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Morocco: Background and U.S. Relations

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SUMMARY

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Morocco: Background and U.S. Relations

Morocco is a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament and local government entities. King Mohammed VI, who inherited the throne in 1999, maintains overarching political authority but has taken some liberalizing steps. In 2011, amid domestic and regional protests, the king introduced a new constitution providing more power to elected officials and expanding individual rights. The monarch nonetheless remains the arbiter of national political decision-making, the head of the military, and—as "Commander of the Faithful"—the country's highest religious authority. The king's seizure of the initiative in 2011 and quick response to protests arguably helped the monarchy retain its popular legitimacy and stability. In recent years, officials have struggled to respond to resurgent protests and other forms of activism that apparently reflect ongoing grievances over economic challenges, corruption, and police brutality.

Successive U.S. Administrations have viewed Morocco as an important regional security, trade, and development partner. Morocco is a designated Major Non-NATO Ally, and bilateral trade and investment have expanded since a U.S.-Morocco Free Trade Agreement was signed in 2004. The United States allocated $38.6 million in bilateral aid in FY2017; Morocco is also implementing a five-year $450 million U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact, its second such program. Security cooperation has also expanded amid instability in Libya and the Sahel region of West Africa. Morocco is a purchaser of U.S. defense materiel (including F-16 jets), hosts an annual military exercise in which some 1,000 U.S. personnel participate, and is a member of the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State. In 2017, the United States and Morocco launched an "Initiative to Address Homegrown Violent Extremists" under the auspices of the multilateral Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). In September 2018, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita pledged to reconvene a high-level U.S.-Morocco Strategic Dialogue, last held in 2015.

With regard to the disputed territory of Western Sahara, the United States has recognized neither Morocco's claim of sovereignty, nor the self-declared Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), led by the independence-seeking Polisario Front from exile in Algeria. The United States has provided funding and diplomatic backing for a U.N. peacekeeping operation, known as MINURSO, which was conceived to organize a referendum on the territory's final status but currently observes a 1991 ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario. The U.N. Security Council—including the United States, a veto-capable permanent member—has called for Morocco and the Polisario to negotiate a "mutually acceptable political solution." U.S. officials have praised Morocco's proposal to grant the territory autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, while maintaining support for the U.N.-led diplomatic process. U.S.-Morocco tensions temporarily erupted in 2013 and 2016 over perceived Obama Administration support for greater pressure on Morocco in the United Nations. (See CRS Report RS20962, *Western Sahara*, for background.)

Congressional interest in the Western Sahara issue and the scope of U.S. aid has been reflected in recent appropriations legislation—most recently, §7041(g) of Division K, P.L. 115-141 and the accompanying Explanatory Statement—among other channels. Relevant bills and resolutions pending in the 115th Congress include the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2019 (H.R. 6385 and S. 3108, respectively), as well as H.Res. 1101 (*Affirming the historical relationship between the United States and the Kingdom of Morocco […]*).

Morocco's foreign policy focuses on its Western partners (including the United States along with France, Spain, and the European Union); the Arab Gulf states; and sub-Saharan Africa. Since the 2011 "Arab Spring," Morocco has drawn closer to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which have provided aid and investment; it has remained officially neutral in the current rift between Qatar and other GCC countries. In mid-2018, Morocco cut ties with Iran for the second time in the past decade, accusing it of providing military support to the Polisario via Hezbollah, a U.S.-designated terrorist network. Tensions between Morocco and neighboring Algeria—a regional rival and the Polisario's primary backer—have long stymied security and economic cooperation within North Africa. The king has instead launched various economic, trade, and exchange initiatives in sub-Saharan African countries, and in 2016, Morocco joined the African Union (AU), having previously refused to do so due to the organization's recognition of the SADR as a member state.

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Introduction

Successive U.S. Administrations have viewed Morocco as an important regional partner on security, trade, and development. Historically warm ties expanded after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when President George W. Bush sought the cooperation of moderate Arab governments in countering terrorism. His Administration designated Morocco a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2004 and concluded a bilateral Free Trade Agreement the same year (authorized by Congress under P.L. 108-302). The United States has continued to build strong relations with the kingdom under Presidents Obama and Trump, notwithstanding occasional friction over U.S. human rights criticism and the issue of Western Sahara, a disputed territory that Morocco claims and largely administers. High-level visits regularly occur, and the two countries recently agreed to restart a U.S.-Morocco Bilateral Strategic Dialogue (see "U.S. Relations").

Morocco's stability has taken on greater prominence amid conflicts in Libya and the Sahel region of West Africa. It is the only country in North Africa not to have experienced a terrorist attack since 2012; authorities regularly report the disruption of internal and transnational threats. King Mohammed VI weathered large urban protests during the 2011 regional wave of unrest known as the "Arab Spring," to which he responded with a new constitution devolving some executive powers to elected officials. The moderate Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD) has led the government since then, although the palace has increasingly moved to check its influence over policymaking in recent years. Amazigh (Berber) cultural rights, women's rights, administrative decentralization, and judicial independence have expanded under the 2011 constitution, even as these stated objectives remain works in progress.

