



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. Counterterror measures may be setting back progress in human rights. Morocco's foreign policy focuses largely on Europe, particularly France and Spain, and the United States. This report will be updated as developments warrant. See also CRS Report RS21464, *Morocco-U.S. Free Trade Agreement*, by Raymond J. Ahearn and CRS Report RS20962, *Western Sahara: Status of Settlement Efforts*, by Carol Migdalovitz.

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Government and Politics

King Mohammed VI ascended to the throne in 1999. He is committed to building a democracy, but he remains the pre-eminent state authority. The King 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 sets the agenda of parliament in an annual Speech from the Throne, dissolves parliament, calls elections, and rules by decree. The King also has a “shadow government” of royal advisors and is head of the military. Reforms depend on the King’s will and he has undertaken several hallmark liberalizing initiatives.

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. The September 2007 election also met international standards, but only 37% of the voters turned out and 19% cast blank ballots, reflecting widespread disillusionment with the political process. The nationalist Istiqlal (Independence) Party, Morocco’s oldest party, placed first. Its Secretary-General, Abbas al Fassi, became Prime Minister and formed a four-party coalition government with a 34-member cabinet, including an unprecedented five women ministers. The moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) had expected to win the elections, but it placed second and charged irregularities. Some 23 parties and blocs plus independents are represented in the legislature. The 270-seat Chamber of Counselors, the upper house, is elected indirectly by local councils, professional organizations, and labor unions. The Islamist Al Adl wal Ihsan (Justice and Charity/JCO), officially banned as a political movement, is the largest grassroots organization in the country and is led by Shaykh Abdessalem Yassine. JCO called for a boycott of the 2007 election, arguing that participation was pointless without constitutional reform – ostensibly aimed at diminishing the role of the monarchy. PJD and JCO condemn each other and terrorism.

Terrorism

The 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 tried two Moroccans for aiding the 9/11 terrorists. 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.¹ A French-Moroccan, Zacarias Moussaoui, was tried in the United States as the 20th hijacker for 9/11. Eighteen Moroccans allegedly linked to Al Qaeda in Afghanistan were detained at the U.S. Naval Station in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; three remain there.

Numerous small Salafi jihadist groups threaten Morocco. In 2002, 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

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

ruling governments” “enslaved by America” and, therefore, “most eligible for liberation.”² To some observers, this *fatwa* or edict appeared to trigger May 16, 2003 attacks in Morocco, in which 14 suicide bombers identified as Salafiya Jihadiya adherents connected to the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM) and Al Qaeda attacked five Western and Jewish targets in Casablanca, killing 45 and injuring more than 100. A large GICM network later was implicated in the March 2004 Madrid train bombings. Several European countries arrested Moroccans suspected of GICM affiliation. In 2005, the U.S. State Department designated GICM as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), but it now states that the group has disintegrated as most of its leaders in Europe and Morocco have been killed, imprisoned, or are awaiting trial.³ Moroccan and European authorities continue to disrupt cells that they say are linked Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), formerly the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), a group originating in Algeria with regional ambitions. The AQIM threat to Morocco stems mainly from the transfer of operational capabilities to inexperienced radicals. In April 2007, two suicide attacks occurred near the U.S. Consulate and the American Language Center in Casablanca; the bombers killed only themselves. Moroccans also have fought with insurgents in Iraq.

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 U.S. and British ships in the Strait of Gibraltar.⁴ Morocco also has exerted greater control over religious leaders and councils, retrained and rehabilitated some individuals 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. In 2005, the King launched a National Initiative for Human Development to redress socioeconomic conditions extremists exploit for recruitment. Observers question its effectiveness.

Human Rights

Moroccan human rights problems include reports of torture by security forces, arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detention, police and security force impunity, trafficking in persons, and child labor.⁵ The government restricts freedoms of speech, press, and religion. 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 changes to improve the status of women. The King also created an Equity and Reconciliation Commission to provide an historical record of abuses, to account for the “disappeared,” and to compensate victims. In 2001, he launched a dialogue on Berber culture, and the government has since authorized the teaching of Berber dialects and issued a textbook in Berber.⁶

² “Moroccans Say Al Qaeda Masterminded and Financed Casablanca Suicide Bombings,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2003.

³ U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2007*, released on April 30, 2008.

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

⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2007, Morocco*, March 11, 2008.

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

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 express concern about restrictions on the press, detention without charge, and reduced requirements for the death penalty. Other observers question whether elements in the regime are using the threat of Islamist terror to roll back reforms. Some worry that detention may create radicals who will eventually be released into society.⁷

Economy

Although there have been attempts to diversify the economy, large portions of Morocco's gross domestic product (14%) and labor force (40%) continue to depend on agriculture and are vulnerable to weather. Oil price increases have detrimental effects because imports supply 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. There is a successful, if erratic, privatization program, and growth in foreign direct investment despite the impediments of excessive red tape and corruption.⁸

Economic growth and reforms have been insufficient to reduce unemployment and poverty. Remittances from an estimated 3 million Moroccans expatriates, mainly in France, account for about 9% of the gross national product.

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. Morocco occupies 80% of the Western Sahara, considers the region its three southern provinces, and will only accept a solution that guarantees it sovereignty over "the whole of its territories." The King submitted an autonomy plan for the region to the U.N. in April 2007, and Moroccan and Polisario negotiators met four times under U.N. auspices in 2007 and 2008.⁹ In October 2001, Morocco had authorized French and U.S. oil companies to explore off the Saharan coast, and the prospect of discoveries, as yet unrealized, may have hardened Morocco's resolve to retain the region.

