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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 officials. King Mohammed VI, who inherited the throne in 1999, maintains overarching political authority but has taken some liberalizing steps. In 2011, amid large protests in Morocco and the popular overthrow of governments in other North African countries, the king introduced a new constitution that strengthened the office of the Prime Minister and expanded individual rights. The monarch remains the arbiter of national decision-making, the head of the military, and—as "Commander of the Faithful"—the country's highest religious authority. Morocco's stability has taken on greater prominence amid the conflicts in Libya and the Sahel region and political turbulence in Tunisia and Algeria. The country has nonetheless seen recurrent protests over economic challenges, corruption, and police brutality, to which authorities have sometimes responded harshly.

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has brought new economic and governance challenges. As of late September 2021, Morocco had experienced the second-highest cumulative number of confirmed cases in Africa (after South Africa) and also had achieved one of the highest vaccination rates. Cases most recently peaked in July-August 2021. The United States has provided Morocco with COVID-19-related health aid and vaccine donations.

Successive U.S. Administrations have viewed Morocco as an important regional partner on security, trade, and development. Morocco is a designated Major Non-NATO Ally, and a U.S.-Morocco Free Trade Agreement was signed in 2004. A high-level Bilateral Strategic Dialogue has met periodically since 2012, and Morocco is a member of the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State. In July 2021, the United States transferred a Moroccan Guantánamo detainee to Morocco, marking the first prisoner transfer out of Guantánamo since 2016. The Biden Administration has hailed Morocco as "a strategic partner" and lauded its "key role in fostering stability in the region," while expressing concerns about recent human rights and press freedom trends.

In a significant U.S. policy change in late 2020, President Trump announced that the United States would recognize Morocco's claim over the disputed territory of Western Sahara and redrew U.S. maps accordingly. Previously, the United States had recognized neither Morocco's claim, nor the self-declared government led by the independence-seeking Polisario Front; U.S. officials had, however, characterized Morocco's proposal of autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty as "serious, realistic, and credible." The U.S. shift in 2020, a top Moroccan priority for decades, coincided with a pledge by Morocco to normalize diplomatic relations with Israel. The Biden Administration initially indicated that it was reviewing the Western Sahara recognition policy, but has not altered it to date.

U.S. bilateral aid, totaling $41 million in FY2021, seeks to improve Morocco's education system, local governance, livelihood opportunities, and military capabilities. In line with its broader budget proposals, the Trump Administration repeatedly proposed to decrease bilateral aid to Morocco; Congress did not enact these proposals. The Biden Administration has proposed a slight decrease to $36 million in bilateral aid for Morocco in FY2022. Morocco also is implementing a $450 million, five-year U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) development aid compact.

U.S.-Morocco security cooperation is extensive. Morocco has been a growing recipient of U.S. Defense Department global train and equip programs in recent years. It hosts an annual U.S. multinational military exercise, African Lion, involving thousands of soldiers from the United States and other countries in North and West Africa. Morocco is a significant purchaser of U.S. arms for its income level; the Trump Administration approved, with congressional assent, up to $10 billion in new arms sales to Morocco in 2019 alone, including 25 new F-16 jets, 36 Apache attack helicopters, TOW missiles and missile launchers, and an upgrade of Morocco's existing 23 F-16s.

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. Tensions between Morocco and Algeria—a regional rival that hosts and backs the Polisario—have long stymied security and economic cooperation in North Africa. In August 2021, Algeria announced it was severing diplomatic ties with Morocco, in the context of renewed military clashes in Western Sahara in late 2020 and Morocco's current normalization of relations with Israel. Morocco expressed regret over the decision. In 2018, Morocco cut ties with Iran for the second time in a decade, accusing it of supplying arms to the Polisario via Hezbollah, a U.S.-designated terrorist group. In 2016, Morocco joined the African Union (AU), having previously refused to do so due to the organization's recognition of the Polisario's Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as a member state.

