

How Highways Decided Morocco's Victory in the Western Sahara Conflict

Road Infrastructure, Infrastructural Power, and Sovereignty Recognition, 1975–2025

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Abstract

This capstone examines how Moroccan roadway development helped transform de facto control in Western Sahara into increasingly credible claims of sovereignty in the international sphere. Existing explanations of Morocco's success in Western Sahara emphasize military conquest, diplomatic recognition, resource extraction, or postcolonial continuity. This paper argues that these explanations remain incomplete unless road infrastructure is treated as a central mechanism of state power. Drawing on theories of infrastructural power, legibility, and territorial governance, the project traces how Morocco used highways, border crossings, checkpoints, fuel stations, and development corridors to make disputed territory administratively governable and internationally legible.

This paper uses a process-tracing approach to follow three key infrastructural episodes: the emergence of the N1 Atlantic coastal spine, the Guerguerat border crossing and its crises, and later interior and southern corridor expansion. These cases show how roads enabled Moroccan state personnel, settlers, commercial flows, and international observers to move through and interpret Western Sahara as a functioning extension of the Moroccan state. The paper argues that roads did not independently cause international recognition, but they created the material preconditions that made Morocco's diplomatic position appear increasingly realistic, credible, and administratively viable. By extending the literature on infrastructural power into contested territory, this study shows how infrastructure can perform a sovereignty-making function: roads make territory legible to the state that builds them, to the observers who use them, and eventually to the institutions that decide what counts as legitimate rule.

Introduction: The Mural in Sidi Ifni



Figure 1: McIntyre, Angus (Photographer). *Mural Depicting the Green March of 1975, in Sidi Ifni, Guelmim-Oued Noun, Morocco*. Photograph. Accessed April 25, 2026. <https://raingod.com/photos/africa/morocco/sidi-ifni/green-march/>.

The Moroccan town of Sidi Ifni sits on the Atlantic coast about 100 miles North of the border that separated Morocco from the longtime disputed Western Sahara territory. In that town, there is a mural celebrating The Green March on November 6, 1975, when over 350,000 Moroccans peacefully demonstrated in support of King Hassan II’s claims over what was formerly Spanish Sahara. The caption in green is entitled “The Oath of the Green March,” and it reads as follows:

I swear by God Almighty that I will remain faithful to the spirit of the Green March, struggling for the unity of my homeland from the Strait of Gibraltar to the

Sahara. I swear by God Almighty that I will pass this oath on to my family and descendants, privately and publicly.¹

The Green March began a multigenerational oath, and that oath was kept. In fact, the UN Security Council's recent Resolution 2797 in November 2025 effectively guaranteed Morocco's sovereignty through accepting its 2007 Autonomy Plan. Murals like this are no longer a dream, since over time they became celebrations of victory.

This muralist chose to illustrate the caravan of trucks that brought so many Moroccans across the contested border and several kilometers into the Western Sahara territory. This mural tells a similar story to the 100 dirham banknote², which celebrates the Green Marchers that are bringing with them large roadways and development. The automotive aspect of The Green March is iconically celebrated in many forms of cultural production, yet it has never been investigated. Some kind of infrastructure must have been present in order to execute such a massive demonstration, so where did it come from? After most of the marchers returned home, these roads continued to grow, and over half a century later, they connected Tangier in the far north to Guerguerat in the extreme south.

The fifty-year-long stalemate ended seemingly overnight, but UNSC Resolution 2797 was actually decades in the making, so what actually changed that led the highest levels of international governance to recognize the Moroccan state's sovereignty over its Southern Provinces? I argue that roadway development was a primary mechanism through which Morocco

¹Angus McIntyre, photographer, *Mural Depicting the Green March of 1975, in Sidi Ifni, Guelmim–Oued Noun, Morocco*, photograph, accessed April 25, 2026, <https://raingod.com/photos/africa/morocco/sidi-ifni/green-march/>. Caption transcription (“The Oath of the Green March”) from the mural itself as photographed by McIntyre.

² Bank Al-Maghrib, “100 Dirhams Banknote (2002 Series),” accessed May 9, 2026, <https://www.bkam.ma/en/Banknotes-and-coins/Banknotes-in-circulation>. The reverse depicts Green March imagery including marchers and infrastructure.

converted *de facto* territorial control in Western Sahara into stronger claims of state legitimacy in the international sphere.

Background

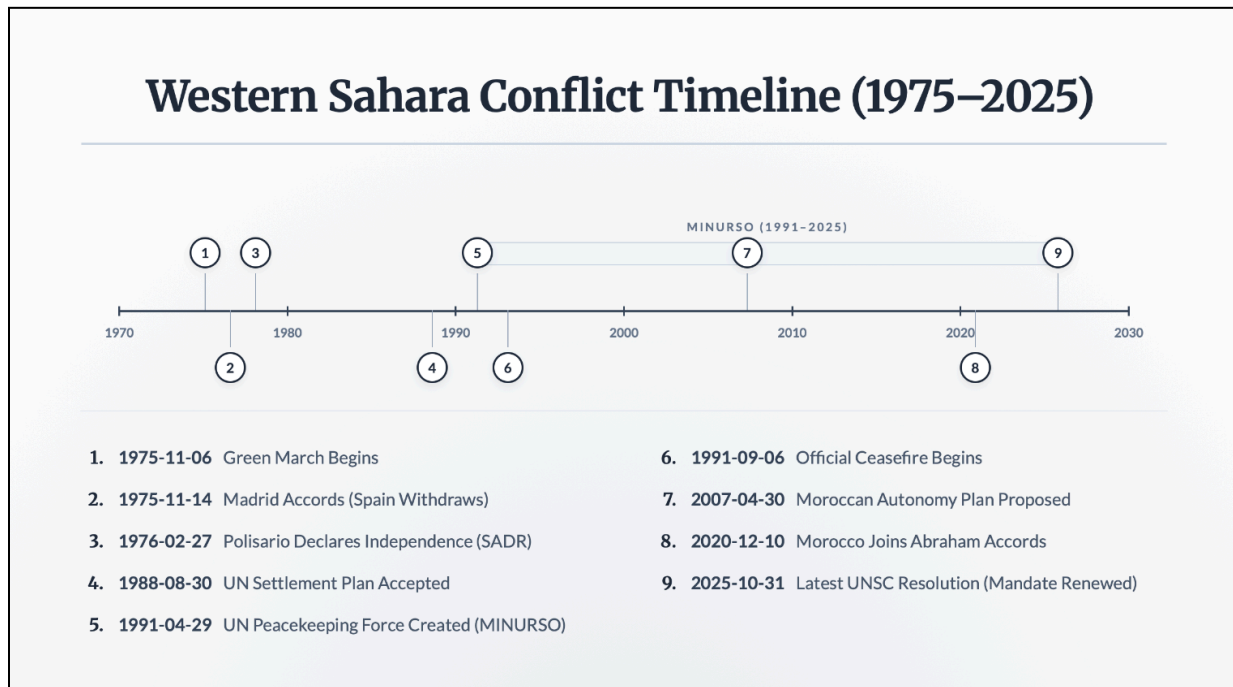


Figure 2: Western Sahara Conflict Timeline (1975-2025). Author generated using Gemini.

Western Sahara is sometimes called “Africa’s Last Colony.” Spain abandoned their colonial project in the Sahara in 1975, and a question arose as to who should govern the 272,000 square kilometer territory. It was the most sparsely populated territory on earth. In 1975, its population only totaled around 50,000 people who mostly lived a nomadic lifestyle because of the realities of the desert environment.

Sahara is the Arabic word for desert, and someone who comes from Western Sahara would today be known as “Sahrawi,” which means “of the Sahara.” The idea of Sahrawi self-determination arose when Sahrawi students in Moroccan universities began organizing a nationalist movement in 1971. Two years later, those students formed the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro, also known as the POLISARIO Front. With

Algeria's support, the POLISARIO Front proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in February of 1976, just four months after the Green March. Their mission was self-determination, and they demanded a referendum.

The UN agreed, and the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, MINURSO was established in 1991. But the referendum was always postponed and never happened. As talks stalled, so too did the military conflict. Morocco built a massive wall that effectively divided control of the territory, but behind the berm, they built so much more. In fact, investment into development in Morocco's "Southern Provinces" only increased as the conflict halted to a stalemate. The state incentivized settlement, and the territory's population totals over 600,000 today. This project was only achievable due to the state's investment in infrastructure, but there are other explanations for Morocco's actions in the territory.

