criteria of effectiveness as sufficient for constituting statehood independent of recognition, the constitutive theory on the other hand completely disregards the legal framework and the role of international law and submits recognition as the exclusive mechanism of constituting statehood. Suppose the Declaratory theory is good in providing objective fact-based criteria for statehood and establishing that the latter depends on "a general rule with a degree of predictability and consistency rather than on ad hoc decisions based on a narrowly defined self-interest" (Nicholson and Grant, 2019). It still fails in accounting for the crucial role of recognition as a matter of practical realities on the ground. Even if the theory aims to establish impartial parameters for statehood, the truth of the matter is that political considerations are part of the equation in international politics. So the complete disregard for recognition is clearly inconsistent with reality. Consider entities like the Vatican City and Somalia; the first fails to meet the objective criteria of territory and population, and the second, for an extended period of disorder, lacked effective governance, but both are widely recognized. Another inconsistency of the theory is not accounting for recognition as a customary rule within the international rule-based order that the theory advocates for. Where customary rules are established when evidenced by states' practices accompanied by *opinio iuris*. Recognition may then acquire an evidentiary value. Hence, "a pattern of acts of recognition, especially if the

recognizing states explicitly invoke the criteria, may function as practice and *opinio iuris* evidencing the parameters of the customary rule setting out the criteria" (Nicholson and Grant, 2019). This means that through practicing recognition of entities, states create a general rule that becomes the basis for statehood, and recognition then operates as an indirect rather than a direct mechanism of creating new states (Nicholson and Grant, 2019). On the other part of the debate, the constitutive theory in its purest form implies that the practice of recognition should not and cannot be regulated legally, which in turn is at odds with the principles of peremptory norms of international law (*ius cogens*) that states cannot deviate from. The theory is also inconsistent in its failure to account for the actual existence of polities that fulfill legal requirements of statehood but are not recognized. One of the most common criticisms of the theory lies in its complete dismissal of the legislative framework of statehood and instead emphasizing discretionary criteria, which consequently further promotes realpolitik in international politics (Nicholson and Grant, 2019). An even more alarming implication of the theory's reliance on recognition and emphasizing the discretionary power of existing states and encouraging a relativistic approach to international law is not only allowing states to recognize others selectively outside any regulatory structure but even more so jeopardizing the unity and applicability of the system of international law.

c- Hybrid Approaches and Implications on the Case of the SADR

Clearly, the extreme tendencies and implications of both the declaratory and constitutive theories underscore the need for a more comprehensive and balanced approach to international recognition that synthesizes elements of both theories. While labeled as "Constitutivist", modern constitutivism represents in fact a hybrid approach to both traditional theories. Forsaking any dogmatic approach to recognition, it applies an inductive approach that starts from examining the evidence, including divergent cases, and rejects the rigid "dichotomy in which recognition means either everything or else nothing at all" (Nicholson and Grant, 2019, p. 29). With three main hybrid approaches, Modern constitutivism aims to draw elements from both traditional theories, consider the existing realities of statehood, and provide a more rational understanding of state recognition. The first approach in this regard considers both the criteria of effectiveness and recognition as essential, starting from the need for a central institution that grants authoritative certification of statehood or lack thereof.

Proponents of this approach argue that while legal prerequisites of statehood are important in regulating the process of creating new states, there is an equally important need for a central authority or intermediary that would have the last say of who meets the criteria of statehood or not. In the absence of such authority, states are the only authorities empowered by international law to make decisions of attributing statehood to specific polities (Kelsen, 1941). Thus, in making these decisions and recognizing entities as sovereign states, existing states are not only acting on their own behalf but they are actually operating as "organs of the decentralized international community" (Guggenheim, 1953). A strong critic of the realpolitik implications of the pure constitutive theory, Hersch Lauterpacht (1947) argues that existing states "have a duty to recognize an entity that meet the criteria of statehood", they are not entitled to act only based on their own convenience and national interest disregarding the established criteria for statehood.

The second approach within modern constitutive theory or hybrid theories to recognition submits that while not always required, recognition might be sufficient in certain cases. Drawing from the legal opinion of the esteemed jurist James Crawford (2006), who, despite maintaining that recognition is 'declaratory in principle', notes that "recognition may be constitutive of legal obligation for the recognizing or acquiescing State" (as cited in Nicholson, R., & Grant, T. D. 2019). if an entity is recognized despite not meeting the criteria of statehood. This is further elaborated on by Rowan Nicholson (2019), who argues that recognition has the power to establish or maintain the rights and other characteristics of statehood between the recognizer and the recognized. So, while this approach retains the view of the traditional declaratory theory of the sufficiency of the criteria of effectiveness in constituting statehood, it makes the argument for "particular circumstances in which recognition plays a more direct role" (Nicholson and Grant, 2019, p. 31).

The third and last approach of modern constitutive theory accounts for the practice of "Collective Non-Recognition". Contrary to other approaches that highlight a clear chasm between practitioners of international law and those of international politics, this approach is one, if not the only, that comes close to bridging the gap between the two sides. By emphasizing the duties of collective non-recognition arising first from "a serious breach by a State of an obligation arising under a peremptory norm of

general international law" (ILC 2001: art. 40 as cited in Visoka et al., 2019), these serious breaches are further explained by The International Law Commission in Articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts to include "unlawful use of force against another state or the commission of genocide". The second circumstance in which this duty of non-recognition may arise is "under a binding decision of the Security Council", such as the decision of the UNSC calling on all states to "refrain from any dealings with South Africa" following the latter's authorities "continued presence in Namibia after the termination of South Africa's mandate to govern the territory" (Nicholson and Grant, 2019). With many questions arising from this approach of collective non-recognition and other approaches to recognition pertaining to the practical effects this act may produce and other theoretical implications, observing and addressing the applications of these various approaches to the case of the SADR is imperative.

2.4.2. Application of Recognition Theories to the Case of the SADR

While the question under study is related to the decline in international recognition of the SADR, it is important nevertheless to understand how recognition theories apply to the case of the SADR as a contested state before directly addressing the question of decline in recognition of the entity. By engaging the core concepts and assertions of recognition theories, it becomes clear that the polity was unable to establish its sovereignty and statehood, even theoretically, beyond contestation, based on either of the traditional theories. While meeting most of the criteria of statehood according to the Montevideo Convention, it remains that those prerequisites are not binding for all countries; hence, the legal claims for legitimacy of the polity based on the right to self-determination, while widely accepted, especially in the context of the decolonization era, was not sufficient. And so, the simple act of declaring a state in a contested area did not come to fruition in the case of the SADR. On the other hand, while the entity was successful in garnering the recognition of an important number of states, the quest to become an international person, even through "recognition only and exclusively" was met with failure. This might be due to the absence of recognition of the statehood claims of the polity by any major power. It is even possible that the number of recognizing states was not enough to establish what would amount to a pattern of acts of recognition of the entity, leading to recognition acquiring an evidentiary value and

establishing a customary rule that could then be the legal basis for statehood of the polity.

The question of the number of recognizing states or how widespread the recognition of a contested polity emerges again when examining the assertions of some of the hybrid theories of recognition. In relation to Guggenheim–Kelsen theory, Nicholson and Grant (2019) wonder about the number of recognition acts required for an entity to objectively be regarded as a state within the international community, including "states that still do not recognize it". The other issue emerges from Thomas Grant's (1999) criticism of Lauterpacht's warning against realpolitik implications of the pure constitutive theory stating that while Lauterpacht's view was "at odds with the practice of his own time, more recent practice has displayed signs of a shift towards a collective or multilateral process in which states exercise less discretion" underlining how Western European states adopted 'guidelines' on recognition during the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Grant is ultimately suggesting that states' practices of recognition and the balance between exercising less discretion versus engaging in full realpolitik is contingent on the general context of world politics of the time.

In the case of the SADR, the first question of "the number of recognition acts sufficient for an entity to be considered a state" directs us to the mechanisms put in place for states to be admitted to the UN. Defined in the Charter of the United Nations, admission of new members to the international organization "will be effected by a decision of the General Assembly upon recommendation of the Security Council" (UN Charter, Chapter II: art 4). Admission recommendations by the UNSC "must receive the affirmative votes of 9 of the 15 members of the council," provided that none of the council's five permanent members exercise their veto power. After presenting the recommendation of the Council to be considered by the General Assembly, the admission of a new state requires "a two-thirds majority vote in the Assembly"[35]. These mechanisms highlight the important role UN member states would play in the case of either recognizing or rejecting the SADR's bid for statehood and admission to the international body. Thus, both Morocco and the SADR have to design a strategy that aims to achieve what we would call in this study "**Selective recognition**" and

[35] See "About UN membership" retrieved from https://www.un.org/en/about-us/about-un-membership

"**Broad recognition**". Recognition in this context refers to recognizing either the SADR claim and aspiration for statehood or Morocco's Autonomy Plan for Western Sahara. The recognition of the international community of either party's project necessarily means rejection of the other's. So, achieving "Selective recognition" can only materialize through a specific targeting strategy of UNSC permanent member states, not only to acquire a sponsor but also to neutralize the position of the other veto-holding members. On the other hand, achieving "Broad recognition" requires an overall strategy of convincing at least 129 UNGA member states of the submissions of either party.

The second issue relating to recognition practices of states in correspondence with the general context of world politics or world order of the time emphasizes yet again the importance of recognition as a political tool to be wielded by states. If Grant's criticism of Lauterpacht's assertions and warnings are based on the argument that they are time-specific, given that Hersch Lauterpacht's arguments were concerned with a post-WWII context in which the Allies won the war and the US emerged as the world's major military superpower establishing a unipolar world order, it is logical then to make the inferences that with the rise of non-Western rivals to US hegemony in global politics, and with the current world order on the verge of collapse and "the emergence of a transitional period" (Bremmer, 2015), the unsettled and unpredictable nature of this stage of world politics is bound to strengthen and bring to the surface the political expediency and realpolitik like that of which Lauterpacht warned against while deciding for or against recognizing a state. This is bound to undoubtedly affect the SADR and its quest for statehood and sovereignty.

The second approach within hybrid modern constitutive theory does not seem to be applicable to the case of the SADR in which recognition may suffice and become constitutive of statehood on 'particular circumstances', notwithstanding the ambiguity of these particular circumstances, even in this case when recognition is accepted to be 'constitutive of legal obligation', those obligations are only binding for the recognizing states given that duties cannot be imposed on states by other states (Nicholson 2019) which means that even if the SADR were to meet the ambiguous threshold of 'particular circumstances' that is still not a successful path for establishing statehood, for as Nicholson (2019) points out, on this basis, a polity cannot be a state in the true

and full sense unless it is universally recognized. Lastly, recognition of the SADR or its decline cannot be explained according to the duty of collective non-recognition since that means total and complete denial of recognition of the entity due to legal obligations of members of the international community, which is clearly not the case here since the SADR even with the loss of a substantial number of recognitions still holds that of more than 30 states. This then leads to a deeper exploration of the instrumental factors that led to the decline in recognition of the SADR over the last three decades.

Most of the explanations attempting to account for the decline in recognition of the SADR look within the parameters of the polity as a contested state in search of an explanation of an externally exercised practice (recognition), effectively dismissing a significant part of the equation, Morocco. As the other key party to the conflict and directly concerned with all its ramifications, Morocco is deeply invested in obstructing the SADR's efforts to achieve statehood or garner international recognition, as well as having the upper hand in any possible resolution to the conflict. With the question of Western Sahara and the territorial integrity of the country at the heart of the kingdom's foreign policy and direct interconnectivity with regime stability, it is understandable that Morocco will not sit idle without working towards garnering recognition of its own claims and proposed solution of an Autonomy Plan for Western Sahara, and subsequently leading to the loss of political and diplomatic ground by the SADR through the loss of international recognition. Exploring the role Moroccan foreign policy is playing in the decision of many countries to revoke their recognition of the SADR is rather an obvious assumption that requires further investigation into the mechanisms conducted to carry it and understand the source of the positive interaction of these states with Morocco's efforts and policies towards the issue.

2.5. Rental Recognition and the Derecognition of States in World Politics

Defined as "a political decision to withdraw recognition of the legal sovereignty of a state or government" (Visoka et al, 2019), the derecognition of states is a consequential practice in world politics. If international recognition is accepted to be important for a polity to gain external legitimacy, then, contrastingly, derecognition by virtue means the loss of that legitimacy. Yet, unless a loss of statehood capacity occurs or

recognition of an entity is extended or reassigned to another entity, derecognition is concluded to be theoretically impossible (Visoka 2019). Nevertheless, with the revocation of state recognition taking place in world politics, uncovering the determinants, actors, and narratives involved is crucial to understanding how the decision is made. Between declaratory and constitutive theorists that refer to their respective arguments based on either international law or international politics, a third perspective of what is referred to as discretionary theory emerges to emphasize the practical significance of the discretionary power of states in granting, withholding, or revoking recognition in the absence of binding regulations of the practice by international law (Visoka 2019). Contrary to the theoretical assertion to the inconceivability of revoking recognition Jean d'Aspremont (2012) argues (as cited in Visoka et al., 2019) that states are as much entitled to withdrawing recognition as they are granting it, submitting that the state is the only concerned international entity with the manner it chooses to "interpret and construe the facts or the situation that is the object of recognition". Gëzim Visoka (2019) points out the fact that derecognition is mostly significant to "claimant states that are outside the UN system… that have secured partial international recognition", effectively highlighting that contested states are understandably more susceptible to revocation of recognition. Stressing the importance of the role 'former base states' and 'regional powers', as well as 'great powers' play in this process, he argues that their role is respectively consequential in "determining the positions of all the parties involved" and their "support or opposition plays a pivotal role in deepening and entrenching the contestation of claimant states" (Visoka, 2019, p. 321).