Some observers question whether Morocco can remain stable absent deeper changes.[1] Since 2016, protests have surged in the historically marginalized north and east, apparently reflecting grievances over the economy, governance, and police brutality. Anger at perceived high-level cronyism and corruption has also fueled a boycott movement in 2018 targeting, in part, firms led by individuals seen as close to the palace and influential in both business and politics.[2] Economic growth has been strong in recent years but has not always outpaced population growth. Unemployment and regional economic disparities remain salient challenges and drive high rates of emigration. Morocco's role in enforcing European efforts to curtail illicit migration across the Mediterranean has also sparked some domestic controversy.

The king has undertaken several human rights initiatives that have drawn international praise in recent years, for example ending military trials for civilian suspects and affording legal registration to a handful of critical civil society organizations in Western Sahara. At the same time, activists and journalists probing sensitive issues such as transparency, human rights abuses, and protests in the restive northern Rif region have faced harassment and criminal prosecution. The ongoing crackdown on protests in the north and east has reportedly featured serious abuses, including excessive use of force and torture of detainees.[3]

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[1] Vish Sakthivel, "Six years after the Arab Spring, Morocco is experiencing its own unrest," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2017.

[2] *Jeune Afrique*, "Maroc : 'Le boycott des produits alimentaires est dirigé contre des personnes anti-PJD,'" May 12, 2018. The Arab Barometer public opinion survey reported as of May 2017 that by far, Moroccan respondents' top concerns were the "economic situation" and "corruption."

[3] HRW, "Morocco: Another Crackdown on Protests," June 4, 2018; "Morocco: King Brushes Off Evidence of Police Abuse," September 5, 2017. See also Committee to Protect Journalists, "Morocco," https://cpj.org/mideast/morocco/.

The ongoing push and pull in Morocco over political power, economic opportunity, and freedom of expression is playing out amid a shifting regional and international context. Western efforts to encourage political reforms in the region have arguably waned since the 2013 leadership change in Egypt and the rise of the Islamic State in 2014. As elsewhere in the region, Moroccan citizens have continued to seek new ways to influence official decision-making, while state actors have toggled between a responsiveness to public demands and more hardline approaches.[4]

Table 1. Morocco at a Glance

Population: 34 million

Ethnic Groups: Arab and Berber 99%, other 1%

Languages: Arabic (official), Tamazight (official), other Berber languages, French

Religions: Muslim 99% (official, virtually all Sunni), other 1%

Life Expectancy: 77.1 years

Median Age: 29.3 years

Fertility Rate: 2.1 births/woman

Literacy: 68.5% (male 78.6%, female 58.8%) (2015)

Urban Population (% of total): 62.5% (2018)

GDP Growth / Per Capita: 4.2% / $3,151

Unemployment: 10%; ages 15-24: 20% (2014)

Key Exports: clothing and textiles, automobiles, electric components, inorganic chemicals, transistors, crude minerals, fertilizers (including phosphates), petroleum products, citrus fruits, vegetables, fish

Export Partners: Spain 23%, France 23%, Italy 5%, US 4%

Key Imports: crude oil, textile fabric, telecommunications equipment, wheat, gas and electricity, transistors, plastics

Import Partners: Spain 17%, France 12%, China 9%, US 7%, Germany 6%, Italy 6%, Turkey 5%

Source: CRS graphic; borders are not necessarily authoritative. Information from CIA World Factbook (2018) and International Monetary Fund (IMF, April 2018); 2017 estimates unless noted.

Note: Morocco considers Western Sahara to be part of its national territory, but U.S. government maps do not depict it as such. See, e.g., U.S. Department of State, "Morocco," at http://www.state.gov/p/nea/ci/mo/index.htm.

[4] Intissar Fakir and Sarah Yerkes, "Governance and the Future of the Arab World," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 16, 2018.

Foreign Relations

Morocco's foreign relations are focused on its Western partners (including the United States along with France, Spain, and the European Union); the Arab Gulf states; and friendly countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Since the "Arab Spring," Morocco has drawn closer to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which have provided aid and investment. In 2015, Morocco temporarily redeployed its F-16 jets from counter-Islamic State operations to participate in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, where one F-16 crashed.[5] The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar were respectively the second-, third-, and fourth-largest sources of foreign investment in Morocco as of 2016 (France was the top source), which may help explain why Morocco has strived to remain neutral in the rift between Qatar and other GCC countries.[6] In mid-2018, Morocco cut ties with Iran for the second time in a decade, after accusing it of providing weaponry to the Polisario via Hezbollah, a U.S.-designated terrorist network.[7]

Morocco supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and King Mohammed VI chairs the Al Quds (Jerusalem) Committee of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which seeks to bolster Muslim claims to the city. Morocco closed Israel's liaison bureau in Morocco and Morocco's office in Tel Aviv during the Palestinian intifada (uprising) in 2001. Links between the two countries nevertheless remain, as some 600,000 Israelis are of Moroccan origin and many travel there regularly. The king criticized the Trump Administration's December 2017 decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, stating that it would "negatively impact the prospects for a just and comprehensive solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict."[8] Thousands of Moroccans joined street protests against the U.S. Embassy's move to Jerusalem in May 2018.

