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POLICY PAPER

TOWARDS AUTONOMY FOR THE SAHARA; A DYNAMIC UNDERWAY

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The autonomy proposal put forward by Morocco in April 2007 as the unique basis for settling the dispute over the Moroccan Sahara is gradually gaining international recognition. Although rejected by Algeria and the Polisario, the Initiative has enjoyed broad international support since its launch, particularly from the United States and France, who have reaffirmed their support for Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara region. On April 8, 2025, the United States reiterated its position by calling on the UN Secretary-General's Personal Envoy, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, to work on the basis of this Initiative. This position opens up a real opportunity to achieve a lasting settlement. In this context, the planned tour by Mr. Massad Boulos, advisor to the US President on African and Middle Eastern affairs, aims to accelerate the process and encourage Algeria to become actively involved in this dynamic. The joint commitment of Washington and Paris to relaunching the settlement process requires time, consistency and, above all, a sincere political will on the part of Algeria and the Polisario to commit to a logic of peace and compromise. The current situation offers an unprecedented window of opportunity for a definitive settlement of the conflict. For the first time, an initiative led by the United States and supported by a favorable international context is proposing a realistic, lasting solution that respects Morocco's legitimate rights. This pivotal moment could mark a decisive turning point in the history of the region.

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INTRODUCTION

Autonomy as the basis for a solution to the dispute over Morocco's recovery of its Sahara is gradually gaining ground on the international scene, twenty-four years after it was first mooted by James Baker, then Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary-General, and eighteen years after the official presentation of the Moroccan Autonomy Initiative.

Although this Initiative has been firmly rejected by Algeria and the Polisario — both of which are committed to the organization of a referendum on self-determination that would inevitably lead to independence — it has, on the other hand, received broad international support since its launch. Dozens of countries from all regions of the world have endorsed it, with varying or nuanced but convergent formulations.

Three recognitions were particularly decisive in setting in motion a new dynamic: those of the United States, France, and Spain — all members of the Group of Friends of the Secretary-General for the Sahara, including two permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, historically active on this issue.

Over the past two years, the United States and France have clearly distinguished themselves from the other permanent members. Not only have they recognized that the Moroccan Autonomy Initiative is the only realistic framework for a settlement, but they have also demonstrated a firm commitment to advancing the political process on this basis.

The reaffirmation of this position and commitment by the United States on April 8, 2025, the visit of the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, to Washington on April 10, and his briefing to the Security Council on April 14, have all contributed to opening up a real prospect of accelerating the process of resolving this dispute.

The idea of a settlement based on a negotiated autonomy regime gradually matured after the United Nations concluded in June 2001 that the 1990 Settlement Plan was unworkable. The concept was at the heart of the draft Framework Agreement proposed by James Baker the same year (1). Its formalization into a structured proposal, in line with international standards, was preceded by an extensive national and international consultation process, before its submission to the UN in April 2007.

Faced with the persistent immobility of Algeria and the Polisario - illustrated in particular by their refusal to take part in the roundtables and by the Polisario's violation of the ceasefire agreement - Morocco has shown a constant readiness and flexibility that have been hailed by the international community, earning it growing support for its autonomy-based approach.

Since its inception, the Autonomy Initiative has been gradually consolidated, driven by a twofold normative and institutional dynamic. Internally, this evolution was reflected in the adoption of the 2011 Constitution, marking a turning point in the strengthening of the rule of law. Internationally, it has been accompanied by a steady strengthening of the Kingdom's commitment to human rights, as well as its cooperation with the monitoring mechanisms guaranteeing their observance.

The solution to this dispute is now at a turning point in its long history, thanks to the active commitment of the United States and France, and a favorable international climate. By tracing the genesis of this option, the multifaceted support it has received at diplomatic level and its positive reception by the Security Council, it now appears that the time has come for its consecration.

I- AUTONOMY: THE MATURATION OF A VISION

Between July 2000 and February 2001, the Security Council invited the parties to engage in "direct talks to try to resolve the multiple problems facing the implementation of the Settlement Plan and to try to agree on a mutually acceptable political solution to their dispute over the Sahara".(2) At this invitation, Morocco was the only one to express its willingness to explore an alternative to the Settlement Plan.

