



# Outside Of Washington, Morocco Is Winning

January 27, 2022 **Ilan I. Berman** *Al-Hurra Digital*

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; International Economics and Trade; Global Health; Israel; Middle East; North Africa

These are trying times in the U.S.-Moroccan relationship. After consistently warm contacts with Washington during the Trump era, the Kingdom is now getting a decidedly chillier reception from the Biden White House. Although the new administration has reaffirmed its predecessor's determination regarding Rabat's sovereignty over the Western Sahara, it has so far failed to do much to reinforce the notion. At the same time, redoubled pressure from critics of the Kingdom in the U.S. Congress has resulted in new, more restrictive legislative language governing military cooperation between the two countries. That, coupled with a hit piece on the country's foreign minister in a leading foreign policy magazine, has put Rabat on the political back foot in recent weeks, at least as it regards its ties to Washington.

Elsewhere, however, the picture is very different. In Africa and the Middle East, the Kingdom's stature is unmistakably rising, buoyed by at least two distinct trends.

The first is African development. In recent years, the Kingdom has pursued a concerted strategy to increase its influence and appeal on the continent. That project has reaped some real diplomatic successes, particularly over the course of the coronavirus pandemic, throughout which Rabat's robust "health diplomacy" has helped provide vaccines, personal protective equipment and other aid to less well-off neighbors. As a consequence, the country has emerged as a regional political leader and a "gateway to Africa" for foreign powers eager to engage the rest of the continent.

The second is the growing connectivity unleashed by "Abraham Accords." Since they were signed in 2020, those normalization pacts have spurred a flurry of economic, political and diplomatic activity between their participants (Israel, the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco). But they are also having the effect of drawing the Kingdom closer to the strategic dynamics of the Middle East. Thus, at its most recent annual summit last month, the Gulf Cooperation Council formally endorsed Morocco's sovereignty over the entirety of the Western Sahara. (The Arab League has since followed suit and recognized Morocco's modern map, encompassing the Western Sahara.)

These moves represent a recognition of realities on the ground in the Kingdom's "southern provinces," where Rabat has further solidified its political presence and legitimacy since the Trump era. They are also a warning of sorts to Morocco's regional rival, Algeria, which has long harbored dreams of expanded regional influence that necessitate a weakening of Morocco's claim to the Sahara. The evolving Gulf stance likewise reflects a growing recognition of the Sahara's economic promise; the territory is now poised for an explosion of new business, development and connectivity, and the countries of the Persian Gulf are understandably eager to capitalize on it.

But all this dynamism has failed to register within the Capital Beltway – at least so far. To date, the Biden administration's embrace of the Kingdom has been tepid at best, and its recognition of the Sahara has come with concrete strings attached: that Rabat restart the moribund peace process with Algeria, despite the latter's increasingly hostile posture.

Moreover, the U.S. has made clear that – although the White House has not thrown its weight behind American investment in the Sahara in any meaningful way – it nonetheless expects the Kingdom to forgo other opportunities (such as the economic advances of China). This has forced officials in Rabat to think up ways to spur Saharan development without running afoul of Washington's unfolding strategic competition with Beijing.

The disconnect is striking. In Africa and the Persian Gulf, Morocco's influence is expanding. In the United States, however, the Kingdom faces new difficulties driven by hardening partisan positions and shifting policy priorities on the part of the Biden administration. All of which should beg the question: what does the Arab World see that Washington doesn't?