Tensions between Morocco and Algeria—a regional rival and the Polisario's primary backer—have long stymied security and economic cooperation in North Africa. Partly in response, the king has launched various economic, trade, and exchange initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa, and Moroccan private sector investment in that region has accordingly increased since the 2000s.[9] In 2016, in a sign of its increased outreach to Africa, Morocco joined the African Union (AU), having previously chosen to remain outside the organization due to the AU's recognition of the SADR as a member state. The shift suggested that Morocco would seek to counter the SADR's influence within AU institutions, but no longer viewed the SADR's expulsion as a prerequisite for its own participation. Morocco has also requested to join the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), although it is not geographically contiguous with the bloc.

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[5] In response to a CRS query in October 2018, Morocco's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated: "Since 2016, Morocco has suspended its military participation within the Arab coalition supporting the legitimate government in Yemen. However, Morocco remains committed in support of the constitutional legitimacy in Yemen, aiming to preserve its unity, sovereignty and stability. Morocco encourages all the Yemeni parties to positively engage and participate in a flexible and constructive way to the efforts undertaken by the United Nations, aiming to reach a political solution, in conformity with the Security Council resolution 2216, while keeping a particular focus on the humanitarian aspects of this crisis."

[6] Economist Intelligence Unit, "Morocco and Qatar Strengthen Bilateral Co-operation," March 23, 2018. See Haim Malka, "Maghreb Neutrality: Maghreb-Gulf Arab Ties Since the GCC Split," Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), June 2018.

[7] Morocco previously severed diplomatic ties with Iran from 2009 to 2016, after accusing Iran of fostering Shi'ite proselytization in the kingdom.

[8] *Morocco World News*, "US Recognition of Jerusalem: King Mohammed VI Expresses 'Deep Concern' to Trump," December 5, 2017; see also ibid, "UN: Morocco Renews its Commitment to Palestine," October 1, 2018.

[9] See *The Economist*, "Why Morocco is Cosying Up to Sub-Saharan Africa," July 19, 2018.

Politics

The 2011 constitution requires the king to appoint a prime minister/head of government from the largest party in the directly-elected Chamber of Representatives. The king remains the arbiter of national political decision-making, the head of the military, and (as "Commander of the Faithful") the country's highest religious authority. In practice, King Mohammed VI continues to exercise significant policy influence and has regularly dismissed or reshuffled cabinet ministers. In early 2018, the king spent several months abroad after undergoing surgery in France, raising concerns among some observers about his health and ability to shape policymaking at home.[10]

Morocco's main Islamist political party, the Party for Justice and Democracy (PJD, also known as *Al Misbah* or "the lamp"), holds a plurality of seats in the Chamber of Representatives and has led a series of coalition governments since 2011. The PJD spent its first two decades of existence as an opposition party before its first electoral victory in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 protests and constitutional revision. The party again won a plurality of seats in the last legislative elections, held in 2016. In recent years, however, the palace and its political allies have taken steps to curtail the PJD's influence over policymaking.[11]

Then-Prime Minister and PJD leader Abdelilah Benkirane was unable to form a majority coalition in 2016 after the RNI party (National Rally of Independents, after its French acronym), widely seen as close to the palace, refused to join unless Benkirane agreed to exclude the PJD's coalition partner of choice (the Istiqlal or "independence" party) while including smaller parties at odds with the PJD's policy agenda.[12] After months of stalled negotiations, the king dismissed Benkirane in early 2017 in favor of the PJD's then-deputy leader, former Foreign Minister Saad Eddine al Othmani—who quickly announced a coalition with the very parties to which Benkirane had objected. These included the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP after its French acronym), a secularist opposition party that shares few policy priorities with the PJD and whose electoral strength has declined in recent cycles. A trend toward diminished PJD political influence was also visible in the aftermath of regional and municipal elections in 2015. The PJD won a plurality of seats and votes, but the pro-palace Party for Authenticity and Modernity (PAM)—founded by top royal advisor Fouad Ali el Himma—secured control of more regional councils.

The PJD has generally refrained from pressing for deep political changes, preferring to reassure the palace of its ability to function within the established order.[13] The party has nonetheless long espoused an anti-corruption message that can be understood as a critique of the status quo. This message appears to be popular, but the PJD's influence has been constrained by Morocco's political system and electoral rules. As the large protests of 2011 fade into the past, the palace and its allies may also feel more emboldened to intervene directly in politics and check the PJD.[14] A perceived shift in Western donor attention away from democratic reforms and toward counterterrorism may also be a factor. The PJD itself may be responding to these trends. In its 2017 party convention, PJD members voted against a bid by Benkirane to remain party leader for

[10] *Middle East Eye*, "Mohammed VI, the absent king of Morocco," March 30, 2018.

[11] Intissar Fakir, *Morocco's Islamist Party: Redefining Politics Under Pressure*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 28, 2017.

[12] *Morocco World News*, "Benkirane Speaks Out Over Akhannouch's Government Formation 'Blockage,'" December 22, 2016.

[13] Anouar Boukhars, *Morocco's Islamists: Bucking the Trend?* FRIDE, June 6, 2014.

[14] Mohamed Daadaoui, "Morocco's king just named a new prime minister, in case you forgot who's in charge," *Washington Post* Monkey Cage blog, March 20, 2017.

a third term, replacing him with Al Othmani, who has arguably pursued a less populist tack and greater accommodation with the palace.

