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Morocco: Current Issues

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Summary

The Bush Administration views Morocco as a moderate Arab regime, an ally against terrorism, and a free trade partner. Morocco has made democratic advances, but King Mohammed VI retains ultimate power. Since 9/11, Moroccan expatriates have been implicated in international terrorism, and Morocco has suffered terror attacks. Counter terror measures may be setting back progress in human rights. Morocco's foreign policy focuses largely on Europe, particularly France and Spain, yet its ties to the United States are getting closer. This report will be updated as developments warrant. See also CRS Report RS21464, *Morocco-U.S. Free Trade Agreement*, and CRS Report RS20962, *Western Sahara: The United Nations Shifts Course*.

Government and Politics

King Mohammed VI ascended to the throne in 1999 upon the death of his father and is the ultimate authority in Morocco. On May 8, 2003, his son, Hassan, was born and immediately became crown prince and first in line of succession. Mohammed VI says that he is committed to building a democratic state, yet he retains significant power, such as that to appoint the prime minister and ministers of foreign affairs, interior, defense, and justice — the key portfolios in the government.

The September 2002 election for the 325-seat Chamber of Representatives, the lower house chosen by universal suffrage, was deemed the first free, fair, and transparent election ever held in Morocco. An unprecedented 35 women were elected deputies (30 to reserved seats); the prior legislature had only two women members.

The King appointed Driss Jettou, an unaffiliated technocrat, to be Prime Minister. The political spectrum is highly fragmented. Jettou formed a six-party coalition government out of 22 parties in parliament. The Popular Union of Socialist Forces (USFP) is the largest party with 50 seats in parliament. The traditionalist Istiqlal or Independence Party is second with 48 seats. They each hold eight cabinet portfolios. The Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) has 43 seats and is the third largest party. Another political actor is an Islamist grassroots organization popular in the slums and on university campuses led by Shaikh Abdessalem Yassine, Al-Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and

Charity), which is recognized as a charity and not as a political party and cannot compete in elections. PJD and Al-Adl wal-Ihsan condemn terrorism.

Terrorism

The Moroccan monarchy often asserted that its claimed descent from the Prophet Mohammed was a shield against Islamist militancy. This belief has been shattered since September 11, 2001, as expatriate Moroccans have been implicated in terrorism abroad and Morocco has suffered terrorism at home. Abroad, a Moroccan was convicted in Germany for aiding the 9/11 terrorists but released due to lack of U.S. evidence, and another was acquitted of similar charges. Germany is trying to deport them to Morocco. A Moroccan imam has been called “the spiritual father of the Hamburg cell,” extremists who helped execute and support the 9/11 attacks, and identified as the founder of the Salafiya Jihadiya (Reformist Holy War/”Jihadists”) movement.¹ A French-Moroccan, Zacarias Moussaoui, is the only person charged in the United States in connection with 9/11 as the alleged 20th hijacker. A Dutch-Moroccan murdered a Dutch film maker in November 2004. Five Moroccans reportedly linked to Al Qaeda and detained at the U.S. Naval Station in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba were released and are on trial in Morocco.

Although domestic terrorism is unusual in Morocco, in 2002, Jihadists and members of the Casablanca slum-based As-Sirat al-Mustaqim (The Straight Path) murdered locals who had committed “impure acts” such as drinking alcohol.² In 2003, a Jihadist spiritual leader, who had fought in Afghanistan, had praised the 9/11 attacks, and had acclaimed Bin Laden, was convicted of inciting violence against Westerners.³ In February 2003, Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden listed Morocco among the “oppressive, unjust, apostate ruling governments” “enslaved by America” and therefore “most eligible for liberation.”⁴ This *fatwa* or edict appeared to trigger attacks in Morocco. On May 16, 2003, 14 suicide bombers attacked five Western and Jewish targets in Casablanca, killing 45 and injuring more than 100. Seven of the dead were European; most were Moroccan. The bombers were identified as Salafiya Jihadiya adherents with connections to the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM) and Al Qaeda.⁵ Over 2,000 people suspected of terrorist links have been arrested since the bombings. GICM is listed in the U.S. State Department’s annual *Patterns of Global Terrorism* report and operates in Europe. Spanish officials later blamed it for the March 2004 Madrid train bombings, tying a suspect to GICM and to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the pro-Al-Qaeda, Jordanian-born, terror leader now based in Iraq.⁶ Moroccans working with Zarqawi have been captured in Iraq.