The significant role played by the 'former base state' or 'parent state' in the process of states' derecognition is closely examined by James Ker-Lindsay (2019). By emphasizing how the general context and circumstances of different secession endeavors highly affect the manner in which states engage in counter-recognition activities, Lindsay identifies four pillars of any counter-recognition strategy pursued by parent states to prevent wide international acceptance of the concerned secessionist territory. These elements are as follows:

I. Ongoing claim to the sovereignty over the seceding territory.
II. Formal diplomatic efforts to prevent the territory from being recognized by other states or joining different regional and international organizations.

III. Ensure that the territory does not gradually gain acceptance.
IV. Legal challenges to the claims of independence of the territory while shoring up the claim to sovereignty over the breakaway territory.

With Morocco effectively controlling more than 80% of the territory and challenging the claims of the Polisario Front by asserting its sovereignty and invoking legal counterclaims of secession and territorial integrity, both the first and last elements of Lindsay's counter-recognition strategy are easily detected in the case of Morocco as the 'parent state' or former base state' in the context of the Western Sahara conflict. Yet, for the purpose of unpacking how Moroccan foreign policy is instrumental in the decline in recognition of the SADR, the focus of the data collected and analyzed in the course of this study will center around the second and third elements. What remains to be accounted for is the recognizing or derecognizing states and why they interact positively with Moroccan efforts to obstruct the wide acceptance of the SADR as a member of the international community.

With the scarcity of literature specifically studying the practice of state derecognition in world politics, it is hard to come across a straightforward explanation, especially in the case of a remote regional conflict like that of Western Sahara. Having made the case for Moroccan interest in obstructing the efforts of the Polisario Front and the high stakes the kingdom has in the conflict, what remains to be accounted for is the position of the recognizing or rather derecognizing states. understanding why some states, after decades of formal recognition of the SADR and the Polisario Front's claims to Sahrawi statehood then come to the conclusion and the decision to change course and revoke that recognition is crucial to understanding this trend not only in the case of Western Sahara but also on a global scale. If Morocco is understandably concerned with the outcomes of the conflict, subsequently engaging in a counter-recognition strategy of the SADR, what prompts more than 50 states that have once recognized the polity to increasingly come around to accepting the Moroccan stance and arguments and withdraw their recognition of the self-proclaimed Sahrawi state. Victor S. Mariottini de Oliveira (2023) proposes the concept of "Rental Recognition" to criticize what he calls the commodification of statehood recognition. His argument is yet another scathing condemnation of the highly political nature of state recognition in practice. By coining the term 'rental recognition' de Oliveira submits that statehood is for sale

and recognition is up for grabs by the highest bidder. While Gëzim Visoka (2019) has alluded to a similar explanation by explaining how countries in the global south, struggling with severe poverty and ruled by semi-authoritarian regimes resolve to the use of derecognition as the "only available foreign policy asset they can use to reduce their vulnerability and benefit from foreign aid", de Oliveira argues that practice is not exclusive to small, poor and authoritarian countries, but rather more widespread in world politics even among the so-called 'first world' countries. Highlighting the cases of countries like India or Sweden, respectively revoking and withholding recognition of the SADR, he underlines how economic incentives and the prospects of strengthening economic ties with the kingdom play a significant role in shaping the aggressive Moroccan policy towards Western Sahara and rendering recognition and derecognition into a bargaining chip.

2.6. Discussion of Literature Review

Most of the legal-centered explanations to the question of the decline in recognition of the SADR revolve around the legal prerequisites of statehood, criteria of effectiveness, and Self-determination as the legal basis for Sahrawi statehood. Considering the theoretical debate between the declaratory and constitutive theory of statehood and recognition, suffice it to say that legal claims alone are not sufficient in practical terms to constitute statehood, but more importantly, they don't explain the withdrawal of various states of their recognition of the SADR. legally speaking, the Sahrawi state seems to possess a better case than that of Morocco. By establishing that the polity meets at least three of the legal prerequisites of statehood, and to a great extent meeting the threshold of the criteria of effectiveness and internal legitimacy through the control of a specific territory and having a political structure in place that manages the needs of the population, a substantial part of the legal argument explaining the decline in international recognition of the entity falls apart. While Moroccan counterclaims that invoke territorial integrity and accusations of succession may make it harder for the Polisario Front to achieve its goals, it is far from making a legally convincing case. Legal assertions of international law are still on the side of the SADR in this case, even with existing sensitivity to both the issues of secession and territorial integrity of sovereign states. Considering Western Sahara as a non-self-governing territory automatically refutes Moroccan claims over the territory from a legal perspective.

Thus, with all the complexities surrounding the invocation of the right to self-determination, it is still not sufficient to explain why the SADR has been losing international recognition since the mid-1990s.

While the international community's aversion to the use of force might seem like a good explanation, it is not holding when examined, since that should've been a reason for the SADR not to receive any recognition, not to lose it. If the use of force was indeed a deciding factor in this case, it should've mattered at the beginning of the conflict when the SADR was relying on hit-and-run guerrilla tactics against Spain, Mauritania, and Morocco. The fact is that despite the military campaigns carried out by the Polisario Front, the leadership of the polity was able to garner significant support and recognition which refutes the argument that the use of force is causing the decline in international recognition of the polity, which only started two decades after its proclamation, and indeed during the peaceful period of the conflict not the violent one. Finally, the last politically driven explanation that would be considered is the influence of Algeria as a patron state on the SADR. The argument suggests that due to the deeply seated dependence of the SADR as a contested state on Algeria as a patron state for its survival, a shift in that dynamic may explain the decline in the recognition of the polity. Given that the majority, if not all, of the international recognition of the SADR, was mainly achieved thanks to Algerian support, this seems like a sound argument to contemplate. Yet, examining the facts proves that not much has changed in the dynamics between the SADR and Algeria, and the latter is as committed as before to supporting the Polisario Front and Sahrawi statehood, alongside a continued engagement in a regional rivalry with Morocco for the hegemony of the Maghreb.

Acknowledging Morocco as a highly motivated actor to thwart efforts of the Polisario Front to achieve Sahrawi statehood provides the first stepping-stone into unpacking the factors driving the decline in the entity's recognition. When applied to the case of the SADR, the concept of 'Rental Recognition' provides a more appropriate framework to understand the phenomena and account for the role of all parties involved. Contemplating the solidity of the support provided to the SADR to the more fluid one of the Moroccan position by external actors in the 70s and 80s of the 20th century, King Hassan II compared the two to "absolute solidarity within a camp" versus "relative solidarity within a club", alluding to the ideological lines of that

support between the ‘Eastern camp’ and ‘Western club’ (laurent, 1993, p. 116). While this quote is still relevant in understanding the role of major powers and their struggle for hegemony in shaping the conflict, yet it seems like the solid core of the once-held support by the SADR has been gradually waning since the mid-1990s proving that major changes have occurred on the level of how Morocco started approaching the issue.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

State derecognition is almost as highly controversial as state recognition if not even more so, and it remains to be one of the most understudied areas of world politics. This means that theoretically there are few clear-cut explanations of why states revoke their recognition of polities in the world, especially if they are contested ones. Hence, any inferences are bound to be case-specific. While theories of international recognition are relevant in understanding the legal and political rationale behind state recognition, they are only as useful as providing a general lens in the context of derecognition. For this reason, using an abductive approach to unpack the factors behind the decline in recognition of the SADR seems more appropriate. Through a critical review of the literature on statehood, international recognition, and the question of Western Sahara, major explanations emerge as to why states are revoking their recognition of the SADR. Whilst most of these explanations are relevant in understanding the frozen nature of the conflict that has lasted for decades, they do not concretely clarify the factors that led to the increasing derecognition of the entity.

The main objective of this chapter is to provide an analysis of my research data. I will first outline the methodology and research design I have chosen for this study. I will then further explain the theoretical framework of the study by delineating the concept of 'Rental Recognition' and how it applies to the case of the SADR and finally, I will conclude by presenting the findings of the study. This research starts from the hypothesis that the decline in international recognition of the SADR is increasingly taking place due to an aggressive foreign policy by the Kingdom of Morocco that utilizes various diplomatic tools to buy out the derecognition of the SADR and prevent it from achieving affirmed statehood. This derecognition strategy carried out by Morocco is proving successful because of the willingness of various states to rent out

their recognition for the right price. A policy that is made even more possible in a transitional world order with major powers vying for supremacy in the African continent.

3.2. Research Design and Methodology

This research is essentially exploratory. The reason for this approach is justified by the complexity of the question "Why is the SADR losing international recognition?". The scarcity of Derecognition literature and the focus of the majority of the scholarship around the issue of Western Sahara on the legitimacy of the entity and the legal argument for Sahrawi statehood situates this study in a position of exploring and removing different layers related to the issue to provide concrete explanations that consider factors that have either never been considered or not in connection to each other. By considering the role of the derecognizing states and their positive interaction with the derecognition strategy carried out by the Moroccan foreign policy in the case of the decline in recognition of the SADR, this study focuses on external variables which consequently necessitates the use of an exploratory approach. Furthermore, an exploratory approach was chosen to carry out this study based on its suitability in uncovering the observed patterns and their generating processes (Traunmüller as cited in Curini & Franzese., 2020).

As one of the stated objectives of the study, uncovering patterns in this specific case with the possibility of arriving at generalizable results in similar contexts to that of the SADR is part of the reason behind choosing it as a case study. After all, the assumption of this generalizability is part of the requirements of a research design as Chiara Ruffa (2020) argues. The selection of the SADR as a single case study for this research is by no means conducted randomly, the selection process combines both convenience and strategy. The convenience in this regard mainly stems from having a natural interest in this case, having a command of the Arabic language which facilitates the examination of both literature and data, and finally holding previous knowledge of the issue. While single case studies are good in providing a deeper understanding of how theories play out in the context of the specific case at hand, choosing them based on convenience increases their selection bias often related to this type of case selection technique, which in turn makes fulfilling the objective of maximizing the

generalizability potential of the theory to a broader population of cases problematic (Ruffa, 2020). For this reason, the case selection of this study was combined with strategic factors. As a so called "last colony in Africa", the case of Western Sahara combines the interplay of many factors; first, the context of the decolonization process which provides a certain amount of legitimacy based on the territory being one of the few remaining Non-self-governing territories in the world (as per the UN) and has the right per international law to practice self-determination. Second, the overt fait-accompli claim of Morocco, which only achieved a deeper hold over the territory over time without any concrete pushback from the international community. Third, the ebbs and flows of the positions of different parties to the conflict, while seen for a long time as a strong case for realizing independence and achieving confirmed statehood, the SADR surprisingly started losing ground due to the increased revocation of many recognitions. The interplay of these three factors brings to the forefront several questions related to the role of international law, power politics, and the role of parent states in influencing the practice of international recognition through pursuing a derecognition strategy of the secessionist entity. By choosing Western Sahara as a case study for this thesis, we will be able to make inferences about how Derecognition takes place and the factors that determine states pursuing it as a foreign policy, it also provides an opportunity to shed much-needed light on the various factors that affect the halted project of the Maghreb Union and African integration.

Throughout this thesis, I will conduct a comparative small N case study**,** focusing on two decades and a half of the reign of King Mohammed VI (1999-2024). My research design will employ both Qualitative and Quantitative methods. Using a mixed-method research design will assist me in both testing my hypothesis and analysing the relevant data to showcase the elements of Morocco's counter-recognition strategy and its adoption as a foreign policy objective throughout the period that is under study.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

My data collection methods will mainly include archival research, content, and discourse analysis. In the archival research and content analysis data collection method, I plan to collect data from Books, official documents (Constitution, press statements, official declarations…), and news articles from media outlets. Royal

speeches are also a very important source of data that I will need to collect. With this type of data, I plan to make inferences based on interpreting the collected content to showcase the foreign policy tools used by Morocco in its counter-recognition strategy of the SADR.

CHAPTER IV

DERECOGNITION OF THE SADR AND MOROCCAN FOREIGN POLICY

4.1. Introduction

State derecognition is almost as highly controversial as state recognition if not even more so, and it remains to be one of the most understudied areas of world politics. This means that theoretically, there are few clear-cut explanations of why states revoke their recognition of polities in the world, especially if they are contested ones. Hence, any inferences are bound to be case-specific. While theories of international recognition are relevant in understanding the legal and political rationale behind state recognition, they are only as useful as providing a general lens in the context of derecognition. For this reason, using an abductive approach to unpack the factors behind the decline in recognition of the SADR seems more appropriate. Through a critical review of the literature on statehood, international recognition, and the question of Western Sahara, major explanations emerge as to why states are revoking their recognition of the SADR. Whilst most of these explanations are relevant in understanding the frozen nature of the conflict that has lasted for decades, they do not concretely clarify the factors that led to the increasing derecognition of the entity.