The palace and government leaders have struggled to respond to unrest since 2016 in the northern mountainous Rif region, where ethnic Amazigh (Berbers) predominate. Protests have also surged in parts of the east, reflecting similar grievances over economic marginalization as well as a "deep distrust…in the formal political process."[15] Human rights groups have decried lengthy prison sentences against Rif protest leaders as well as evidence of security force abuses and forced confessions.[16] In October 2017, the king dismissed four cabinet ministers, two each from the leftist Party for Progress and Socialism (PPS) and the centrist Popular Movement (MP), after a judicial auditing report identified severe problems with the implementation of a Rif development project that the king had launched. The reshuffle appeared to be part of a wider effort to frame unresolved tensions as failures of the political class, despite a long history of conflict between Rif populations and the monarchy.[17] Prosecutors have also secured lengthy prison sentences for Rif protest leaders.[18]

The Economy

Morocco is a lower middle-income country; poverty and illiteracy remain widespread, despite sophisticated urban centers in Casablanca and Rabat. The economy is diverse: key sectors include agriculture, tourism, mining, and textiles and apparel. Remittances from Moroccans living in Europe are a source of foreign exchange and a social safety net. Through domestic and Western Sahara mines, Morocco controls nearly 75% of global reserves of phosphates, used in fertilizers.

Annual economic growth has ranged from 1% to 5% over the past decade, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—in line with regional averages, but not consistently outpacing population growth.[19] The unemployment rate is officially 10% but unemployment is reportedly twice as high among youth.[20] Socioeconomic hardships drive emigration and periodic unrest. Some view the palace's extensive role in the economy and political system as enabling corruption and conflicts of interest. Such sentiments, along with anger at high prices, have spurred the aforementioned boycott protest movement in 2018.[21]

Heavily reliant on fossil fuel imports to meet its domestic electricity needs, Morocco has sought investment in renewable energy, including large-scale solar and wind power infrastructure.[22] Because the domestic cost of fuel and electricity are politically sensitive, Morocco historically subsidized these and other key commodities, a policy that the World Bank criticized in 2014 as

[15] Mohammed Masbah, "What Protest in Morocco Reveals About Public Trust in Political Parties," Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, July 30, 2081.

[16] Maâti Monjib, "The Relentless Tide of Morocco's Rif Protests," *Sada*, June 21, 2017.

[17] Maghreb Arab Press (MAP), "Text of King Mohammed VI's Address to the Nation Marking Morocco's Throne Day," July 31, 2017; *New York Times*, "Morocco's Stability is Roiled by Monthslong Protests over Fishmonger's Death," August 26, 2017

[18] Reuters, "Moroccan court jails Rif protest leader for 20 years," June 26, 2018.

[19] International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook database, April 2018.

[20] CIA World Factbook, consulted October 2018.

[21] Reuters, "Morocco consumer boycott has big business in its sights," May 30, 2018.

[22] The World Bank in 2014 approved a $519 million loan to support the construction of a major solar power electricity generation plant in southern Morocco—reportedly the largest facility of its kind in the world. See also Moroccan Investment Development Agency, Investment Opportunities, "Solar Energy" and "Wind Energy," at http://www.invest.gov.ma/index.php?Id=22&lang=en.

"costly, inefficient, and… putting the medium-term sustainability of public finances at risk."[23] Leveraging declines in global oil prices at the time, Morocco ended most fuel subsidies in 2015, with the notable exception of butane gas, used for cooking. Although the move did not set off major unrest, it has prompted public scrutiny over whether politically-connected gas distribution companies have benefitted disproportionately.[24] Subsequent fuel price increases may also have contributed to frustrations over the high cost of living.

The American Chamber of Commerce in Morocco lists 300 members, including large American firms such as 3M, Chevron, Citibank, Colgate Palmolive, Johnson & Johnson, and Microsoft. The State Department's 2018 *Investment Climate Statement* reports that Morocco "is actively encouraging and facilitating foreign investment, particularly in export sectors, through macro-economic policies, trade liberalization, investment incentives, and structural reforms." The report identifies a "lack of skilled labor, weak intellectual property rights protection, inefficient government bureaucracy, and the slow pace of regulatory reform" as key challenges.

Terrorism and Foreign Fighters

Morocco is the only country in North Africa not to have suffered a major terrorist attack since 2012, although it experienced large Al Qaeda-linked bombings in Casablanca in 2003 and an isolated attack on a tourist-friendly café in Marrakesh in 2011.[25] Numerous small domestic Islamist extremist cells have long posed a security threat. In recent years, authorities also have repeatedly claimed to disrupt multiple terrorist cells and plots tied to Al Qaeda or the Islamic State. In 2017 alone, Moroccan authorities announced that they had arrested 186 terrorism suspects and broken up nine cells planning to attack a range of targets, including public buildings and tourist sites.[26] The State Department has praised Morocco's "comprehensive counterterrorism strategy," noting that it includes "vigilant security measures, regional and international cooperation, and counter-radicalization policies."[27]

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a regional network and U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, has carried out attacks in other North African countries—as have several of its splinter factions and affiliated groups—but not in Morocco to date. In 2014, a State Department official stated in congressional testimony that Morocco's "holistic counterterrorism strategy" had made it "difficult for AQIM to effectively establish a foothold."[28]

At the height of the Islamic State's territorial control in Syria and Iraq (2014-2015), an estimated 1,500 Moroccans traveled to those countries as "foreign fighters," placing Morocco among the top global sources of Islamist foreign combatants there.[29] Hundreds reportedly joined the Islamic State organization, while others—including three former Guantánamo detainees who had been

[23] World Bank, "Reforming Subsidies in Morocco," *Economic Premise*, No. 134, February 2014.

