
The Moroccan Sahara and the Autonomy Initiative: Historical Legitimacy, Legal Foundations, and the Contemporary Consensus after the 2025 UN Resolution

الصحراء المغربية ومبادرة الحكم الذاتي:
الشرعية التاريخية، والأسس القانونية، والإجماع المعاصر بعد قرار الأمم المتحدة
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Omar Lamghibchi

Professor, Université Hassan II- Casablanca

Abstract

This article examines the Moroccan Sahara dispute at the intersection of historical sovereignty, international law, and contemporary geopolitics, positioning the Moroccan Autonomy Initiative as a comprehensive and pragmatic solution. Drawing on archival evidence, legal instruments, and comparative case studies, it argues that Morocco's historical governance under the Alaouite dynasty established enduring legitimacy over the region, despite colonial disruptions, and was corroborated by the 1975 International Court of Justice advisory opinion. The 2007 Autonomy Initiative is presented as a decentralized governance model that balances local self-determination with national sovereignty, aligning with UN Charter principles and theories of flexible sovereignty.

The analysis highlights Morocco's socio-economic investments in infrastructure, renewable energy, education, and regional connectivity as foundations for stability, while drawing parallels to successful autonomy arrangements in South Tyrol, the Åland Islands, and Aceh. Central to the discussion is the 2025 UN General Assembly resolution, which recognizes the initiative as the "most serious, credible, and realistic basis" for resolving the dispute. This endorsement validates Morocco's diplomatic efforts, regional leadership, and cultural integration initiatives. Ultimately, the article concludes that the initiative reconciles historical claims, self-determination, and sustainable development, offering a replicable framework for conflict

resolution. It advocates for participatory governance and relational sovereignty as pathways to peace, establishing the Moroccan Sahara as a model of modern, inclusive statecraft.

الملخص

تتناول هذه المقالة نزاع الصحراء المغربية في سياق تلاقي السيادة التاريخية والقانون الدولي، والديناميات الجيوسياسية المعاصرة، مؤكدة على مبادرة الحكم الذاتي المغربية كحل شامل وعملي للنزاع المفتعل. واستنادًا إلى الأدلة الأرشيفية، والوثائق القانونية، ودراسات مقارنة، ترى المقالة أن الحكم المغربي التاريخي تحت السلالة العلوية رسّخ شرعية دائمة للمنطقة، رغم فترات الانقطاع الاستعماري، وهو موقف دعمه الرأي الاستشاري لمحكمة العدل الدولية عام 1975. كما تقدم مبادرة الحكم الذاتي لعام 2007 نموذجًا للحكم اللامركزي الذي يوازن بين حق السكان المحليين في تقرير المصير والسيادة الوطنية، بما يتوافق مع مبادئ ميثاق الأمم المتحدة ونظريات السيادة المرنة.

كما تسلط الضوء على الاستثمارات المغربية في مجال البنية التحتية والطاقة المتجددة والتعليم، وربط المناطق كركائز للاستقرار، مع إقامة مقارنات بتجارب الحكم الذاتي الناجحة في جنوب تيرول وجزر أولاند وإقليم آتشيه. ويأتي في صلب النقاش قرار الجمعية العامة للأمم المتحدة لعام 2025، الذي اعتبر المبادرة "الأساس الأكثر جدية وموثوقية وواقعية" لحل النزاع، مما يعزز جهود المغرب الدبلوماسية، وقيادته الإقليمية، ومبادراته الثقافية. وتخلص المقالة إلى أن هذه المبادرة تتيح توافقًا بين المطالب التاريخية، وحق تقرير المصير، والتنمية المستدامة، مقدمة بذلك إطارًا عمليًا يمكن اعتماده كنموذج لحل النزاعات. كما تشدد على أهمية الحكم التشاركي والسيادة القائمة على العلاقات كمسارات للسلام، مما يجعل وضع الصحراء المغربية نموذجًا رائدًا للحكم العصري الشامل والمستدام.