Alternative Explanations for Morocco's Victory

Other diplomatic historians, political scientists, and international political economists have tried to explain how Morocco was able to transform Western Sahara into its Southern Provinces. While many of the explanations overlap in how they understand Morocco's motives, each explanation attributes Morocco's victory to different yet linked factors: (1) military conquest in the name of national security, (2) diplomatic efforts to gain international recognition of its sovereignty over the territory, (3) economic opportunity in developing the region, and (4) continuing colonialism after independence. I propose that, in addition to other explanations, roadways are evidence of the infrastructural power that the Moroccan state wielded in order to conquer Western Sahara and gain international recognition of sovereignty.

Military Conquest & National Security

Many scholars of international relations and geopolitics would commonly identify the Western Sahara Conflict as a military stalemate, but this trend ended recently when Morocco decisively won sovereignty over what became its Southern Provinces. The Secretary General of the United Nations Security Council released a report on September 30, 2025 entitled the “Situation Concerning Western Sahara.”³ On that day, 11 UNSC member states voted in favor of Morocco’s Autonomy Plan. Only three states abstained, so the council as a whole took “as basis Morocco’s Autonomy Proposal with a view to achieving a just, lasting and mutually acceptable resolution to the dispute, consistent with the UN Charter.”⁴ The international support for Morocco’s autonomy plan was certainly informed by diplomatic factors, but the UN Security Council understood the conflict through a different lens of national and international security. From a national security perspective, this school of thought sees Morocco’s eventual “victory” in Western Sahara primarily as the outcome of a long, disciplined campaign to secure territory and borders rather than of economic development or legal arguments alone.

Security studies scholars and practitioners would not attribute Morocco’s victory to this recent diplomatic decision, but they ~~would~~ instead trace back Morocco’s winding yet path-dependent military campaign that turned over 50 years of a stalemate into a victory. The Western Sahara Wall was perhaps the largest symbol of a military stalemate. Also known as the Sand Wall, defensive wall, and the Berm, this structure was made up of six walls that over the years stretched to a length over 2,200 kilometers.⁵ Morocco constructed these walls during the 1980s,

³ United Nations Security Council, “Situation Concerning Western Sahara,” Press Release SC/16208, September 30, 2025, <https://press.un.org/en/2025/sc16208.doc.htm>.

⁴ Elliott Abrams, “Morocco’s Victory on the Western Sahara,” Pressure Points (blog), Council on Foreign Relations, November 2, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/moroccos-victory-western-sahara>.

⁵ Said Saddiki, *World of Walls: The Structure, Roles and Effectiveness of Separation Barriers* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0121>.

which fit the specific international and regional conflicts that made the Cold War just as intense for Morocco and Algeria as it was for the two global superpowers. According to Moroccan scholar of international law Said Saddiki, the military originally intended the walls to serve a security function, not simply to prevent arms and drugs from entering Morocco, but more so to make the region more secure by preventing the risks that a new, fragile state would pose to international peace.⁶ With this military explanation, national security is inextricable from international security, since a nascent Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic would be unable to maintain sovereignty and secure control of these desert borderlands.

As military infrastructure, the berm certainly used to be defensive, but it has begun to play a diplomatic role for convincing realists at the international level that Morocco's autonomy plan would succeed. In the 1980s, small-scale warfare on the frontiers became a major national concern as attacks from the POLISARIO Front (The Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro) increased.⁷ This berm allowed Morocco to gain more territory and decrease the number of attacks carried out by POLISARIO against Moroccan forces. According to Saddiki, the wall was the "turning point in the course of the conflict that led eventually to a cease-fire between the two sides."⁸ With this change in the conflict, the wall's purpose changed too, shifting away from military importance and towards diplomacy.

Today, the berm is a physical landmark of the cease-fire monitoring agreement: The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). MINURSO had many goals, but its ultimate objective was to facilitate "a transitional period for the preparation of a referendum in which the people of Western Sahara would choose between independence and

⁶ Saddiki, *World of Walls*, 115.

⁷ Saddiki, *World of Walls*, 108.

⁸ Saddiki, *World of Walls*, 108.

integration with Morocco.”⁹ This referendum never happened, but the United Nations still monitored the cease-fire in Western Sahara using the wall to do so in ways both figurative and literal. As will be explored in the following section on diplomacy, maps of this conflict reveal that the border wall was less important as a military tool and more significant as a diplomatic one. Nevertheless, this national security explanation helps clarify why the cease-fire endured and why many states were comfortable endorsing Morocco’s autonomy plan, but on its own it cannot fully explain how everyday mobility, settlement, and economic activity in Western Sahara have been reorganized and ultimately justified Morocco’s internationally recognized right to rule it.

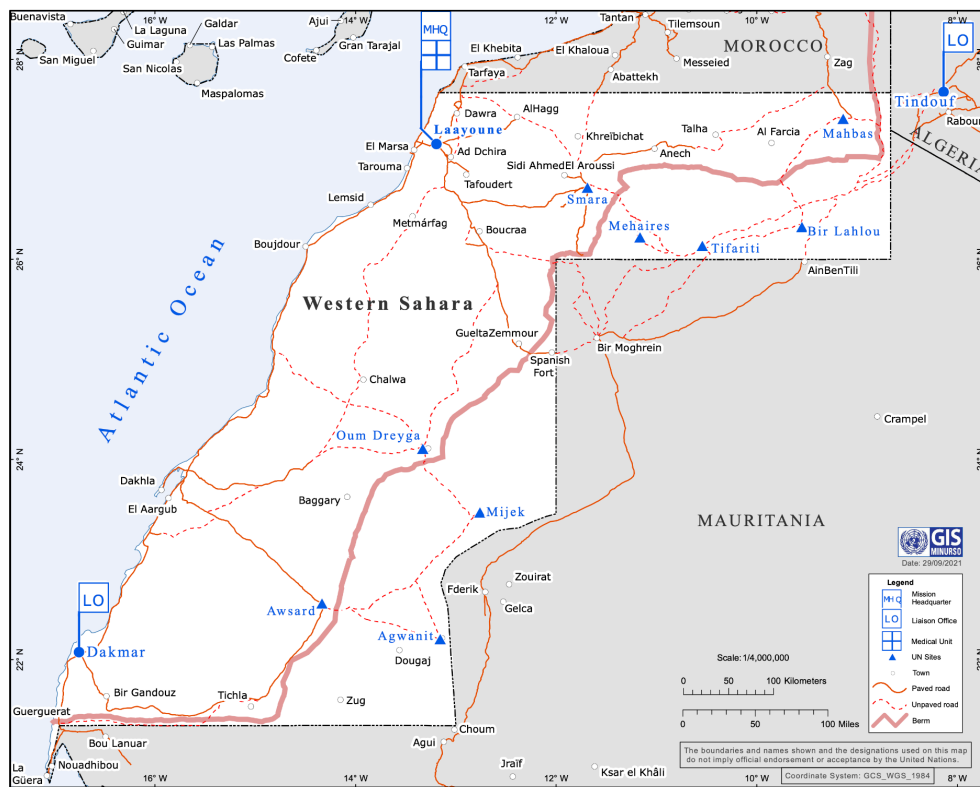


Figure 3: United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), GIS Section. Western Sahara. Map, scale 1:4,000,000. Updated 29 September 2021. PDF.

<https://minurso.unmissions.org/map>

⁹ MINURSO (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara), “Mandate,” accessed September 29, 2025, <https://minurso.unmissions.org/mandate>.

Diplomacy & International Recognition

A third explanation centers on diplomacy and international recognition, arguing that Morocco's victory in Western Sahara was ultimately secured in foreign ministries and UN chambers rather than on the battlefield. From this perspective, the key turning point came with the 2020 Abraham Accords, when the United States formally recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in exchange for Rabat's normalization of relations with Israel.¹⁰ Analysts have shown how this policy shift rebranded Western Sahara as Morocco's 'Southern Provinces' within U.S. diplomacy and encouraged other actors to treat the Moroccan position as a settled fact.¹¹ In UN forums, the same logic appears in how major powers increasingly treat Morocco's Autonomy Plan as the only 'serious, realistic, and credible' basis for resolving the dispute.¹² Critics like Stephen Zunes, quoted by Armstrong, counter that this shift rewards Morocco's long record of stalling on the referendum and offers little reason to believe that Rabat would honor meaningful autonomy for Sahrawis. However, for scholars in this diplomacy school, Morocco's success lies precisely in this ability to reframe the conflict for international audiences, redefining what 'self-determination' means in practice and lining up powerful states behind its preferred outcome.