[24] *Jeune Afrique*, "Maroc: Le Parlement rend public un rapport sur les prix des carburants sur fond de boycott commercial," May 17, 2018.

[25] Large simultaneous suicide bombings in Casablanca in 2003 killed 33 civilians along with 12 assailants. The attacks spurred large street protests against terrorism as well as a state crackdown on domestic Islamist movements seen as supporting extremism.

[26] State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2017*, "Morocco," released September 19, 2018

[27] Ibid.

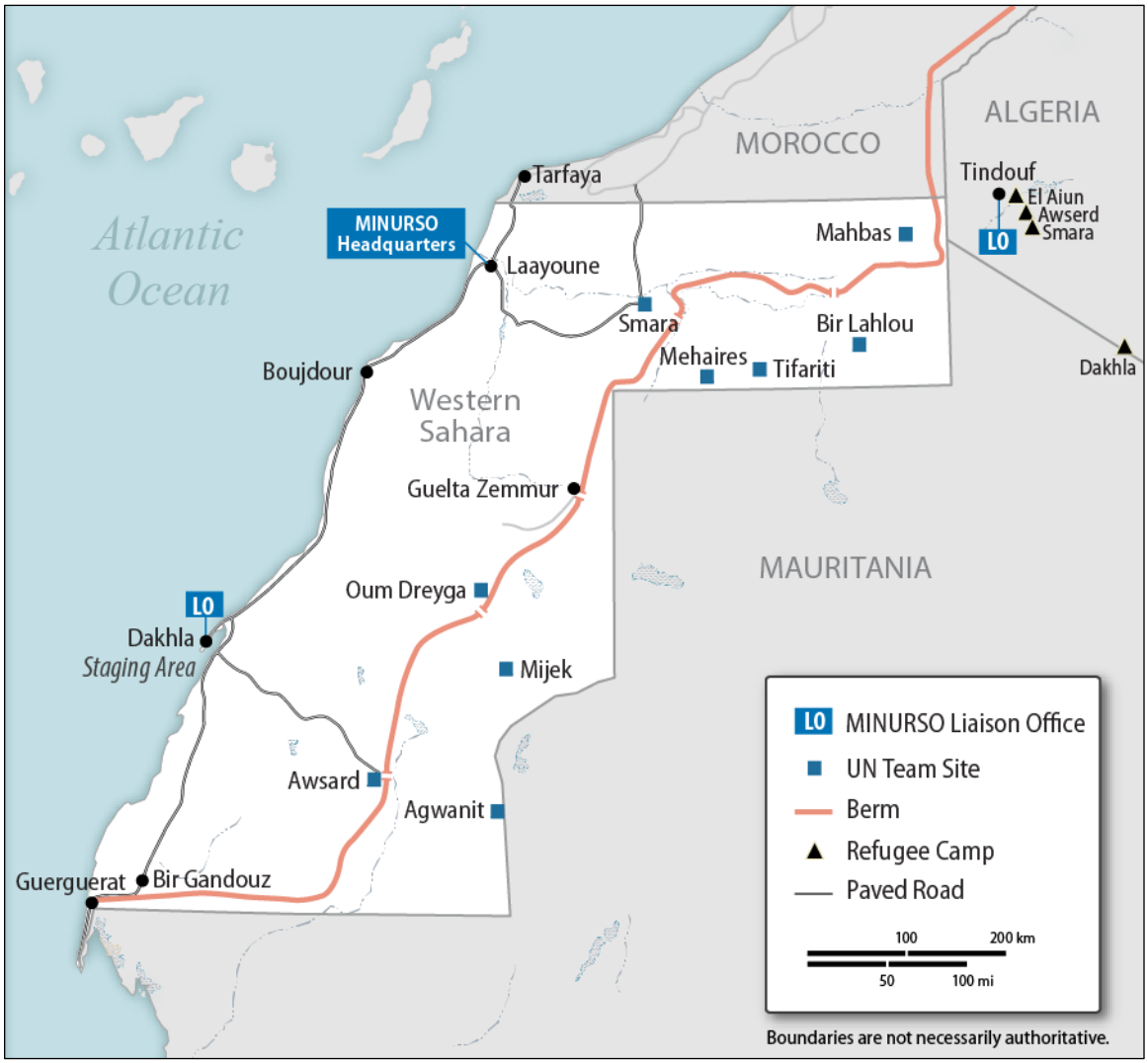
[28] Statement of William V. Roebuck, then-Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, April 9, 2014.

[29] See, e.g., *Washington Post*, "Foreign Fighters Flow to Syria [Info-Graphic]," October 11, 2014.

repatriated to Morocco under the George W. Bush Administration—joined or formed Al Qaeda-linked groups.[30] The above figures do not include various individuals of Moroccan descent who have been implicated in terrorist plots in Europe and the United States. The head of Morocco's Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations stated to the press in mid-2018 that the country had prosecuted and convicted more than 200 returning fighters.[31] He also cited Moroccan legislation allowing police to arrest returnees upon arrival before processing charges against them.