After noting Morocco's readiness to help break the deadlock in the peace process, Personal Envoy James Baker III organized a series of meetings in Berlin and London to reconcile views on a third way solution. He concluded that "there would be no point in holding further meetings of the parties unless the Moroccan Government, as the administering Power of the Territory, was prepared to propose or genuinely support the delegation of certain practical powers to all the inhabitants and former inhabitants of the Territory, in accordance with international standards."(3)

Faced with the obstructionist policy of the other parties, Morocco confined itself to confirming its readiness to move towards the devolution of powers to bodies in the Sahara region, without going any further. This attitude, welcomed by the Secretary-General and the permanent members of the Council, led the Personal Envoy to propose a framework agreement based on the notion of autonomy.

In May 2001, James Baker toured the region to gather the parties' views on a draft Framework Agreement (known as Baker I), drawn up by himself with the assistance of an expert in autonomy regimes. He presented his draft to the parties as "the last chance for the next few years" which "all interested parties should seize, as it serves the interests of the Sahara population" and those of "the whole Maghreb region". He also called on Algeria in particular to "participate, as a party, in these consultations and to negotiate any changes it would like to make to the draft document to make it acceptable". (4)

The draft Framework Agreement grants to the population of the Sahara, among other things, the right to elect their own executive, legislative, and judicial bodies, and to exercise powers specific to the region. More specifically, it provides for the following distribution of powers:

The Kingdom of Morocco will exercise its exclusive jurisdiction, particularly in the fields of foreign relations, national security and defense, and the preservation of territorial integrity against any attempt at secession, whether from within or outside the Territory. In addition, the Kingdom's flag, currency, customs services and postal and telecommunications systems will also be those of Western Sahara;

2- the Sahara Region will exercise, through its executive, legislative and judicial bodies, powers covering, among others, the fields of local administration, territorial taxation, social welfare, culture, education, commerce, transport, agriculture, mining, fisheries and industry, housing and basic infrastructure;

3. the region will have an Executive, an elected Legislature, and a Judiciary, whose actions must comply with the Constitution of the Kingdom of Morocco and respect its provisions;

4- Neither the Kingdom of Morocco nor the executive, legislative or judicial bodies of the Sahara region may unilaterally modify or abolish the present statute. Any changes or modifications that may be made must be approved by the Executive and the Assembly of the Sahara;

5- a referendum on the status of the Sahara will be organized within five years following the first acts giving it effect. To be eligible to vote, a voter must have resided permanently in the Sahara throughout the entire previous year;

6- the French Government and the Government of the United States of America guarantee the implementation of the Agreement by the parties.

In its resolution 1359 of June 29, 2001, the Security Council “encouraged the parties to examine the draft framework agreement and to negotiate any modifications which they expressly wished to see included in this proposal, as well as to examine any other proposal for a political settlement which might be put forward by the parties, in order to reach a mutually acceptable agreement”. (5)

On the substance of the draft Framework Agreement, which Mr. Baker felt he could propose with Morocco’s support, Algeria expressed reservations, stressing that the text reflected an “integrationist approach”. According to Algiers, this vision did not fully meet neither the objectives sought nor the parameters defined by the settlement framework endorsed by the Security Council. For its part, the Polisario tried to reorientate the draft agreement to bring it closer to the provisions of the initial Settlement Plan, turning it into a kind of “Settlement Plan bis”.

Morocco’s determination to break the deadlock in the United Nations’ efforts to obtain definitive international recognition of the Moroccan status of the Sahara has prompted the government to present the Council with an autonomy project inspired by the UN’s proposals and the experiences of its neighbouring countries and based on international standards.