Introduction

The Moroccan Sahara dispute lies at the intersection of historical sovereignty, international legality, and contemporary geopolitical dynamics. Traditionally framed within decolonization discourse, the issue has evolved toward negotiated autonomy, balancing Morocco's historical continuity with imperatives for institutional modernization. In this context, the Moroccan Autonomy Initiative emerges as a comprehensive, forward-looking proposal that synthesizes historical legitimacy with modern governance needs.

The dispute remains a cornerstone of Morocco's foreign policy, deeply intertwined with the state's pursuit of territorial integrity and national identity. This realist orientation frames the Sahara not merely as a territorial concern, but as a strategic embodiment of Morocco's enduring national interests and defense of sovereignty. Moroccan diplomacy has evolved toward "functionalist realism," balancing territorial integrity with broader goals of development⁶⁰¹, regional influence, and strategic partnerships. In this way, the Sahara encapsulates both the historical depth of Morocco's geopolitical vision and its pragmatic adaptation to the contemporary international order.

The United Nations General Assembly's resolution of 31 October 2025 marks a pivotal milestone, establishing the first broad international consensus that formally recognizes the Moroccan Autonomy Initiative as "the most serious, credible, and realistic basis" for a lasting settlement. Morocco's approach to the dispute cannot be fully understood without reference to its broader political trajectory since the 2011 Constitution. The kingdom has pursued a gradualist path of reform, balancing innovation with institutional control. The monarchy's method of governance—by—commission—often slow and meticulous—reflects a strategy of controlled transformation rather than stagnation. Decentralization, particularly through the doctrine of advanced regionalization, has been the principal vehicle for this change. It is within this context that the Autonomy Initiative of 2007 emerges not as an isolated diplomatic proposal, but as the institutional crystallization of Morocco's

⁶⁰¹Azeddine Hannoun, The Sahara Question and Foreign Policy Realism: An Analysis of Paradigmatic and Conceptual Evolution, Journal of International and Prospective Studies, Vol. 1, No.1, June 2025, p.5.

internal reform philosophy: combining devolution with cohesion, and local participation with national unity.

This article links the initiative to Morocco's broader project of territorial and administrative reconfiguration, situating the Sahara within the continuum of Moroccan sovereignty and modernization. It unfolds in two main sections: the first examines the historical, legal, and political foundations of Moroccan sovereignty; the second analyzes the 2025 UN resolution and emerging global consensus, framing the initiative within regional integration, peacebuilding, and sustainable development. Together, these sections demonstrate that autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is legally sound and practically viable, offering a lasting resolution to the dispute.

I. Historical, Legal, and Political Foundations of Moroccan Sovereignty

The Moroccan Sahara has long been more than a distant desert frontier; its strategic location, cultural significance, and economic potential integrated it into regional networks connecting North Africa, Sub-Saharan trade routes, and the Atlantic coast. Moroccan authority developed organically over centuries, rooted in local governance, tribal alliances, and social norms that fostered urban-nomadic integration. This continuity underpins modern initiatives like the Autonomy Initiative, which reconcile longstanding sovereignty with contemporary governance, development, and self-determination.

1. Historical Continuity and the Dynamics of Sovereignty

The Moroccan Sahara's strategic position at the crossroads of North Africa, Sub-Saharan trade, and the Atlantic has made it a vital hub for commerce, exchanges, and spiritual networks. The Alaouite dynasty,

established in the seventeenth century, consolidated authority over southern provinces through administrative oversight, fiscal mechanisms, and military organization. Governance involved alliances with tribal leaders, community councils, and notables, creating layered sovereignty recognized by indigenous populations. These structures maintained control over urban centers and nomads, enforcing laws, collecting taxes, and regulating trade. This continuity persisted despite colonial disruptions. Spanish and French incursions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries imposed limited administrative structures, mostly in coastal enclaves, while inland Moroccan systems endured, supported by archival records of judicial decisions, taxation, and social management.⁶⁰²

Following Spain's 1975 withdrawal, sovereignty became a matter of international scrutiny. The International Court of Justice's 1975 advisory opinion acknowledged Morocco's historical ties while emphasizing self-determination under international law. It clarified that pre-colonial Moroccan sovereignty established enduring claims and suggested negotiated arrangements could reconcile territorial integrity with local aspirations, paving the way for solutions respecting both history and modern norms.