Western Sahara

Figure 1. Map of the Western Sahara



Source: CRS graphic, adopted from U.N. Secretary-General reports to the U.N. Security Council.

[30] *Wall Street Journal*, "After Guantanamo, Freed Detainees Returned to Violence in Syria Battlefields," June 3, 2014. In 2014, another Moroccan ex-Guantánamo detainee, who had reportedly been transferred from U.S. to Spanish custody in 2005, was arrested in Spain on accusations of recruiting fighters for the Islamic State.

[31] AFP, "Morocco Tackling Jihadist Returnees: Anti-Terror Chief," May 5, 2018.

The four-decade dispute between Morocco and the independence-seeking Polisario Front over the former Spanish colony known as the Western Sahara remains unresolved.[32] A sand "berm" constructed by Morocco marks the effective line of control as of a 1991 ceasefire (**Figure 1**). Morocco administers the western part of the territory, roughly 80%, which it considers its southern provinces or the "Moroccan Sahara." The remainder to the east of the berm, which the Polisario refers to as "liberated areas," comprises largely uninhabited desert with some small settlements. Algeria hosts and backs the Polisario, but contends that it is not a party to the conflict. A small U.N. peacekeeping operation known as MINURSO, originally conceived to oversee a referendum on the final status of the region, monitors the ceasefire.

Morocco asserts that it will accept only a solution that guarantees its sovereignty over the territory and will negotiate only on that basis—while the Polisario says it will accept only an outcome involving a referendum with independence as an option. In 2007, King Mohammed VI submitted to the U.N. a proposal to grant Western Sahara "autonomy" under Moroccan sovereignty, and he has pursued policies of political decentralization that he says are intended to empower residents of his "Saharan provinces."[33] Since 2007, the U.N. Security Council has called for Morocco and the Polisario to engage in "negotiations without preconditions" to pursue a "mutually acceptable political solution" to the situation. The two sides have not held talks since early 2012, however. Neither side has shown an interest in compromise.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres has named former German President Horst Köhler as his Personal Envoy charged with facilitating talks, replacing U.S. diplomat Christopher Ross, who held the post since 2009. (Moroccan officials criticized Ross as biased, particularly after a U.N. report in 2012 suggested that Morocco may have spied on MINURSO.[34]) U.N. Security Council Resolution 2351 (2017), which renewed MINURSO's mandate until April 2018, called on the parties (i.e., Morocco and the Polisario) to "resume negotiations... without preconditions and in good faith." In April 2018, U.S. diplomats proposed and secured a six-month renewal of MINURSO's mandate (instead of the usual yearlong extension), which some observers interpreted as an effort to pressure the parties to come to the table.[35] Köhler has invited the Polisario and Morocco, along with Algeria and Mauritania, to meet in Geneva in December.

Tensions within the territory and between Morocco and U.N. officials have often heightened during U.N. deliberations over MINURSO's mandate. In the lead-up to the mandate renewal in April 2018, Morocco accused the Polisario of violating the ceasefire with Algerian backing.[36] Soon after, Morocco cut ties with Iran after accusing it of arming the Polisario via Hezbollah, although it did not publicly release evidence for this accusation.[37] (Iran and Hezbollah denied the allegations.[38]) In 2016, Morocco expelled MINURSO civilian staff in response to remarks by then-U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon referring to Morocco's "occupation" of the territory.

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[32] For background, see CRS Report RS20962, *Western Sahara*, by Alexis Arieff.

[33] King Mohammed VI, speech on the 33rd anniversary of the Green March, November 11, 2008.

[34] Reuters, "Morocco slams 'biased' U.N. Western Sahara envoy," May 17, 2012.

[35] U.N. Security Council Resolution 2414 (2018). See *Pass Blue*, "John Bolton Cracks the Whip on the UN Mission in Western Sahara," May 15, 2018. The position of U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton has been much dissected in the region because he was an advisor to former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker while the latter held the position of U.N. envoy on Western Sahara (1997-2004). Baker's 2003 peace plan for the territory, which would have involved a referendum on independence, was ultimately rejected by Morocco, prompting Baker to resign as envoy in 2004.

[36] *Middle East Eye*, "Morocco threatens Algeria with intervention in Western Sahara," April 10, 2018.

[37] Sarah Feuer, "Delicate Diplomacy in Western Sahara," The Washington Institute, October 18, 2018.

[38] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Iran Denies Morocco Accusation Of Arming Secessionists," May 2, 2018; AFP, "Morocco: Algeria complicit in meddling in Moroccan affairs," May 3, 2018.

Some MINURSO civilian staff began to return to headquarters in the city of Laayoune in 2017, but some positions were consolidated or relocated to other locations. Military tensions also escalated in the territory in 2016 and 2017 as Moroccan and Polisario forces reportedly entered the demilitarized "buffer zone" in an area near the Mauritanian border known as Guerguerate.