II- THE EMERGENCE OF A SERIOUS AND CREDIBLE INITIATIVE:

Faced with Algeria’s and the Polisario rejection of the Baker Plan I, and Morocco’s rejection of the Baker Plan II perceived as a mere reproduction of the 1990 Settlement Plan - Morocco was encouraged by the United Nations and solicited by several friendly powers to draw up and submit an autonomy proposal. This Initiative, the fruit of an inclusive national process, was drawn up to meet the following key requirements:

- *represent a compromise between the two options of the settlement plan (integration with Morocco or independence);*
- *take into account the sociological and cultural specificities of the Sahara region;*
- *preserve the foundations of national sovereignty in terms of national unity and territorial integrity;*
- *provide a credible basis likely to rally the support of the other parties to the dispute.*

It is within these parameters that Morocco has embarked on the development of its autonomy project, adopting the same inclusive and consensual approach that characterizes the actions of the Moroccan authorities. This method, a true hallmark of the national reform process, has presided over the adoption of major documents such as the 2011 Constitution, the 2004 Family Code - currently under revision - and the New Development Model launched in 2021.

The autonomy proposal put forward by Morocco in April 2007 is a natural extension of a process of political democratization and territorial decentralization that began in the early years of independence. This process has been progressively strengthened by the introduction of a system of advanced regionalization, designed to allow the local authorities to exercise exclusive powers and elect their own representative bodies responsible for implementing public policies as closely as possible to local realities.

The autonomy regime envisaged for the Sahara region represents an advanced stage in participatory democracy. It reflects Morocco's determination to consolidate the rule of law on a national scale, while meeting the expectations expressed by the international community for a final and mutually acceptable settlement of this regional dispute.

The text presented by Morocco has deepened and enriched the draft Framework Agreement proposed by James Baker, both in terms of the content of the competences attributed to the Sahara Region and the structuring of representative bodies.⁽⁶⁾ Morocco has also included essential provisions on guarantees of respect for the human rights and dignity of the populations of the Tindouf camps who agree to return to the Kingdom, the general amnesty that will be proclaimed, as well as the firm commitment to submit the outcome of negotiations on the autonomy regime to the democratic approval of the populations concerned.

In addition to these commitments, Morocco reaffirmed its full readiness to engage in serious and constructive negotiations, in a spirit of compromise, and to work actively to establish a climate of confidence conducive to a positive outcome to the process.

It is with all these factors in mind that the Security Council has, since 2007, developed a progressive and favorable assessment of the relevance and pre-eminence of the Moroccan initiative to promote a negotiated, realistic and mutually acceptable political solution. In successive strokes, it has sketched out the contours of the desired political solution, highlighting the fundamental qualities it must embody: seriousness, credibility, a spirit of compromise, pragmatism, realism and reciprocity. It is precisely these attributes of the Moroccan Initiative that have earned it broad international support, contributing to the diplomatic momentum and positive dynamic that are now taking shape to bring this issue to a definitive close, through the direct and effective involvement of the United States and France, the two powers committed to bringing the process out of the state of lethargy in which it has become bogged down.

III- THE AUTHENTICITY OF AUTONOMY REQUIRES NEGOTIATION

Notwithstanding the party in charge in the White House, the US position on the Sahara issue has been rather constructive and attentive to Morocco's interests, with the exception of the period of President Carter and the year 2013 during which Washington tried to push for the inclusion of human rights in the Minurso mandate, before retracting.

President Trump's clear and unambiguous recognition in 2020 of Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara marked a major strategic turning point for the Kingdom. It was also the starting point for a sustained diplomatic dynamic that continues to grow stronger. The recent reaffirmation of this position by the United States was all the more significant in that it was accompanied by an explicit commitment from Washington to "facilitate progress in this direction". This orientation is in line with the position expressed by France, notably in President Emmanuel Macron's letter to His Majesty King Mohammed VI, in which he

considered that “it is time to move forward” and “calls on all parties to come together to achieve a lasting political solution, now within reach”.

In the two communiqués issued at the end of the visit to Washington by the Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs, African Cooperation and Moroccans Abroad and the Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Sahara, their two American hosts referred to “genuine autonomy”.

The US Secretary of State reaffirmed his country’s recognition of Morocco’s sovereignty over the Sahara and its support for the Moroccan autonomy proposal as the only basis for resolving the dispute. He added that the United States “continues to believe that genuine (Genuine) autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution”. Finally, he recalled President Trump’s call for “the parties to engage immediately in discussions, relying exclusively on Morocco’s autonomy proposal as the sole framework for negotiations, with a view to reaching a mutually acceptable solution. He also stressed that the United States stands ready to facilitate progress in this direction.”