At the same time, these diplomatic outcomes rest on a material landscape that Morocco helped to create through the wall, MINURSO's cease-fire regime, and the legalization of its Autonomy Initiative. As Said Saddiki notes, the decision to construct the Western Sahara Wall was 'absolutely the most important military decision' Morocco made in the conflict, precisely

¹⁰ Alexis Arieff, Jim Zanotti, and Brock R. Williams, "Morocco-Israel Normalization and U.S. Policy Change on Western Sahara," CRS Insight IN11555 (Congressional Research Service, December 15, 2020), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IN11555>.

¹¹ Arieff, Zanotti, and Williams, "Morocco-Israel Normalization and U.S. Policy Change on Western Sahara."

¹² Arieff, Zanotti, and Williams, "Morocco-Israel Normalization and U.S. Policy Change on Western Sahara."

because it later produced major political and diplomatic consequences.¹³ By the time MINURSO was created in 1991 through Security Council Resolution 690, the wall had already shifted the balance of forces in Morocco's favor and given the UN a fixed line along which to monitor the cease-fire.¹⁴ Saddiki underlines that the wall is not an international border in law, but MINURSO's own operational maps treat it as the backbone of the mission's 'Operational Area,' including links to refugee camps around Tindouf.¹⁵ With a literal border wall cutting through the territory, the international community began to see the idea of a referendum as unworkable, especially because no one could agree on who should be entitled to vote.¹⁶

Figure 3, MINURSO's own reference map, quietly reflects this order by plotting the berm, paved and unpaved roads, key towns, and UN sites across the territory, even while a disclaimer insists that its boundaries and designations do not imply any official endorsement.¹⁷ For diplomats and analysts working from maps like these, Western Sahara appears as a space already divided by the wall and threaded by Moroccan-built corridors that function as the territory's main arteries. The diplomacy-centered explanation thus shows how international recognition shifted toward Morocco, but it largely takes this infrastructural landscape for granted.

Resources & Economic Development

Visible from the International Space Station is the open-pit Bou Craa Phosphate mine, which produces around 2.4 millions tons of phosphates annually, which in 2011 accounted for

¹³ Saddiki, *World of Walls*, 98–99.

¹⁴ Saddiki, *World of Walls*, 105–106.

¹⁵ Saddiki, *World of Walls*, 111–112.

¹⁶ Saddiki, *World of Walls*, 114; see also Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

¹⁷ Hannah Rae Armstrong, "Africa's Last Colony," *World Policy Journal* 31, no. 4 (2014): 84.

14% of the world's phosphate production.¹⁸ Phosphate is one of the three nutrients needed to make fertilizer for large scale agriculture, and with Western Sahara, Morocco is estimated to be sitting on 70-80% of the world's total phosphate reserves.¹⁹ Attached to the mine is the world's longest conveyer belt, which at 100km transports the rock to the coast and to take it out to port. While Western Sahara may initially appear to be a featureless and vacant territory with no clear exploits, the phosphates below the surface explain Morocco's economic interests in annexing the territory. Those scholars who believe that economic incentives drove Morocco's settlement of the territory are able to look beyond the means of diplomacy and military action, and towards the motives of a rich few who control phosphates, Morocco's largest industry.

Morocco's phosphate industry is of macroeconomic significance, powering the country's development of a modern economy both during and after formal colonization. On the other hand, Western Sahara is comparably rich in phosphates, yet it did not develop a modern economy until many years after decolonization from Spain. By the time that Spain relinquished control of its Spanish Sahara territory in 1975, Morocco's phosphate giants and the co-conspiring state were prepared to make an acquisition: a monopolizing buyout so large that it would require the annexation of over 125,000 square kilometers of land. Only a small population stood in the way: estimates of the population in 1975 varied between 18,000 and 70,000 persons, and the majority of them lived in nomadic modes of life.²⁰ Those who advocate for Sahrawi independence would tend to interpret economics through a Marxist lens, wherein the Sahrawi lumpenproletariat stood no chance in a clash between Moroccan state and its capitalist economic interests. This is the

¹⁸ NASA Earth Observatory, "Bou Craa, Western Sahara," October 5, 2008, <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/35524/bou-craa-western-sahara>.

¹⁹ Dan Egan, *The Devil's Element: Phosphorus and a World Out of Balance* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2023), 66.

²⁰ "Struggle for Spanish Sahara," *MERIP Reports*, no. 42 (November 1975): 23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3693728>.

position of the Sahrawi population who align themselves with Algeria and the POLISARIO Front.

The Spanish were the first developers of the Bou Craa mines after an envoy of its scientists found the phosphate deposit in the early 1960s.²¹ Spain then invested some 400 million dollars in developing the mine, bringing in a German firm to design the aforementioned conveyor belt.²² The demand for phosphate was immediately guaranteed once the first shipments for Japan were delivered in 1972. Shipments were sometimes disrupted by POLISARIO attacks along the conveyor, but these small acts of sabotage were a drop in the bucket when compared to an industrial phosphate production that employed over 2,600 workers. Spain successfully developed a profitable phosphate export industry out of the Sahara in just over a decade, but their political power swayed as the era of decolonization nearly concluded its initial sweep throughout Africa. Once Spain exited the Sahara in 1975, an independent Morocco became sucked into a struggle for this vacuum.

Modern critiques of Morocco's exploitation of the territory's phosphate reserves tend to view the state as motivated by profit. Environmental journalist Dan Egan characterizes Morocco's push for the Western Saharan territory as "a business move."²³ After all, Morocco already had massive phosphorus mines and could set global prices in the early 1970s, but an independent Western Sahara would threaten to control Morocco's market power.²⁴ Other scholars who have done extensive fieldwork in the region like Hannah Rae Armstrong corroborate this argument, publishing articles that criticize the market power that Morocco's state-owned Office Cherifien des Phosphates (OCP) controls.²⁵ Armstrong also claims that the Berm had the double

²¹ Egan, *The Devil's Element*, 66.

²² Egan, *The Devil's Element*, 57.

²³ Egan, *The Devil's Element*, 48.

²⁴ Egan, *The Devil's Element*, 59.

²⁵ Armstrong, "Africa's Last Colony," 82.

effect of enclosing the phosphate mining installations and protecting them from POLISARIO attacks.²⁶ International watchdog groups like Western Sahara Research Watch have brought together many respected researchers and advisors under one mission: to “ challenge corporate and governmental decision-makers with our research to create better conditions for a just and lasting peace in Western Sahara.”²⁷ Taken together, these critiques depict Morocco’s annexation of Western Sahara as a profit-driven project in which phosphates, fisheries and offshore energy anchor the occupation. This economic-development school explains why the territory is such a valuable prize, but it does not fully capture how Morocco inherited and repurposed earlier colonial patterns of settlement and infrastructure.

Colonial and Postcolonial Development

A second line of argument therefore emphasizes continuity, treating Moroccan rule in Western Sahara less as a purely economic calculation and more as a postcolonial extension of European empire, in which a “Greater Morocco” takes over the roads, mines and settlement projects first laid down under Spanish and French control. Western Sahara was already a classic colonial space, already seized, mapped, roaded, and mined by European powers before Morocco stepped in. The territory became a Spanish colony in 1884 at the height of the Scramble for Africa, and it was declared a Spanish province in 1950.²⁸ They originally viewed the Sahara as “primitive and poor,” but they changed their position after phosphates were discovered, and the Spanish state company Fosfatos de Bu Craa invested \$447m in the mine and \$72m in the

²⁶ Armstrong, “Africa’s Last Colony,” 82.

²⁷ Western Sahara Resource Watch, “Colonising the Territory with Unwanted Infrastructure,” April 14, 2022, <https://wsrw.org/en/news/infrastructure>; Western Sahara Resource Watch, “The Conflict Phosphates—Four Decades of Plunder,” May 11, 2023, <https://wsrw.org/en/news/the-phosphate-exports>.

²⁸ “Struggle for Spanish Sahara,” *MERIP Reports*, no. 42 (November 1975): 23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3693728>.

conveyor belt, which they expected to produce 10m tons/year for 130 years.²⁹ The Spanish colonial state transformed the “empty” desert into a valuable prize that would be inherited by Morocco as Western Sahara decolonized from Spain.

From this perspective, Morocco’s annexation of Western Sahara represents a postcolonial handoff, in which a newly independent state inherits and redeploys the colonial toolkit of marches, partitions and settlers over a non-self-governing people. This handoff took place in 1975 when Spain announced it was willing to relinquish sovereignty, but Morocco’s next move, The Green March, would be immediately condemned by the international community.³⁰ Most Green Marchers returned home following the demonstrations while the soldiers who preceded them stayed.³¹ The Green March was a political spectacle and performance, which has led many scholars to ask whether Moroccan settlers were colonists or something else.³² For those scholars who subscribe to this postcolonial school of thought, Morocco was not simply decolonizing Spanish Sahara, but instead, they took over a ready-made colonial formation and extended it under a new flag.

