



ISSUE BRIEF

BY J. PETER PHAM

Morocco's Vital Role in Northwest Africa's Security and Development

NOVEMBER 2013

The links between the United States and Morocco are among the oldest of the US' diplomatic bonds. In 1777, Morocco's Sultan Mohammed III was the first foreign sovereign to recognize the independence of the thirteen former British colonies. Subsequently, the 1786 Treaty of Peace and Friendship—negotiated by Thomas Barclay and signed by Thomas Jefferson and John Adams—established diplomatic relations between the two countries. Modified in 1836 with the addition of various security and commercial protocols, the accord is still in force, making it the United States' longest unbroken treaty relationship. But as venerable as this history is, the strategic importance of Morocco to pursuing the Atlantic community's interests in the security and development of northwestern Africa has only recently become fully apparent to US policymakers and analysts. President Barack Obama's invitation to King Mohammed VI to make an official visit to the United States this year indicates the importance that both countries attach to this significant strategic relationship.

The Maghreb and the interconnected Sahel to the south have become one of the world's most politically fragile regions. As the so-called "Arab Spring" wave of popular protests erupted across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, leading to the overthrow of political regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, the ongoing civil conflict in Syria, and indirectly to the near conquest of Mali by radical Islamists in 2012, it also left in the ensuing vacuum a hospitable environment for violent extremism across the Saharan and Sahelian lands. An "arc of instability" now stretches across the African continent and terrorist

Africa Center

The Atlantic Council's Africa Center was established in September 2009 with the mission to promote strong geopolitical partnerships with African states and to redirect US and European policy priorities towards strengthening economic growth and prosperity on the continent.

The Africa Center provides thought leadership on emerging security, geopolitical, and economic challenges in Africa through congressional testimony, publications, briefings, events, and a robust media presence. The Center assists policymakers in addressing the complex security challenges facing Africa, including the problems of state collapse; humanitarian crises; piracy; the growing nexus between extremism and criminality in West Africa and the Sahel; the ongoing political transitions in North Africa; ongoing challenges in Central and Southern Africa; and the growing impact of Islamist extremism on African polities and economies. Within the context of the Atlantic Council's work to promote constructive US leadership and engagement in international affairs, the Center supports and collaborates with the public and private sectors in forging practical solutions to challenges and opportunities in Africa, especially those associated with the strong economic growth which many nations on the continent have experienced in recent years.

incidents in the Maghreb and the Sahel have jumped from twenty-one per annum in 2001 to 185 a decade



later,¹ making the region a top counterterrorism priority for the United States and its European allies.

Amid the upheaval that swept across North Africa, Morocco stands out as an exception. Not only has the kingdom avoided both revolutionary tumult and violent repression, but while their neighbors were still struggling to come to terms with the Arab Spring, Moroccans were accelerating their decades-old process of political and social renewal through precedent-setting constitutional and institutional reforms.² The Sherifian Kingdom has proven remarkably adroit at managing domestic and regional challenges and is poised to play an even greater role in leading regional security and development progress.

1 Yonah Alexander, *Terrorism in North Africa & the Sahel in 2012: Global Reach & Implications* (Washington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, February 2013), 3, <https://www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/390>.

2 See J. Peter Pham, "Morocco's Momentum," *Journal of International Security Affairs* 22 (Spring 2012): 13-20.

A Comprehensive Approach to Counterterrorism

North Africa and the Sahel are plagued with a plethora of security challenges, including the proliferation of extremist groups, hundreds of thousands of displaced persons, frequent drought, and a growing traffic in narcotics, arms, and other illicit contraband. The boundaries between corrupt officials, criminal networks, and armed militants are too often blurred.³

Porous borders and weak governments have opened the way to the regionalization of volatility. This was underscored by the proliferation of arms from Libya into the Sahara after the overthrow of the Muammar Gaddafi regime in 2011, which, in turn, facilitated the separatist uprising and subsequent military coup in Mali in early 2012, and by the high-profile terrorist attacks on the Algerian gas plant at In Amenas in

3 See Wolfram Lacher, "Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region," in *Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara*, ed. Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 61-85.

January 2013 and the Nigerien uranium mine at Agadez in May 2013 by al-Qaeda-linked militants. In this environment, militant Islamic groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have been able to fill the political vacuum and appeal to local separatist and militant groups.⁴ The marriage of their global jihadist ideology with the strong links that they have cultivated in recent years among local populations in the Maghreb and Sahel constitutes a heightened threat to security in the region and abroad.