As discussed in the literature review section of this dissertation, considering the role of Morocco as a directly involved party in the conflict and highly motivated to reach a resolution that serves its interests and the kingdom's pursuit of a derecognition strategy as a goal for its foreign policy to thwart the efforts of the Polisario Front in achieving affirmed statehood of the SADR fits within James Ker Lindsay's (2020) counter-recognition activities of 'former base state' or 'parent state'. By firmly laying claim over the territory since 1975 and heavily investing in the region, as well as steadily invoking claims of territorial integrity and secession, Morocco fulfills two of the most important elements of Lindsay's counter-recognition strategy regarding the

ongoing claim to the sovereignty over the seceding territory and shoring up the claim to sovereignty over the breakaway territory through legal challenges to the claims of independence of the territory. In parallel, the kingdom engages in various diplomatic efforts and pursues a foreign policy that is focused on preventing the territory from being recognized and gradually gaining international acceptance. Morocco's counter-recognition strategy has been proving successful and has gained more momentum since the mid-1990s due to what Victor S. Mariottini de Oliveira (2023) coined 'Rental Recognition' of derecognizing states in reference to the willingness of these countries to withdraw their recognition of the SADR in exchange for greater economic interests with Morocco.

In this chapter of the study, I will unpack each element of this equation, present the collected data, and analyze it to test the proposed hypothesis within the theoretical framework adopted for this study. By dividing the hypothesis into three separate parts and operationalizing the concepts I will be unpacking throughout the course of this study. By starting with the question of "Why is the SADR losing international recognition?" this study proposes quite an elaborate hypothesis to arrive at specific factors that are leading to this derecognition phenomenon of the entity. The proposed hypothesis suggests that the decline in international recognition of the SADR is increasingly taking place due to an aggressive foreign policy by the Kingdom of Morocco that utilizes various diplomatic tools to buy out the derecognition of the SADR and prevent it from achieving affirmed statehood. This derecognition strategy carried out by Morocco is proving successful because of the willingness of various states to rent out their recognition for the right price. A foreign policy decision that is made even more possible in a transitional world order with major powers vying for supremacy in the African continent.

By examining the central hypothesis of this study, it asserts that the decline in international recognition of the SADR can be attributed to the aggressive foreign policy of Morocco and the willingness of the derecognizing states to rent out their recognition taking advantage of the abundance of opportunities to maximize their interests due to the transitional nature of the world order. To clearly lay out the collected data and analyze it in a way that uncovers the causal link between the dependent variable of the decline in international recognition of the SADR and the two

independent variables of Moroccan foreign policy and the 'rental recognition' derecognizing states engage in, as well as how the intervening variable of transitional world order serves as a catalyst to maximize the chances of 'rental recognition' becoming a preferred foreign policy choice, we first need to examine each of these variables, their Operationalization, and how they influence each other. I will start by examining the two independent variables, then the intervening variable, and lastly the dependent one to come to an explanation of the end result of how all of them interact with each other.

4.2. Moroccan Foreign Policy and the Question of Western Sahara

Moroccan rulers have long understood that the political and military realms are as important as the religious realm in consolidating their legitimacy. When sultans in the 15th and 17th centuries were to lose some of their political weight and control over parts of *Bilad al-Siba*, they would resort to using the Friday prayers' sermons as a tool for exerting their religious authority and keeping the people anchored in their allegiance to the throne, though they eventually realize the need for military campaigns and political maneuvers to bring the territory under question to the fold of *Bilad al-Makhzen*[36] (Slawi, 2001).

Being one of the world's oldest monarchies and the oldest in the Arab world, Morocco is one of the few countries in the region that can rely on centuries of diplomatic relations with various states worldwide (Sater, 2010). This long history of international relations shaped the kingdom's foreign policy agenda and focused its priorities on three major pillars: first promoting the multifaceted, open, and modern identity of the country as well as its stability; second, emphasizing Morocco's commitment to positive interaction with its regional neighbors and deepening the relationship with its European allies; and third and most importantly, garnering international recognition of the country's claim over Western Sahara (Fernández-Molina, 2016). Due to various

[36] Both terms *Bilad al-Makhzen* and *Bilad al-Siba* refer to the territorial control of the Sultan in pre-colonial Morocco. While *Bilad al-Makhzen* (Land of the Makhzen/Law) refers to the parts of the country that were subject to the central rule of the Sultan through *Caids* (Governors) assigned through Dahir, or *bay'a* of the tribal leaders, the term *Bilad al-Siba* (Land of dissidence) was used to refer to parts of the country that would either challenge the Sultan's authority or simply be outside of that authority temporarily for various political or logistical reasons

historical events during the colonial era, foreign policy has shaped up to become a key component of the kingdom's policy area and a source of the monarchs' sovereignty and legitimacy (Sater, 2010). Western Sahara consequently occupied a central position in the state's foreign policy agenda because of the sensitive question of the country's territorial integrity (Sater, 2010).

This symbiotic relationship between territorial integrity and regime stability which consequently informs and influences third-world countries' foreign policy has long been investigated, Steven R. David proposed a theory of Omnibalancing which provides a more appropriate analytical framework to understand this phenomenon, appraising both internal and external threats to the leadership and the need to counter **all** threats, as the basis for these countries' alliance formation strategies and foreign policy decision-making processes. David's Omnibalancing theory also provides a different approach to understanding how perceptions of national interests in this particular context differ from those of major powers or countries of "the first world". In the context of Morocco, historic events like those of the Sand War in 1963 and the Green March in 1975 were conceptualized as an expression of this relationship. Jerome B. Weiner (1979) notes in his article "The Green March in Historical Perspective" how Mohammed V, in his capacity as the Sultan of Morocco and through the crucial role he played in unifying the country in the struggle for independence, maintained and reinforced the legitimacy of the monarchy and the Alawite dynasty. King Hassan II understood the lesson, and even though he maintained that he "halted the battles in the events of the fall of 1963 because logical reasons ceased to exist for an illogical war… and wisdom required ending the war… and preventing the loss of more lives and resources…" (Laurent, 1993, p. 50), the border conflict with Algeria fortified the perception of the Alawite dynasty as safeguarding and protecting the country and its territorial integrity (Weiner, 1979). Again when the monarchy was facing an imminent threat in the period between 1965 and 1975 due to political unrest and two consecutive military coup attempts, Weiner argues that King Hassan II orchestrated the Green March in an effort not only to fulfill his role as "defender of Moroccan sovereignty and integrity vis-à-vis the colonial powers", but also to cover his political bases and stabilize the regime that was left exposed (Weiner, 1997, p. 26)

The same balancing act persisted with the arrival of the new king; after spending the first eight years of his reign carefully constructing an image of an active, dynamic, and reformist monarch working hard to achieve prosperity for his people, and righting the wrongs of the past, while falling short of delivering on promises of accomplishing a successful and concrete "Democratic transition" with more civic and political freedoms, King Mohammed VI and the *Makhzen* quickly realized the need for tangible accomplishments to conclude the first decade of the new monarch's reign. This realization delivered the initiative for an autonomy plan for Western Sahara in 2007 as a framework for a "permanent and only political solution to the conflict"[37]. During the 2011 upheavals, King Mohammed VI will find himself in the same position his father was facing during the turbulent "years of lead" 1965-1975, with looming dangers to the monarchy from the domestic realm in the context of the populace demands of "The Arab Spring", and the abandonment of the kingdom's traditional allies (namely France & the US) in the international arena[38] The monarchy was aware that accomplishments on the Foreign Policy front were needed to counter both internal and external threats the regime was facing. The *Makhzen* had to recalibrate its foreign policy by "seeking out new alliances and strengthening older ones". This has led to a change in the kingdom's alliance formation, with growing interest in forging relations with non-traditional allies like China and Russia and promptly changing course in the relationship with Africa (Abouzzohour, Tomé-Alonso, 2018) which resulted in Morocco's return to the African Union in January 2017 after thirty-three years of leaving OAU. This return posited the issue of Western Sahara and the country's territorial integrity at the center of the new foreign policy decision[39].

[37] As proposed by Morocco

[38] The relationship during this period was becoming contentious with the two countries, events like The Center of Robert Kennedy issue of an unflattering report about the state of human rights in Western Sahara combined with increasing tensions with the UN special envoy to the region, Christopher Ross (an American), as well as a US-proposed resolution project to the Security Council to expand the mission of the MINURSO to include monitoring human rights in Western Sahara in 2013, which France announced it was not planning to Veto was among the most prevalent.

[39] King Mohammed VI's letter to the AU directly addresses the question of Western Sahara and the historic events of admitting the Polisario Front and recognition of SADR as the catalyst of Morocco's exit from the OAU in 1984

4.2.1. Determinants and Actors of Moroccan Foreign Policy

Due to various historical and political considerations and factors, the issue of Western Sahara is evidently inviolable in Morocco. It is approached from the standpoint of maintaining the kingdom's territorial integrity, leading to consistent challenges to the Polisario Front's and SADR's claims over the territory. Notwithstanding the legality of Morocco's submissions of territorial integrity according to international law, the Kingdom is directly involved as a party in the conflict, seeking to convince the international community with its Autonomy plan for Western Sahara as a permanent solution to the conflict. The *Makhzen* understands that resolving the issue in any way that does not preserve the country's territorial sovereignty will endanger the unity and stability of the kingdom and put the regime in a precarious position. Understanding the tools and strategies employed by Morocco in its pursuit of a counter-recognition strategy of the SADR requires identifying the actors and determinants of the kingdom's foreign policy, especially in regard to the issue of Western Sahara.

The centrality of the Western Sahara issue for Morocco's foreign policy and how it serves as an equilibrium for regime security is rather understandable when examining the determinants for the kingdom's foreign policy. Working within a framework that strikes a balance between the country's assets and constraints, what determines Morocco's foreign policy revolves around what I have explained at the beginning of this section in terms of the priorities of the country's foreign policy agenda. But the correlation between foreign policy (with the Western Sahara issue at its core) and regime security in Morocco really comes into sharp focus in light of understanding the dynamics that govern the relationship between its actors.

Based on the literature on Morocco's foreign policy, we can deduce that four parties constitute what is supposed to be the corners of the country's foreign policy decision square:

I. The Palace and the King.
II. The Government/Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
III. The Parliament
IV. Non-Government Organizations.

In his book, «Moroccan Foreign Policy: actors and Interactions» in 2002, Dr. El Hassan Bouquentar, a professor of constitutional law at the Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences at the University of Mohamed V in Rabat, Morocco explains how elected officials and civil society play a consultative and supportive role within what's customarily referred to in Moroccan political vernacular as "Parallel Diplomacy". What is clear though from the legal framework determining the conduct of the kingdom's foreign policy as well as realities on the ground; is that the king is the real and sole architect of the kingdom's foreign policy. Remaining a reserved domain for the monarch for decades based on unspoken agreements and postulates in Moroccan politics, this has only been more emphasized during the 2011 upheavals by clearly stipulating for the first time that the king is constitutionally responsible for all matters and policies pertaining to the security of the territorial integrity of the kingdom and its diplomatic relations.

4.2.2. Role of Royal Visits in Initiating Morocco's SADR Derecognition Strategy

Understanding the determinants of Moroccan foreign policy and its main players is crucial for fully grasping how the derecognition strategy of the SADR the kingdom has engaged in was shaped. The central role of the King in determining the priorities, designing the vision, and implementing the strategies of the kingdom's foreign policy with selected advisors, ministers, and institutions is important to identify the features and characteristics of that strategy. Royal visits in this regard were crucial in setting the stage for not only a shift in the kingdom's alliance formation in service of the "first national cause", but also in changes in the positions of various countries around the world toward Western Sahara, ultimately resulting in this increasing trend of derecognizing the SADR. Simply put, while foreign visits of the royal British family, for example, are considered more ceremonial and symbolic, their counterparts in a country like Morocco are directly connected to the kingdom's foreign policy.

Before addressing how royal visits of King Mohammed VI were an instrumental feature of the kingdom's derecognition strategy of the SADR, it is important to highlight some of the changes in the narratives regarding the issue of Western Sahara that were taking place in the kingdom since the mid-1990s. While derecognition of the SADR has in fact started as early as 1980 with Equatorial Guinea withdrawing its

recognition of the entity and both St. Lucia and Solomon Islands doing the same in 1989, as demonstrated in *figure 4.1.* The pace has only increased since the mid-1990s and became an observable trend in the last two decades, with the years 1997, 2000, and 2010 witnessing "the most extensive changes" as per the report published in 2021 by the De facto States Research Unit on "why is Western Sahara losing recognition?". The significance of these years, in particular, can be attributed to the leadership change (death of King Hassan II and ascension of King Mohammed VI to the throne in 1999) and the political unrest of the Arab Spring (first erupted in Tunisia in 2010), but understanding how this trend came to be can only be understood by first tracing back the conversations that started taking place in the kingdom of Morocco in the last years of King Hassan II's rule and became more pronounced after King Mohammad VI ascended the throne.