¹ “An Islamic Cleric Becomes the Focus of Madrid Inquiry,” *Asian Wall Street Journal*, March 18, 2004.

² “‘Local Hands’ Accused in Morocco Blast,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 2003.

³ “Moroccan Islamists Suspected of Suicide Bombings,” *Reuters*, May 18, 2003.

⁴ “Moroccans Say Al Qaeda Masterminded and Financed Casablanca Suicide Bombings,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2003.

⁵ U.S. State Departments, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, 2003.

⁶ “Spain Confirms Inquiry Focuses on Moroccans,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2004.

Morocco is cooperating with U.S. and European agencies to counter terrorism at home and abroad. In 2002, authorities arrested three Saudis, who allegedly had fled Afghanistan and were an Al Qaeda cell, on suspicion of planning to use an explosives-laden dinghy to attack the U.S. and British ships in the Straits of Gibraltar.⁷ The attack would have been similar to the assault on the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000. In 2003, the Saudis were sentenced to 10 years in prison for criminal conspiracy and minor crimes. Six Moroccan accomplices were convicted of lesser crimes. Morocco also has taken steps to exert greater control over religious leaders and councils, retrain and rehabilitate some of those convicted of terror-related crimes to correct their understanding of Islam, and has launched a radio station to broadcast “Moroccan religious values” of tolerance.

Human Rights

Prior to the Casablanca attacks, Morocco’s human rights record was improving, although the security forces continued to be implicated in abuses.⁸ Parliament ended the state monopoly on the media in January 2003, yet freedom of the press remains restricted. In May 2003, a prominent editor was convicted of defaming the King; he was pardoned in January 2004. Domestic violence, discrimination against women, and child labor are common. At the King’s initiative, parliament enacted revolutionary changes to the family law in January 2004, making polygamy rare by requiring permission of a judge and the man’s first wife, raising the legal age for marriage for girls to 18, and simplifying divorce procedures for women, among other amendments to improve the status of women. The King also has created an Equity and Reconciliation Commission to provide a historical record of abuses from 1956 to 1999, to account for “disappeared,” and to compensate victims. In 2001, he had launched a dialogue on Berber culture, and the government has since authorized the teaching of Berber dialects and issued a textbook in Berber.⁹

After the May 2003 attacks in Casablanca, parliament passed antiterrorism laws to define terrorist crimes and establish procedures for tracking terrorist finances. Human rights activists expressed concern about new restrictions on the press, detention without charge to 12 days, and reduced requirements for the death penalty. Journalists were arrested for publishing interviews with bombing suspects. Human Right Watch has charged that the anti-terror crackdown “is eroding the substantial advances made on human rights over the last decade.”¹⁰

⁷ “Arrests Reveal Al Qaeda Plans,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 2002.

⁸ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2002, Morocco*, March 31, 2003.

⁹ The Berbers are the original inhabitants of North Africa before the Arabs invaded in the 8th century.

¹⁰ “Powell Embarks on Arab Democracy Trip,” *Washington Times*, December 2, 2004.