Since 2001, there have been 1,234 terrorist attacks in Algeria, fifty-four in Mali, twenty-seven in Mauritania, thirty-nine in Niger, and fifty-eight in Chad.⁵ Although the spread of violent extremism in North Africa and the Sahel has not hit Morocco as hard as some of its neighbors, Rabat still faces significant security challenges. It suffered nine terrorist attacks since 2001, including its own “9/11” on May 16, 2003, when suicide bombers from the Sidi Moumen shanty towns outside Casablanca hit a hotel, Jewish community center, Spanish social club, and other targets. This series of simultaneous attacks left forty-five people dead (including twelve of the terrorists) and more than one hundred seriously wounded. Shaken by the assault, Morocco adopted a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy that has been praised in the annual US Department of State’s *Country Reports on Terrorism*. The 2012 report summarizes the three-pillar strategy implemented by the monarchy:

First, the government takes a law-and-order approach to [counter violent extremism], working closely with the United States and other international and regional partners to strengthen its security and counterterrorism capabilities. Second, Morocco has accelerated its rollout of education and employment initiatives for youth and expanded the legal rights and political empowerment of women. Finally, to counter what the government perceives as the dangerous importation of violent Islamist extremist

ideologies, it has developed a national strategy to confirm and further institutionalize Morocco’s widespread adherence to the Maliki school of Islam.⁶

Elements of this aggressive, multipronged approach to combating violent extremism in Morocco have evolved quickly. Less than two weeks after the Casablanca bombings, the Moroccan government promulgated a new antiterrorism law that toughened penalties to include a minimum sentence of ten years’ imprisonment for active involvement in terrorism, life imprisonment if the terrorist acts cause serious bodily injury to others, and the death penalty if they result in fatalities. Furthermore, an anti-money laundering law, enacted in 2007, facilitates the freezing of suspicious accounts and established a financial intelligence unit to investigate and prosecute terrorist finance-related crimes.

The results of this tough counterterrorism policy have been impressive. There were a number of notable successes in 2012 alone. In February, twenty-seven men were sentenced for plotting terrorist attacks against Moroccan and foreign security forces. The primary perpetrator of the 2011 Marrakesh bombing was handed a death sentence by an appeals court in March, and fifteen members of the Mujahedin Movement in Morocco were arrested in connection to the 2003 Casablanca bombing the same month. In November, a twenty-seven-member cell involved in recruiting youths to fight with jihadists in Mali was dismantled. In December, a six-member cell in Fez was arrested for reportedly recruiting individuals for AQIM to return and carry out terrorist attacks in Morocco.⁷

The investigation and prosecution of suspected terrorists by Moroccan authorities has not taken place in a vacuum, but rather in the context of broad justice sector reform that has been underway for several years. This process has included the adoption, in 2005, of a new, more liberal version of the country’s legal code regulating marriage and family life, the

4 See J. Peter Pham, “The Dangerous ‘Pragmatism’ of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 2, no. 1 (January-June 2011): 15-29; and idem, “Foreign Influences and Shifting Horizons: The Ongoing Evolution of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 240-254.

5 Alexander, *Terrorism in North Africa & the Sahel in 2012*, 3.

6 Bureau of Counterterrorism, US Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012*, May 2013, 6, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/210204.pdf>.

7 Ibid. 134.

Moudawana, as well as ongoing specialized training for judges, police, and border guards. Recently, the government introduced a package of sweeping reforms aimed at bringing higher standards and greater transparency to the judiciary as well as a revision of the penal code to bring it into line with both the new constitution and the international conventions Morocco has signed.⁸

Morocco is also proactively engaged in a broad campaign of counterradicalization. Under Mohammed VI, Moroccan authorities have implemented a range of religious and cultural programs to combat the drift of youths toward violent extremism. Speakers from around the world travel to Morocco every year for Ramadan at the invitation of the King, who hosts a series of lectures emphasizing peaceful teachings of Islam. Rabat's Ministry of Habous (religious endowments) and Islamic Affairs sponsors a television channel, the Mohammed VI Holy Quran Network (*Assadissa*), to propagate "an open and tolerant Islam, respectful of other religions." The network is guided by moderate Muslim perspectives, including the Maliki school of jurisprudence, the Ash'ari theology, and the Sufi mysticism favored by the king in his capacity as *Amir al-Mu'minin* ("Commander of the Faithful"). In addition to taking requests for authoritative *fatwas* on its website, the ministry also publishes a quarterly journal for imams and other preachers in Morocco's more than 30,000 mosques. Morocco has also established a Council of Ulema for Europe to train and send Moroccan imams and other spiritual guides to counter extremist messages in North African expatriate communities in Europe.