After decades of struggle and political push and pull between the opposition (mainly socialist) and the palace, the years leading up to the 1998-2002 "alternance government" witnessed a political breakthrough in the kingdom, resulting in more freedom of expression, which in turn changed the conversations surrounding the Western Sahara issue. Decades after Morocco left the OAU in 1984 in protest of admitting the SADR as a member state in the African organization, discussions surrounding political and public affairs in the kingdom started evaluating the decision and pointing out the diplomatic losses that the kingdom suffered due to that decision. While initially considered a principled position of the kingdom to serve the purpose of declaring its sovereignty over Western Sahara in a public manner to the world, Moroccan journalists, political analysts, and politicians alike started criticizing what was dubbed an "empty chair" policy. This was in reference to all regional and international summits,

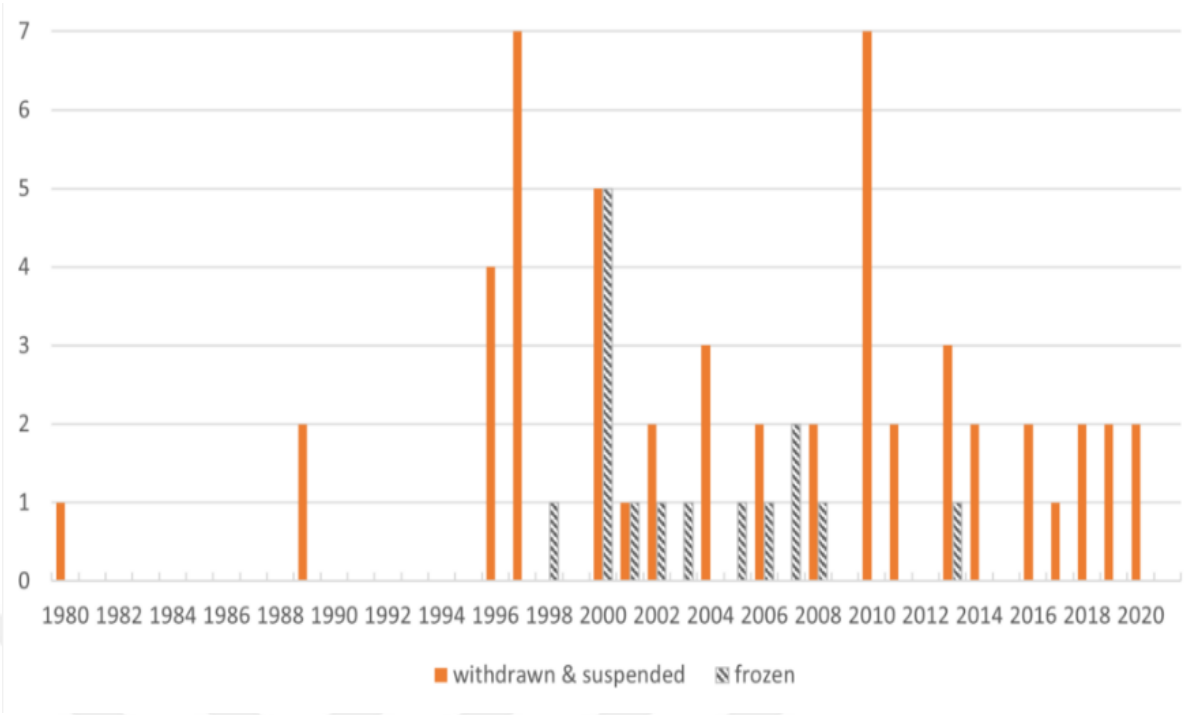


Figure 4.1. A Diagram Showing the SADR's Loss of International Recognition

Source: De facto States Research Unit

forums, and conferences, the kingdom would miss the opportunity to attend and defend its position on the Western Sahara issue, based on the assertion following the 1984 decision to boycott all events attended by members of the Polisario Front. Highlighting how Morocco was losing diplomatic ground to make the case for its claims over the territory by withdrawing from these forums, more calls were being echoed in the kingdom to change this policy and engage more actively with various countries and regional and international institutions to change their positions towards the issue. Months before Morocco officially returned to the African Union, Samir Bennis (2016), a prominent Moroccan political analyst described the new decision as an "ultimate break with the empty chair policy". While acknowledging that the decision represented a shift from the kingdom's traditional policy, he pointed out how the decision was indeed an emphasis on a new direction of the country's foreign policy the kingdom has adopted in recent years. Bennis pointed out how the new decision allows the kingdom to defend its interests from within the African organization. He identified two major tools of the kingdom's policy in this regard; religious diplomacy and economic presence and penetration. The ultimate goal of this strategy according to Bennis was to "gain the trust of the largest possible number of leaders of African countries and convince them that their rapprochement with Morocco will benefit their people, and

thus persuade them to adopt positions in favor of the country with regard to its existential issues, or at least remain neutral regarding them".

4.2.2.1. Rapprochement Strategy with the Arab World

The change in public discussion around the Western Sahara issue in Morocco set the stage for the *Makhzen* to lay the first foundations for reshaping the kingdom's alliance formation strategy in service of what will prove to be an aggressive derecognition policy aiming to obstruct the SADR from achieving confirmed statehood and stripping the entity of any international recognition it had once received. Given the practically exclusive role of the king in shaping the state's foreign policy and the instrumental role of royal visits in that regard, King Mohammad VI's visits to various countries since ascending the throne in 1999 but especially in the years after the Arab Spring to particularly African and Arab states were used as means to redesigning Morocco's foreign policy in the region and creating momentum for bilateral and multilateral relationships with neighboring countries in the south and east that would serve the kingdom's interests and garner support for Morocco's first national cause. Considering that all parties of the conflict (Morocco, Algeria, Polisario Front/SADR) belong to the region geographically (all three parties) or institutionally (Both Morocco and Algeria are members of The League of Arab States and The Arab Maghreb Union/ while Algeria and SADR are members of The African Union) Morocco was aware that the Arab sphere is crucial for any counter-recognition strategy to thwart the SADR efforts to achieve statehood.

Considering that both Morocco and Algeria are members of The League of Arab States and The Arab Maghreb Union, apart from Libya during the earlier days of the conflict, other Arab states whether in the Maghreb, or the Middle East went to tremendous efforts to maintain a policy of parity and neutrality towards the issue of Western Sahara in order not to affect relations with either country negatively. Nevertheless, and due to various historical and political factors, Morocco was in effect farther from its Arab surroundings than Algeria. The kingdom's relations with the Arab World have been especially withering since the late 1970s[40] and have only further dwindled since King

[40] A pan-Arabist at the beginning of his reign, King Hassan II started disengaging Morocco from substantive relations with the Arab world in the wake of the anti-monarchies trend of the 1950s that

Mohammed VI ascended the throne in 1999[41]. The Arab Spring presented the *Makhzen* with the appropriate opportunity to reengage with the Arab World, and the palace put in place a robust plan for the monarch's foreign royal visits to various Arab nations both in the Middle East and North Africa following the 2011 uprisings, as shown in *illustrations 4.1 – 4.2 – 4.3 and 4.4*. Notably, his visit in late 2012 to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, and Jordan. The second significant royal visit during the same period was the one to Tunisia in 2014, and then, a second visit he made to the Gulf in late 2017, which included visiting both Qatar and the UAE. And lastly, two visits to the Kingdom of Bahrain in the span of three years (2016 and 2019).



Illustration 4.1. Formal Reception of King Mohammed VI During His Visit to Saudi Arabia in 2012

Source: www.hespress.com

travelled to Morocco with the blessing and backing of several Arab leaders like Nasser of Egypt and Gaddafi of Libya. This disengagement has been cemented after the Moroccan disenchantment with the dream of the Great Maghreb Union.

[41] Carrying a heritage of disengagement from the Arab world, King Mohammed VI continued the same policies of his predecessor by keeping diplomatic relationships with various Arab states at the bare minimum of diplomatic ties, rarely ever participating in the Arab League summits, and sparsely visiting the Middle East.



Illustration 4.2. Two Heads of State During the Formal Reception of King Mohammed VI of Morocco by King Abdullah II of Jordan in Amman in 2012

Source: www.factjo.com



Illustration 4.3. Formal Reception by Former President Moncef Marzouki of King Mohammed VI During a State Visit to Tunisia in 2014

Source: www.Aljazeera.net



Illustration 4.4. Formal Reception by Emir Tamim Ibn Hamad Al Thani of King Mohammed VI During His Visit to Qatar in 2017

Source: www.hespress.com

At a time when King Mohammed VI's visit to Tunisia in 2014 was the one receiving the most media attention and was accompanied with much controversy due to reports alluding to an increasing dispute between the two countries on the accounts of disagreements on the issue of bilateral relations with Algeria, it was indeed the reoccurring visits to the Gulf that would prove to be more consequential for Morocco and its counter recognition strategy towards the SADR. The significance of the royal visit to Tunisia in 2014 stems from the historical and geopolitical ties between the Kingdom and its North African neighbor, alongside the specific context of the Arab Spring, with Tunisia being the cradle of the populace movement that swamped the region at the time. At the time, the royal visit to Tunisia came at the height of the security challenges in the North African country and its struggle with terrorism and a severe economic crisis. But as expected and due to the high stakes of the visit for both Morocco and Algeria, the visit was riddled with controversy. State media in Morocco, as showcased in *illustrations 4.5* and *4.6* focused on the high level of representation within the accompanying delegation to the king which included his brother *Moulay Rachid*, the heir to the throne *Moulay Hassan*, four royal advisors, eleven ministers,

and “a delegation of officials and economic actors representing the public and private sectors” according to the Moroccan state news agency **(MAP)** to emphasize the importance of the visit for the Moroccan side and promote the stated foreign policy objectives of the visit in “establishing a model for regional cooperation based on a pragmatic vision”.



Illustration 4.5. Article Published by the Moroccan News Agency (MAP) Detailing King Mohammed VI's Accompanying Delegation During His Visit to Tunisia in 2014

Source: www.map.ma



Illustration 4.6. Article Published by the Moroccan News Agency (MAP) under the Title "His Majesty's Visit to Tunisia: An Occasion to Establish a Model for Regional Cooperation Based on a Pragmatic Vision"

Source: www.map.ma

As demonstrated in *illustrations 4.7 – 4.8 and 4.9* non-state media outlets in both Morocco and Algeria engaged in provocative media narratives and mutual accusations. The number one online news outlet in Morocco "***Hespress***" published a report on 31 May 2014 (one day after the Moroccan king arrived to Tunisia) to frame the royal visit in a context of an opposing position to Algeria instead of exclusively focusing on the bilateral Moroccan-Tunisian relations. Under the title "an analyst considers the King's visit to Tunisia an indication of Moroccan eminence over Algeria", the Moroccan outlet approached the royal visit to Tunisia from a broader context emphasizing that "the Moroccan kingdom which used to be besieged by Algeria and the 'defunct' Libyan regime, is operating today from within a vast geographic and political space. Beginning to play a significant role in the Niger, Mali, Libya, and Tunisia, Morocco is now offering a model of reform through which it is poised to provide assistance in the process of development and institutionalization". The article went on identifying the indicators of the importance of the royal visit by asserting that "The importance of the royal visit to Tunisia lies in the fact that it is an embodiment of the position that Morocco has come to enjoy on the geopolitical level in the region" and that Morocco and through the weight of the personal presence of the King is "exerting pressure on

Algeria through its adoption of modern diplomatic tools that include both spiritual/religious diplomacy as well as economic diplomacy based on a win-win approach". For its part, the Algerian newspaper **Al-Shorouk** published articles during the same period suggesting that Tunis and Rabat were at odds. The Algerian newspaper published an article under the title "signs of a diplomatic crisis between Tunisia and Morocco because of Western Sahara", claiming that the "Moroccan King 'offended' the Tunisian president


هسبريس

الرئيسية | سياسة | جهات | مجتمع | اقتصاد | حوادث | السلطة الرابعة | فن وثقافة | تمازيغت | رياضة | صوت وصورة | خارج الحدود

24 ساعة

14:17 غزة تحصي 48 قتيلا في 24 ساعة
14:05 بوتين يلمح لإسقاط "طائرة أذربيجان"
13:36 الضباب يعرقل النقل الجوي ببريطانيا
13:23 الإتلاف يطال كمية مخدرات في وزان
12:41 عدد المشردين يزيد بـ18% في أمريكا
12:27 فتاة هشة تتسلم مساعدات بالرحامنة
11:33 حملة تسقط "مليشيات الأسد" بالأذقية
11:22 توقيف 394 مرشحا للهجرة في كلميم
10:45 الهند تودع رئيس الوزراء السابق سينغ
10:25 أرولاي يشيد بالإبداعات في الصويرة
09:53 الكاتب الخيتي يستعور "ضحك الليل"
09:09 الجفاف يغير ملامح الفلاحة في المغرب

صوت وصورة

السبت 28 دجنبر 2024 - 13:30 2
نوبة العشاق في ملتقى المعادي

السبت 28 دجنبر 2024 - 12:31 1
تشنجات عصبية الكرة بني ملال

هسبريس | سياسة

باحث يعتبر زيارة الملك لتونس تفوقا مغربيا على الجزائر

هسبريس- حسن حمورو

السبت 31 ماي 2014 - 23:15

قال محمد بودن الباحث في العلوم السياسية والقانون العام، إن الزيارة التي يقوم الملك محمد السادس إلى تونس بدعوة من الرئيس التونسي المنصف المرزوقي تندرج ضمن السياسة الخارجية "المتجددة" لكل من المغرب وتونس اللذان يتحركان وفق الباحث الجامعي في الدائرة المغاربية على المستوى الثاني في ظل جمود الاتحاد المغاربي فعليا.