Just before the most recent UNSC resolution, Western Sahara was considered by the UN to be a “non-self-governing territory.”³³ The reality on the ground reflected this pseudo-colonial status: while POLISARIO controlled refugee camps began to form on one side of the border wall, Morocco worked rapidly to start extracting the region’s natural resources of phosphates, fishing, and offshore energy.³⁴ From this view, Morocco is not developing its own south, but

²⁹ “Struggle for Spanish Sahara,” *MERIP Reports*, no. 42 (November 1975): 23.

³⁰ “Struggle for Spanish Sahara,” *MERIP Reports*, no. 42 (November 1975): 23.

³¹ Egan, *The Devil’s Element*, 58.

³² Jacob Mundy and Stephen Zunes, “Moroccan Settlers in Western Sahara: Colonists or Fifth Column?,” in *Settlers in Contested Lands*, ed. Oded Haklai and Neophytos Loizides (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

³³ Armstrong, “Africa’s Last Colony,” 78.

³⁴ Armstrong, “Africa’s Last Colony,” 82.

plundering a people's resources without consent, all while developing different kinds of military, industrial, and civil infrastructure to make this acquisition possible.

Taken together, the national security, economic-development, and colonial–postcolonial explanations each illuminate important pieces of Morocco's victory in Western Sahara, but they remain incomplete on their own because they treat infrastructure as context rather than as a central mechanism. In the next section, I therefore focus more directly on roads themselves, arguing that highways and corridors are not just symbols of colonial domination but key instruments through which Morocco converts disputed desert into governable territory.

Theories of Infrastructural Power

The “Infrastructural Turn” is an important shift in historical scholarship in the 2010s because it allowed researchers to prioritize materiality when understanding various mechanisms of change. The advantages of an infrastructure-oriented approach, according to historian Mary Bridges, provide “a timely and important way to understand long-term connections, hidden power dynamics, and the durability of systems.”³⁵ The international system in question here is made up of states, where their actions are sovereign over a given territory. States often invest in massive infrastructure development projects that sometimes extend beyond their borders. This can cause both conflict and cooperation, since the ability to control infrastructure allows for many uses of power. The following section provides a broad overview of how social scientists have come to understand the relationships between the state, infrastructure, and power. A review of existing literature will uncover a gap, since the effects of infrastructural power have seldom been explored in transnational and international contexts.

³⁵ Mary Bridges, “The Infrastructural Turn in Historical Scholarship,” *Modern American History* 6, no. 1 (March 2023): 104, <https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2023.2>.

Although theories of the state date back all the way to social contract theory, there were changes in social science thinking during the 1980s and 1990s where *institutions* like the state became a primary subject of inquiry. Michael Mann's investigation, "The Autonomous Power of the State" (1984), offers a baseline definition of what the state is. Mann employs Max Weber's definition of a state and its four elements of: "(1) a differentiated set of institutions and personnel embodying (2) centrality in the sense that political relations radiate outwards from a centre to cover (3) a territorially-demarcated area, over which it exercises (4) a monopoly of authoritative binding rule-making, backed up by a monopoly of the means of physical violence."³⁶ In other words, a state's *sovereignty* comes about when it can govern itself, its territory, and its population without external interference, and its sovereignty over its territory is expected to be respected by other states in the international system.

Mann also provides a clear distinction between two types of state power: *despotic power* and *infrastructural power*. Despotic power is employed by the state elite, allowing them to undertake a range of actions "without routine, institutionalised negotiation with civil society groups."³⁷ Infrastructural power, on the other hand, is "the capacity of the state to actually penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm."³⁸ Mann's dual framework of state power allows social scientists to separate processes of rule-making and rule enforcement. Additionally, Mann takes an incredibly broad view of infrastructure that includes much more than highways and ports. He acknowledges that the "multiplicity of the state" includes four main functions: (1) the maintenance of internal order, (2) military defense/aggression, (3) the maintenance of communications, and (4) economic

³⁶ Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results," *European Journal of Sociology* 25, no. 2 (1984): 188.

³⁷ Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State," 188.

³⁸ Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State," 189.

redistribution.³⁹ Infrastructure can therefore be the means by which a state executes these four main functions over a defined territory.

Mann's encompassing definition of the state raised doubts about what the state is *not*, a question raised by Timothy Mitchell in his 1991 essay: "The Limits of the State." Mitchell made different assumptions; he did not view the state as "a distinct entity, opposed to and set apart from a larger entity called society."⁴⁰ To illustrate the fluidity of the state's boundaries, Mitchell employed the case of the U.S. Government and the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco). The U.S. Government helped Aramco, a private consortium of big U.S. oil companies, skimp on paying taxes while collecting subsidies.⁴¹ When the U.S. Government acted in Aramco's interests at its own expense, the line between private and public was blurred. The state, therefore, becomes one of several institutions that societies can use to exercise power beyond a territorially demarcated area.

Mitchell and Mann's essays are as profound as they are abstract. But how can social scientists make their theories measurable and concrete? In *Seeing Like a State*, the political scientist James C. Scott examined the modern state's "attempt to make a society legible" through various different instruments, including permanent last names, standard weights and measures, urban design, and standard legal discourse.⁴² In Scott's view, roads and transportation infrastructure that often radiated with urban hubs and far reaching spokes made territory legible to the state and other observers, allowing for central control as well as increased settlement and sedentarization.⁴³ These theories of state become concrete when social scientists begin to

³⁹ Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State," 196–197.

⁴⁰ Timothy Mitchell, "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics," *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 (March 1991): 89.

⁴¹ Mitchell, "Limits of the State," 89; see also Stephen D. Krasner, *Defending the National Interest: Raw Materials Investments and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

⁴² James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 2.

⁴³ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 75.

examine the complex relationships between infrastructure and power by observing what infrastructure can do. According to Brian Larkin, “infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter,” but there are also other philosophical meanings that infrastructure can symbolize.⁴⁴ Just look at how the 100 dirham banknote shows Green Marchers mobilizing, bringing with them roadways and infrastructure into the modern. We can measure not only infrastructures in and of themselves, but also what they symbolize to various audiences.



Figure 4: Bank Al-Maghrib, 100 Dirhams Banknote (2002 Series). The reverse depicts Green March imagery, including marchers, vehicles, and infrastructure.

Research Design & Mechanism

What explains the shift in international recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara that was catalyzed by the Green March and culminated with UNSC Resolution 2797? To understand changes in international recognition outcomes (DV) over the fifty year period, we observe Moroccan state investment in roadway infrastructure in the disputed territory

⁴⁴ Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 328.

over time (IV). My hypothesis is that roads could not *cause* recognition in isolation, but they were a necessary, material precondition that made diplomatic recognition legible and credible to international observers. Process Tracing will allow us to create a narrative sequence over time that uncovers a causal mechanism (Figure 5), while still keeping the case in its context.

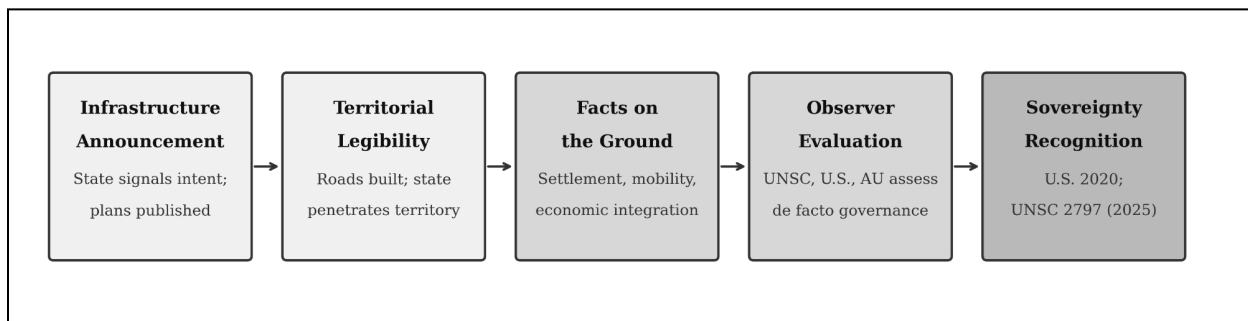


Figure 5: Causal Mechanism. Author generated using Claude.