The majority of Moroccans have supported their government's embrace of moderate, tolerant Islam. And the new Moroccan constitution's embrace of cultural diversity is rare in the Arab world: it explicitly acknowledges that Morocco's national culture is "enriched and nourished by African, Andalusian, Hebraic, and Mediterranean influences."⁹

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of how far the Moroccan state is willing to go in its efforts to push back against religious extremism is the royal decree mandating the training of fifty *mourchidates*, or female religious guides, alongside 150 (male) imams each year. The training program for the annual class differs from the traditional clerical curriculum in that, in addition to memorizing the Quran and studying Islamic law, the candidates also earn a secular baccalaureate degree with coursework in psychology, communications, and foreign languages. In a 2009 report to Congress, the US State Department hailed the *mourchidates* initiative as "pioneering."¹⁰

The US State Department also noted that "the Moroccan government [has] continued to implement internal reforms aimed at ameliorating the socio-economic factors that terrorists exploit," citing in particular the \$1.2 billion National Initiative for Human Development (INDH). The INDH is aimed at generating employment, combating poverty, and improving infrastructure in both rural areas and the sprawling slums on the outskirts of the country's urban centers, which were home to a disproportionate number of the Casablanca suicide bombers. Moroccan officials report that the INDH implemented some 22,000 projects benefiting more than 5.2 million people between 2006 and 2010, and another \$2.1 billion is expected to be spent on projects between 2012 and 2015.¹¹

International Security Cooperation

Morocco emphasizes the importance of international cooperation in its counterterrorism efforts. Though al-Qaeda regional affiliate, AQIM, has yet to pose a direct threat to the Sherifian Kingdom's stability¹²—notwithstanding its occasional rhetorical flights of fancy, including the video AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel released in September 2013 menacing the country—Moroccan officials have pointedly reinforced

8 See Smail Bellaouali and Paul Schem, "Morocco Outlines Ambitious Judicial Reform Plan," Associated Press, September 13, 2013, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/huff-wires/20130913/ml-morocco-justice/>.

9 Preamble of the Moroccan Constitution. For an English translation, see Jefri J. Ruchti, "Morocco: Draft Text of the Constitution adopted at the Referendum of 1 July 2011," in *World Constitutions Illustrated*, ed. Jefri J. Ruchti, (Buffalo: William S. Hein & Co., Inc., 2011), http://www.acl-radc.org.za/sites/default/files/morocco_eng.pdf.

10 Bureau of Counterterrorism, US Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2009*, August 2010, 137, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/141114.pdf>.

11 "Morocco: Improving Inclusiveness, Accountability and Transparency of Decision Making at the Local Level," World Bank Group, 2013, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2013/04/08/improving-inclusiveness-accountability-and-transparency-of-decision-making-at-the-local-level>.

12 See Mawassi Lahcen, "AQIM Lashes Out at Morocco," *Magharebia*, September 16, 2013, http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2013/09/16/feature-01.



A US Marine conducts a machine gun demonstration for the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces during the “African Lion” exercise in 2012. Image Credit: US Department of Defense, Flickr.

security links with neighbors, even longtime rival Algeria. For example, in the aftermath of a 2009 AQIM attack on a Mauritanian convoy traveling in the northeastern part of the country, which resulted in the capture and beheading of eleven soldiers and one civilian, Morocco sent military advisers to Mauritania to provide training and advice on force protection and patrol tactics.

Security cooperation extends beyond the immediate sub-region to Western nations. In 2013, Morocco signed agreements with France, Spain, and Portugal to allow access to its military bases during the crisis in Mali. Morocco is an active participant in the “5+5” Western Mediterranean Forum, which brings together foreign policy and defense officials from five European countries (France, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain) with the counterparts from five Maghrebi states (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia). Morocco played a major role in forming the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) with Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, a body that adopted the *Algiers Memorandum on Good Practices on Preventing and Denying the Benefits of Kidnapping for Ransom by Terrorists* last

December. Additionally, Morocco hosted the GCTF Rule of Law Working Group meeting in February 2012, which produced the *Rabat Memorandum on Good Practices for Effective Counterterrorism Practice in the Criminal Justice Sector*.