المغرب يفرض نفسه على المنطقة

وأوضح بودن في حديث لهسبريس أن أهمية زيارة الملك محمد السادس الى تونس تكمن في عدة مؤشرات، أولها أن المملكة المغربية كانت تحاصر من قبل الجزائر والنظام الليبي "البائد" واليوم أضحت تتحرك في مساحة جغرافية وسياسية كبيرة، وبدأت تلعب أدوارا مهمة في النيجر ومالي وليبيا وتونس، وأنها باتت تقدم نموذجا إصلاحيا يمكن أن تقدم من خلاله المساعدة في المأسسة والبناء، ناهيك عن الثقة التي يحظى بها النموذج الديني المغربي الذي يعد أفضل مدرسة في التثقيف الروحي، ترجمته حسب بودن طلبات دول عديدة تريد الاستفادة من الخبرة المغربية في إحقاق الأمن من الروحي والوحدة المذهبية من بينها تونس، خصوصا مع تزايد

Illustration 4.7. Article Published by the Moroccan News Website Hespress under the Title "An Analyst Considers the King's Visit to Tunisia an Indication of Moroccan Eminence Over Algeria"

Source: www.hespress.com



Illustration 4.8. An Article Published by the Algerian News Website Al-Shorouk under the Title "Signs of a Diplomatic Crisis Between Tunisia and Morocco Because of Western Sahara"

Source: www.echoroukonline.com

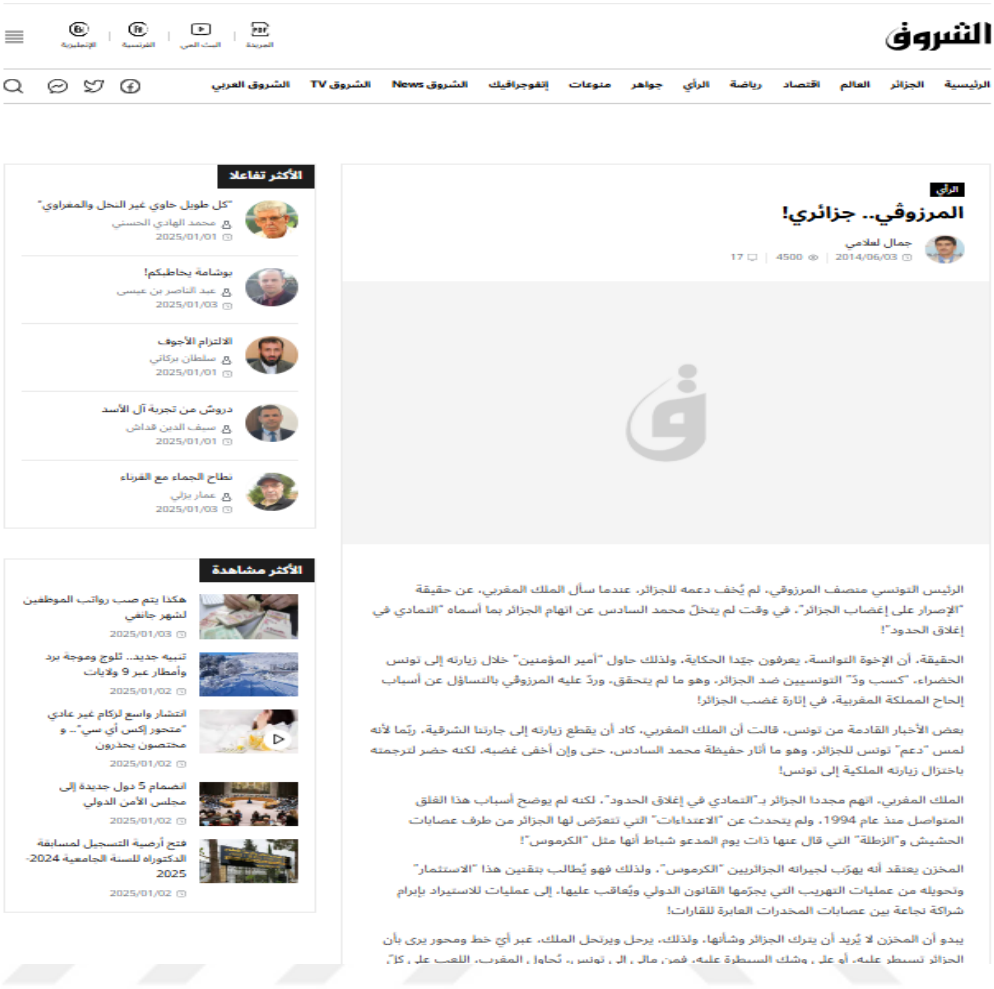


Illustration 4.9. An Article Published by the Algerian News Website Al-Shorouk under the Title "Marzouki… An Algerian"

Source: www.echoroukonline.com

Moncef Marzouk after the latter expressed his viewpoint regarding the issue of the Sahara… leading to the King canceling the remaining program of his visit". In another article by the same newspaper titled "Marzouki… an Algerian", Al-Shorouk reported on the Moroccan King's speech in front of the Tunisian national constituent assembly in which he addressed the ongoing border closure, indirectly criticizing Algeria for obstructing the Maghreb integration, by stating that "continuing to close the borders is not in line with the principles of the Maghreb Union, and is against the interests of the peoples aspiring to unity and integration". The Algerian outlet claimed in its report that the King's speech in front of the Tunisian parliament prompted the Tunisian president to question Morocco's "insistence on angering Algeria" leading to the presumed crisis. The article moved on to criticize the Moroccan foreign policy by stating that "the *Makhzen* seems not to want to leave Algeria alone. For this reason,

the King moves and travels along any line or axis that he perceives Algeria controls or is about to control. From Mali to Tunisia, Morocco attempts to play on all fronts. Its goal in these endeavours is to reap toxic fruits under the table in the name of competing with Algeria or disrupting it in its 'external arenas'!"

The controversy was so intense that the Moroccan palace issued, on a rare occasion, a press release to deny any dispute between the two leaders and confirm the success of the visit, criticizing what it considered "enemies of rapprochement between peoples and opponents of building the Maghreb edifice". As shown in *illustrations 4.10* and *4.11,* Moroccan media outlets consciously made the decision to celebrate the visit, choosing to focus on its elements of success. The Moroccan government's online portal published numerous reports advocating for the historical significance of the royal visit and celebrating its success by highlighting the importance of more than 24 cooperation agreements and memorandums of understanding that were signed between the two countries, including "security, health, economy, tourism, and energy". Hespress and other Moroccan media outlets emphasized the King's decision to extend his visit to the neighboring Maghrebi country to alleviate security concerns and boost the country's tourism sector. The significance of this royal visit to Tunisia was not only related to its agenda aiming at demonstrating the kingdom's welcome and willingness to work and collaborate with "revolutionary Tunisia" but also due to the geopolitical strategy of Tunisia for Morocco as a North African country neighbouring both Morocco and Algeria and a member of the Arab Maghreb Union.

While most of the media coverage focused on the significance of the visit in the general context of the Arab Spring, the shadow of the Western Sahara issue was bound to be present in some way throughout the visit and cast its shadow on it due to the sensitivity of Tunisia's position towards the issue having tried for decades to maintain a difficult balance in its approach to both Morocco and Algeria. In spite of this visit to Tunisia by the Moroccan monarch not resulting in any change in the country's attitude or policy towards the issue of Western Sahara, it remains very important to include in the context of this study, first for the purpose of showcasing the highly significant weight of the royal visits in the context of Moroccan foreign policy, any other Moroccan official's visit would not have garnered as much attention and controversy as that of the King. Second, the lack of any substantive results of the visit regarding Moroccan

interests in the issue of Western Sahara serves to identify the limitations of the Moroccan counter-recognition strategy towards the SADR.



Illustration 4.10. An Article Published by the Semi-Publicly Owned Newspaper "The Sahara" Reporting on the King's "Thanks and Gratitude" at the End of His Visit to Tunisia in 2014

Source: www.maroc.ma


هسبريس

الرئيسية | سياسة | جهات | مجتمع | اقتصاد | حوادث | السلطة الرابعة | فن وثقافة | تمازيغت | رياضة | صوت وصورة | خارج الحدود

24 ساعة

14:31 الشيبي يعاقب بالإيقاف وغرامة مالية
14:17 غزة تحصي 48 قتيلا في 24 ساعة
14:05 بوتين يلمح لإسقاط "طائرة أذربيجان"
13:36 الضباب يعرقل النقل الجوي ببريطانيا
13:23 الإتلاف يطال كمية مخدرات في وزان
12:41 عدد المشردين يزيد بـ18% في أمريكا
12:27 فتاة هشة تتسلم مساعدات بالرحامنة
11:33 حملة تسقط "ميليشيات الأسد" بالأذقية
11:22 توقيف 394 مرشحا للهجرة في كلميم
10:45 الهند تودع رئيس الوزراء السابق سينغ
10:25 أزولاي يشيد بالإبداعات في الصويرة
09:53 الكاتب الخيفي يستفور "ضحك الليل"

صوت وصورة

السبت 28 دجنبر 2024 - 13:30
نوبة العشاق في ملتقى العبادي

السبت 28 دجنبر 2024 - 12:31
تشنجات عصبة الكرة بيني ملال

هسبريس | سياسة

الملك محمد السادس يواصل جولاته "الداعمة" للسياحة بتونس

هسبريس - عبد المغيث جبران

الخميس 5 يونيو 2014 - 14:00

يتابع الملك محمد السادس زيارته الخاصة في تونس، بعد أن كان مقررا أن يقضي ثلاثة أيام في زيارة العمل الرسمية التي قام بها لبلد الياسمين، ممتدة بين يومي الجمعة والأحد الماضي، حيث مد زيارته التي لاقت متابعة لافتة من طرف التونسيين والمغاربة على حد سواء.

وملأت صور العاهل المغربي العديد من الجرائد الورقية والمواقع الإلكترونية وصفحات الفايسبوك في المغرب تماما كما في تونس، حيث يظهر كل يوم في صور عديدة وبـ"لوك" جددي ومتغير مع مواطنين تونسيين، وإلى جانب مغاربة تونس أيضا.

Illustration 4.11. An Article Published on the Renowned Moroccan News Website Hespress Reporting on the King's Visit to Tunisia in 2014 under the Title "King Mohammed VI Continues His Supportive Visit of Tunisian Tourism"

Source: www.hespress.com

On the other hand, royal visits of King Mohammed VI to the Gulf during the same period proved to be more successful and relevant to Moroccan interests and the kingdom's counter-recognition strategy. While the frequent visits of the Moroccan King to the region at the time were relevant to the context of the Arab Spring and the desire of leaders in the Gulf to create a united front of monarchies against the threatening waves of the Arab Spring by having both Morocco and Jordan join the Gulf Cooperation Council, Morocco was more interested in pursuing a policy of

rapprochement with these countries in service of its foreign policy interests and diversifying its alliance formation strategy. At a time when the project of Morocco and Jordan joining the GCC failed, the two sides (Morocco and Gulf monarchies) achieved institutionalizing their mutual rapprochement policy through a joint cooperation summit, which first took place in 2016 in Saudi Arabia. The Moroccan King was very clear in his speech during the first summit in laying down the kingdom's determinants and objectives of this rapprochement strategy, emphasizing the independence of the Moroccan decision-making and the priority of its territorial integrity[42], stating that "Despite Morocco's keenness to maintain its strategic relations with its allies, it has moved in recent months towards diversifying its partnerships, whether at the political, strategic or economic levels", adding that "Morocco is free in its decisions and choices and is not a protectorate of any country. It will remain faithful to its obligations towards its partners, who should not see in this any harm to their interests". Among other issues, King Mohammed VI dedicated a considerable portion of his speech in front of the first Moroccan-Gulf summit in Riyadh to the issue of Western Sahara as follows:

> **The hostile plans targeting our stability are ongoing and will not cease.** After tearing apart and destroying several countries in the Arab East, these plans are now targeting the West. **The latest of these manoeuvres is aimed at undermining the territorial integrity** of your second homeland, Morocco. This is not new. Morocco's adversaries use all means, both direct and indirect, in their overt manipulations. Depending on the circumstances, **they attempt to delegitimize Morocco's presence in its Sahara, promote the option of independence and the separatist narrative, or weaken the autonomy initiative, which has been recognized by the international community as credible and serious**. With the persistence of these conspiracies, the month of April, which coincides with the United Nations Security Council's meetings on the Sahara issue, has become a scarecrow raised before Morocco—a tool sometimes used to pressure us and at other times to blackmail us…**We take this opportunity to express our pride and appreciation for your steadfast support for our country in defending its territorial integrity**. The Moroccan Sahara has always been a cause for the Gulf states as well. This is no surprise. **In 1975, delegations from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the Sultanate of Oman, and the UAE participated in the Green March to recover our southern provinces**… Since then, **the Gulf countries have spared no effort to support our just cause and to defend Morocco's sovereignty over all its territories**. This was reaffirmed during the recent crisis with the UN Secretary-General.
>
> However, the situation this time is grave and unprecedented in the history of this fabricated dispute over the Moroccan Sahara. **It has reached the point of waging a proxy war by using the UN Secretary-General as a tool to undermine Morocco's legitimate historical rights to its Sahara through biased statements and unacceptable actions regarding the Moroccan Sahara**… What can the Secretary-General do when he admits that he is not fully informed about the Moroccan Sahara issue, as with many other issues? He lacks detailed knowledge of its developments and true background. **What can the Secretary-General accomplish when he is held hostage by some of his assistants and advisors, who are entrusted with overseeing significant matters and whose proposals he merely**

[42] See the full text of King Mohammed VI's speech in https://www.maroc.ma/sites/default/files/pdfs/message_7361_ar.pdf

> **implements?** It is well known that **some of these officials have national agendas and political biases, serving the interests of other parties without adhering to the neutrality and objectivity required by their affiliation with the United Nations**… I want to emphasize here that Morocco has no problem with the United Nations, of which it is an active member, nor with the Security Council, whose members it respects and interacts with regularly. Rather, the issue lies with the Secretary-General, particularly with some of his aides, due to their antagonistic positions towards Morocco.
> **Morocco has consistently coordinated** on this **fabricated dispute over its territorial integrity with its traditional allies**, such as the United States, France, and Spain, **as well as with its Arab brothers, particularly the Gulf states**, and **with African nations** like Senegal, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and Gabon. However, **the problem persists with officials in administrations that undergo frequent changes in some of these countries**. **Each change requires significant efforts to acquaint them with all dimensions of the Moroccan Sahara issue**, its true background, and to remind them that this dispute, which has lasted over 40 years, has resulted in numerous victims and significant financial costs. Moreover, the Sahara issue is a matter for all Moroccans, not just the Royal Palace alone.