The causal mechanism that links roadway development to sovereignty outcomes has five observable stages. The chain begins even before breaking ground whenever Morocco announces a new infrastructure plan, which sends an initial signal to outside observers. These signals reach international organizations, who began to pay increasing attention towards Moroccan infrastructure development after the 2007 Autonomy Plan was brought forward at the United Nations. Once infrastructure is completed, people on-the-ground begin to use them, and so too do international monitors. Noticing real changes in transport, speed, and comfort, so their perception of the *de facto* reality changes. This is Scott's legibility argument applied: by making the territory legible, the Moroccan state can execute its functions, establishing more legitimacy. Once established, these aspects of legibility and legitimacy influence sovereignty outcomes.

Instead of looking for a standard regression to track changes in the IV (roadway development) and the DV (sovereignty outcomes) in the abstract, this research uses a process-tracing and narrative-sequencing approach that tracks three specific roadway

development projects as the evidentiary basis: the N1 Atlantic spine, the Guerguerat border crossing, and the Smara-Amgala interior route.

Roadway Development

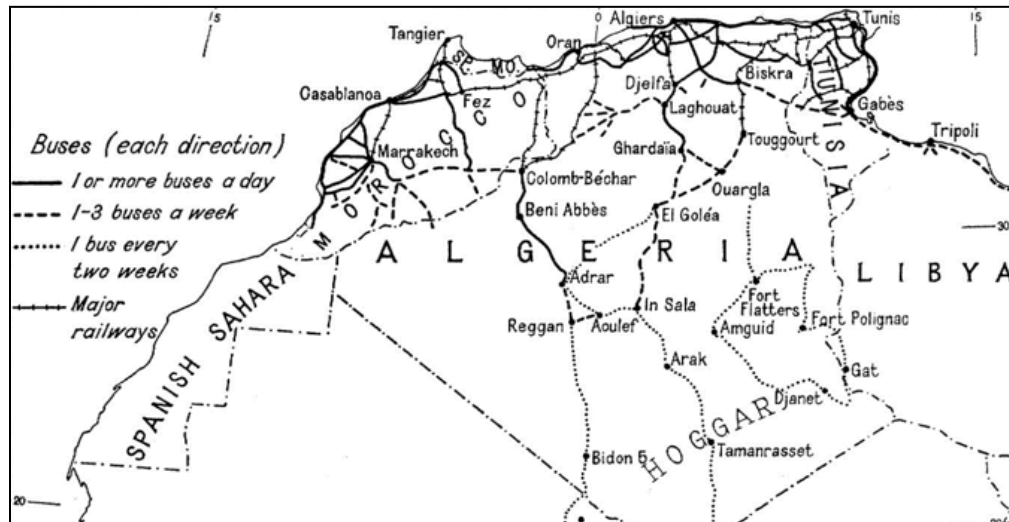


Figure 6: Benjamin E. Thomas, modern trans-Saharan routes (1951), reproduced from Thomas, “Modern Trans-Saharan Routes,” *Geographical Review* 42, no. 2 (1952): 267–82.

Colonial infrastructure in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco developed rapidly during the World Wars because North African military campaigns required rapid construction of roads, airstrips, and other transport infrastructure.⁴⁵ Once the bombs stopped falling, infrastructure was often repurposed for commerce.⁴⁶ Following the troubles of the Spanish Civil War and multiple losses in North Africa, Spain did not emerge from the Second World War with much development in Spanish Sahara. In February 1951, a geographer named Benjamin Thomas crossed the Sahara by bus and published the map reproduced above. Western Sahara’s Atlantic coast appears blank on this map. There are no routes and no oases marked down for bus stops.

⁴⁵ Benjamin E. Thomas, “Modern Trans-Saharan Routes,” *Geographical Review* 42, no. 2 (1952): 268, <https://doi.org/10.2307/211390>.

⁴⁶ Thomas, “Modern Trans-Saharan Routes.”

These maps stayed this way through 1975, so Western Sahara did not see much colonial infrastructural development by the time of decolonization.

Sixty-nine years later, in March 2020, British travel writer Chris Scott rode a motorcycle down the same coastline. He found a two-lane paved highway running the length of the territory, radar-equipped Moroccan police operating as far south as Dakhla, subsidized fuel stations spaced every 150 to 250 kilometers, a wind turbine installation near Tarfaya feeding electricity to Laayoune, and a kite-surfing resort at the southern end of the road. The N1 Atlantic Highway, he wrote, was “essentially a continuation of Morocco.”⁴⁷ A lot happened between Thomas’ blank map and Scott’s highway adventures, and we can see how the roads developed in Western Sahara over time.

Moroccan roadway development was a material mechanism through which the state extended its infrastructural power into a disputed territory and made that extension visible to the international community. Three main projects form the evidentiary basis of this argument. The first is the N1 Atlantic coastal spine, the backbone of Moroccan administration in the territory. The second is the Guerguerat road and the 2020 crisis it produced, a moment when a paved road became an argument for sovereignty. The third is the Smara–Amgala interior route, completed in early 2025, which extended Morocco’s road network through territory previously under UN supervision and established a second border crossing with Mauritania weeks before the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2797. Taken together, these three projects trace a fifty-year arc from Thomas’ unmarked bus map to a continental corridor, and the international community was paying attention.

⁴⁷ Chris Scott, “A is for Atlantic Highway,” Sahara Overland (blog), March 2020, <https://saharaoverland.com>.

Terra Nullius?

When British geographer Benjamin Thomas was mapping modern routes through the Sahara desert, it made way more sense to go through the Algerian Sahara with its developed road network. In 1927, colonial infrastructure emerged from commercial passenger and freight services between Northern Algeria to Sudan. Without infrastructure, road travel through the Sahara has been historically challenging since a truck must be equipped with tons of water, fuel, food, and emergency supplies. Without reliably distanced fuel stations and stopways, travelers had to stop at oases, and when they hit the most southern Oasis, Reggan, the Algerian Sahara stretched what seemed almost infinite. As French and Arab members of Thomas' travel party put it, "there is nothing but sand and sun in the terrible desert of thirst."⁴⁸ Thomas' early remarks on roadway development through the Spanish-Sahara territory reflected less of what was there, and more of what was not.

In Spanish Sahara during the time of Thomas' travels, there was no viable route along the Atlantic coast. There were neither gas stations nor rest stops. There was no commercial service, no scheduled transport, no state presence to administer it.⁴⁹ That was 1951. Seventy years later, a British motorcyclist named Chris Scott rode a single road down the same coastline, and infrastructure was seemingly everywhere. Scott's travel website, *Sahara Overland* is dedicated to motorcycle and long distance road travel throughout the Sahara desert. Its creator has written a handful of adventure travel guide books that center Western Sahara, and his forum messages and blog posts are indeed the most complete and accessible archive of Moroccan infrastructure development in Western Sahara. Photos, maps, and cultural insights contain rich detail about the on-the-ground reality of the infrastructure projects happening in the territory. Looking at Chris

⁴⁸ Thomas, "Modern Trans-Saharan Routes," 272.

⁴⁹ Thomas, "Modern Trans-Saharan Routes," 268–72.

Scott's archive over time gives snapshots of how Morocco built infrastructure that made the very kind of travel the author wrote about much easier. *Sahara Overland* allows us to see the material realities of the state's infrastructural power.

The N1 Atlantic Coastal Spine

A viable trans-Saharan route on the Atlantic coast did not exist until the Moroccan state built the N1 highway in the twenty-first century. Chris Scott's *Sahara Overland* post, "A is for Atlantic Highway," recounts his February and March travels south along the N1 spine in 2020.⁵⁰ The highway is long; it stretches over 2300 kilometers between Tangier in the north to where it terminates in the southern town of Lagouira near the border with northern Mauritania. It is over this road where the Moroccan state was able to extend its reach towards sovereignty, and the de facto rules on the ground preceded full recognition.

Grand government plans for the N1 megaproject were announced in the 2013 *Nouveau modèle de développement pour les provinces du Sud* (New Development Model for the Southern Provinces). Put forth by the *Conseil économique, social et environnemental (CESE)*, this new development was unanimously adopted by Morocco's constitutional economic advisory council.⁵¹ The plan explicitly states how it aligns with the 2007 Autonomy Plan that the Kingdom put forward at the United Nations, positioning the state as the primary infrastructural actor ("*premier investisseur et premier employeur*").⁵² Through putting forth this plan, Morocco sought to transform the Western Sahara territory into its Southern Provinces that would connect Northwest Africa to the rest of Africa south of the Sahara:

⁵⁰ Chris Scott, "A is for Atlantic Highway," Sahara Overland (blog), March 2020, <https://saharaoverland.com>.