For her part, during her meeting with Personal Envoy De Mistura on April 14, 2025, Lisa Kenna, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, considered that “genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only possible solution” and that “the parties must now come to the negotiating table to reach a mutually acceptable outcome”.

This reference to the genuine nature of the autonomy sought, is not new. As far back as 2000, in the time of former Personal Envoy James Baker, the latter had made the resumption of talks between the parties conditional on Morocco’s readiness to genuinely support a delegation of powers to the future autonomous region of the Sahara.

During his tour of the region that same year, Mr. Baker had indicated in his report to the Secretary-General that he had “met with officials of the Kingdom of Morocco to determine whether Morocco, as the administering Power in Western Sahara, was prepared to offer or support some delegation of power to all inhabitants and former inhabitants of the Territory that would be genuine, substantive and consistent with international norms.” (7)

Finally, in his presentation to the Security Council in October 2024, the UN Secretary-General’s Personal Envoy, albeit using measured, diplomatic language, made clear his expectations of Morocco. He declared that “the time has come for Morocco to explain and develop its 2007 autonomy proposal ... and that “it is essential to give a clear idea of the prerogatives that would be transferred to a truly autonomous Western Sahara”. Di Mistura reiterated the same demand, which he had set out as a conviction, in his briefing to the Council on April 14, 2025.

The qualifier “genuine” or “authentic”, depending on the context, refers to notions such as authenticity, sincerity, frankness, honesty, legitimacy, realism and credibility. When used to qualify a political proposal or approach, it implies that it is based on real, serious intentions, and not on window-dressing.

Thus, the American insistence on the need for “genuine autonomy” as the basis for resolving the Sahara dispute reflects a clear expectation: the Moroccan autonomy project must be perceived as sufficiently solid, credible, and sincere to attract support, or at least bring the other parties back to the negotiating table. This presupposes a strengthening or improvement of the existing proposal, so that it is perceived not simply as a strategic posture, but as a serious and legitimate offer, capable of constituting a starting point for a lasting solution.

An analysis of the content of the Moroccan Initiative reveals that a sincere and courageous effort has been made to formulate an autonomy proposal that is both substantial and credible, reflecting Morocco's good faith and genuine commitment to a lasting political solution. The Initiative is not presented as a fixed, definitive or unilateral offer; on the contrary, it incorporates a dimension that is deliberately open to negotiation, leaving room for possible adjustments and reciprocal concessions. Indeed, the negotiable and flexible nature of the proposal is emphasized several times in the text, testifying to a clear desire to reach a consensual settlement through a process of dialogue.

Thus, the draft stresses that its objective is to "create the conditions for a process of dialogue and negotiation leading to a mutually acceptable political solution"(par.7), that Morocco is "ready to engage in serious and constructive negotiation"(par.9), that the Autonomy Initiative "will be the subject of negotiation"(par.27), that "the solution to the Sahara dispute can only be the fruit of negotiation"(par.33) and that "Morocco undertakes to negotiate in good faith in a spirit of openness and sincerity".

However, as long as the other parties remained categorical in their rejection of the autonomy project and refused to open up to negotiations, Morocco could not reasonably unveil its cards, expose its areas of flexibility, or fully deploy the evolving potential of its proposal. Any negotiation is based on a logic of interaction, listening and reciprocal concessions, which presupposes a minimum commitment on both sides. In the absence of this shared willingness, the process remained frozen, deprived of the dynamic essential to any constructive exchange. Reciprocity - the sine qua non of any real negotiation - was lacking, preventing any progress towards a concerted and balanced political solution.

IV - THE PATH TO MAGHREB AND SAHEL STABILITY :

The Franco-American commitment to relaunching the Sahara settlement process requires time, perseverance and real political will, particularly on the part of Algeria and the Polisario, for them to accept to be part of this peace dynamic.

Time is of the essence. In the short term, it would be up to the United States, as "pen holder" of the Saharan dossier at the Security Council, to present and negotiate, as early as next October, a draft resolution clearly affirming autonomy as the one and only lasting political solution to the dispute.

Such an approach would presuppose diplomatic alignment on the part of the Council's permanent members, and in particular Russia's support for this approach. In recent years, however, Moscow has systematically abstained from voting on resolutions concerning the Sahara.