As demonstrated by the excerpt above and the quotes included in the section before that, King Mohammed VI's of Morocco, used an even more direct language on the issue of Western Sahara, criticizing the UN secretary general and "Morocco's adversaries" and their "hostile plans", while praising Gulf countries and what he described as their historic and continued support of Morocco. The North African kingdom while, adopting a new alliance formation policy based on diversifying its partners based on political and economic interests was clear on the objective of garnering support for its first national cause and isolating the SADR and its supporters.

Despite many obstacles that faced this Moroccan-Gulf rapprochement strategy (mainly due to the Gulf crisis and the diplomatic boycott of Qatar) Morocco started reaping the fruits of this policy concretely soon after its launch in 2012. Maintaining a balanced approach towards the Gulf at the height of the interstate conflict in the region while not an easy feat to achieve was crucial for Morocco based on an understanding of the needs of the kingdom for supportive allies in the region. numerous studies were published to address this relationship and identify both the possible risks and gains of the North African kingdom (Nadwi 2017; Kssim 2020; Abouzzohour 2021). In the study published by Aljazeera Centre For Studies, under the title "Moroccan-Gulf Relations: Contexts and Causes of Tension", Driss Kssim (2020) identifies three main determinants and domains of this relationship; first religion and ideology, second economy, and third, strategic and security. In analyzing the less-than-free sailing of the relationship between the two parties, the study accounted for Morocco's welcoming yet undecisive decision to join the GCC by the desire of the kingdom to "Benefit from the economic potentials this membership will provide" and

“Strengthening Morocco's regional political influence and framing the geopolitical dimensions of its dispute with neighboring oil-rich Algeria, particularly as Algeria has utilized its oil wealth to significantly increase defense spending and intensify its diplomatic offensive to bolster support for the Polisario separatists”, yet Morocco’s careful approach to the GCC by neither accepting nor refusing the invitation to join the organization was based on the kingdom’s unwillingness to be firmly entrenched with other monarchies in the region in their approach to the Arab Spring. Morocco was not willing to compromise, according to Kssim (2020), on the reforms it has enacted to address its own internal and external threats posed by the changing winds of the Arab Spring. The kingdom was also very clear, according to Kssim, in confirming that while seeking to achieve a partnership or an advanced status with the Gulf, the Maghreb region remains to represent its strategic depth. For different reasons, the economic factor was highly crucial for both sides, at a time when the GCC aid to Morocco increased during that period, Moroccan exports to the Gulf countries have increased significantly as well during the same period (See *figure 4.2*).

In her article “Bridging the rift in the Gulf region: Morocco’s risks and gains” published by the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, Yasmina Abouzzohour (2021) asserts that Morocco's strong ties with the Gulf countries have allowed it to diversify its base of allies beyond Europe and reduce its reliance on the influence of the European Union. This aligns as one of the key foreign policy objectives of the kingdom in its reorientation of its foreign policy since the second decade of the third millennium toward the Gulf, Africa, and emerging world powers such as China and Russia. Additionally, “close relations with the Gulf region support Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara” according to Abouzzohour (2021). The high stakes of these royal visits and the projected relations with the Gulf states were clearly expressed in Moroccan media. Under the title “The King’s Visit to the Gulf states…various goals” The Moroccan “**Hespress**” published on 15 October 2012 an analysis examining the “reasons and implications” of those visits, acknowledging the economic and political stakes of their agenda. Pointing out the careful selection of the royal visits that focused alongside Jordan to include key players in the region (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait) and concluding that “Today, more than ever, Morocco is concerned with developing a comprehensive strategy regarding its international role, in which it

balances the traditional international axes, represented mainly by Europe and America, and its regional strategic depth at the Arab and African levels".

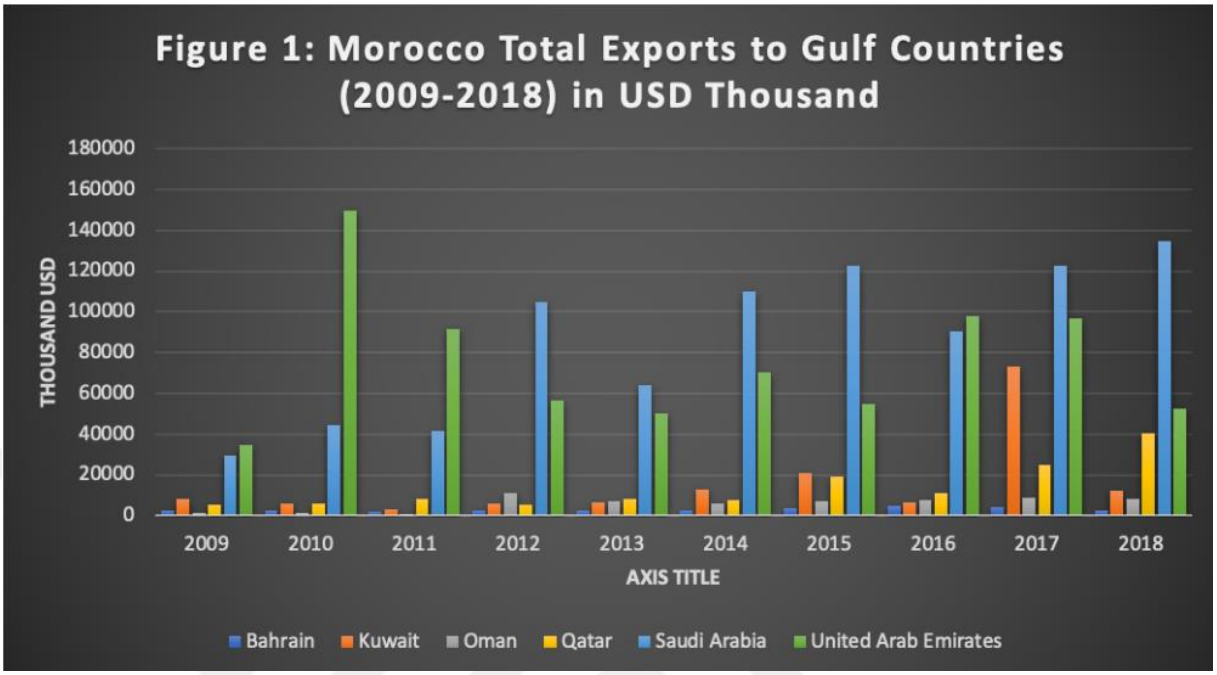


Figure 4.2. A Diagram Showing Morocco's Total Exports to the Gulf Countries (2009-2018)

Source: Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis based on Data provided by World Integrated Trade Solution

Reaping the fruits of this rapprochement policy with the Arab world did not take long to materialize in service of Morocco's interests regarding the issue of Western Sahara. As indicated in *illustrations 4.12 – 4.13 and 4.14* and as one of the clearest indicators of their support of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory and rejection of any separatist projects in the area, three Arab countries opened diplomatic representations in the southern provinces of Morocco (Western Sahara). With the UAE opening the first Arab consulate in the City of Laayoune in November 2020, two more Arab countries quickly followed suit and opened their own diplomatic missions in the same city; Bahrain in December 2020, and Jordan in March 2021. The significance of these decisions is the clear change of a long-lasting Arab policy of parity and non-involvement in the issue of the Sahara. By aligning the economic and political interests of Morocco with those of other Arab states (especially in the Gulf), Morocco

successfully guaranteed their support of its position in clear diplomatic and concrete terms.

a- Jordan

During the opening ceremony of the Jordanian consulate in Laayoune, the Jordanian minister of foreign affairs, Ayman Safadi confirmed his country's "firm position, that we have been and will continue to stand by the territorial integrity of the kingdom of Morocco… and working with our brothers to reach a solution of the Moroccan Sahara issue according to international legitimacy resolutions and in accordance with the autonomy initiative launched by Morocco"[43]. For his part, the Moroccan Foreign Minister, Nasser Bourita focused on "The strong bonds of friendship and brotherhood that unite the leaders of the two countries" pointing out the role that the kingdom of Morocco -in cooperation with the Kingdom of Jordan- plays in supporting Palestinians through social, educational, and medical projects within the frame the Quds committee (Headed by Morocco). Highlighting the support of the committee and *Bayt Mal Al-Quds* agency for residents of Jerusalem during the coronavirus pandemic, the Moroccan foreign minister emphasized "the importance and priority King Mohammed VI gives to the Palestinian issue is on the same level of that of the Moroccan Sahara issue"[44]

b- Bahrain

When the Kingdom of Bahrain made the decision to open a consulate in the city of Laayoune in December 2020, the state's official news agency published a report announcing the decison

[43] See Euronews Arabic article titled "Jordan officially inaugurates a consulate in the city of Laayoune" https://arabic.euronews.com/2021/03/04/jordanian-foreign-minister-officially-inaugurate-jordanian-consulate-western-sahara-morocc

[44] See the article published by the official website of the Moroccan Foreign Ministry about the inauguration of the Jordanian consulate in Laayoune https://shorturl.at/t9wWY



Illustration 4.12. Inauguration of the Jordanian Consulate in Laayoune in 2021

Source: www.addustour.com



Illustration 4.13. Inauguration of the Bahraini Consulate in Laayoune in 2020

Source: www.skynewsarabia.com



Illustration 4.14. Inauguration of the Emirati Consulate in Laayoune in 2020

And explaining the reasons leading to it, asserting the good relations between the two countries by emphasizing the mutual visits between the sovereigns of both countries and especially the visit of King Mohammed VI to Bahrain in 2019 and the visit of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain to Rabat in January 2020. Stating that "the historic decision to open a Bahraini consulate in the city of Laayoune confirms the commitment of the kingdom… to supporting the legitimate rights of the kingdom of Morocco in its southern Moroccan provinces per the autonomy initiative proposed by the kingdom of Morocco in 2007 and reinforces the immutable approach of the Bahraini foreign policy since establishing diplomatic relations between the two kingdoms on 5 March 1973"[45]. According to the same report, the relations between the two countries have accelerated since the last meeting of the Joint Higher Committee for Cooperation in Rabat in 2018. Since then, the two countries have signed more than 60 cooperation agreements and Memorandums of understanding, promoting trade exchange among them, which reached 104 million USD in 2019, as well as establishing joint economic projects, with Morocco investing in 444 commercial and service companies in Bahrain and Bahraini investments in the Moroccan real estate, tourism, and banking sectors. During the inauguration ceremony of the Bahraini consulate in Laayoune on 14 December 2020, Bahraini Minister of Foreign Affairs

[45] See the full report by the Bahrain News Agency in https://bna.bh/news?cms=q8FmFJgiscL2fwIzON1%2BDl8DvZYT543IwWpmVDVjE%2Bk%3D

Abdullatif bin Rashid Alzayani reiterated his country's "Full support and solidarity with Morocco in its legitimate and historic rights in the Sahara", confirming that Bahrain "used to be and will remain alongside Morocco in its defending its unity and sovereignty over its entire territory". The ministers of both countries referred in their speeches to the American decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara which took place only days before Bahrain's decision.

c- UAE

The UAE's decision to establish a diplomatic mission in Laayoune was significant for the Moroccan interests in the Sahara. Choosing the 45th anniversary of the Green March to inaugurate the Emirati consulate in the biggest city in the territory was a clear indication from both countries that the UAE supports Morocco in its claims over the territory. During the inauguration of the Emirati consulate, Moroccan foreign minister, Nasser Bourita chose to highlight three major points in relation to the UAE's decision; first the personal relationships between the leaders of the two countries over the decades with "Successive high-level visits between officials of the two countries, which enabled bilateral relations to be raised to the level of a strategic partnership and opened new horizons for cooperation between the two countries in various fields". Second, the economic relations between the two countries, stating that "Today, the United Arab Emirates has become one of the most important economic partners of the Kingdom of Morocco at the Arab level, which indicates the mutual trust between the two brotherly countries, and the growing interest of Emirati economic actors in the investment opportunities offered by Morocco thanks to the new development model for the southern regions of the Kingdom". And lastly, the corresponding support of Morocco to the UAE in their territorial dispute with Iran, saying that "Morocco remains steadfast, with determination and resolve, in its support for the United Arab Emirates to reclaim its three islands—Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa—and to assert its sovereignty over its airspace, territorial waters, and economic zone". Bourita concluded by confirming that "This stance stems from Morocco's commitment to safeguarding the territorial integrity of Arab countries and its belief in the necessity of strengthening unity and combating divisions to face future challenges"[46].

[46] See the full article published by the official portal of the Moroccan foreign ministry https://shorturl.at/09pvp

With Morocco preparing to host the 2030 World Cup alongside Spain and Portugal, the Kingdom has "an ambitious plan" to boost the country's infrastructure, digital transformation, and connectivity[47] providing ample need and opportunities for internal and external investments with an investment package valued at 4.4 billion USD according to Arabian Gulf Business Insight[48]. In a push to secure some of these investments and significant ones across the African continent, King Mohammed VI made a visit to Abu Dhabi in December 2023, where the two sides signed an announcement to establish "an innovative, renewed, and solid partnership between the Kingdom of Morocco and the United Arab Emirates." for the objective of both countries to initiate "a pioneering joint strategic economic partnerships at the regional and international market levels, particularly with the African sphere"[49]. Less than a year following this announcement, Moroccan media started reporting on a joint project between the UAE, Morocco, and Mauritania. Under the title "An ambitious Emirati project on the Atlantic coast strengthens the Moroccan-Mauritanian Partnership", the Moroccan *Alhadath al'iifriqi* (**The African Event** https://www.alhadathlifriqui.com/) reported on an investment project, funded by the UAE, to connect the Moroccan coasts through the port of Dakhla in Western Sahara to the city of Nouadhibou in Mauritania, within the framework of Morocco's 'Atlantic Initiative' to enable the Sahel and Sahara countries to access the Atlantic Ocean.