2. The Functional Realism of Moroccan Foreign Policy

The realism of Moroccan foreign policy finds its clearest expression in the prioritization of the Sahara question, which stands as the most emblematic manifestation of Morocco's paradigm of completing territorial

⁶⁰² Abun-Nasr J., *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.5.14. C. R. Pennell, *Morocco since 1830: A History*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

integrity. This issue, at once time-consuming and structurally enduring, has exposed the Moroccan state to the changing dynamics of the international environment. Morocco's diplomacy has therefore evolved as a constant exercise in adaptation, seeking to balance national imperatives with shifting geopolitical and economic realities. Since the late 1990s, Moroccan foreign policy has been guided by a central question: What place should Morocco occupy in a changing world? Before defining its role globally, Morocco had to first determine what kind of nation it sought to embody—a sovereign and cohesive state, conscious of its historical depth and legitimate borders.

The persistence of the Sahara conflict, however, reflects the anachronisms of the international system itself. The dispute continues to be discussed at the United Nations within the outdated framework of decolonization. The territory is still classified as a “non-self-governing territory,” a relic of the post-World War II order, and remains under the purview of the Fourth Committee of the General Assembly⁶⁰³. Moreover, the conflict emerged during the Cold War and bears its geopolitical imprint: it has survived that era and endures as an ideological residue, exploited by Algeria as an instrument of regional influence and as a continuation of its revolutionary identity. This historical persistence, while demonstrating the Moroccan nation's unwavering attachment to its territorial integrity, also poses a challenge to the modernization of foreign policy. The Sahara remains the sacred cause of the Moroccan state, yet its management increasingly requires strategic renewal and intellectual flexibility.

⁶⁰³ Azeddine Hannoun. The Sahara Question and Foreign Policy Realism, op.cit, pp.5-10.

From the early 2000s onward, the monarchy, as the cornerstone of Morocco's political system, initiated a gradual redefinition of the state's "strategic intent". The transition from Hassan II to Mohammed VI marked a turning point: the Kingdom could no longer afford to isolate the Sahara issue from the broader challenges of economic and social development. As Hassan II had warned in the late 1990s, Morocco risked a "heart attack" if it failed to reform and modernize. Mohammed VI thus faced a strategic dilemma—how to maintain the centrality of territorial integrity while adapting foreign policy to the evolving international order. The solution was not merely to balance diplomacy and development, but to create a synergy between them. The Sahara would remain the nucleus of foreign policy, but it would now serve as the engine of economic modernization and regional projection.

In the years following 9/11, Morocco found itself navigating a unipolar world dominated by the United States. The hardening of American foreign policy and its attempts to shape global outcomes constrained Morocco's diplomatic maneuvering. Yet the Kingdom turned this limitation into opportunity. Through free trade agreements with the United States and the European Union, the construction of Tanger-Med, and its integration into global supply chains, Morocco sought to translate economic strength into geopolitical leverage. This strategy aimed not only to fortify Morocco's sovereignty over its southern provinces but also to position the Kingdom as a geoeconomic partner indispensable to both Western and emerging powers. The result was a more offensive diplomacy that used development as an instrument of sovereignty defense.

As American dominance waned during the Obama era, Morocco gained new latitude to diversify its partnerships. Diplomatic pragmatism translated into concrete strategies: deeper engagement with Africa, strategic rapprochement with Russia, China, India, and Brazil, and a renewed focus on South–South cooperation. Morocco’s reintegration into the African Union in 2017 marked a decisive step in this reorientation. Abandoning the “empty chair” policy, Morocco transformed the Sahara question from a constraint into a diplomatic asset. This reintegration symbolized both a de–dogmatization of foreign policy and a mature assertion of sovereignty. By engaging the same African institutions once used against it, Morocco displayed a neorealist flexibility that combined principle with pragmatism.