Nevertheless, the dynamic of cooperation that the United States and Russia have been able to establish in the context of the negotiations linked to the conflict in Ukraine could provide a lever and open the way to a compromise on this issue. This convergence, albeit partial, would give the draft resolution greater legitimacy and relaunch, under new auspices, a credible and inclusive diplomatic dynamic around the autonomy plan.

Then, beyond diplomatic time, strong political decisions are needed from the main players involved, starting with Algeria. Significant gestures include, first and foremost, the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Morocco, which were broken off on August

21, 2021. This would send a strong signal of appeasement and would be a symbolic and concrete prerequisite for any regional revival. To this would be added the opening of long-closed borders, which would not only promote human and economic exchanges, but also create a climate of trust conducive to broader dialogue.

In this respect, the United States currently appears to be the only actor capable of engaging in credible mediation between Morocco and Algeria. Indeed, the persistent deterioration in diplomatic relations between Algeria and France compromises any possibility, in the short term, of the latter's involvement in a process of rapprochement between the two neighboring countries. This geopolitical context gives Washington a central, if not exclusive, role in any initiative aimed at easing tensions and encouraging constructive bilateral dialogue.

In an interview with the Al Arabiya channel broadcast on Friday, April 18, 2025, Massad Boulos, Advisor to the US President on African and Middle Eastern Affairs, highlighted the persistent deadlock over the Sahara issue, which dates back almost 50 years. He revealed that during his April 10 meeting with his Moroccan counterpart, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio stressed the urgency of speeding up the search for a solution "accepted by both parties".

Boulos acknowledged that President Trump's busy schedule had prevented him from moving the issue forward, and that today Washington is "determined to contribute actively to its resolution". He expressed his wish to see the establishment of good neighborly relations and brotherhood between Algeria and Morocco. "Morocco," he continued, "is a strategic ally of the United States, but we also aspire to strengthen our relations with Algeria. It is essential to reach a definitive solution to the Sahara question. Let's not forget that some 200,000 Saharawi refugees are currently living in Algeria. It's time to reach an agreement that suits all parties", he concluded.

This statement, issued by an official still in the process of familiarizing himself with the subtleties and stakes of this issue, was interpreted tendentiously by the Algerian press, which saw in it a challenge to American recognition, supposedly "neither absolute nor closed".

This interpretation prompted a clarification from the same official stating that "there is no ambiguity in the United States' position, and any information to the contrary is mere approximation, devoid of foundation."

The wish expressed by Algeria, through the voice of its Ambassador in Washington on March 9, 2025, to develop close and fruitful relations with President Trump's United States, could encourage Algiers not to rule out American mediation from the outset, as it has done with European or Arab initiatives. However, this process risks coming up against a pace deemed too slow by an American Administration whose transactional approach favors the rapid conclusion of agreements, without dwelling on the historical sensitivities and burdens of the past that mark relations between Morocco and Algeria.

On the other hand, the relaunch of the Arab Maghreb Union could provide an appropriate framework for renewed dialogue between Algeria and Morocco, facilitating the emergence of structured cooperation in strategic areas such as security, migration management and the socio-economic development of border areas. Such a regional dynamic, including Mauritania, could have a positive impact not only on the stabilization of the Sahel, but also on the gradual opening-up of this region to the Atlantic Ocean, thereby strengthening its economic and geopolitical integration.

On the polsario side, substantial change is also required. This begins with the long-delayed acceptance of a population identification and census in the Tindouf camps, an essential condition for the repatriation of the camps' population with ties to the Sahara. Added to this is the need for an explicit and definitive renunciation of armed struggle, as was the case in Colombia with the FARC and in Turkey with the PKK, in order to foster a transition towards political legitimacy based on dialogue, representativeness and respect for pluralism.

With this in mind, polsario members could embark on a transformation towards a civilian political formation, capable of competing on an equal footing with the other political formations representing the people of the region. Such a transformation would pave the way for institutional inclusion, breaking with the logic of confrontation, and laying the foundations for lasting reconciliation within the framework of rediscovered unity.