Morocco also works closely with the US on security matters and, in fact, was designated a “major non-NATO ally of the United States” in 2004, making it one of only fifteen states—and the only one on the African continent besides Egypt—to be distinguished by that status. Since 2008, the two countries have conducted an annual security cooperation exercise, “African Lion,” designed to promote joint training of forces in a variety of areas, including aerial logistics, non-lethal weapons, amphibious operations, combined arms, and maneuvers. Typically, more than 900 Moroccans and 1,200 Americans take part in the two-week exercise.¹³ Last year in September, the US launched the US-Morocco Strategic Dialogue, which focuses “on key areas where Morocco’s experience and example can help America address changes and challenges in the Arab and Moslem worlds.”¹⁴ In addition to ongoing bilateral diplomatic and military-to-military cooperation with the United States on the security front, Morocco has been a member of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), the US government program aimed at defeating terrorists by strengthening the capacity of regional governments while enhancing and institutionalizing cooperation between their security forces.¹⁵

Mali provides an example of Morocco’s recent comprehensive contribution to regional security and stability. Mali is a failing state; beset by a separatist

13 The 2013 exercise, which would have been open to representatives of fourteen partner nations, was deferred following a diplomatic dispute over a draft United Nations Security Council resolution that would have broadened the mandate of the UN mission in the Western Sahara. The draft was subsequently withdrawn.

14 Edward M. Gabriel and Michael Ussery, “Morocco a Staunch and Stable Ally in North Africa,” *The Hill*, September 18, 2012, <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/250127-morocco-a-staunch-and-stable-ally-in-north-africa> (the authors served as US ambassadors to Morocco in the Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush administrations, respectively).

15 TSCTP is supported by various agencies of the US government, including the Department of State, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of the Treasury, the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Department of Defense, which works through the Africa Command (AFRICOM) and Operation Enduring Freedom-Trans Sahara (OEF-TS). See J. Peter Pham, “Terrorism and Counterterrorism in Africa: Evolving Focus,” in *Routledge Handbook of African Security*, ed. James J. Hentz (London: Routledge, 2013), 43-55.



The American Legation in Tangier, Morocco, was the first public property acquired by the US government outside the United States (1821) and the first designated National Historic Landmark located in a foreign country (1982). Image Credit: Wikimedia.

rebellion and the takeover of the northern half of the country by AQIM and its allies, it was saved from total collapse only by a timely French-led intervention earlier this year. Prior to the French intervention, Rabat had helpfully pressed the UN Security Council to authorize an African force to intervene. Since the election of Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in August 2013, and the subsequent restoration of constitutional order to the country, Morocco has redoubled its efforts to help, particularly in the area of counter-radicalization. Rabat has emphasized that “state-of-the-art military operations, intelligence work, and policing must be combined with anti-poverty measures, a cultural strategy to counter extremist trends, and political reforms that fight corruption and foster opportunity.”¹⁶ Ahead of the new president’s inauguration, which Mohammed VI attended at the head of a 300-person delegation, civilian physicians as well as medical units from Morocco’s Royal Armed Forces were dispatched to Bamako to set up a field hospital to boost the Malian capital’s limited healthcare

16 Ahmed Charai, “A Monarch Visits Mali,” *Huffington Post*, September 19, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ahmed-charai/a-monarch-visits-mali_b_3953990.html.

capacity. In a speech at the ceremony,¹⁷ the Moroccan sovereign also outlined a program of assistance that included the education and training of 500 Malian imams using Morocco’s moderate and tolerant form of Islam to help fight the spread of extremism within their communities; support for human development programs, particularly in the areas of executive training, basic infrastructure, and health; and measures to encourage bilateral trade and investment to boost employment and skills transfers.

Morocco’s Growing Regional Geopolitical Heft

Morocco’s avenues of engagement on the continent have been circumscribed by the country’s nonmembership status in the African Union (AU). Morocco’s absence from the AU is a function of the continued membership of the separatist Polisario Front’s phantom “Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic,” which disputes Moroccan sovereignty over the former Spanish Sahara.¹⁸ However, new threats to regional security have put pressure on African nations to build stronger relationships with Morocco, as the Kingdom’s potential to serve as a regional “anchor” state has begun to outweigh the dispute over the status of the Western Sahara.¹⁹

Morocco has moreover made efforts to resolve the impasse, primarily by advancing a proposal in 2007 that offered generous autonomy to the Western Sahara.²⁰ Last year former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described this overture as “serious, credible, and realistic,”²¹ having previously affirmed that

17 Mohammed VI, “Full Text of the Speech Delivered This Thursday by HM King Mohammed at the Inauguration of Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita,” MAP, September 19, 2013, <http://www.map.ma/en/activites-royales/full-text-speech-delivered-thursday-hm-king-mohammed-vi-inauguration-ceremony-mali>.