With few sources of international leverage, the Polisario has sought to challenge Morocco's ability to conclude trade and natural resource extraction agreements pertaining to goods sourced in Western Sahara.[39] The Court of Justice of the European Union has ruled in favor of the Polisario's stance, finding that goods produced in the Western Sahara should not benefit from an EU-Morocco tariff agreement, and that an EU-Morocco fisheries agreement does not apply to the Western Sahara coastline.[40]

U.S. Relations

The United States and Morocco have long-running, warm relations; Morocco was one of the first foreign powers to recognize the United States, by opening its ports to American ships by decree of Sultan Mohammed III in 1777.[41] Longstanding U.S. goals in Morocco include promoting regional stability, countering terrorism, strengthening trade and investment ties, and supporting Morocco's development and reform efforts. The Trump Administration has characterized the U.S.-Morocco relationship as "a strategic partnership as we work together to advance our shared vision of a secure, stable, and prosperous North Africa and Middle East."[42]

High-level bilateral meetings occur regularly. In September 2018, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita met in Washington DC and announced their intent to reconvene a Bilateral Strategic Dialogue in 2019, to be the first such session since 2015.[43] (President Obama and King Mohammed VI initiated the Dialogue in 2012, and King Mohammed VI undertook an official state visit to Washington DC in 2013.) Bourita subsequently met with President Trump on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly in New York.[44] These meetings followed a visit to Morocco by Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan in June 2018, during which discussions were held on "a wide range of political, economic, and security issues, including advancing regional stability, expanding bilateral trade opportunities, and promoting ongoing initiatives on religious tolerance."[45]

Morocco and the United States have built strong military-to-military ties through regular training engagements, a large annual exercise known as African Lion (hosted by Morocco), and Moroccan

[39] In 2002, the U.N. Legal Counsel, in response to a query from the Security Council on the legality of contracts concluded by Morocco offshore Western Sahara, concluded that such activities are illegal "if conducted in disregard of the needs and interests of the people" of Western Sahara. This determination is not readily enforceable, but may affect the calculations of private firms. See U.N. doc. S/2002/161, *Letter Dated 29 January 2002 from the Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs, the Legal Counsel, Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, February 12, 2002.

[40] *Financial Times*, "The ECJ's Fishy Business," February 27, 2018.

[41] State Department, "U.S. Relations with Morocco," July 19, 2018. The fact-sheet notes that "Morocco formally recognized the United States by signing a treaty of peace and friendship in 1786, a document that remains the longest unbroken relationship in U.S. history."

[42] Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, press statement on Moroccan National Day, July 30, 2018.

[43] State Department, "Secretary Pompeo's Meeting with Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita," September 17, 2018.

[44] Twitter posting by Morocco's Foreign Affairs Ministry, September 27, 2018.

[45] State Department, "Deputy Secretary Sullivan's Meeting With Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita in Morocco," June 29, 2018.

acquisitions of significant U.S.-origin materiel, including F-16 jets and M1A1 tanks. Morocco's Major Non-NATO Ally status grants it priority in the delivery of U.S. excess defense articles (EDA; 22 U.S. Code §2321j)—among other potential implications for bilateral security ties—and it is a major global EDA recipient.[46] A growing U.S. interest in countering Islamist extremist ideology (often referred to as Countering Violent Extremism or CVE) has coincided with Morocco's efforts to train domestic and regional imams in its traditions of religious moderation. In November 2017, the United States and Morocco launched a "global initiative to address homegrown terrorism" under the multilateral Global Counterterrorism Forum.[47]

The U.S.-Morocco partnership extends into regional initiatives. Morocco is a member of the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State. A senior State Department official testified before the Senate in late 2017 that, "Morocco continues to distinguish itself as a capable security partner and regional leader, particularly with respect to countering violent extremism and radicalization on the African continent."[48] In recent years, African Lion has expanded to include participants from other militaries in North and West Africa along with Europe.[49] In 2017, Morocco arrested a U.S.-designated Hezbollah financier who was apparently en route from Guinea to Lebanon, later transferring him to U.S. custody to face trial.[50] Morocco also hosted Libyan political talks that culminated in the 2015 agreement calling for a Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), which the United States supports.

With regard to Western Sahara, the Trump Administration has continued a policy of supporting U.N.-led diplomatic initiatives to achieve a negotiated solution.[51] It has also used the same language as the Obama Administration to characterize Morocco's autonomy proposal, calling it "serious, realistic, and credible" and a "potential approach that could satisfy the aspirations of the people in the Western Sahara to run their own affairs in peace and dignity."[52] In 2013 and 2016, brief diplomatic crises erupted over perceived Obama Administration pressure on Morocco in the United Nations over Western Sahara.[53]

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[46] In 2017, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) authorized equipment collectively valued at $44 million (total acquisition value: $429 million) to be supplied to Morocco via EDA, including more M1A1 tanks.

[47] State Department, "Initiative To Address Homegrown Terrorism Launch Event Held in Valletta, Malta," November 16, 2017.

[48] Testimony by Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Joan Polaschik, "Beyond ISIS: Countering Terrorism, Radicalization, and Promoting Stability in North Africa," Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia and Counterterrorism, December 6, 2017.

[49] Department of Defense, "Exercise African Lion 2018 Concludes in Morocco," May 17, 2018.

[50] *Washington Post*, "Lebanese businessman, Hezbollah supporter, charged with evading U.S. terror sanctions," March 24, 2017.