⁵¹ Conseil économique, social et environnemental, *Nouveau modèle de développement pour les provinces du Sud* (Royaume du Maroc, octobre 2013), 7.

⁵² Conseil économique, social et environnemental, *Nouveau modèle de développement*, 13.

This momentum can legitimately aspire to confer upon the Southern Provinces the function of a hub between the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, through in particular a maritime cluster, an adequate connectivity plan based on the development of electrical transmission corridors, the construction of the Atlantic coastal road and the desert road, the strengthening of the port network and of maritime and air transport.⁵³

Cette dynamique peut légitimement aspirer à conférer aux provinces du Sud une fonction de hub entre le Maghreb et l'Afrique subsaharienne à travers notamment un cluster maritime, un plan de connectivité adéquat basé sur le développement des autoroutes électriques, la construction de la rocade atlantique et de la route du désert, le renforcement du réseau portuaire et du transport maritime et aérien.⁵⁴

The two major routes named here are undoubtedly the N1 Atlantic Highway and the Smara-Angala interior route, announced six years after the 2007 Autonomy plan and twelve years before UNSC 2797.

The N1 Atlantic Coastal Highway is a tool of the Moroccan state because it allows the state to monitor and control who gets to move what, where, and when in a greater area than ever before. For instance, after being stopped by police for doing 80 in a 60, Scott observed that “the speed cops are creeping south,” past Tan Tan and on the approach of each Moroccan settlement.⁵⁵ When Scott wrote this article in 2020, Western Sahara was a military zone, so checkpoints along the N1 highway were regular. Below (Figure 7) is an example of a checkpoint *fiche* (form) that can speed up the checkpoint process.⁵⁶ Whether checking a *fiche* or a passport, an officer executing the duties of the state has the authority to decide whether you can continue traveling or must turn back, and they make this decision based on a standardized set of information.

⁵³ Author's translation.

⁵⁴ Conseil économique, social et environnemental, Nouveau modèle de développement, 17.

⁵⁵ Scott, “A is for Atlantic Highway.”

⁵⁶ Scott, “A is for Atlantic Highway.”

Nom	<i>Surname</i>	Passeport n°	<i>Passport #</i>
Prénoms	<i>Forename</i>	Délivré le	<i>Issue date</i>
Date de naissance	<i>Date of birth</i>	Délivré à	<i>Place of issue</i>
Lieu de naissance	<i>Place of birth</i>	Valide jusqu'à	<i>Expiry date</i>
Nationalité	<i>Nationality</i>		
Profession	<i>Occupation</i>	Date d'entrée Maroc	<i>Date of entry</i>
Domicile	<i>Home address</i>	Ville d'entrée	<i>Port of entry</i>
Situation familiale	<i>Marital status</i>	CIN or visa #	<i>CIN #</i>
Nom du père	<i>Father's name</i>	Motif du voyage	<i>Tourisme</i>
Nom de la mère	<i>Mother's name</i>	Marque du véhicule	<i>Vehicle make</i>
		Immatriculation	<i>Registration #</i>

Figure 7: Fiche from Sahara Overland “A is for Atlantic Highway”

In addition to state personnel, Scott also observed several physical signs of infrastructural development that the state uses to incentivise settlement in the Southern Provinces. For example, stations selling fuel that is subsidized about 30% subsidized begins about 92km south of Tan Tan, right by a checkpoint.⁵⁷ Further south near Dakhla, road adventurers will see huge installations of wind turbines south that help “keep the lights on in Laayoune.”⁵⁸ These infrastructure projects enabled large amounts of settlement into the disputed territory. In fact, Moroccan settlement between 1994 and 2004 created massive population increases in the Western Sahara territory, from 252,146 to 415,945 inhabitants in a matter of a decade.⁵⁹ Demographers studying these settlements concluded that “the population growth seen in the major provinces of Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara is above and beyond natural human growth patterns, and thus is highly suggestive of a state campaign to populate the region.”⁶⁰ The state’s campaign to settle the Western Sahara territory can be visibly seen in the infrastructure

⁵⁷ Scott, “A is for Atlantic Highway.”

⁵⁸ Scott, “A is for Atlantic Highway.”

⁵⁹ Mundy and Zunes, “Moroccan Settlers in Western Sahara,” 108.

⁶⁰ Mundy and Zunes, “Moroccan Settlers in Western Sahara,” 111.

and the incentives that the government provides (e.g. double wages, housing, lower taxes, and subsidized goods).⁶¹ The N1 Atlantic Highway thus represents the Moroccan state's infrastructural power to administer the territory and promote settlement, changing the facts on the ground that would be considered in any international conversation about sovereignty.

The Guerguerat Border Crossing

The final kilometers of the N1 Atlantic highway threads through the Moroccan border town of Guerguerat. Immediately south is four kilometers of No Man's Land that stretches between two border crossings on the Moroccan and Mauritanian sides. The space between is full of landmines that lay on either side of a half-completed asphalt road, a road that only stretches halfway from the Moroccan side into the middle of No Man's Land. In 2020, that stretch of pavement became the site of a flare in international tensions when pro-SADR protestors blockaded trucks at the border. The Guergarat Road and border crossing were state infrastructure projects that caused a lot of tension that international observers witnessed and judged. Even travel bloggers and YouTubers saw night-and-day differences between their experiences on either the Moroccan or Mauritanian sides of the border. In their travel videos, the Moroccan side runs relatively smoothly and efficiently, whereas the Mauritanian passport and customs experience tends to be long and patience-testing.

Morocco's first attempt in 2001 to construct an asphalt road across the buffer-strip was condemned by the UN. The Moroccan state undertaking was accused of having "involved activities that could be in violation of the ceasefire agreement," but the ceasefire held.⁶² It was not until 2016 that Morocco completed paving its Guergarat road, and by that time, its border

⁶¹ Mundy and Zunes, "Moroccan Settlers in Western Sahara," 108–111.

⁶² Western Sahara Resource Watch, "Morocco Intervenes Militarily to Re-open Its Plunder Corridor," November 13, 2020, <https://wsrw.org/en/news/morocco-intervenenes-militarily-to-re-open-its-plunder-corridor>.

outpost ballooned in acreage and dirhams invested. The justification for the creeping border infrastructure came from the declared need for national security. In 2016, *The North Africa Post* reported that Morocco completed the asphaltting of the road as a part of a security measure “following a successful anti-smuggling operation to clear the border area of Guerguerat from all sorts of illegal commercial activities.”⁶³ According to government sources, the choice to complete asphalt paving beyond the security wall was motivated by wanting to safeguard “the supreme interest of the Kingdom and protecting its border.”⁶⁴ The article from the Rabat-based *North Africa Post* takes a clearly pro-Moroccan position, condemning POLISARIO armed fighters and unarmed protestors for inflaming international tensions.

The UN, represented by spokesperson Stephane Dujarric, was certainly aware of the inflamed tensions that the road and the POLISARIO’s “desperate attempt” brought: “the UN is actively engaging with the parties and key member states to urge restraint and identify options for an acceptable solution to the current crisis.”⁶⁵ When the road was finished and tensions relaxed, Morocco’s 2007 Autonomy Plan looked all the more suitable to international observers. On 28 August 2016, the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, “urged both parties to withdraw all armed elements and respect the status quo,” but the road was already there.⁶⁶ Morocco withdrew from the Guerguerat Zone the following year, and international observers saw. One of whom was the Foreign Minister of Zambia, who withdrew his support for the SADR and instead switched sides, adding that “Morocco’s return to the African Union affords the

⁶³ “Morocco Completes Asphalt Paving of Guergarat Road,” *The North Africa Post*, September 10, 2016, <https://northafricapost.com/14014-morocco-completes-asphalt-paving-guergarat-road.html>

⁶⁴ “Morocco Completes Asphalt Paving of Guergarat Road,” *The North Africa Post*, September 10, 2016, <https://northafricapost.com/14014-morocco-completes-asphalt-paving-guergarat-road.html>.

⁶⁵ Stéphane Dujarric, quoted in “UN: Situation in Western Sahara ‘Remains Tense,’” *Middle East Monitor*, September 8, 2016, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160908-un-situation-in-western-sahara-remains-tense/>.

⁶⁶ European Parliament, Parliamentary Question: *VP/HR — Violation by Morocco of the Ceasefire in Western Sahara*, E-006609/2016, September 2016, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2016-006609_EN.html.

African family an opportunity to push for this question, which has lasted for a long time, towards a peaceful solution in a spirit of African consensus, dialogue and mutual respect.”⁶⁷ Even though Morocco violated the ceasefire by making an incursion into Guerguerat, as claimed by the POLISARIO, it exited the crisis with more allies than it had before this paving job.