Economy and Social Issues

Although governments have attempted to diversify the economy in recent years, large portions of Morocco's gross domestic product (15%) and labor force (50%) continue to depend on agriculture and are vulnerable to weather. Good weather in the past few years has resulted in positive growth. Services and tourism are growth sectors, with tourism and remittances from abroad providing foreign exchange. The public sector remains large. A successful, if erratic, privatization program began with the national telephone company and continued with the sale of 80% of the state tobacco monopoly to a French-Spanish group, netting US\$1.5 billion. However, excessive red tape and corruption remain impediments to foreign investment.¹¹

Basic Facts	
Population	32.2 million (2004)
Gross Domestic Product growth rate	6% (2003)
Gross Domestic Product per capita	\$4000 (2003)
Inflation	1.2% (2003)
Unemployment	19% (2003)
Exports	clothing, fish, inorganic chemicals, transistors, crude minerals, fertilizers (including phosphates), petroleum products, fruit, and vegetables
Imports	crude petroleum, textile fabric, telecommunications equipment, wheat, gas and electricity
Major Trading Partners	France, Spain, United Kingdom, Italy, Germany
Source: CIA, <i>The World Factbook 2004</i> .	

Foreign Policy

Western Sahara. The dispute between Morocco and the independence-seeking Popular Front for the Liberation of Saqiat al-Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario) over the former Spanish colony south of Morocco remains unresolved. In July 2003, the Polisario accepted a U.N. plan to resolve the issue temporarily by granting the region semi-autonomous status as part of Morocco for four to five years before the U.N. holds a referendum to decide whether it would gain independence, autonomy, or be part of Morocco. Morocco, which controls 80% of the Western Sahara and considers the region its three southern provinces, rejected the plan and will only accept a solution that guarantees it "sovereignty and territorial integrity over the whole of its territories." The process is stalemated. In October 2001, Morocco authorized French and U.S. companies to explore for oil off the Western Saharan coast, and the prospect of oil discoveries may have hardened Morocco's resolve to retain the region.

Algeria. Morocco and Algeria have long engaged in a regional rivalry. The Western Sahara is the main impediment to improving bilateral relations and to the resuscitation of the regional Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), a loose organization of Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Mauritania, and Libya. Morocco argues that the Sahara is a bilateral issue to be discussed by Algeria and Morocco and refuses to compromise for the sake of bilateral relations or the UMA. Algeria backs the Polisario, which analysts view as an Algerian surrogate, and the U.N. peace plan. It wants bilateral relations to be separated from the

¹¹ "Morocco Must Curb Graft to Boost Financial Success," *Reuters*, July 11, 2003.

Sahara issue and to be mended, and to have the common border, closed since September 1994, reopened. Despite these disagreements, the King met Algerian President Bouteflika at the U.N. in September 2003, ministers exchange visits, and the two governments agreed to cooperate against terrorism, illegal immigration, and on other issues. In July 2004, Mohammed VI abolished visa requirements for Algerians entering Morocco.

Europe. Morocco's Association Agreement with the European Union (EU) came into force on March 1, 2000, and is supposed to lead to a free trade agreement by 2012. Morocco participates in the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Partnership to improve cooperation among countries of the Mediterranean littoral, and has received considerable EU aid as a result. Illegal immigration and drug (cannabis)-trafficking have caused friction in Moroccan-European relations. High unemployment drives Moroccan youths to Europe, and Morocco also is a transit route for Africans going north. EU-funded efforts to shift farmers in Morocco's underdeveloped Rif Mountains from cannabis cultivation to alternative crops have not been successful.



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS.