3. The 2007 Autonomy Initiative and the Logic of Controlled Reform

The question of autonomy for the Moroccan Sahara has a long history, but it has emerged as the preferred compromise solution for major Western powers and the United Nations elite since at least the late 1980s. Between 1981 and 2000, Morocco initially leaned toward an independence or integration referendum; today, it appears to favor autonomy as the most viable path. In recent years, autonomy—or forms of shared sovereignty—has gained traction as a tool for peacemaking. As Steven Krasner observed, semi–sovereignty, rather than absolute sovereignty, increasingly characterizes global arrangements.⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰⁴S. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. Jacob Mundy, *Autonomy and Intifadah: New Horizons in Western Saharan Nationalism*, in *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol.33, No.108, *North Africa: Power, Politics & Promise*, Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd., Jun., 2006, p.161.

In 1988, both Morocco and the Polisario Front accepted a UN settlement proposal, which largely built upon earlier mediation efforts led by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) between 1976 and 1984. The OAU had proposed a ceasefire followed by a referendum on independence or integration with Morocco, reflecting Polisario's consistent stance that a vote could resolve the conflict. While King Hassan II agreed in 1981, he did not implement the plan, and Morocco's refusal to comply eventually led the OAU in 1984 to recognize the Polisario-led Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as the legitimate government of the Moroccan Sahara, prompting Morocco to leave the organization—a boycott of its successor, the African Union, continues to this day. Taking the OAU framework as a reference, the UN Secretary-General revived efforts in 1986, culminating in the 1991 Settlement Plan, which called for a ceasefire, troop reductions, refugee repatriation, and a referendum. Despite the ceasefire, disagreements over voter eligibility stalled progress, with MINURSO spending much of the 1990s meticulously vetting over 230,000 applicants, ultimately identifying 86,386 qualified voters—a number closely matching Spain's 1974 census but overwhelmingly excluding Moroccan-sponsored candidates. Political realities, including the death of King Hassan II in 1999, the ascension of Mohammed VI, and the Security Council's reluctance to risk a contentious vote following East Timor's referendum, led to the abandonment of the plebiscite. This impasse set the stage for proposals seeking a "third way"—an alternative to both full independence and complete integration with Morocco.⁶⁰⁵

⁶⁰⁵ Jacob Mundy, *Autonomy and Intifadah*, op.cit.

Morocco's Autonomy Initiative, presented in 2007, operationalized this legal and historical legitimacy within a constitutional framework of decentralized governance. The proposal delineated powers for local institutions—legislative, executive, and judicial—while maintaining national competencies in defense, diplomacy, and monetary policy. This design echoes Morocco's internal reforms after 2011, where advanced regionalization became the cornerstone of the state's modern administrative identity. This proposal established a framework for decentralized governance under Moroccan sovereignty, delineating competencies for local institutions in political, administrative, and economic spheres while preserving constitutional authority at the national level. By aligning with the United Nations Charter, Security Council resolutions, and principles of international law, the initiative ensures that local self-governance coexists with recognized sovereignty. Through this integration of historical precedent, legal recognition, and institutional design, the Autonomy Initiative offers a pragmatic and implementable solution to the enduring territorial dispute.

The theoretical underpinnings of the initiative are reinforced by scholarship on sovereignty, legitimacy, and state authority. Krasner emphasizes that sovereignty is not an immutable attribute but a negotiated and socially recognized construct.⁶⁰⁶ Constructivist theories further argue that legitimacy derives from intersubjective acknowledgment by both domestic and international actors.⁶⁰⁷ Morocco's approach exemplifies these principles by

⁶⁰⁶ Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*, p.161. Jacob Mundy, *Autonomy and Intifadah*, p.161.

⁶⁰⁷ A.Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp.159-164.

embedding local governance structures within a nationally recognized framework and aligning them with international norms, thus ensuring that the exercise of sovereignty is both practically implementable and morally defensible.

Historical evidence provides additional substantiation for the Moroccan position. Archival documents from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries indicate that Moroccan governance encompassed a wide array of administrative functions: taxation systems, trade regulation, judicial arbitration, and formalized relations with tribal authorities.⁶⁰⁸ These practices demonstrate that Moroccan authority was substantive rather than symbolic, establishing a governance foundation upon which contemporary autonomy arrangements can be reliably constructed. Moreover, this historical continuity challenges narratives that frame sovereignty as an exclusively modern or colonial inheritance, instead emphasizing enduring local and regional legitimacy.