By 2020, the asphalt road through Guerguerat had become a commercial artery that channeled Moroccan freight south into Mauritania and onward to West Africa. A blockade began on October 21, 2020, when MINURSO monitors observed approximately fifty Sahrawi civilians, including women and children, obstructing the paved route within the buffer strip and leaving roughly 200 Moroccan hauliers stranded south of the berm.⁶⁸ Soon after, on November 6, Morocco deployed 250 vehicles to the area, and on November 13, the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces launched what Rabat termed a “security operation” to reopen the route, prompting the POLISARIO to declare the 1991 ceasefire over.⁶⁹ In a response to the United Nations Secretary General’s November 21 letter, King Mohammed VI “asserted that the actions of Morocco at Guerguerat were ‘irreversible’ while noting that Morocco remained ‘committed to the ceasefire.’”⁷⁰ Less than a month later, on December 10, 2020, the United States formally

⁶⁷ “Morocco to Withdraw from Guerguerat Zone,” Asharq Al-Awsat, February 27, 2017, <https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/theaawsat/news-middle-east/morocco-withdraw-guerguerat-zone>.

⁶⁸ United Nations, Situation Concerning Western Sahara: Report of the Secretary-General, S/2021/843 (New York: United Nations, October 2021), <https://reliefweb.int/report/western-sahara/situation-concerning-western-sahara-report-secretary-general-s2021843-enar>

⁶⁹ International Crisis Group, “Time for International Re-engagement in Western Sahara,” Briefing No. 82, March 11, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/western-sahara-morocco-mauritania/time-international-re-engagement-western-sahara>.

⁷⁰ United Nations General Assembly, Question of Western Sahara: Report of the Secretary-General, A/76/388 (October 2021), ¶9, <https://reliefweb.int/report/western-sahara/question-western-sahara-report-secretary-general-a76388-enar>.

recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the territory and announced a consulate in Dakhla, where the N1 terminates.⁷¹

While the 2001 paving was condemned by the United Nations, the 2016 paving was accepted with the caveat that Morocco must withdraw; however, the tides had changed by the time that Morocco continued paving in 2020.⁷² By the time international observers turned to register an opinion, the infrastructural facts on the ground had already been made non-negotiable. The Guerguerat crossing thus represents infrastructural power deployed under conditions of crisis: a chokepoint where Morocco converted three weeks of contested asphalt into a permanent border regime, and where international observers ratified the result only after the facts had been set. What worked at one chokepoint could be scaled, and within five years the same logic would extend across the berm and interiorally.

Expansions, Interior Routes, and Investment

Morocco has since continued constructing roads in its Southern Provinces at the same time that the cascade of international recognition of Morocco's sovereignty accelerated. Days after the 47th anniversary of The Green March in 2022, the government announced a two-phase, 40km expansion of the N1 Atlantic corridor linking Dakhla to El Argoub, investing over 100 million Moroccan Dirhams (MAD) into the project.⁷³ This investment, according to King Mohammed VI, was a part of other "massive development projects in the southern provinces

⁷¹ Donald J. Trump, "Proclamation on Recognizing the Sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco over the Western Sahara," The White House, December 10, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-recognizing-sovereignty-kingdom-morocco-western-sahara/>

⁷² United Nations General Assembly, *Question of Western Sahara: Report of the Secretary-General*, A/76/388 (October 2021), <https://reliefweb.int/report/western-sahara/question-western-sahara-report-secretary-general-a76388-enar>.

⁷³ Safaa Kasraoui, "Morocco Launches Project to Strengthen Dakhla Road Infrastructure," Morocco World News, November 11, 2022, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2022/11/39646/morocco-launches-project-to-strengthen-dakhla-road-infrastructure/>

with a budget of over MAD 77 billion (\$7.1B).⁷⁴ State media and other state-sanctioned publications like *Morocco World News* constantly tout the significant figures of investment that these projects are allotted. In a similar way, reports on the Tiznit-Dakhla expressway highlight the large budget of the MAD 10 billion (\$1B), which the king says “forms part of a larger development programme for Morocco’s southern regions.”⁷⁵ In addition to the on-the-ground changes, the state can flex its investment to make its solutions seem more credible and real.

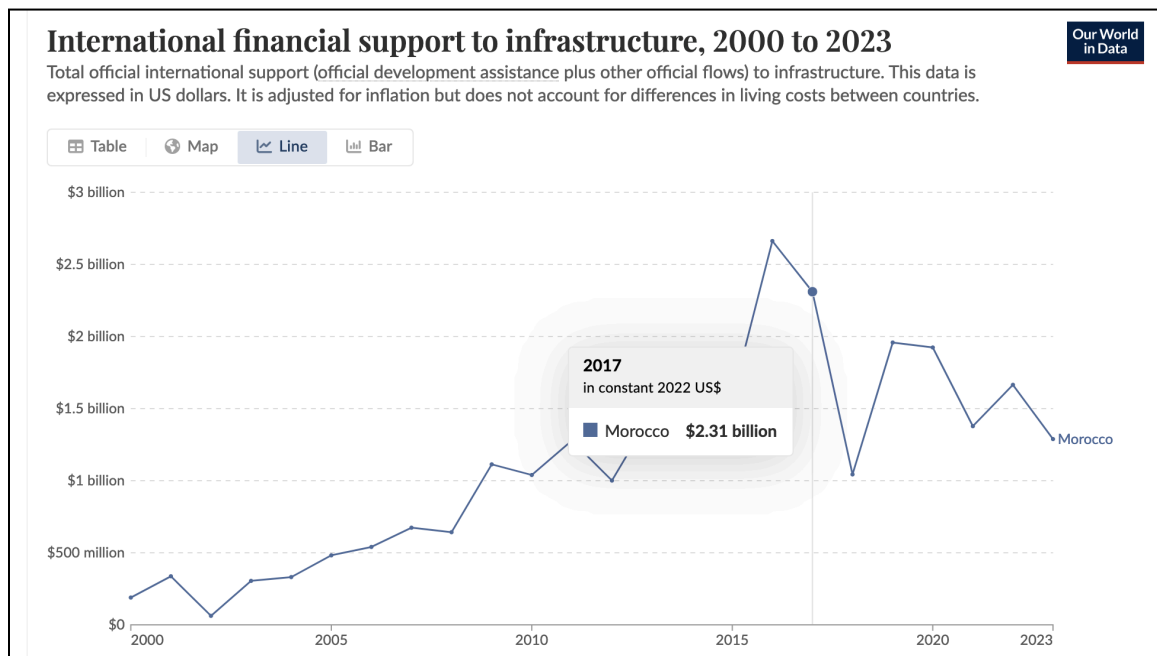


Figure 8: International financial support to infrastructure (Morocco), 2000 to 2023.

Most of the financial capital required for these infrastructure projects comes from the Moroccan state, yet international investment for infrastructure has also increased. As a matter of fact, the Tiznit-Dakhla highway was the result of a governmental collaboration that spanned three ministries (Ministry of the Interior, of Economy and Finance, and of Equipment, Transport,

⁷⁴ Kasraoui, “Morocco Launches Project to Strengthen Dakhla Road Infrastructure.”

⁷⁵ Aymen Alami, “Morocco Opens Tiznit-Dakhla Fast Freeway,” *Morocco World News*, January 10, 2025, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2025/01/166037/morocco-opens-tiznit-dakhla-fast-freeway/>.

Logistics and Water) and four regions.⁷⁶ Today, that road stretches over 1,000 kilometers, and is heralded as the “artery of southern Morocco’s logistics.”⁷⁷ In addition to the money that the state invested, international financial support to Moroccan infrastructure rose. It increased from under \$200 million in 2000 to a peak above \$2.6 billion in 2016, settling around \$1.3-2 billion in the 2019-2023 range (Figure 8).⁷⁸ That is a roughly 7-10x increase when measured in constant 2022 USD.

Some critics could claim that Morocco could very well be biting off more than it can chew. According to a more recent 2025 report from the International Trade Administration, Morocco will face an “infrastructure investment gap” of \$37B leading up to the year 2040, especially as it announced so many substantial investments in the years leading up to the 2030 FIFA World Cup.⁷⁹ Highways alone account for \$1.3B invested for the years between 2025 and 2032, and plans also exist in the north, including the Continental Rabat-Casablanca Highway, Tit Mellil-Berrechid Highway, and upgrades to Ain Harrouda and Sidi Maarouf junctions.⁸⁰ Morocco built and spent, and as will be explored in the next and final section, the international community responded in Morocco’s favor.

