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## Foreign Policy Experts Urge US and International Community Focus on Realistic Solution, Not Ideology, to Break W. Sahara Deadlock

*Fact-finding mission participants say "sustainable solution" should recognize new realities, offering stability, security, and self-determination to people in region; deny breeding ground to new al-Qaeda threat*

**Washington, DC** (March 12)—Members of a distinguished panel of foreign policy experts, some recently returned from a fact-finding mission in Western Sahara, called on US and international policymakers yesterday to take a fresh look at ways to break the deadlock and work towards a realistic, sustainable solution to the decades-old regional conflict. Panelists pointed to alarming intelligence reports of al-Qaeda terrorists in the Sahel, and said autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty offered the "best practical way forward" to provide stability, security, and self-determination to the Sahrawi population. The experts noted the sharp contrast between the thriving society today in Morocco-administered W. Sahara and bleak conditions in Polisario-controlled refugee camps in Algeria.

Hosted by the [Middle East Institute](#), the policymakers roundtable on the Western Sahara included: Ambassador David Welch, Former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs; Dr. J. Peter Pham, Senior Fellow, National Committee on American Foreign Policy; Sam Spector, former corporate associate at Weil, Gotshal and Manges LLP, former Fulbright Fellow, and Associate on a project examining Middle East political change for the Secretary of Defense; Larry Velte, Professor, NESAC Center for Strategic Studies, National Defense University; and Ambassador Wendy Chamberlain, President, Middle East Institute, and former Ambassador to Pakistan.

Welch said a number of approaches have been tried to resolve the Western Sahara but have failed to break the stalemate. The UN referendum process in the 1990's, he said, "never got past disagreements over who votes and what they vote on." The current UN-mediated negotiations process began in 2007 when Morocco offered its compromise autonomy plan, which Welch called a step forward that deserved more serious consideration than it has received in negotiations to date.

Spector, author of 'Western Sahara and the Self-Determination Debate' (*Middle East Quarterly*), called "Morocco's autonomy [proposal](#) the best practical way forward. It is also a valid legal framework for self-determination," answering the UN Security Council's [call](#) for "a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution" that provides for "self-determination of the people of W. Sahara." Spector said international legal scholars frame self-determination as a continuum of ways to achieve self-governance. He said some scholars "blame the deadlock on resolving the W. Sahara in part on framing self-determination only as independence," an ideological position Algeria and the Polisario have insisted on for decades, but not reflecting the realities of evolving legal concepts of self-determination.

Pham said that the prospect of the Polisario ruling an independent W. Sahara "couldn't be a less promising state." He said by almost every measure—governance structure and experience, resource base, a common sense of nationhood—the Polisario fails the test. "The last thing Africa needs is another 'failed state', much less one in a geopolitically sensitive area like the Sahara."

Pham added that the Polisario's poor record on refugee rights, trafficking contraband, military training, and bleak conditions in the camps "is a classic profile for potential terrorist recruitment." He noted that al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has established a strong foothold in the Maghreb and Sahel, has linked up with drug traffickers in the region, and was casting a wide net for recruits. Pham contrasted the conditions in the camps with thriving economic and social conditions in Morocco-administered W. Sahara, to which refugees "are willing to risk passage over very inhospitable terrain to reach."

Chamberlain concluded the roundtable saying "the human cost of doing nothing is too high." She said that whether refugees in the desert camps number 90,000 or 50,000 (Algeria refuses a census), "these people are still stewing in refugee camps and that's unacceptable."

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