News



Peter Marocco, a political appointee focused on gutting USAID, departs after briefing the House Foreign Affairs Committee behind closed doors, on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, March 5, 2025. (AP/J. Scott Applewhite)

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***Editor's note**: Pete Marocco has left the U.S. Agency for International Development, a senior Trump administration official confirmed April 14.*

Before Peter Marocco was selected to dismantle America's entire foreign aid sector on behalf of President Donald Trump, he was an official with the U.S. State Department on a diplomatic mission.

In 2018, during Trump's first term, Marocco was a senior political appointee tasked with promoting stability in areas with armed conflict. That summer, he made a two-week trip to the Balkans, visiting several Eastern European countries in what was advertised as an effort to "counter violent extremism" and "strengthen inter-religious dialogue."

At the time, the U.S. was trying to maintain a fragile peace agreement it had helped broker two decades earlier in the region. The Balkans are still living in the shadows of the Bosnian war, a 1990s conflict between the region's disparate ethno-religious groups that led to the deaths of an estimated 100,000 people, including thousands of Muslim civilians who were massacred by Serb forces.

To avoid compromising such delicate international relations, American diplomatic work is carefully prescribed, even down to the people U.S. officials meet — and those they should avoid, like politicians under Treasury Department sanctions for corruption for war crimes.

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On a 2018 visit to the Balkans, Marocco secretly met with officials whom the American government had determined were off-limits without the highest levels of approval: ethnonationalist Bosnian Serb separatist leaders. Those politicians had been working for years to defy their nation's constitution and undermine the

American-backed peace deal in an effort to promote a Christian Bosnian Serb state. ProPublica pieced the episode together from interviews with seven current and former U.S. officials.

Among those in attendance was Milorad Dodik, according to one of the officials. The leader of a political region within the broader nation, Dodik was at the time under U.S. sanctions by the Trump administration for actively obstructing American efforts to prevent more bloodshed. (The officials interviewed for this article requested anonymity for fear of retaliation from the administration.)

Dodik has since called himself "pro-Russian, anti-Western and anti-American" in a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin and is currently under new sanctions for corruption charges. He has also vowed to tear the country apart rather than allow the U.S. to unify it.

Maureen Cormack, then the American ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, discovered the meeting had taken place and confronted Marocco in the embassy at the end of his visit. Marocco initially demurred, an official said, before finally acknowledging the gathering. Cormack was furious, issuing a sharp rebuke, the official said. Cormack didn't respond to repeated requests for comment.

Marocco left the country soon after. A year later, he was no longer working at the State Department.

What he had discussed with the Bosnian separatists is not clear. But the meeting itself provided legitimacy to far-right politicians pushing for a Christian state and undermined U.S. foreign policy, experts and officials said.

"He reinforced a whole political trajectory that is antithetical to what the U.S. is trying to do," one U.S. official told ProPublica, "which is supporting a peace agreement."

Children with jar labeled "USAID"

A Rohingya refugee girl holds a jar with U.S. Agency for International Development logo imprinted, at the refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, March 16. The Trump administration has moved to formally close USAID and fold remaining functions into the State Department. (OSV News/Reuters/Mohammad Ponir Hossain)

After the State Department, the Trump administration sent Marocco to a senior post at the U.S. Agency for International Development, where he attempted to delay or halt dozens of programs — including those that benefited Bosnia and Herzegovina's unified government — and reinvent the agency to better align with his version of U.S. foreign policy. That agenda, former colleagues told ProPublica, was overtly militaristic and Christian nationalist. The complaints about Marocco alarmed agency leaders so much that they significantly curtailed his duties in the waning months of the administration.

Marocco's turbulent tenure during the last Trump administration sheds light on his recent efforts to destroy the American foreign aid system from the inside out. Current and former officials see it as a campaign of retribution against those who opposed his earlier work, as well as an opportunity to fulfill his most controversial policies by sidelining bureaucrats who get in his way.

As director for foreign assistance at the State Department, Morocco had been delegated the power of deputy administrator of USAID — helping lead the two agencies that previously rejected him. And unlike last time, Marocco was without strictures and answered to few in the executive branch besides Trump himself.