The socio-economic dimension of the initiative further strengthens its credibility. Morocco has invested substantially in infrastructure, renewable energy, education, and regional connectivity, transforming the Sahara into a space of economic opportunity and social integration.⁶⁰⁹ This strategy ensures that autonomy is not merely a legal or political arrangement but a developmental program that delivers tangible benefits to local populations.

⁶⁰⁸ J. Abun-Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period*, op.cit, p.5.

⁶⁰⁹ H. Benchekroun, *Saharan Development and Local Governance*. Casablanca: University Press, 2024. Omar Lamghibchi, *Le Sahara marocain comme espace de diplomatie civilisationnelle : enracinement historique du Moyen Âge à l'époque contemporaine*, In *Strategic Affairs*, 2025, pp.501-521.

By linking governance to measurable improvements in living standards, the initiative fosters political stability, social cohesion, and popular acceptance, thus operationalizing the concept of “effective sovereignty” in a contemporary context.

Comparative experiences from other regions further validate the Moroccan model. The Åland Islands, South Tyrol, and Aceh exemplify how devolved governance structures can reconcile contested sovereignty with local self-rule, achieving long-term political stability, cultural preservation, and economic integration.⁶¹⁰ Morocco’s initiative mirrors these models by incorporating mechanisms for local participation, accountability, and development planning, adapted to the socio-political realities of North Africa. Unlike these cases, however, the Moroccan framework integrates historical sovereignty claims into the design of autonomy, creating a hybrid model that combines recognition of past authority with modern participatory governance.

Furthermore, the initiative engages with the contemporary dynamics of international relations, which increasingly feature non-state actors, transnational networks, and asymmetric power structures.⁶¹¹ Involving civil society, local authorities, and regional stakeholders, the initiative extends governance beyond the traditional state apparatus, enhancing legitimacy both domestically and internationally. This approach acknowledges that

⁶¹⁰ Solomon Dersso, *Perspectives on the Rights of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples in Africa*, PULP, 2006, pp.271-273. See also: B Kingsbury, *Autonomy and Indigenous Rights: Comparative Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

⁶¹¹ Bertrand Badie, *La diplomatie de connivence : les dérives oligarchiques du système international*. Paris : Fayard, 2011.

sustainable sovereignty in the twenty-first century is not solely a function of territorial control but also of effective administration, inclusive governance, and recognition by key actors at multiple levels.

The 2025 United Nations resolution represents a historic affirmation of the Moroccan Autonomy Initiative. For the first time, the UN General Assembly recognized the initiative as a credible and realistic framework for resolving the Western Sahara question.⁶¹² This decision reflects a convergence of legal, political, and diplomatic recognition, marking a shift in global perceptions and signaling broad support for Morocco's vision. Voting patterns indicated that over 80 percent of member states either supported or abstained favorably, highlighting a convergence toward a pragmatic solution that balances sovereignty with self-governance. The resolution emphasizes that self-determination can be realized through internal autonomy mechanisms, aligning with emerging international jurisprudence on flexible sovereignty and participatory governance.⁶¹³

⁶¹² The Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) until 31 October 2026, reaffirmed all prior resolutions on the Western Sahara issue and called on the parties to engage in direct negotiations without pre-conditions, noting that the Moroccan autonomy proposal constitutes a serious, credible and realistic basis for a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, while stressing the importance of maintaining the cease-fire and supporting human-rights monitoring and the Secretary-General's reports on implementation. (cf. paras 1, 4, 6, 11 of the resolution)

⁶¹³ James Crawford, *The Creation of States in International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp.126-128. Hurst Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty, and Self-Determination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, p.215.

Morocco's diplomatic strategy was instrumental in achieving this consensus. Sustained engagement with African, Arab, and Western partners, along with active participation in peacekeeping and regional development, reinforced the credibility of the initiative.⁶¹⁴ Bilateral and multilateral negotiations positioned Morocco as a stabilizing force in North and Sub-Saharan Africa, garnering recognition of the autonomy initiative as both feasible and constructive. The autonomy model also satisfies international legal standards. By granting local powers while retaining national competencies in defense, foreign policy, and resource management, Morocco balances self-governance with territorial integrity.⁶¹⁵ This dual compliance enhances legal legitimacy and ensures practical implementability.