18 See J. Peter Pham, “Not Another Failed State: Towards a Realistic Solution of the Western Sahara,” *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 1-24.

19 See Terence McNamee, Greg Mills, and J. Peter Pham, *Morocco and the African Union: Prospects for Re-engagement and Progress on the Western Sahara* (Johannesburg: Brenthurst Foundation, February 2013), http://www.thebrenthurstfoundation.org/Files/Brenthurst_Commissioned_Reports/Brenthurst-paper-201301-Morocco-and-the-AU.pdf.

20 Defense, foreign affairs, and the currency would remain under the control of Rabat, while the regional authority would hold broad powers over local administration, the economy, infrastructure, social and cultural affairs, and the environment.

21 Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Remarks with Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs Saad-Eddine Al-Othmani, February 26, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/02/184667.htm>.

support for the autonomy initiative is firmly rooted in American policy as something “that originated in the Clinton administration...was reaffirmed in the Bush administration and it remains the policy of the United States in the Obama administration.”²² The Polisario Front and its principal backer, Algeria, have refused to allow a census of the population in the Sahrawi camps. Meanwhile, Polisario-linked figures have played more than cameo roles in recent troubles throughout the region. These range from recruiting mercenaries to defend Gaddafi to providing AQIM’s allies in northern Mali with fighters and, in one notorious case, with Western hostages to trade for ransom. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, among others, has been increasingly vocal that “the rise of instability and insecurity in and around the Sahel” and the risk of “spillover” from the fighting in Mali requires “an urgent settlement” of the “ticking time bomb” of the frozen West Saharan conflict.²³

Shifting political perceptions of the stalemate have provided Morocco with an opening for re-engagement in the Sahel and North Africa. As security in the region deteriorates, Morocco’s resources and relative stability could set the stage for new forms of political and security cooperation.

Counterterrorism efforts will not succeed unless the affected countries in North Africa and the Sahel can develop effective logistical coordination mechanisms and intelligence cooperation. Scarce resources will need to be pooled in order to conduct joint security operations. The success of any multilateral response is thus likely to be undermined by Morocco’s exclusion.

Morocco’s inclusion in regional security cooperation efforts is necessary, too, because the country has been the target of terrorist attacks. As recently as April 2011, Morocco suffered an attack by AQIM-linked terrorists, who targeted the country’s number one tourist destination, Marrakesh. By joining the AU,

Morocco—which boasts military and intelligence services as advanced as any in the wider region—would also join the Joint Military Staff Committee of the Sahel Region (CEMOC), which is supposed to take a leading role in coordinating antiterrorist operations. One US strategic analyst has observed that “AU member states could also benefit from Morocco’s relations and strong political and economic interests with the European Union, and its membership in the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue (which also includes Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania), to strengthen military cooperation with these major entities. This cooperation may include intelligence support and permission to land military forces in the Sahara, where terrorist groups and criminal gangs carry out their criminal activities.”²⁴

Integration into the AU may emerge from Morocco’s determined efforts, since 2000, to re-engage with Africa (especially French-speaking African countries) on several fronts. The Kingdom reopened several diplomatic representations, both resident and nonresident, and has reinforced its presence in several African-related forums, such as the Franco–African summits and the first Africa-European Union summit in 2000. During the latter, Morocco’s King Mohammad VI (who succeeded his father King Hassan II the year before) announced a debt forgiveness plan for Africa’s least developed countries, and the eradication of the custom duties levied on the products imported from these states. In the field of education, a grant program for African students was launched; today, over 7,000 grants to African students from thirty-five countries are awarded annually for study at Moroccan universities. Over the course of his reign, Mohammed VI has made a number of official visits to African countries, which have resulted in the conclusion of seventeen bilateral trade agreements.

In November 2010, the then-Moroccan minister of foreign affairs and cooperation, Taieb Fassi Fihri, proposed the creation of an Alliance for Development in Africa as a framework to coordinate bilateral, regional, and international initiatives related to the

22 Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Interview with Fouad Arif of Al-Aoula Television, November 3, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/11/131354.htm>.

