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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. King Mohammed VI retains supreme power but has taken incremental liberalizing steps. 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. On May 8, 2003, his son Hassan was born and became first in line of succession. Mohammed VI says that he is committed to building a democratic state, but although personally responsible for several hallmark liberalizing initiatives, he remains the pre-eminent state authority and all reforms depend on his will. He chairs the Council of State that endorses all legislation before it goes to parliament, appoints the prime minister and ministers of foreign affairs, interior, defense, and Islamic Affairs, and approves other ministers. He also sets the agenda of parliament in his annual Speech from the Throne, dissolves parliament, calls elections, and rules by decree. In addition, the King has a "shadow government" of eight royal advisors and is head of the military.

The September 2002 election for the 325-seat Chamber of Representatives, a weak lower house chosen by universal suffrage, was deemed the first free, fair, and transparent election ever held in Morocco. However, voter turnout was only 50%, and the Ministry of Interior discouraged the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) from running in all districts, so the results do not accurately reflect its strength. An unprecedented 35 women were elected deputies (30 to reserved seats); the prior legislature had only two women members. The Popular Union of Socialist Forces (USFP) won 50 seats, the traditionalist Istiqlal or Independence Party 48, and the PJD 43. Some deputies have since shifted party allegiance; the PJD is now the largest party, and USFP is third. The King appointed Driss Jettou, an unaffiliated former Minister of Interior with close links to the

palace, to be Prime Minister. Jettou formed a six-party coalition government out of 22 parties in parliament.¹ USFP and Istiqlal each hold eight cabinet portfolios. The fundamentalist Islamist Al-Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Charity/JCO) is the largest grassroots organization in the country. The daughter of JCO leader Shaykh Abdessalem Yassine, Nadia Yassine, is on trial for insulting the monarchy (and preferring a republic). PJD and JCO denounce each other and both 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. Morocco has tried to distance itself from its expatriates, blaming their experiences in exile for their radicalization. German courts convicted a Moroccan for aiding the 9/11 terrorists but released him due to lack of U.S. evidence and returned him to Morocco. Another was acquitted. A Moroccan imam was “the spiritual father of the Hamburg cell” that helped execute and support the 9/11 attacks; he founded the Salafiya Jihadiya (Reformist Holy War/”Jihadists”) movement.² A French-Moroccan, Zacarias Moussaoui, was tried in the United States as the 20th hijacker for 9/11. A Dutch-Moroccan murdered a Dutch film maker in November 2004. Some Moroccans linked to Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and detained at the U.S. Naval Station in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba have been returned to 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. In 2003, a Jihadist spiritual leader, who had fought in Afghanistan and praised the 9/11 attacks and Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, was convicted of inciting violence against Westerners. In February 2003, Bin Laden listed Morocco among the “oppressive, unjust, apostate ruling governments” “enslaved by America” and therefore “most eligible for liberation.”³ To some observers, 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. The bombers were identified as Salafiya Jihadiya adherents with connections to the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM) and Al Qaeda. Since the bombings, more than 3,000 suspects have been arrested. Spanish officials tied a large GICM network to the March 2004 Madrid train bombings, for which many Moroccans were indicted. Several other European countries have arrested Moroccans suspected of GICM affiliation. Captured Moroccans have been accused of working with Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi’s Al Qaeda in Iraq. In October 2005, the U.S. State Department designated GICM as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. In August 2005, Algeria handed over Moroccans allegedly seeking to join the (Algerian) Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) terrorist group.

¹ A new law raises the threshold to enter parliament in the 2007 election and will diminish the number of parties.

² “An Islamic Cleric Becomes the Focus of Madrid Inquiry,” *Asian Wall Street Journal*, March 18, 2004.

³ “Moroccans Say Al Qaeda Masterminded and Financed Casablanca Suicide Bombings,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2003.

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.⁴ 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 launched radio and television stations and a website to transmit “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.⁵ Parliament ended the state monopoly on the media in January 2003, yet freedom of the press remains restricted. Domestic violence, discrimination against women, and child labor are common. At the King’s initiative, parliament enacted revolutionary changes to the Family Code or *Moudawana* 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 created an Equity and Reconciliation Commission to provide a historical record of abuses from 1956 to 1999, to account for the “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.⁶

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 up to 12 days, and reduced requirements for the death penalty. Journalists were arrested for publishing interviews with bombing suspects. Human Right Watch charged that the anti-terror crackdown “is eroding the substantial advances made on human rights over the last decade.”⁷

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. The rise in prices is having detrimental effects because imported oil supplies 97% of the country’s energy needs. 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

⁴ “Arrests Reveal Al Qaeda Plans,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 2002.

⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2005, Morocco*, March 8, 2006.

⁶ The Berbers are the original inhabitants of North Africa before the Arabs invaded in the 8th century.