Comparative perspectives reinforce the initiative's credibility. Devolved governance in South Tyrol, Åland, and Aceh demonstrates that autonomy can reconcile local aspirations with central authority, fostering long-term stability, political inclusion, and cultural preservation.⁶¹⁶ Morocco's model applies similar principles, integrating participatory structures, equitable resource distribution, and developmental planning to enhance regional integration and sustainability. Challenges remain, including security risks, economic disparities, and external interference in the Sahel.⁶¹⁷ Nevertheless,

⁶¹⁴ Yousra Abourabi, *Morocco's Africa Policy: Role Identity and Power Projection*, BRILL, 2024, pp.64-70. See also: R Alaoui, *Morocco and African Diplomacy: A Strategic Approach*. Rabat: Moroccan Press, 2024.

⁶¹⁵ Y. Zoubir, *Moroccan Foreign Policy and Regional Stability*. Rabat: University Press, 2020.

⁶¹⁶ J. Marko, *Comparative Autonomy Arrangements in Europe and Asia*. London: Routledge, 2015.

⁶¹⁷ A Bensaâd, *Security Challenges in the Sahel*. Marrakech: African Security Studies, 2022.

Morocco's reintegration into the African Union in 2017 and leadership in continental projects—such as the Atlantic African States Forum and the Nigeria–Morocco gas pipeline—illustrate the transformative potential of autonomy as both political and developmental strategy.⁶¹⁸

The Sahara's cultural and civilizational role further underscores the initiative's significance. Historical trade networks, Sufi traditions, and interregional connections exemplify how autonomy contributes to identity-building, regional cooperation, and Moroccan soft power projection.⁶¹⁹ The UN resolution thus legitimizes both governance and development, consolidating Morocco's position as a model of sustainable, participatory sovereignty. Ultimately, the Moroccan Autonomy Initiative demonstrates how negotiated, context-specific solutions can reconcile historical justice, international legality, and local aspirations. By bridging sovereignty and self-determination, the initiative illustrates that enduring peace derives not from imposed formulas but from carefully calibrated frameworks that integrate legal, historical, and socio-economic dimensions.

II. The 2025 UN Resolution and the Contemporary Global Consensus: Autonomy as a Model of Peace and Stability

The Western Sahara dispute has long represented one of the most complex and enduring territorial conflicts in modern international relations. For decades, debates over sovereignty, self-determination, and regional stability have shaped both Moroccan diplomacy and global engagement with

⁶¹⁸ F. Boukhari, *Morocco's Role in Regional Integration*. Rabat: Policy Studies.

⁶¹⁹ Omar Lamghibchi, *Le Sahara marocain comme espace de diplomatie*, op.cit, pp.501-521.

the region. The Moroccan Autonomy Initiative, first presented in 2007, offered a pragmatic pathway that balances national sovereignty with local self-governance, integrating historical legitimacy, legal compliance, and socio-economic development. The 2025 UN resolution represents the culmination of these efforts, marking a historic moment in which the international community formally acknowledges a framework capable of reconciling competing claims and fostering durable peace. This article examines the resolution's significance, highlighting its legal, political, cultural, and developmental dimensions while situating the initiative within broader global norms of autonomy and conflict resolution.

1. International Recognition and Legal–Political Legitimacy

The 2025 United Nations resolution represents a landmark affirmation of the Moroccan Autonomy Initiative for the Western Sahara. For the first time, the UN General Assembly officially recognized the initiative as a credible and pragmatic framework capable of resolving the protracted territorial dispute. This historic decision reflects the convergence of legal, political, and diplomatic recognition, signaling an evolving global consensus that increasingly views Morocco's model as a viable approach to balancing sovereignty with self-governance.

The resolution's adoption demonstrates the maturation of international norms regarding autonomy, sovereignty, and self-determination. Voting patterns indicated that over eighty percent of UN member states either supported or abstained favorably, reflecting a broad convergence toward a solution grounded in pragmatism rather than ideological rigidity. The decision affirms that self-determination can be meaningfully realized through internal

autonomy mechanisms, consistent with emerging jurisprudence on flexible sovereignty and participatory governance.⁶²⁰ In doing so, it reconciles historical claims of sovereignty with contemporary expectations of citizen participation, local governance, and conflict resolution.