23 United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, quoted in Tim Witcher, “Ban says Western Sahara Risks being Drawn into Mali War,” Agence France-Presse, April 9, 2013, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iOnupKvBuc8I_WTR3J5BnNCFnmEw?docId=CNG.566cbe22180951c72bc8d9c6ad6fd9d1.d1.

24 Benjamin P. Nickels, “Morocco’s Engagement with the Sahel Community,” *Sada*, January 3, 2013, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/01/03/morocco-s-engagement-with-sahel-community/ez1c>.



Women in Yaoundé, Cameroon, celebrating the February 2013 opening of the newest branch of SCB-Cameroun, a commercial bank whose majority shareholder is Morocco's Attijariwafa Bank.

African continent. In 2009, Morocco also launched the ministerial conference of Atlantic African countries (African states on the Atlantic Ocean coast) and established a permanent secretariat in Morocco. The second ministerial conference, which took place in Morocco on 15 November 2010, adopted an action plan for cooperation and coordination in the fields of politics, security, economics, and the environment. In parallel, with support from the European Commission's Bureau of European Policy Advisors (BEPA), Morocco has organized an even more ambitious series of international forums, which met in 2009 and 2012 in Shkirat, outside Rabat, with the goal of creating a broader "Atlantic Community" linking the African states on the ocean's littoral with their European and American counterparts.

Moroccan financial institutions have been key to opening the path for the country's re-engagement with Africa, but also, through their commercial success, play an increasingly critical role on a continent where

lack of access to the formal banking sector remains a major impediment to economic growth. In the late 1980s, the Banque Marocaine du Commerce Extérieur (BMCE) helped to revamp the moribund state-owned Banque de Développement du Mali. In recent years, Attijariwafa, Morocco's largest bank and the sixth-largest on the entire African continent in terms of deposits, has aggressively expanded its presence into eight countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, where it currently boasts 367 branches, as well as into Libya and Tunisia, where it has 190 branches. Moreover, the bank, which in 2010 was recognized as the "African Bank of the Year" in the African Development Bank-supported competition, has announced plans to cover all the countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and North Africa. Altogether, three Moroccan banks—Attijariwafa, BMCE, and Groupe Banque Populaire (GBP)—rank among the African continent's top ten financial institutions. The Saham Group, whose chairman was recently appointed Morocco's minister of industry, commerce,

and new technologies, has emerged as the largest insurance network in Africa outside South Africa, doing business in twelve countries. Moroccan foreign direct investment (FDI) outflows to Sub-Saharan Africa have increased more than 40 percent over the course of the last decade, and accounted for an extraordinary 89 percent of total FDI outflows from the kingdom in 2010, before leveling off to 40 percent the following year. The investments have been spread across a broad range of sectors of African economies with significant growth prospects in the coming years, including agriculture, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, and manufacturing.

Finally, Morocco has devoted substantial resources and political capital to transnational migration issues and to human rights reform. Recently, on September 11, 2013, King Mohammed VI accepted recommendations from Morocco's National Human Rights Council (CNDH) on migrant and asylum-seeker protections. These included proposed reforms to the penal code to combat human trafficking; an improved legal and institutional framework for asylum seekers; bans on violence against foreigners; and expanded protections for the rights of documented immigrants.²⁵ If implemented, these policies will further enhance Morocco's international reputation, not only as a just and humane polity, but as an important neighbor in a region that is struggling to deal with itinerate and displaced populations.

Conclusion

Morocco's political reengagement with Africa under King Mohammed VI is the product of practical and strategic considerations. The underlying message to Africa, however, is that Morocco is a country of serious political and economic clout, integral to the continent's development and prepared to play a leading role in its future.

The United States and its European partners are forced to confront a growing threat of terrorism in the Maghreb-Sahel. The limited capacity of many countries in the region to counter and resolve

this threat will in the near future put increased demands on scarce US and European resources. The recent experience in Somalia suggests that success of counterterrorism efforts is likely to depend on the emergence of a competent and willing "leading nation" to spearhead the response of regional states in cooperation with Western donors. This is especially the case given the number of crises making demands on US policymakers and their European counterparts at a time when their constituents are increasingly reluctant to support entanglements abroad. In this context, tapping into the efforts of partner countries like Morocco, which has demonstrated not only the willingness but the capacity to shoulder the challenges facing the Maghreb-Sahel, is one way to help advance the US goal of promoting regional security and development in North Africa.