By pointing out "the pivotal role" of the Moroccan-Emirati partnership and the latter's substantive contribution in funding "Renewable energy projects along the Atlantic coast and energy connectivity initiatives, such as supporting the African-Atlantic gas pipeline. Development of seaports and infrastructure to stimulate regional and international trade", the Moroccan outlet pointed out the positive impact of such investment projects on improving and developing the relations between Morocco and Mauritania and the latter's adoption of "a balanced policy in addressing regional challenges, where it seeks to advance its interests with Morocco while avoiding

[47] The Moroccan Minister of equipment and water, Nizar Baraka announced on December 2024 in a parliamentary session at the House of Councillors. See https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2024/12/367197/moroccos-2030-world-cup-infrastructure-projects-extend-to-35-cities-says-minister

[48] See "Morocco makes 2030 World Cup a focus for Investment" in https://www.agbi.com/analysis/business-of-sport/2024/08/morocco-makes-world-cup-a-focus-for-investment/

[49] See the Middle East Online's article "A summit meeting cements a broader and closer partnership between the UAE and Morocco" https://shorturl.at/9YAHk

alignment with other axes, such as Algeria, which promotes initiatives opposing Morocco's approach toward Africa"[50]. In an analysis of the developments taking place in Moroccan-Mauritanian relations following the recent visit of the president of Mauritania, Mohamed Ould Cheikh Ghazouani to Morocco in which he met with the Moroccan King, and the Emirati role in advancing those relations, under the title "reclaiming Mauritania", Moroccan renowned journalist and editor in chief of "**The Voice of Morocco**", Youness Meskine suggested that "Signs of a geopolitical shift revitalizing the Rabat-Nouakchott axis" are in the horizon. By analyzing the historically complicated relationship between Morocco and Mauritania and considering the tripartite relations with the UAE[51], Meskine described the projected improved ties with the Southern neighbor as a "Reclaiming" of Mauritania in reference to Morocco's wooing of Mauritania to support its position on the Sahara issue and blocking Algeria's interventions.

To sum up this section regarding Morocco's strategy, it is clear how the North African kingdom engaged in a shift of its Alliance formation strategy, adopting a rapprochement strategy with the Arab world to weaken the decades-long policy of parity by Arab states towards the issue of Western Sahara. By employing royal visits to the region and providing investment opportunities to strengthen economic ties with Gulf countries, Morocco successfully garnered clear support from three Arab countries, solidifying regional momentum for its proposed autonomy plan for the Sahara as the only permanent solution to the issue. As demonstrated in the case of Tunisia, this strategy has limitations that keep obstructing the kingdom's objectives in garnering support for its position within the Maghreb region, yet the recent development in the relations with Mauritania showcase that the ties with key players in the Gulf can serve to achieve diplomatic gains beyond the bilateral relations with those countries. It seems that Gulf investments can contribute to strengthening Morocco's economic strategy in the African continent as well.

[50] See the full article on https://www.alhadathlifriqui.com/?p=71340

[51] See the Full article titled "Reclaiming Mauritania" by Youness Meskine on https://thevoice.ma/%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7/

4.2.2.2. Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean

Morocco's relationship with Africa, on the other hand, was more paradoxical. While the biggest challenge in approaching the Arab world laid in trying to break down the solidified parity policy adopted by the majority of the Arab states for decades towards the issue of the Sahara, Morocco was forced to contend with more complicated challenges in Africa, making the approach to the continent and reshaping of the kingdom's alliances and counter-recognition strategy of the SADR rather trickier. This paradoxical relationship could be understood by highlighting two major points: first, the historical ties of the kingdom with many countries in the continent that date back centuries poised Morocco to start from an advantageous position in terms of reshaping its alliances within Africa; second, the existence of hostile actors within the continent toward Morocco's claim over Western Sahara that led the kingdom to leave the Organization of African Unity in 1984 meant that Morocco had a difficult path forward to rejoin the fold and effectively enact its counter-recognition strategy.

Similar to its approach to the Arab World, Morocco used the symbolic weight of royal visits to redraw the map of its African alliances. What served the kingdom in this regard is that, unlike with the Arab world, Morocco didn't completely disengage with Africa[52]. Building on the pre-existing historic ties and concrete diplomatic ties with various African states, Moroccan diplomacy focused its efforts on two axes: strengthening existing relations and building new significant ones. The latter axis required that Morocco strategically approach key African states that would well serve Morocco in the reshaping of its overall alliance formation and counter-recognition strategy. The most significant diplomatic overture in this regard is the royal visit of King Mohammed VI in late 2016 to Rwanda, Tanzania, and Ethiopia. All three African states officially recognize the Polisario Front and oppose Morocco's claim over the Western Sahara. The royal visit to these countries came during the Kingdom's bid to return to the African fold and join the African Union after leaving the OAU in 1984 in a protest against the decision to admit the SADR to the organization. **France 24** pointed out how the royal visit to the three African countries was accompanied by "The most significant change Moroccan diplomacy has experienced" since King

[52] Despite leaving the Organization of African Unity, Morocco maintained political, economic, and cultural relations with several African states, especially in the Sahel, like Mali and Senegal.

Mohammed VI ascended the throne in 1999, reporting that the visit of the Moroccan monarch to the region in the Kingdom's bid to reclaim its position in the African organization coincided with his appointment of nearly seventy new ambassadors (almost half of the Kingdom's ambassadors), "including 18 appointed in African countries where Morocco had been almost absent"[53].

For various geopolitical factors, Africa remains crucial for Moroccan foreign policy and its counter-recognition strategy but it's not the only sphere that Morocco is interested in engaging with. As explained in the literature review section of this thesis, for the Kingdom to achieve its objectives of derecognizing the SADR and garnering international support for its proposed autonomy plan for the Sahara, Morocco needs to accomplish both "**Selective**" and "**Broad**" recognition of its plan. In a study conducted by Caroline Hecht of Georgetown University in 2024, she identified how Africa houses the majority of countries that "do or did recognize the SADR", while Latin America "predominates the reverser category". Understandably, this makes the continent crucial for Morocco to implement its derecognition strategy. By analyzing the positions of states concerned with the question of Recognition and Derecognition of the SADR, Hecht divided them into three major categories: holdouts, reversers, and cyclers. Holdouts are countries that firmly support the SADR claims over Western Sahara and have never changed their position on the matter. Reversers are countries that have made the decision to revoke their recognition of the entity, and cyclers are states that have at least once revoked their recognition of the SADR and then reversed that decision to another recognition. This last category can sometimes keep moving between recognition and derecognition multiple times. As shown in *Table 1* below, the decision of these countries to derecognize the SADR at least once comes in correspondence to various tools employed by Morocco in its "Derecognition diplomacy". Besides domestic politics, power politics, and other tools, economy remains to be the predominant instrument in the kingdom's toolkit according to the study. According to the author, economic tools have been identified to be used in 28 cases "exclusively by Morocco".

[53] See the full article on France 24 under the title "The Moroccan monarch begins an African tour to reclaim the kingdom's seat in the African Union" in https://tinyurl.com/4w6ketzv

Table 4.1. Foreign Policy Tools of Morocco's SADR's Derecognition Strategy

	Total countries	Economics	Domestic politics	Identity	Power politics	International law
Holdouts	28	3	1	0	0	0
Reversers	35	18	3	2	2	16
Cyclers	21	7	5	0	0	11

Source (Derecognition Diplomacy: A Study of Morocco's Foreign Policy on the Western Sahara by Caroline Hecht, 2024)

Sampling African, Caribbean, and Latin American countries, the study suggests that Morocco utilizes economic incentives to convince countries in these regions to support the Moroccan position and revoke their recognition of the SADR. The same conclusion is arrived at by Victor S. Mariottini de Oliveira (2023), who proposed the "Recognition for Sale", or "Rental recognition" theory, who states that apart from specific cases, most derecognitions of the SADR "are seen as a condition necessary to strengthen economic ties with Morocco". While subtly understood for decades, the causation between economic incentives and derecognitions of the SADR can be deduced as an official tool of the Moroccan counter-recognition strategy from the speech of King Mohammed VI of Morocco in celebration of the 46th anniversary of the Green March:

> "…We take pride in **the sovereign decision of the United States of America, which recognized Morocco's full sovereignty over its Sahara**. This is a natural result of the continuous support of previous U.S. administrations and their constructive role in resolving this issue. **This direction irreversibly strengthens the political process towards a final solution based on the autonomy initiative within the framework of Moroccan sovereignty**. Furthermore, **the opening of more than 24 consulates in the cities of Laayoune and Dakhla affirms the broad support for Morocco's stance, especially within our Arab and African surroundings**. This represents the best legal and diplomatic response to those who claim that recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara is neither explicit nor tangible. **Today, we are entitled to expect bolder and clearer positions from our partners regarding the Kingdom's territorial integrity**. Such positions will contribute to supporting the political process and the efforts being made to reach a final and applicable solution.
>
> Dear People, Morocco does not negotiate over its Sahara. The Moroccan Sahara has never been and will never be on the negotiation table. Instead, we negotiate to find a peaceful solution to this fabricated regional conflict. On this basis, we reaffirm Morocco's commitment to the United Nations-led political process…The positive developments regarding the Sahara issue also bolster the ongoing development trajectory witnessed in our southern provinces. These regions are experiencing comprehensive developmental progress, including infrastructure, economic, and social projects. Thanks to these initiatives, the Sahara regions have become open spaces for development and both domestic and foreign investment. **We**

> **are grateful to have sincere international partners who invest alongside the national private sector within a framework of clarity and transparency, benefiting the region's population**. We express our appreciation to the countries and organizations that have agreements and partnerships with Morocco, recognizing our southern provinces as an integral part of the national territory. **To those with ambiguous or dual positions, we say: Morocco will not undertake any economic or trade agreements with them that do not include the Moroccan Sahara**…"[54]

With the accumulation of various diplomatic achievements by Morocco, through clear support by various countries revoking their recognition of the SADR and inaugurating diplomatic missions in the cities of Laayoune and Dakhla (Western Sahara) and the American decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the entire territory of Western Sahara, the Moroccan monarch was very straightforward in his demand for "bolder and clearer positions" from the kingdom's partners in regard to its territorial integrity. By deciding to withhold any economic or trade agreements that do not include "the Moroccan Sahara" with "those with ambiguous or dual positions" King Mohammed VI figuratively drew a line in the sand and announced his country's policy going forward regarding the corresponding relation between the issue of Western Sahara and the establishment of any economic ties with the kingdom.

4.2.2.3. Global and Regional Powers

a- USA

Going back to the proposed axes of the Moroccan counter-recognition strategy, the Kingdom was seeking to achieve both "Broad" and "Selective" recognition. To emphasize, any recognition of the Moroccan position consequently means the Derecognition of the SADR claims. In order to achieve its stated objectives in relation to its territorial integrity, the Kingdom was bound to seek "selective" recognitions among world and emerging powers to strengthen the country's position after the increasing success of achieving "Broad" recognition in the Arab World, Africa, and the global south in general. As a first step in garnering this selective recognition of key members of the Security Council, Morocco actively engaged with the American efforts during the first Trump administration 2017-2021 to initiate diplomatic relations between Israel and various states in the MENA region. By joining the "Abraham Accords" on 22 December 2020, Morocco was able to guarantee an American proclamation to recognize the kingdom's sovereignty over the entire territory of

[54] The full text of the royal speech of King Mohammed VI on the occasion of 46th anniversary of the Green March published by the official portal of the Moroccan government https://shorturl.at/K79Mq

Western Sahara, which was announced days before the signing of the joint declaration to normalize relations with Israel.

b- Old Colonial Powers (France & Spain)

In the case of Spain and France, due to their colonial history and their direct involvement in the creation of the issue of Western Sahara, as well as their ongoing interests in the Mediterranean and African continent, Morocco was well aware that the two European countries were directly concerned with any future resolution of the conflict and cannot be sidestepped in that regard. Through the highs and lows, Morocco was yet again able to successfully convince the two countries to change course in their stated policy towards the issue of Western Sahara, which has for decades been ambiguous. Less than two years after the American recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory, Spain declared its support of the Moroccan autonomy plan for the Sahara, stating that "Spain considered the autonomy initiative put forward by Morocco in 2007 as the most serious, realistic and credible basis for resolving the dispute over Western Sahara"[55]. In a joint press conference in December 2023 with his Spanish counterpart, Moroccan foreign minister, Nasser Bourita stated that "The relations between the two countries are based on several principles; the first is trust, especially in the fields of combating migration and terrorism, and economic cooperation based on mutual benefit. The second is mutual respect, whereby neither party makes unilateral decisions that affect the other". The Moroccan diplomat made sure to emphasize the importance of said economic relations between the two countries, adding that "it had developed unprecedentedly in 2022 and is expected to achieve an even greater leap in 2023", noting that the 2030 bid to host the World Cup "will be an opportunity to strengthen relations" (*Bourita: Relations Between Morocco and Spain Are in the Best State*, 2023).