[51] AFP, "US Says It Backs Morocco Autonomy Plan for Western Sahara," June 29, 2018.

[52] State Department, "Joint Statement of the Second Session of the United States - Kingdom of Morocco Strategic Dialogue," April 4, 2014; State Department, Office of the Spokesperson, "Deputy Secretary Sullivan's Meeting With Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita in Morocco," June 29, 2018.

[53] In 2013, tensions arose when U.S. diplomats temporarily backed a proposal in the U.N. Security Council that would have added human rights monitoring to MINURSO's mandate. Morocco responded by expelling U.S. military personnel participating in the annual joint military exercise African Lion. The proposal ultimately was not put forward, and tensions seemed to fade with the king's visit to Washington DC later that year. In 2016, Morocco expelled U.N. civilian officials from Western Sahara after the then-U.N. Secretary-General used the term "occupation" to refer to its administration of the territory. The king then delivered a speech (which observers saw as aimed at U.S. diplomats serving in the U.N.) in which he criticized what he portrayed as fair-weather friends and called for the "diversification" of Morocco's foreign partnerships. (Morocco World News, "Full Text of King Mohammed VI's Speech to Morocco-GCC Summit in Riyadh," April 20, 2016.) The speech followed an official visit by the king to Russia.

U.S. Foreign Aid

U.S. bilateral aid, totaling $38.6 million in FY2017, aims to help Morocco improve its education system, local governance, and livelihood opportunities. In doing so, U.S. aid programs seek to "address the drivers of instability, such as social and economic marginalization, especially of youth, and the unmet expectations of government reforms."[54] Morocco additionally began implementing a $450 million, five-year U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact in 2017, the country's second such program.[55] The current compact seeks to address "two Moroccan Government priorities that have posed binding constraints to economic growth and investment: youth employability and land productivity."[56]

In line with its proposals to cut U.S. foreign aid globally, the Trump Administration proposed to decrease bilateral State Department- and USAID-administered aid to Morocco in both FY2018 and FY2019, although this would not directly affect MCC or Department of Defense activities. In enacting the FY2018 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 115-141), Congress did not follow the Administration's FY2018 proposals for aid to Morocco, maintaining bilateral aid at FY2017 levels (see **Table 2** below).

Table 2. U.S. Bilateral Aid to Morocco: State Department & USAID

Appropriations, $ Millions

	FY2016	**FY2017**	**FY2018** (requested)	**FY2018** (congressionally directed)	**FY2019** (requested)
DA	15.0	-	-	-	-
ESF/ESDF	-	20.0	10.0	20.0	10.0
INCLE	3.0	5.0	3.0	5.0	3.0
FMF	10.0	10.0	-	10.0	-
IMET	2.1	2.1	2.0	2.0	1.9
NADR	1.6	1.5	1.0	1.5	1.0
TOTAL	**31.7**	**38.6**	**16.0**	**38.5**	**15.9**

Source: State Department Congressional Budget Justifications (FY2016-FY2019); Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying P.L. 115-141 (FY2018).

Notes: Does not include funding administered by other federal entities, such as the MCC or Department of Defense. Includes funds designated as both base budget and Overseas Contingency Operations. DA=Development Assistance; ESF=Economic Support Fund; ESDF=Economic Support & Development Fund (Administration proposal for FY2018-FY2019); INCLE=International Narcotics Control & Law Enforcement; FMF=Foreign Military Financing; IMET=International Military Education & Training; NADR=Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, & Related Programs.

[54] State Department FY2019 Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, "Morocco," March 2018.

[55] Morocco's $697.5 million 2008-2013 MCC compact focused on alleviating poverty through targeted investments in fruit tree productivity, fisheries, artisan production, financial services, and private enterprises.

[56] MCC, "Morocco Employability and Land Compact," https://www.mcc.gov/where-we-work/program/morocco-employability-and-land-compact.

Foreign Aid Legislation Regarding Western Sahara

It has been the policy of successive Administrations that funds appropriated for bilateral aid to Morocco may not be implemented in Western Sahara, as such use could be interpreted as a tacit endorsement of Moroccan sovereignty and therefore as a shift in U.S. diplomatic recognition policy. The House Appropriations Committee-reported FY2019 foreign aid appropriations bill (H.R. 6385) would provide that funds "made available for assistance for Morocco shall also be made available for assistance for any region or territory administered by Morocco, including the Western Sahara." The bill reported in the Senate (S. 3108) does not contain such a provision. In recent years, such measures have passed the House, but final enacted bills have contained modified language, providing that funds appropriated for *global* bilateral economic assistance "shall be made available for assistance for the Western Sahara." This is the case for the FY2018 Consolidated Appropriations Act (§7041[g] of Division K, P.L. 115-141).

In response to similar provisions in previous appropriations measures, the Obama Administration initiated a program to strengthen civil society organizations based in the territory, drawing on Economic Support Fund (ESF) funding under the regional Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). The House Appropriations Committee report on the FY2018 appropriations act (H.Rept. 115-253) stated that "The Committee expects funds to support democratic reforms and economic development" in Western Sahara.[57]

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[57] The joint Explanatory Statement accompanying P.L. 115-141 endorsed House and Senate report language where not explicitly negated.