



Morocco: Current Issues

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Summary

The United States government 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. Morocco takes a proactive approach to countering terror, but some of its 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. In the Middle East, it supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and has severed diplomatic relations with Iran for bilateral reasons. 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

The Moroccan royal dynasty has ruled the country since 1649. The reigning 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 and popular understanding of the powerlessness of the legislature. Some 14 parties or alliances of parties and independents won seats. 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 and well-organized Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) had expected to win the election; it placed second and charged irregularities, but accepted the legitimacy of the outcome. Some 23 parties and blocs plus independents are represented in the current legislature. The 270-seat Chamber of Counselors, the upper house, is elected indirectly by local councils, professional organizations, and labor unions.

In August 2008, Fouad Ali al Himma established the Party for Authenticity and Modernity (PAM). Al Himma is a former classmate of King Mohammed VI and former deputy interior minister. He was elected to parliament as an independent in 2007 and became chairman of its Committee on Foreign, Defense, and Islamic Affairs. Al Himma has not assumed the leadership of PAM, but he is deputy leader and considered the party’s de facto head. The September 2008, PAM formed an parliamentary alliance with the National Rally of Independents (RNI) and it has sought alliances with other parties long known as recipients of royal patronage. PAM’s goals reportedly are to “rationalize” the political landscape by diminishing the number of parties, encourage more participation in politics, and stand up to the PJD.¹ Few were surprised by PAM’s first place finish with 21.6% of the vote in the elections for seats on municipal councils on June 12, 2009, when PJD dropped to sixth place. Some politicians fear that PAM is a nascent state party similar to those in Egypt and Tunisia that might be used to dominate politics.² Moreover, some observers predict that Al Himma will be the next prime minister.

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

¹ James Liddell, “Morocco: Modern Politics or Politics of Modernity?” *Arab Reform Bulletin*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2008.

² Socialist Union of Popular Forces politician Idriss Lashgar, quoted in *Africa Research Bulletin*, October 1-21, 2008, p. 17714.

without constitutional reform – ostensibly aimed at diminishing the role of the monarchy. PJD and JCO condemn terrorism and compete for support.

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 from 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.³ 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, isolated, tactically limited Salafi jihadist cells 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 ruling governments” “enslaved by America” and, therefore, “most eligible for liberation.”⁴ To some observers, this *fatwa* or religious edict appeared to trigger attacks in Morocco on May 16, 2003, in which 14 suicide bombers identified as Salafiya Jihadiya adherents linked 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. Moroccans suspected of GICM affiliation were arrested in several European countries. In 2005, the U.S. State Department designated GICM as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), but the Department now states that “much of the GICM's leadership in Morocco and Europe has been killed, imprisoned, or are awaiting trial.”⁵ The Moroccan government convicted the group's alleged leader in absentia for his role in the Casablanca attacks, but he remains free in exile in the United Kingdom.

Moroccan and European authorities continue to disrupt cells that they say are linked to 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 potential 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.

³ “An Islamic Cleric Becomes the Focus of Madrid Inquiry,” *Asian Wall Street Journal*, March 18, 2004.

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

⁵ U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2008*, released on April 30, 2009.

Counterterrorism

Morocco is cooperating with U.S. and European agencies to counter terrorism at home and abroad. The U.S. State Department recognized that in 2008

The Moroccan government pursued a comprehensive counterterrorism approach that, building on popular rejection of terrorism, emphasizes neutralizing existing terrorist cells through traditional law enforcement and preemptive security measures, and prevented terrorist recruitment through comprehensive counter-radicalization policies. Morocco aggressively targeted and dismantled terrorist cells within the Kingdom by leveraging policing techniques, coordinating and focusing the security services, and expanding and bolstering regional partnerships. These efforts resulted in the neutralization of numerous Salafi Jihadi-inspired terrorist groups....⁶

Morocco has exerted greater control over religious leaders and councils, retrained imams, 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

The U.S. State Department described human rights problems in Morocco in 2008 in the following way:

Citizens did not have the right to change the constitutional provisions establishing their monarchical form of government or the establishment of the practice of Islam. Reports of torture and other abuses by various branches of the security forces persisted, and prison conditions remained below international standards. Reports of arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detentions, and police and security force impunity continued. Politics, as well as corruption and inefficiency, influenced the judiciary, which was not fully independent. The government restricted freedoms of speech, religion, and the press. Corruption was a serious problem in all branches of government. Trafficking in persons continued, and child labor, particularly in the unregulated informal sector, remained a problem.⁷

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

⁶ U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism – 2008*, Released April 30, 2009.

⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2008, Morocco*, February 25, 2009.

Berber culture, and the government has since authorized the teaching of Berber dialects and issued a textbook in Berber.⁸

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.⁹

Economy

Although there have been attempts to diversify the economy, large portions of Morocco's gross domestic product (14.73%) and labor force (44.6%) continue to depend on agriculture and are vulnerable to rainfall fluctuations. Oil price increases also have detrimental effects because imports supply 97% of the country's energy needs. Services and tourism are considered 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.¹⁰

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

The government's goals include achieving 6% GDP growth rate, creating 250,000 new jobs, and building 150,000 housing units a year until 2013. While perhaps overambitious, these targets reflect the government's intent to combat poverty and unemployment—conditions which it believes produces terrorists. The government's plans are being affected by the global financial crisis/recession which already has resulted in thousands of job losses in textiles and automotives, as well as decreases in tourist spending, expatriate remittances, and exports. In 2009, however, a surge in farm yields is expected to offset these difficulties and help produce a growth rate of over 5%.¹¹

Morocco: Basic Facts

Population: 34.6 million (2009 est.)
 Gross Domestic Product growth rate: 5.9% (2008)
 Gross Domestic Product per capita: \$4,000 (2008)
 Inflation: 4.6% (2008)
 Unemployment: 10% (2008)

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*, June 1, 2009.