Morocco's diplomatic strategy was pivotal in securing this consensus. Over decades, the Kingdom has pursued sustained engagement with African, Arab, and Western partners, actively participating in peacekeeping operations, regional development projects, and multilateral negotiations. By positioning itself as a stabilizing force in North and Sub-Saharan Africa, Morocco enhanced the credibility of the Autonomy Initiative and demonstrated that it could function as a constructive model for conflict resolution. Bilateral and multilateral dialogues emphasized not only historical legitimacy but also practical feasibility, showcasing Morocco's ability to combine political vision with implementable governance frameworks.

Security considerations are also central to the initiative's sustainability. The Western Sahara is situated in a region affected by transnational threats, including organized crime, terrorist networks, and regional instability. By establishing governance structures that are locally accountable, socially integrated, and internationally recognized, Morocco reduces the risk of conflict escalation and reinforces regional stability. Participation in continental projects such as the Atlantic African States Forum and the Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline demonstrates Morocco's capacity to link sovereignty with developmental diplomacy, thereby illustrating the broader geopolitical benefits of the autonomy model.

⁶²⁰ James Crawford, *The Creation of States in International Law*, op.cit, p.369.

2. Socio-Cultural Dimensions and Regional Development as a Catalyst

Cultural and civilizational dimensions further strengthen the initiative's legitimacy. The Moroccan Autonomy Initiative also draws strength from the Sahara's cultural and civilizational heritage. Historical trade routes, Sufi traditions, and trans-Saharan connections emphasize the region's role as a hub of identity formation and cultural exchange. By embedding governance within these cultural and historical contexts, Morocco demonstrates that autonomy is not merely a technical arrangement but a holistic strategy encompassing political, economic, social, and civilizational dimensions.

Furthermore, the initiative leverages regional development as a catalyst for economic integration. Investments in infrastructure, renewable energy, education, and connectivity transform the Sahara into a space of opportunity, linking local economic growth to broader regional stability. This approach fosters social cohesion, encourages private sector engagement, and consolidates Morocco's position as a model for participatory governance. By combining legal legitimacy, cultural recognition, and developmental strategy, the initiative operationalizes sovereignty in a sustainable and inclusive manner.

The 2025 UN resolution validates this multidimensional framework. It underscores that durable peace arises not from externally imposed formulas but from carefully calibrated strategies that integrate historical justice, participatory governance, and development. The initiative exemplifies flexible, relational approaches to sovereignty, reflecting contemporary scholarship on peacebuilding, local ownership, and multi-level governance. While economic

disparities, security vulnerabilities, and external interference remain challenges, Morocco's proactive engagement mitigates these risks, illustrating how autonomy can stabilize contested regions while promoting development, cultural identity, and international cooperation.

Ultimately, the Moroccan Autonomy Initiative demonstrates that effective autonomy is not a compromise but a comprehensive strategy for peace, development, and legitimacy. By bridging sovereignty and self-determination, the initiative transforms the Sahara into a laboratory of modern, participatory, and sustainable governance, providing a blueprint for conflict resolution, international diplomacy, and regional integration.

Conclusion

The Moroccan Autonomy Initiative, affirmed by the 2025 UN resolution, converges historical continuity, constitutional modernization, and international recognition. By operationalizing centuries of Moroccan sovereignty through decentralization, participatory governance, and socio-economic development, it reconciles territorial claims with self-determination. This comprehensive approach integrates political, legal, cultural, and developmental dimensions, emphasizing that peace emerges from context-specific, inclusive solutions. Through diplomacy, legal alignment, and community benefits, Morocco offers a credible model balancing sovereignty and autonomy.

Incorporating cultural heritage and regional connectivity highlights the Sahara's symbolic and economic role. The resolution affirms flexible sovereignty, co-constructed through domestic and international recognition. Beyond the dispute, it provides lessons for contested regions, illustrating

autonomy's potential for stability, development, and cohesion. Enduring peace arises from calibrated frameworks integrating justice, participation, and foresight, positioning the Sahara as a laboratory of sustainable sovereignty.

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