Morocco traditionally has had good relations with France and Spain, its former colonizers. Relations with France are particularly close. France is Morocco's largest trading partner. It officially supports U.N. efforts to resolve the Western Sahara dispute, but blocks Security Council initiatives that Morocco rejects. Morocco's relations with Spain have been tense but are improving. Spain holds and refuses to discuss Ceuta and Melilla, two enclaves on Morocco's Mediterranean coast that are vestiges of the colonial era and are claimed by Morocco. Spain and Morocco further disagree over EU quotas for Morocco's agricultural products that compete with Spain's and over Spanish demands for fishing rights off Morocco's coast. In October 2001, Morocco recalled its ambassador from Madrid without official explanation after several pro-Saharan groups in Spain conducted a mock referendum on the fate of the region. In July 2002, Spanish troops ejected Moroccan soldiers from the uninhabited Perejel/Parsley or Leila Island off the Moroccan coast that Spain says that it has controlled for centuries. Diplomatic ties were not restored until January 2003. That July, Morocco again complained about what it viewed as Spain's lack of neutrality on the Sahara issue as chair of the Security Council, and in October, Spain suspended arms sales to Morocco due to the Perejel crisis. After Moroccans were implicated in the March 2004 bombings in Madrid, however, Morocco immediately assisted Spanish investigators. New Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero visited Morocco in April 2004, and a joint statement called for a political solution to be negotiated by all parties to the Sahara issue — the Moroccan position. In October 2004, 120 Moroccan soldiers deployed under Spanish command in the U.N. stabilization mission in Haiti. Moroccan gendarmes have joined Spanish patrols against illegal immigration in the Strait of Gibraltar.

Middle East. Morocco supports international efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and seeks the activation of the Roadmap to a two-state solution developed by the United States, EU, U.N., and Russia. The King and other officials maintain a dialogue with both Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

Relations with the United States

The United States and Morocco have long-standing, good relations. The United States views Morocco as a moderate Arab state that supports the Arab-Israeli peace process. Bilateral ties have been strengthened by the fight against terrorism and improving trade relations. An FBI team helped investigate the Casablanca bombings. In July 2003, a Moroccan Caucus was formed in the House of Representatives. Congress approved a free trade agreement (FTA) with Morocco, P.L. 108-302, August 17, 2004. In 2003, the United States exported \$465 million in goods to Morocco and imported \$385.2 million in goods.

U.S. aid to Morocco has increased to assist it in fighting terrorism, democratization, and the FTA. In FY2004, Morocco received an estimated \$45.4 million in Development Assistance (DA), \$9.940 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), \$1.750 million for International Military Education and Training (IMET), and \$2.732 million for the Peace Corps. For FY2005, the Administration requested \$6 million in DA, \$20 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF), \$20 million in FMF, \$1.875 million for IMET, \$6 million in International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funds, and \$3.488 million for the Peace Corps. Morocco is part of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue on regional security issues and has hosted and participated in NATO military exercises. In June 2004, President Bush designated Morocco a major non-NATO ally, and in November, Morocco became eligible to compete for Millennium Challenge Account funds. In December, Morocco hosted the "Forum for the Future," a meeting of regional countries and the G-8 group of industrial powers for the U.S.-initiated Broader Middle East and North African reform initiative. Morocco has refused to send forces to Iraq but expressed willingness to host training for Iraqi security forces.

The Moroccan government's desire for closer relations with the United States may not be shared by the Moroccan people. A Pew Research Center poll released in June 2003 revealed that only 27% of Moroccans viewed the United States favorably, down from 77% in 2000, 93% were disappointed in the lack of Iraqi military resistance to the U.S. invasion, and 91% believed that the United States had not done enough to avoid civilian casualties. A Pew poll released in March 2004 found 66% of Moroccans agreeing that suicide bombings against Americans and Westerners in Iraq were justifiable and 72% that the U.S. was overreacting to terrorism.¹² Moroccans criticize U.S. support for Israel and for the U.N. peace plan for the Western Sahara developed by former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker. After the Casablanca bombings, some Moroccan analysts suggested that the country was paying a price for being a friend of the United States. A Zogby International survey conducted in June 2004 revealed that 88% of those surveyed had a negative attitude toward the United States due to "unfair foreign policy."¹³

¹² Both Pew polls cited accessible at [<http://people-press.org>].

¹³ "Polls Shows Growing Arab Rancor at U.S.," *Washington Post*, July 23, 2004.