Changes in International Perceptions

In 2007, following a decade and a half of stalemate over the 1991 ceasefire, Morocco presented its Autonomy Plan to the United Nations. By reclaiming sovereignty over the Royal

⁷⁶ “Tiznit-Dakhla Highway,” Région Guelmim-Oued Noun, accessed May 12, 2026, <https://rgon.ma/en/tiznit-dakhla-highway/>.

⁷⁷ “Tiznit-Dakhla Expressway: Artery of Southern Morocco’s Logistics,” Middle East Online, accessed May 12, 2026, <https://www.middle-east-online.com/en/tiznit-dakhla-expressway-artery-southern-morocco%E2%80%99s-logistics>.

⁷⁸ Our World in Data, “International Financial Support to Infrastructure, 2000 to 2023,” based on OECD Creditor Reporting System data, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/total-financial-support-infrastructure>.

⁷⁹ International Trade Administration, “Morocco — Infrastructure,” Trade.gov, July 31, 2025, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/morocco-infrastructure>.

⁸⁰ International Trade Administration, “Morocco — Infrastructure.”

Domains that the Moroccan state's claimed were its precolonial territory ("Greater Morocco"), it would be able to protect the internal autonomy of the people who lived there.⁸¹ The 2007 Autonomy Plan declared that the populations of "the Sahara autonomous Region" shall exercise powers including local administration, policing, economic development, budget, and taxation, as well as "infrastructure: water, hydraulic facilities, electricity, public works and transportation."⁸² The state, on the other hand, would keep "exclusive jurisdiction" over the "attributes of sovereignty," as well as "national security, external defence and defence of territorial integrity."⁸³ Morocco's 2007 plan explicitly names infrastructure as an aspect of autonomy, but the state later would usurp the sovereign roles that its plan delegated by building and investing in infrastructure. According to the UN Secretary General's report, Moroccan investments west of the berm continued as previously reported in Laayoune.⁸⁴ Of course, the Moroccan state asserted that it was doing all of this in direct consultation with the territory's people.

To many outside observers, most critically those in the United States, the 2007 plan presented "a serious and credible proposal to provide real autonomy for the Western Sahara." Those were the words of the Undersecretary of State Burns, who reacted to the plan by stating how "The United States welcomes all efforts to find a realistic and workable solution."⁸⁵ As outlined in the previous section, Moroccan built infrastructure changed the de facto reality on the ground, and as more was built, the plan looked increasingly legitimate. That legitimacy also increased through December of 2020, when President Trump proclaimed that "the United States

⁸¹ Kingdom of Morocco, "Moroccan Initiative for Negotiating an Autonomy Statute for the Sahara Region," April 11, 2007, UN Doc. S/2007/206, Annex.

⁸² Kingdom of Morocco, "Moroccan Initiative for Negotiating an Autonomy Statute for the Sahara Region."

⁸³ Kingdom of Morocco, "Moroccan Initiative for Negotiating an Autonomy Statute for the Sahara Region."

⁸⁴ United Nations Secretary-General, Situation Concerning Western Sahara, S/2019/787 (New York: United Nations, 2019).

⁸⁵ U.S. Department of State, "Western Sahara Initiative," April 11, 2007, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/apr/82882.html>

(...) reaffirms its support for Morocco’s serious, credible, and realistic autonomy proposal as the only basis for a just and lasting solution.”⁸⁶ Trump used that same language that Undersecretary Burns used thirteen years prior.

More than just language, the Trump administration operationally followed through on their promises to the Moroccan state. In that same December Declaration, the United States stated that it would “open a consulate in the Western Sahara territory, in Dakhla, to promote economic and business opportunities for the region.”⁸⁷ Other countries were also in a cascade: on June 26, 2019, Côte d’Ivoire opened an “honorary consulate” in Laayoune, which the POLISARIO protested.⁸⁸ Other countries agreed to do the same, and “Bahrain, Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Jordan, Libya, Malawi, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Suriname, the United Arab Emirates and Zambia all inaugurated or announced their intention to inaugurate ‘Consulates General’ in Laayoune or Dakhla.”⁸⁹ All of these consulates were connected into the road system, fully participating in this infrastructural and diplomatic cascade.

What ultimately connects roadways to international sovereignty outcomes was the fact that MINURSO (The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara) functionally operated on top of Moroccan-built infrastructure. Looking back at Figure 3 (page 7), one can see the different monitoring sites where MINURSO conducted its operations, which

⁸⁶ Donald J. Trump, “Proclamation on Recognizing the Sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco over the Western Sahara,” The White House, December 10, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-recognizing-sovereignty-kingdom-morocco-western-sahara/>.

⁸⁷ Trump, “Proclamation on Recognizing the Sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco over the Western Sahara.”

⁸⁸ United Nations General Assembly, Question of Western Sahara: Report of the Secretary-General, A/76/388 (October 2021), ¶56, <https://reliefweb.int/report-western-sahara/question-western-sahara-report-secretary-general-a76388-enar>.

⁸⁹ United Nations General Assembly, Question of Western Sahara: Report of the Secretary-General, A/76/388 (October 2021), <https://reliefweb.int/report-western-sahara/question-western-sahara-report-secretary-general-a76388-enar>.

included “427,913 km of ground patrols and 989 hours of air patrols, and 6,866 verification visits,” most of it using Moroccan roadways.⁹⁰ Additionally, MINURSO used Moroccan license plates in the territory west of the berm, which was a small scale sign and assertion of Moroccan sovereignty.⁹¹ Those who made observations on the ground with MINURSO directly informed the diplomatic discourse surrounding the Western Sahara territory. By operating in the territory that was under de facto Moroccan control, the United Nations and its observers could note how the state’s sovereignty was changing on the ground, ultimately leading to the 2020 US-Morocco deal and UNSC Resolution 2797 five years later.

Conclusion

Over fifty years, the Moroccan state extended a continuous network of paved roads, checkpoints, fuel stations, settlements, and consulates across what had once been the most sparsely populated territory on earth, and that network became the material precondition for international recognition. The N1 produced the administrative spine; Guerguerat converted that arterial logic into a chokepoint argument that yielded U.S. recognition within weeks; the Smara–Amgala route closed the loop east of the berm and opened a second border with Mauritania weeks before the Security Council voted. Roads alone did not produce sovereignty, but no other mechanism (military, diplomatic, economic, or rhetorical) could have produced sovereignty without them.

Today, the conversation is over, and the building continues. What began with ceremonies like the one King Mohammed VI presided over in Laayoune on the fortieth anniversary of the Green March in November 2015—committing nearly MAD 77 billion to the Southern Provinces, including MAD 6.2 billion for the Tiznit–Laayoune highway, MAD 2.3 billion for the

⁹⁰ United Nations Secretary-General, Situation Concerning Western Sahara, S/2019/787 (New York: United Nations, 2019), ¶23.

⁹¹ United Nations Secretary-General, Situation Concerning Western Sahara, S/2019/787, ¶58.

Laayoune–Dakhla expansion, MAD 16.8 billion for OCP’s full phosphate chain, and MAD 6 billion for the new Dakhla Atlantic Port—has continued for over a decade without meaningful international pushback.⁹² The underlying logic is by now empirically established: a 2024 World Bank firm survey along recently completed motorway corridors in mainland Morocco found that 86 percent of newly established firms located within ten kilometers of the road, 81 percent of new jobs clustered in that same band, and 58 percent of surveyed firms reported employment growth after the highway opened.⁹³ Roads measurably produce settlement, employment, and market integration. That template, having proven itself in the mainland, is now being applied to the Southern Provinces with the Security Council’s blessing rather than its scrutiny.

This case extends the infrastructural-power literature into territory the literature has rarely entered. Mann, Mitchell, Scott, and Larkin developed their frameworks largely within established state borders, where the question was how state power penetrates society. Western Sahara reframes the question of how state power can penetrate contested territory, and at what point does that penetration become indistinguishable from sovereignty itself? The answer this paper offers is that material infrastructure performs the conversion. Roads make a territory legible to the state that builds them, legible to the international observers who use them, and eventually legible to the institutions that decide what counts as a legitimate state.

⁹² Jawad Maniani, “Morocco’s New Economic Model in Its Western Sahara,” Morocco World News, November 12, 2015, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2015/11/113889/moroccos-new-economic-model-in-its-western-sahara/>.

⁹³ Clotilde V. Minster, Jean-François Arvis, Nabil Samir, and Dickson Effah, “Morocco: How Do Road Infrastructure Investments Influence Private Sector Investments?,” World Bank Blogs, March 14, 2024, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/arabvoices/morocco-how-do-road-infrastructure-investments-influence-private-sector-investments>.

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