France, on the other hand, took more time to reverse course. In a letter to the Moroccan King in July 2024, French President Emmanuel Macron proclaimed France's decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. The French "**Le Monde**" reported that the French President asserted in his letter to King Mohammed VI that the future of the territory "falls within the context of Moroccan sovereignty". Describing

[55] See Questions for written answers by the EU parliamentary question on https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2022-002180_EN.html

the decision as "a turning point in French diplomacy", the French outlet reported that the Élysée recognized the Moroccan autonomy plan as "the only basis for achieving a just, lasting and negotiated political solution in accordance with the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council."[56].

c- Russia and China

Unlike the case with the US, Spain, and France, it is highly unlikely that Morocco would be able to achieve a concrete breakthrough in changing the positions of world powers like China and Russia towards the issue of Western Sahara, at least in the foreseeable future. The low probability of the Moroccan counter-recognition strategy working in the case of China and Russia is due to the fact that both states are not as involved in the question of Western Sahara as their Western counterparts, moreover, any direct interest in the future might be harmful to Moroccan interests due to the ongoing conflict with other world powers in the continent especially the US. For while China's foreign policy has a "less interventionist approach", Russia, on the other hand, utilizes recognition and independence movements recognition as "strategic assets to weaken Western powers and expand its sphere of ideological and geopolitical influence" (Visoka et al, 2019, p. 8). The probability of Morocco's ties with Western powers might backfire in the case of their Eastern counterparts. Aware of this risk, the North African Kingdom has laid the foundation for a more engaged policy with the two world powers. Unlike his predecessor, who was keen on sparing the Kingdom direct involvement in the conflict between the East and West, King Mohammed VI adopted a more active approach towards emerging world powers. Through the exchange of visits between the leaders of the two countries (King Mohammed VI visited Moscow twice in 2002 and 2016, while the Russian president visited the kingdom back in 2006), Morocco and Russia established a "strategic partnership" since 2016, through which The Russian-Moroccan Business Council "works to support economic and technological cooperation between the two countries" according to the Russian "**Sputnik**". The same source highlighted the involvement of Russia in funding and supporting five major energy projects in Morocco[57].

[56] See the full article here https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2024/07/30/paris-shifts-position-and-recognizes-morocco-s-sovereignty-over-western-sahara_6705159_7.html

[57] See full report of "62nd Anniversary…History of Russian-Moroccan Relations" published by Russian outlet "Sputnik" in September 2020 via https://shorturl.at/s9xa5

While more ideologically aligned with Algeria, Russia's interests in the last two decades in developing relations with the Maghreb and Africa through a robust economic and military strategy provide equal opportunities for Morocco to advance its own interests. Similarly, the relationship with China appears to have the same importance for the Kingdom's objectives in diversifying its partners in service of its counter-recognition policy. With King Mohammed VI's visit to China in 2016 and the recent visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Morocco in November 2024, the bilateral relations between the two countries seem to be constantly improving. According to an analysis of **Aljazeera.net** published in October 2024, titled "Why is China keen on deepening the partnership with Morocco?", China became the third-largest trade partner of Morocco in 2022 and the first in Asia. The total volume of trade exchange reached $7.6 billion in 2024, and Chinese investments in Morocco currently amount to approximately $56 million, according to the same source[58]. Despite Morocco being at the bottom of the exporting North African partners of China and coming behind Algeria in the value of imports from China, as clearly depicted in *Figures 4.3* and *4.4*. The Kingdom is poised to develop its trade and economic relations with China further in the future.[59] The report points out the strategic geopolitical position of the Kingdom as the optimal Mediterranean partner for China to link Africa and Europe within the Chinese Belt and Road initiative. By carefully cultivating these relations, Morocco can benefit from developing its bilateral relations with China in service of its counter-recognition strategy and support for its autonomy plan.

[58] See full article "Why is China keen on deepening the partnership with Morocco?" in Arabic published on www.aljazeera.net in October 2024 https://shorturl.at/CEbRz
[59] Ibid

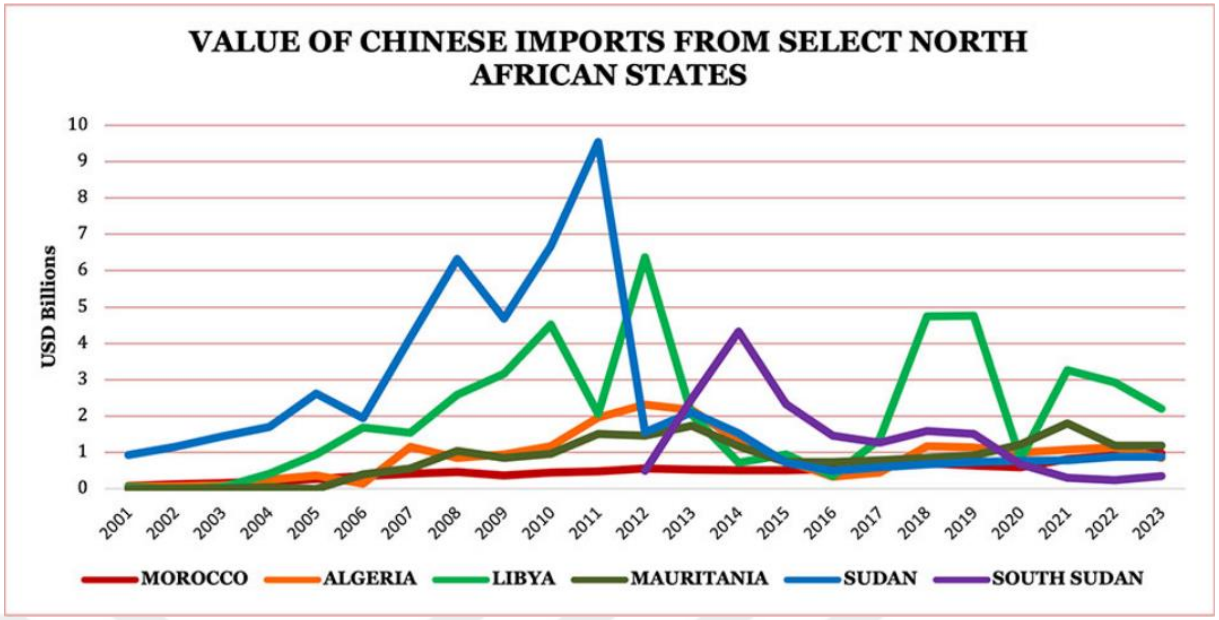


Figure 4.3. A Diagram Showing the Difference in Value of Chinese Imports from Morocco Compared to Other North African States in the Period 2001-2023

Source: China Global South Project via https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/exploring-new-data-on-sino-mediterranean-relations-trade-energy-security-and-contracts/

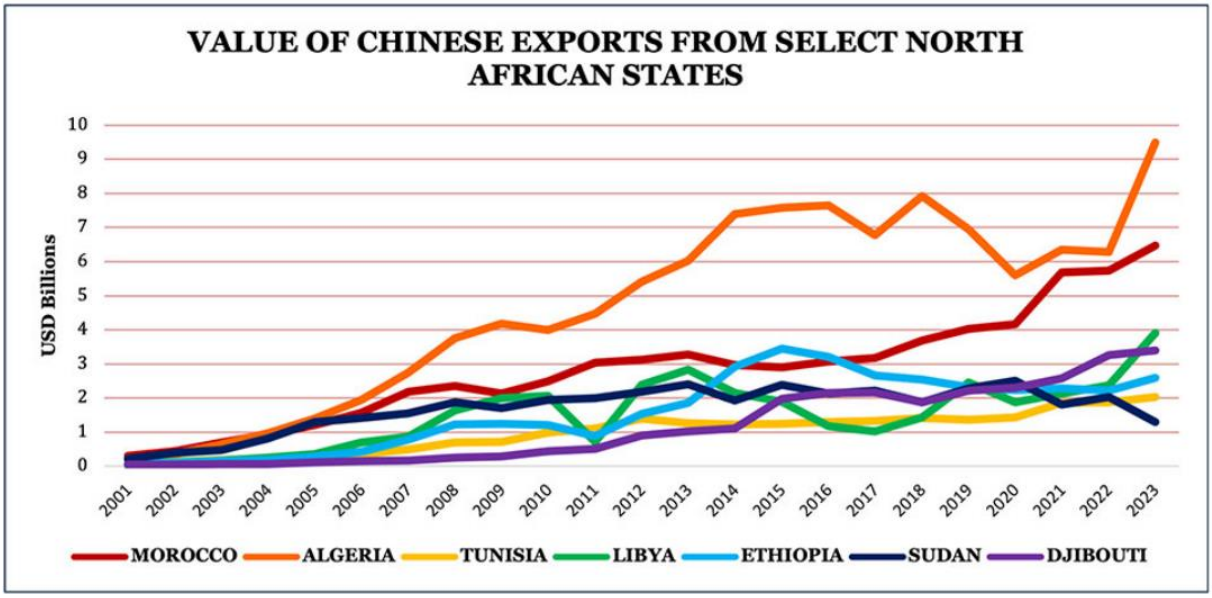


Figure 4.4. A Diagram Showing the Difference in Value of Chinese Exports to Morocco Compared to Other North African States in the Period 2001-2023

Source: China Global South Project

As demonstrated right from the beginning of this thesis and throughout different sections of the literature review, the question of Western Sahara is entrenched in the colonial history of the African continent. And today, as yesterday, Africa remains an important sphere of conflict between world powers. With the declining influence of traditional powers like France and Spain in the continent, new world powers like China and Russia are vying to compete against American hegemony in the continent providing small states in the global south to use Derecognition as a bargaining chip in their foreign policy toolkit as suggested by Visoka (2019) who states that it is "the only available foreign policy asset they can use to reduce their vulnerability, benefit from foreign aid". While the American decision in December 2020 to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory provided more momentum for the Moroccan position and its autonomy plan, the ongoing struggle between different world powers within Africa may explain the reason behind the continent housing the highest number of cycler states as per Hecht's study. If Morocco is to succeed in gaining the support of more world powers, mainly Russia and China, it might be able to minimize the highly volatile nature of derecognition both in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In terms of approaching the question of determining factors behind the decline in recognition of the SADR and assessing how the pursuit of Morocco as a parent state of a counter-recognition strategy by reshaping its alliance formation strategy proved successful, we must necessarily identify any observed trends pertaining to the question of Western Sahara. After decades of the SADR gaining momentum in the international arena, supported by Algeria and the international principle of self-determination as the basis for its claims over the territory, the self-proclaimed state successfully obtained the recognition of 84 UN member states and was able to join the Organization of African Unity in 1982 as a member state, yet not only was the entity not successful in achieving confirmed statehood and joining the international community as a sovereign UN member state, the SADR started witnessing a decline in international recognition. Starting in 1980 with Equatorial Guinea withdrawing its recognition of the entity, the pace picked up in the mid-1990s and became an observable trend ever since.

With King Mohammed VI ascending the throne of Morocco in 1999 and the changing tides of the Arab spring in the years following 2010, the *Makhzen* was bound to engage in an aggressive counter-recognition strategy of the SADR. With the kingdom's territorial integrity at stake and Western Sahara perceived as the "first national cause" in Morocco, the regime could not afford to resolve the issue in any manner not in line with its interests. This required an overhaul of the Kingdom's foreign policy and a reshaping of its alliance formation strategy. After decades of exclusive reliance on the US and France and most trusted allies of the Kingdom, a need for a diversification of Morocco's partners was paramount. Using the significant weight of royal visits, the North African kingdom adopted a rapprochement policy with the Arab World, especially with the Gulf to break the cycle of decades-long policy of parity of these states towards the Sahara issue. Contending with more hostile actors in Africa but at the same time possessing decades -if not centuries- of concrete relations with many African states, especially in Western and sub-Saharan Africa Morocco yet again

utilized the symbolic value of royal visits and both economic incentives and soft power tools to join the African Union in 2017 and put an end to a long-standing "empty chair" policy enacted by King Hassan II to protest admitting the SADR to the OAU.

The shift in the kingdom's alliance formation strategy and utilizing economic incentives in pursuit of a counter-recognition strategy proved successful in achieving the kingdom's foreign policy objectives of isolating the SADR and thwarting its efforts to achieve confirmed statehood. While difficult to compile a comprehensive list, numerous countries either revoked or suspended their recognition of the entity. Declining from 84 UN member states at one point recognizing SADR as a sovereign state, nowadays barely 30 states are still holding on to their recognition of the entity's claims over Western Sahara. Morocco is increasingly succeeding in convincing states in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America to Derecognize the polity, a considerable number have even opted to launch diplomatic missions in the contested territories under Moroccan rule. Morocco's counter-recognition strategy is gaining more momentum after successfully garnering explicit support for its claims from World and regional powers like the US, France, and Spain. This does not mean that this strategy is without limitations, as discussed in the data analysis section of this study, Morocco still has to contend with the weight of Algerian diplomacy and its role in circumventing Moroccan efforts. The failure in convincing or at least neutralizing Tunisia is a glaring example. At the same time, and due to the somewhat modern-day scramble for Africa, the kingdom is bound to contend with other world powers like Russia and China and their contradicting interests in the region with other Western powers vying for hegemony in the continent. While the current trend of increasing decline in the international recognition of the SADR is promising for Moroccan national interests, failure on the kingdom's part to balance the various world interests in the region will either maintain the status quo and decades-long standstill, or matters may be heading towards more escalation.

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