⁷ “Powell Embarks on Arab Democracy Trip,” *Washington Times*, December 2, 2004.

sale of 80% of the state tobacco monopoly. However, excessive red tape and corruption remain impediments to foreign investment.⁸

Economic growth and reforms have been insufficient to reduce unemployment and poverty. About 30,000 Moroccans emigrate illegally each year; remittances account for about 9% of the gross national product. The King launched a Human Development Initiative in 2003 to combat poverty as a means to combat terror, but observers question its effectiveness.

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 occupies 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 peace process is stalemated. The King is expected to submit an autonomy plan to the U.N. soon. 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 resuscitating 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 Sahara issue and to be mended, and to have the common border, closed since September 1994, reopened. Despite these disagreements, relations warmed with ministerial visits, a meeting of leaders at the U.N. in September 2003, cooperation to counter terrorism and illegal immigration, and with King Mohammed VI’s first visit to Algiers for an Arab League

Morocco: Basic Facts

Population:	33.2 million (2006 est)
Gross Domestic Product growth rate:	1.2% (2005)
Gross Domestic Product per capita:	\$4300 (2005)
Inflation:	2.1% (2005)
Unemployment:	10.5% (2005)
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, *The World Factbook*, March 29, 2006.

⁸ Morocco is ranked 78 out of 158 countries on the Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2005*, on line at [<http://www.transparency.org>].

summit in March 2005. In July 2004, Mohammed VI abolished visa requirements for Algerians entering Morocco; in April 2006, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika reciprocated the gesture. However, the King refused to attend an UMA summit in Libya in June 2005, after Bouteflika sent a congratulatory message to the POLISARIO on its anniversary, causing the summit's cancellation.

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 and its Neighborhood Policy Plan and has received considerable EU aid as a result. Illegal immigration both of Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans transiting Morocco and drug (cannabis)-trafficking have caused friction in Moroccan-European relations. High unemployment drives Moroccan youths to Europe. 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.

In recent years, Morocco's relations with Spain have been intermittently discordant. Spain possesses two enclaves on Morocco's Mediterranean coast, Ceuta and Melilla, that are vestiges of colonialism and are claimed by Morocco. In October 2001, Morocco recalled its ambassador from Madrid after 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 it has controlled for centuries. Diplomatic ties were not restored until January 2003. That July, Morocco again complained that Spain lacked neutrality on the Sahara issue when it chaired the Security Council, and in October, Spain suspended arms sales to Morocco due to the Perejel crisis. Morocco still closely cooperated with Spanish authorities in the investigation of the March 2004 bombings in Madrid. Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero visited Morocco in April 2004, and King Juan Carlos I visited in January 2005; on both occasions, statements called for a negotiated settlement to the Sahara issue based on a consensus of all parties — the Moroccan position. Since October 2004, 120 Moroccan soldiers have served 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. In May 2005, it was

reported that Spain had sold 20 M-60A3 tanks to Morocco. However, Zapatero's provocative visit to Ceuta and Melilla in January 2006 again set back relations.

Middle East. The King chairs the Jerusalem Committee of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and supports international efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis a two-state solution. He maintains a dialogue with both Israeli and Palestinian leaders; some 600,000 Israelis are of Moroccan origin, and 25,000 travel to Morocco each year. In August 2005, Mohammed VI personally congratulated Prime Minister Sharon for Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

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 cooperation in the fight against terrorism and improving trade relations. An FBI team helped investigate the Casablanca bombings. Congress approved a free trade agreement (FTA) with Morocco, P.L. 108-302, August 17, 2004, and it came into effect on January 1, 2006. In 2005, the United States exported \$23.8 million in goods to Morocco and imported \$27.1 million in goods.

The United States has increased aid to Morocco to assist with countering terrorism, democratization, and the FTA. In FY2006, Morocco is receiving \$10.890 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF), \$12.375 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), \$8.217 million in Development Assistance (DA), and \$1.856 million for International Military Education and Training (IMET). For FY2007, the Administration has requested \$18 million in ESF, \$12.5 million in FMF, \$5.4 million for DA, and \$1.975 million for IMET. In June 2004, President Bush designated Morocco a major non-NATO ally. Morocco is part of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and has hosted and participated in NATO military exercises. Morocco qualified for Millennium Challenge Account funds and is cooperating in the U.S. Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI). In December 2004, Morocco hosted a Forum for the Future meeting of regional countries and the G-8 group of industrial powers and Russia for the U.S.-initiated Broader Middle East and North African reform initiative.

The Moroccan government's desire for closer relations with the United States may not be shared by the Moroccan people. 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 as well as the war in Iraq. Although polls indicate that their sympathy for Islamist extremism has declined, 56% still approve of suicide bombings against Americans and other Westerners in Iraq.⁹ Yet, many Moroccans still seek to come to the United States for education.

⁹ Pew Center for the People and the Press, *Islamic Extremism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Publics*, July 14, 2005, online at [<http://people-press.org>].