Morocco: Basic Facts

Population: 34.3 million (2008 est)
Gross Domestic Product growth rate: 2.2% (2007)
Gross Domestic Product per capita: \$3,700 (2007)
Inflation: 2% (2007)
Unemployment: 9.8% (2007)

Exports:
clothing, electronic components, 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, China, Italy, Saudi Arabia

Source: CIA, *The World Factbook*, Oct. 23, 2008.

⁷ Jill Carroll, "Morocco's Harder Line on Security Challenges Reforms," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 9, 2007.

⁸ Morocco is ranked 80 out of 180 countries on the Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2008*, on line at <http://www.transparency.org>.

⁹ For text of plan, see http://www.map.ma/eng/sections/politics/sahara_issue__full_t/view.

Algeria

Morocco and Algeria have a longstanding regional rivalry. The Western Sahara is the main impediment to improving bilateral relations and to reviving the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), a loose organization of Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Mauritania, and Libya. Morocco refuses to compromise on the Western Sahara issue for the sake of bilateral relations or the UMA. Algeria hosts and backs the Polisario. It wants Algerian-Moroccan relations to be separate from the Sahara issue. Despite these disagreements, there are official visits and meetings, cooperation to counter terrorism and illegal immigration, and Mohammed VI's first visit to Algiers for an Arab League summit in March 2005 indicated prospects for improving relations. In July 2004, the King abolished visa requirements for Algerians entering Morocco; in April 2006, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika reciprocated the gesture. However, in June 2005, the King refused to attend an UMA summit in Libya after Bouteflika sent congratulations to the Polisario on its anniversary, causing the summit's cancellation. In March 2008, Morocco requested that Algeria reopen their land border, but Algeria has not acted.

Figure 1. Map of Morocco



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS.

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 of Moroccans and of 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 programs to shift farmers in the underdeveloped Rif Mountains from cannabis cultivation to alternative crops have not been successful.

Morocco traditionally has had good relations with France and Spain, its former colonizers. Relations with France, Morocco's largest trading partner, are particularly close even as France's share of the Moroccan market decreases. Paris officially supports U.N. efforts to resolve the Western Sahara dispute and Morocco's autonomy proposal for the region, and blocks Security Council initiatives on the matter that Morocco rejects.

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 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 and continues to cooperate to counter terrorism. Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero visited Morocco in April 2004, and King Juan Carlos I visited in January 2005; on both occasions, joint statements called for a negotiated settlement to the Sahara issue—the Moroccan position. Moroccan soldiers have served under Spanish command in the U.N. stabilization mission in Haiti and Moroccan gendarmes have joined Spanish patrols to combat illegal immigration in the Strait of Gibraltar. However, visits to Ceuta and Melilla by the Spanish prime minister in January 2006 and monarchs in November 2007 again set back relations.

Middle East

The King chairs the Jerusalem Committee of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and supports international efforts to achieve a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He recognizes President Mahmud Abbas as the legitimate leader of the Palestinian people in Abbas's dispute with Hamas and sent an envoy to the international conference in Annapolis in November 2007. Morocco closed Israel's liaison bureau in Morocco and Morocco's office in Tel Aviv in reaction to Israel's conduct during the Palestinian *intifadah* (uprising) in 2001. The offices have not reopened. The King and others kept contacts with Israeli officials and, in August 2005, he personally congratulated Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Some 600,000 Israelis are of Moroccan origin, and about 25,000 travel to Morocco yearly.

Relations with the United States

The United States and Morocco have long-term, good relations. The United States views Morocco as a steady and close ally and 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, and the FBI and CIA Directors have visited Rabat for consultations. A free trade agreement (FTA) with Morocco, P.L. 108-302, August 17, 2004, came into effect on January 1, 2006. The U.S. State

Department considers the Moroccan autonomy plan for the Western Sahara “serious and credible.”

The United States has increased aid to Morocco to assist with countering terrorism, democratization, fighting poverty, and the FTA. In August 2007, the Millennium Challenge Corporation Board approved a five-year, \$697.5 million grant for Morocco. In FY2008, Morocco received an estimated \$15.374 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF), \$3.625 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), \$4.136 million in Development Assistance (DA), \$1.713 million for International Military Education and Training (IMET), \$496,000 for International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE), and \$1.317 million for Non-Proliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related Activities (NADR). The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2008, P.L. 110-161, December 26, 2007, provided \$3.655 in FMF and said that an additional \$1 million in FMF may be made available if the Secretary of State certifies that Morocco is making progress on human rights and is allowing the free expression of views regarding the status and future of the Western Sahara. For FY2009, the Bush Administration requested \$3.655 million in FMF, \$21.5 million in DA, \$1.725 million for IMET, \$1 million for INCLE, and \$625,000 for NADR. In 2004, President Bush designated Morocco a major non-NATO ally. Morocco is part of NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue, has hosted and participated in NATO military exercises, and has joined NATO’s Operation Active Endeavor, monitoring the Mediterranean for terrorists. It also is cooperating in the U.S. Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). In December 2007, the Defense Department announced an FMF sale to Morocco of 24 F-16 aircraft and associated equipment and services for up to \$2.4 billion. Bilateral U.S.-Moroccan military exercises are held regularly.

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