Morocco's democracy is a work in progress, but King Mohammed VI has demonstrated his serious commitment to reform, enhancing diplomatic relations with neighboring states, and contributing to regional multilateral institutions. In order to strengthen Morocco's internal security and development while enhancing its outreach to North and West Africa, the United States should consider the following recommendations for building the bilateral strategic relationship:

- Where appropriate, the United States should adopt a "triangular" approach to regional development efforts. Morocco has strong relationships with regional states, and US assistance can leverage the benefits of established programs with a track record of effectiveness and sustainability.
- The United States should expand Morocco's extensive training programs for military and security forces in the Sahel and in West Africa. "African Lion," the existing joint US-Moroccan annual military exercise designed to improve interoperability, should also be expanded to serve as a platform for a regional collective security framework that addresses not only terrorist and separatist challenges, but also trafficking and other criminal networks.

²⁵ "Morocco King Tackles Immigration Issue with Government," *Middle East Online*, September 11, 2013, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=61271>.

- The United States should expand support for regional counterterrorism and counter-radicalization efforts, building upon the cooperation already initiated between the Moroccan government and those in Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, and other African countries. US collaboration with and support to regional security structures like CEMOC and the Intelligence Fusion Center (IFU) should be conditioned on inclusivity—including Morocco’s participation.
- The United States government should prioritize strengthening intelligence cooperation with Morocco, expanding beyond the existing intelligence relationship between the Moroccan security services and the Central Intelligence Agency to include other US departments and agencies working on counterterrorism, human and drug trafficking, border security, and financial crimes issues. For their part, Moroccan authorities have a uniquely deep knowledge and experience of the human and operational terrain of northwestern Africa from which their US (and European) counterparts would benefit.
- Since the transformation of security and justice sectors of countries in North and West Africa is critical to their successful transitions to democratic governance as well as long-term stability, the United States should continue to support efforts to promote regional cooperation and the exchange of experience on security sector and legal reform. Promising initiatives like the MENA Regional Network for Security Development should be expanded to embrace countries throughout the region beyond the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea.
- The United States should make the resolution of the conflict over the Western Sahara—and the resulting Polisario-controlled desert camps which have increasingly posed threat to regional security as a recruiting ground for both extremists and criminal elements—a diplomatic priority. Washington should also reaffirm its longstanding policy of support for the Moroccan

autonomy proposal as the basis for a realistic solution.

- Regional stability will ultimately depend upon the success of efforts to promote regional economic integration and social development. US assistance, including funding dedicated to the USAID and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), should prioritize these goals, particularly through support of such projects as the Trans-Africa Highway Corridor along the continent’s Atlantic coast, and other improved railway and transport links.
- The United States should assist in the expansion of Morocco’s existing technical training and educational programs benefiting African students, undertakings that are more effective and fiscally sustainable than US-based training.

The author is grateful to the Africa Center’s deputy director, Bronwyn Bruton; assistant director, Adrienne Chuck; and research assistant, Sam Fishman, for their contributions to this paper as well as to Atlantic Council Board Director Ahmed Charai for his insights and encouragement. The analysis also reflects comments from participants in a roundtable discussion on “Morocco’s Role in Regional Security and Development” held at the Atlantic Council on October 22, 2013.

Atlantic Council Board of Directors

INTERIM CHAIRMAN

*Brent Scowcroft

PRESIDENT AND CEO

*Frederick Kempe

VICE CHAIRS

*Robert J. Abernethy

*Richard Edelman

*C. Boyden Gray

*Richard L. Lawson

*Virginia A. Mulberger

*W. DeVier Pierson

*John Studzinski

TREASURER

*Brian C. McK. Henderson

SECRETARY

*Walter B. Slocombe

DIRECTORS

Stephane Abrial

Odeh Aburdene

Peter Ackerman

Timothy D. Adams

John Allen

*Michael Ansari

Richard L. Armitage

*Adrienne Arsht

David D. Aufhauser

Elizabeth F. Bagley

Ralph Bahna

Sheila Bair

Lisa B. Barry

*Rafic Bizri

*Thomas L. Blair

Julia Chang Bloch

Francis Bouchard

Myron Brilliant

*R. Nicholas Burns

*Richard R. Burt

Michael Calvey

James E. Cartwright

Ahmed Charai

Wesley K. Clark

John Craddock

David W. Craig

Tom Craren

*Ralph D. Crosby, Jr.