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

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

¹⁰ Morocco is ranked 80 out of 180 countries on the Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2008*, on line at <http://www.transparency.org>.

¹¹ "Morocco Sees Economy Up 5.3%," *TradeArabia*, June 23, 2009.

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, but not since then.¹² On April 10, 2007, then Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns stated that the United States considers the Moroccan autonomy plan for the Western Sahara “serious and credible.” 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.

Algeria

Morocco and Algeria have a longstanding regional rivalry. The Western Sahara is the main impediment to improving their 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. Despite these disagreements, there is some cooperation to counter terrorism and illegal immigration. In July 2004, the King abolished visa requirements for Algerians entering Morocco; in April 2006, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika reciprocated the gesture. In March 2008, Morocco requested that Algeria reopen their land border, but Algeria has not acted.

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. In October 2008, Morocco became the first southern Mediterranean country to be granted “advanced status relations” by the EU, opening up EU markets more for Moroccan products. Morocco participates in the EU’s Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and its Neighborhood Policy Plan and receives considerable EU aid -- €190 million (\$265 million) annually. Illegal immigration of Moroccans and of sub-Saharan Africans transiting Morocco to Europe and drug (cannabis)-trafficking have caused friction in Moroccan-European relations. High unemployment drives Moroccan youths to Europe and EU-funded programs to shift farmers in the underdeveloped Rif Mountains from cannabis cultivation to alternative crops have not been successful.

¹² For text of plan, see http://www.map.ma/eng/sections/politics/sahara_issue__full_t/view.

Figure I. Map of Morocco



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS.

Morocco traditionally has had good relations with France and Spain, its former colonizers. Relations with France, Morocco's largest trading partner, are particularly close. 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. An emerging issue concerns Morocco's plans for a "super port" at Tangiers, which may be competition for Spanish ports. Financed by Gulf countries, the port will achieve full capacity in 2014.

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 resulting in viable, contiguous, Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. He recognizes President Mahmud Abbas as the legitimate leader of the Palestinian people in Abbas's dispute with Hamas.

Morocco closed Israel's liaison bureau in Morocco and Morocco's office in Tel Aviv in reaction to Israel's conduct during the first Palestinian *intifadah* (uprising) in 2001. The offices have not reopened. The King and others kept up contacts with Israeli officials and, in August 2005, he personally congratulated Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. The link may be unbreakable because some 600,000 Israelis are of Moroccan origin, and about 25,000 of them travel to Morocco yearly. Morocco again condemned Israel's conduct against Palestinian civilians during its December 2007/January 2008 campaign against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and Moroccan political groups of all stripes held some of the largest rallies in the Arab world in protest.

In March 2009, Morocco severed diplomatic relations with Iran, blaming it for "intolerable interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom." The Foreign Ministry accused the Iranian Embassy in Rabat of seeking to spread Shi'a Islam in the 99% Sunni kingdom. It also charged Iranian officials with making unacceptable remarks following Morocco's expression of solidarity with Bahrain in the face of Iran's claim to Bahrain.¹³ The situation rapidly deteriorated. Tehran charged that Morocco's decision harmed "the unity of the Islamic world" and the solidarity needed to support the Palestinian people. Rabat rejected the allegation and argued that, "Iran is not qualified to speak for the Islamic world.... Morocco does not need lessons from Iran or anybody else to show solidarity with the Palestinian people...."¹⁴

Relations with the United States

The United States and Morocco have long-term, good relations. Successive Administrations, of both political parties, have viewed Morocco as a steady and close ally and as a moderate Arab state that supports the Arab-Israeli peace process. In January 2009, King Mohammed VI congratulated President Obama on his election and seized the opportunity "to say how satisfied I am with the special strategic partnership between the Kingdom of Morocco and the United States of America."¹⁵ On April 8, after meeting Moroccan Foreign Minister Taieb Fassi Fihri, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said, "We are so committed to our relationship and have a very high regard for the extraordinary progress that has taken place in Morocco ... and we look forward to deepening and strengthening our relationship."

¹³ Statement of Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, MAP News Agency, March 6, 2009, BBC Monitoring Newsfile.

¹⁴ "Moroccan Government Spokesman on Reasons Behind Severing Ties with Iran," *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, March 9, 2009, BBC Monitoring Middle East.

¹⁵ "King Congratulates Barack Obama on Investiture, MAP news Agency, January 20, 2009, BBC Monitoring Middle East.

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. In addition, bilateral U.S.-Moroccan military exercises are held regularly. Morocco 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 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 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.

Table 1. U.S. Aid to Morocco

	FY2008 Actual	FY2009 Estimated	FY2010 Request
ESF	15,374	0	3,000
FMF	3,625	3,655	9,000
IMET	1,713	1,725	1,900
INCLE	496	1,000	2,030
NADR	1,119	625	1,200
DA	4,136	18,000	24,500

Notes: All figures are in thousands. FMF=Foreign Military Financing, ESF=Economic Support Funds, IMET=International Military Education and Training, INCLE=International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, NADR=Non-Proliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related Activities, DA=Development Assistance.

Table 2. U.S. Trade with Morocco

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Exports to Morocco	\$526.6	\$525	\$878.4	\$1.3 (billion)	\$1.5 (billion)
Imports from Morocco	\$515.2	\$445.8	\$521.4	\$609.9	\$878.7

Notes: All figures in millions, except 2007 and 2008 exports in billions.

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Trade Stats Express, <http://tse.export.gov>

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