Immediately after Trump's inauguration, Marocco drafted the order shutting down all of USAID's programs and freezing foreign aid. He led the efforts to place nearly all the agency's staff on administrative leave, though the courts have temporarily lifted many of those. Much of USAID's work has not resumed, according to interviews with dozens of government employees and nongovernmental organizations, despite the State Department's claim that waivers allow work involving "core lifesaving medicine, medical services, food, shelter and substance assistance" to continue.

"It's an exact repeat of what he did but at scale," said a former senior official at USAID who worked alongside Marocco during his previous stint in government. "He had no problem stopping foreign assistance. … He came in, he said, 'We’re going to stop all programming, stop everything going on in the field.' "

Marocco and the State Department did not respond to a detailed list of questions about the meeting or his views. Dodik did not respond either.

Marocco's meeting was not the only diplomatic misstep in his tumultuous career.

During a trip to Serbia, Marocco on his own volition invited the country's president, Aleksandar Vučić, to visit Srebrenica, where more than 8,000 Muslims were killed during the Bosnian genocide, according to two officials familiar with the incident. Considered highly inappropriate — Bosnian Serb and Serbian paramilitary forces had massacred the people buried there — the invitation had not been approved by the U.S. ambassador.

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In 2020, the Trump administration appointed Marocco to USAID, the world's largest foreign aid organization. As assistant to the administrator in charge of the Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization, he bewildered staff by attempting to reorient the work exclusively toward his brand of U.S. national security interests, according to interviews with his former subordinates and superiors, as well as an official complaint, known as a dissent cable, lodged against him within three months after he'd joined. Some said he frequently favored programs that benefited Christian minorities abroad.

Marocco told subordinates that he disagreed with much of USAID's traditional "soft power" approach toward diplomacy and ordered wide-ranging but vague reviews of the agency's programs, insisting that he personally approve any expenses over $10,000, the officials said.

Those who worked alongside him throughout government were particularly alarmed by comments he had made during private conversations when discussing American foreign policy. Those officials told ProPublica that Marocco has questioned whether USAID should be funding programs to combat racist nationalism and hate speech abroad.

While he was at the agency, he frequently expressed wanting to cut programs he didn't like or understand, his former colleagues said. In the internal cable filed to leaders of the agency, they accused Marocco of trying to withhold congressionally approved funds slated for most of the programs supporting democracy and fair elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina and redirect that money toward addressing Islamic extremism.

That cable warns that "operational capacity and strategic efficacy have been and continue to be rapidly degraded" by Marocco, and that the programs risk being irreversibly damaged "at significant financial cost to the American taxpayer."

Diplomats said his efforts undermined U.S. strategic interests in the region and, by favoring one religion over another, likely ran afoul of the constitution's religious freedom clause, according to the cable. They were concerned that his actions "risk worsening BiH's tense sectarian tensions by affirming one side’s narrative while stigmatizing the other," they wrote in the cable, using the abbreviation for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia is about 50% Muslim with large minority populations of Serb Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholic Croats.

"He had it in for Bosnia," a former official at USAID said, "and I didn't know why at the time.”

Marocco's short time at USAID during Trump's first term was the last in a stretch of four jobs at four agencies, including the Pentagon and the Department of Commerce.

Marocco was next seen inside the U.S. Capitol during the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection, according to footage gathered and analyzed by an online group. He was not charged with a crime and has not responded to multiple requests for comment about his role that day, though he has called the accusations "[p]etty smear tactics and desperate personal attacks by politicians with no solutions."

Experts in and outside government say Marocco had been orchestrating the new Trump administration's foreign aid policy largely by himself. His official position was director of foreign assistance at the State Department, and the powers of the deputy administrator of USAID had been delegated to him as well. "Right now he is the most important person at the State Department," one official observed.

Marocco's rapid-fire assault on USAID has come under legal scrutiny after dozens of employees and organizations filed lawsuits, seeking to reverse his most consequential changes. Judges have at least temporarily reined in the broad use of administrative leave for thousands of employees across the agency and told the agency to reinstate programs that were funded and approved prior to Trump's inauguration.

Marocco has defended his sweeping takedown as a necessary measure to root out government waste and support Trump's agenda to make America safer and more prosperous.

"His thinking was that the people in government were not abiding by the right theory," another official told ProPublica. "Well we know now how far he's willing to go."

Pratheek Rebala and Alex Mierjeski contributed research.

***Editor's note**: This story was originally published by ProPublica.*

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.