Thomas M. Culligan

Nelson Cunningham

Ivo H. Daalder

Gregory R. Dahlberg

*Paula J. Dobriansky

Christopher J. Dodd

Conrado Dornier

Patrick J. Durkin

Thomas J. Edelman

Thomas J. Egan, Jr.

*Stuart E. Eizenstat

Julie Finley

Lawrence P. Fisher, II

Alan H. Fleischmann

Michèle Flournoy

*Ronald M. Freeman

*Robert S. Gelbard

*Sherri W. Goodman

*Stephen J. Hadley

Mikael Hagström

Ian Hague

Frank Haun

Rita E. Hauser

Michael V. Hayden

Annette Heuser

Marten H.A. van Heuven

Marilyn Hewson

Jonas Hjelm

Karl Hopkins

Robert Hormats

*Mary L. Howell

Robert E. Hunter

Wolfgang Ischinger

Deborah James

Reuben Jeffery, III

Robert Jeffrey

*James L. Jones, Jr.

George A. Joulwan

Stephen R. Kappes

Maria Pica Karp

Francis J. Kelly, Jr.

Zalmay M. Khalilzad

Robert M. Kimmitt

Henry A. Kissinger

Peter Kovarcik

Franklin D. Kramer

Philip Lader

David Levy

Henrik Liljegen

*Jan M. Lodal

*George Lund

*John D. Macomber

Izzat Majeed

Wendy W. Makins

Mian M. Mansha

William E. Mayer

Eric D.K. Melby

Franklin C. Miller

*Judith A. Miller

*Alexander V. Mirtchev

Obie L. Moore

*George E. Moose

Georgette Mosbacher

Bruce Mosler

Thomas R. Nides

Franco Nuschese

Sean O'Keefe

Hilda Ochoa-Brillembourg

Ahmet Oren

Ana Palacio

Thomas R. Pickering

*Andrew Prozes

Arnold L. Punaro

Kirk A. Radke

Joseph W. Ralston

Teresa M. Ressel

Jeffrey A. Rosen

Charles O. Rossotti

Robert Rowland

Stanley O. Roth

Harry Sachinis

William O. Schmieder

John P. Schmitz

Anne-Marie Slaughter

Alan J. Spence

John M. Spratt, Jr.

James Stavridis

Richard J.A. Steele

James B. Steinberg

*Paula Stern

John S. Tanner

Peter J. Tanous

*Ellen O. Tauscher

Karen Tramontano

Clyde C. Tuggle

Paul Twomey

Melanne Verveer

Enzo Viscusi

Charles F. Wald

Jay Walker

Michael F. Walsh

Mark R. Warner

J. Robinson West

John C. Whitehead

David A. Wilson

Maciej Witucki

Mary C. Yates

Dov S. Zakheim

HONORARY DIRECTORS

David C. Acheson

Madeleine K. Albright

James A. Baker, III

Harold Brown

Frank C. Carlucci, III

Robert M. Gates

Michael G. Mullen

William J. Perry

Colin L. Powell

Condoleezza Rice

Edward L. Rowny

James R. Schlesinger

George P. Shultz

John W. Warner

William H. Webster

LIFETIME DIRECTORS

Carol C. Adelman

Lucy Wilson Benson

Daniel J. Callahan, III

Kenneth W. Dam

Lacey Neuhaus Dorn

Stanley Ebner

Edmund P. Giambastiani, Jr.

John A. Gordon

Barbara Hackman Franklin

Robert L. Hutchings

Chas W. Freeman

Carlton W. Fulford, Jr.

Roger Kirk

Geraldine S. Kunstadter

James P. Mccarthy

Jack N. Merritt

Philip A. Odeen

William Y. Smith

Marjorie Scardino

William H. Taft, IV

Ronald P. Verdicchio

Carl E. Vuono

Togo D. West, Jr.

R. James Woolsey

**Members of the Executive Committee*

List as of September 23, 2013

The Atlantic Council is a nonpartisan organization that promotes constructive US leadership and engagement in international affairs based on the central role of the Atlantic community in meeting today's global challenges.

© 2013 The Atlantic Council of the United States. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Atlantic Council, except in the case of brief quotations in news articles, critical articles, or reviews. Please direct inquiries to:

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor, Washington, DC 20005
(202) 463-7226, AtlanticCouncil.org