To support the United Nations in this acceleration process, MINURSO's mandate would have to be adapted, leading to a transformation of both its status and its functions. Assuming that autonomy is established as the sole framework for negotiations, MINURSO's role would evolve from that of a traditional peacekeeping mission to that of a political mission. Its main vocation would be to accompany and support efforts to facilitate negotiations, under the aegis of the UN Secretary-General's Personal Envoy.

Such a development would mark a decisive turning point in the handling of the Sahara question. International recognition of autonomy as a definitive political solution would de facto settle the question of sovereignty. This would call for two major decisions at the international level:

the removal of the question of the Sahara from the agenda of the Special Committee on Decolonization (C24), reflecting the outcome of a political process under the aegis of the United Nations;

a decision by the African Union to withdraw, or at least suspend, the membership status granted to the Polisario, pending the final conclusion of negotiations on the status of autonomy.

In return, should Algeria and the Polisario be led, under the combined effect of American pressure and with the benevolent acquiescence of Russia, to commit to a compromise based on autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, they will probably seek to preserve certain symbolic elements of diplomatic recognition of the Polisario, which Morocco would not consent to, or, failing that, to obtain clear assurances from international players as to the evolving nature of the autonomous status, or at the very least, a formal guarantee of its irreversible nature, with a view to a lasting and equitable settlement of the conflict.

Diplomatically and politically, Algeria, which has been involved in the Saharan question since 1975 - both diplomatically and through sustained financial and military support - would be relieved to see the repatriation to the Sahara of the populations of the Tindouf camps, increasingly perceived as a factor of insecurity and instability within its borders. However, this relief would not come without a quid pro quo: Algiers would seek to capitalize on its long-standing involvement in the issue.

Internally, the polsario's renunciation of the referendum option and independence could be perceived as an ideological defeat, and feed a feeling of frustration or abandonment within the Algerian security and military apparatus. This context could reawaken latent tensions, notably the spectre of the Hirak, whose - still sensitive - popular demands could find a new echo in a climate of questioning of the regime's historic diplomatic dogmas. Algiers will also seek to guard against any form of autonomist contagion that might fuel similar demands in Kabylia or other regions of the country.

The month of October 2025 promises to be a decisive stage in the realization of this perspective. One project, led by the United States with the support of France, would consist of a succinct resolution, breaking with the language of previous resolutions. This draft would introduce two major changes: on the one hand, the affirmation that autonomy is both the starting point and the culmination of the new negotiation process; on the other, the transformation of MINURSO's mandate into an operation to support the new political process, which could be called MANSASO (Mission d'assistance pour la négociation d'un statut d'autonomie au Sahara occidental).

Such a project should rally the majority of the Council's non-permanent members without much difficulty, with the notable exception of Algeria. The most likely scenario would be support from 12 members, accompanied by a triple abstention — from Russia, China, and Algeria — followed by explanations of vote.

CONCLUSION :

Today's window of opportunity for a final settlement of the Sahara dispute is undoubtedly a major turning point in the history of the region. For the first time, a settlement project supported by the United States and benefiting from a favorable international context, offers a realistic and lasting solution that recognizes Morocco's legitimate rights. This new impetus also creates an opportunity for Algeria to engage in a constructive dynamic, in the service of stability in the Sahel and the renewal of the Maghreb integration project. This requires boldness and political courage.

Seizing this opportunity requires time, patience and, above all, a collective will to innovate diplomatically. Today, we need to instill a new spirit, capable of overcoming the logics of stalemate, mistrust and rivalry that have hampered the region for too long. This dynamic must be based on the principles of dialogue, cooperation and common interest. The peoples of the Maghreb, like the region's international partners, will be watching the emergence of this new direction with anticipation and attention, in the hope that it will finally succeed in freeing energies and revealing the full potential of the five Maghreb states. The ambition is clear: to pass on to future generations a Maghreb that is peaceful, solidary and resolutely united.

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He also acted as Morocco's Ambassador to Hungary, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Croatia (1995-1999), and was the Moroccan Government's Ambassador Coordinator with MINURSO (1999-2001). Furthermore, he served as Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva (2006-2008) and New York (2001-2003 and 2008-2014), including a term as President of the Security Council in December 2012. [Lire plus](#)

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