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# Introduction

Successive U.S. Administrations have viewed Morocco as an important regional security, trade, and development partner, and successive Congresses have supported U.S.-Morocco cooperation and aid on a bipartisan basis. Historically warm ties deepened after the attacks of September 11, 2001, as President George W. Bush sought the cooperation of Arab governments in countering terrorism. His Administration designated Morocco a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2004 and concluded a U.S.-Morocco Free Trade Agreement the same year, which Congress enacted under P.L. 108-302. President Obama continued to pursue close ties via a U.S.-Morocco Bilateral Strategic Dialogue and other initiatives, notwithstanding occasional U.S. human rights criticism and some friction over Western Sahara—a disputed territory that Morocco claims and largely controls. At the time, the United States did not recognize Morocco's claim to the territory, nor did it recognize the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), a self-declared state founded by the independence-seeking Polisario Front from exile in Algeria.

In a policy change in late 2020, President Trump announced that the United States would recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara and redrew U.S. maps accordingly (**Figure 1**). The U.S. shift, a top Moroccan priority for decades, coincided with Morocco's decision to join the "Abraham Accords," a set of diplomatic normalization agreements between Arab states and Israel.[1] The Biden Administration initially indicated that it was reviewing the recognition policy, but has not altered it to date.[2] The Biden Administration has hailed Morocco as "a strategic partner" and lauded its "key role in fostering stability in the region," while expressing some concerns about recent human rights and press freedom trends.[3]

Morocco's stability has taken on greater prominence amid the conflicts in Libya and the Sahel region and political turbulence in Tunisia and Algeria. King Mohammed VI, who ascended to the throne in 1999, responded to protests during the 2011 "Arab Spring" with a new constitution, adopted by referendum, which devolved some executive powers to elected officials and expanded some individual rights protections. Morocco is the only North African country not to have experienced a large terrorist attack since 2012. At the same time, it was reportedly a top source of Islamist "foreign fighters" in Iraq and Syria in 2014-2015, and two European tourists were killed in Morocco in 2018 by individuals who had reportedly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.

Some analysts debate whether Moroccan institutions can continue to weather internal and regional strains, including those posed by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.[4] Prior to the pandemic, the Arab Barometer regional opinion survey reported that Moroccan respondents' top concerns were the "the economy," "the quality of public services," and corruption.[5] Nearly half of Moroccan respondents stated that they would consider emigrating, including 70% of those aged 18-29. Sporadic localized protests and strikes occurred from 2019 through early 2020, following a wave of larger demonstrations in 2016-2018 in historically marginalized rural areas in the northern Rif region and in the east.[6] Protesters' stated grievances

[1] See CRS Insight IN11555, *Morocco-Israel Normalization and U.S. Policy Change on Western Sahara*.

[2] State Department press briefing, February 22, 2021.

[3] Respectively, Secretary of State Antony Blinken statement via Twitter, 10:00 am, May 18, 2021; State Department, "Secretary Blinken's Call with Moroccan Foreign Minister Bourita," May 18, 2021, and press briefing, July 12, 2021.

[4] See, e.g., Intissar Fakir and Isabelle Werenfels, "The Pandemic and Governance in the Maghreb: A Moment of Truth," *SWP Comment*, February 2021.

[5] Arab Barometer V, "Morocco Country Report," 2019.

[6] See Abdelillah Essatte, "Protests of Morocco's Margins: The credibility gap," Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis

included economic hardships, corruption, lack of access to state services, poor working conditions, and police brutality. Perceptions of cronyism and corruption also fueled a boycott movement in 2018 targeting firms led by individuals seen as influential in both business and politics.[7] Morocco's curtailment of migration to Europe also has sparked domestic controversy.[8]

In recent years, human rights groups have highlighted what they view as a pattern of politically motivated prosecutions of local activists, artists, social media posters, and journalists probing sensitive issues such as corruption, land tenure abuses, and the recent unrest in the Rif.[9] Police allegedly employed excessive force and torture against the Rif protesters in 2016-2017, and protest leaders were sentenced to lengthy prison terms.[10] More recently, Moroccan security forces have reportedly violently suppressed pro-independence protests in Western Sahara.[11]

These trends follow a period in which King Mohammed VI pursued various human rights initiatives, for example ending military trials for civilian suspects, affording legal registration to a handful of critical civil society organizations based in Moroccan-administered Western Sahara, and granting legal residency status to many migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. The 2011 constitution expanded ethnic Amazigh (Berber) cultural rights, women's rights, political decentralization, and judicial independence, although these initiatives remain works in progress. Early in his reign, the king oversaw a landmark truth and reconciliation process pertaining to state repression under his father, King Hassan II, and a reform of Morocco's family code that raised the minimum age of marriage and advanced women's rights in marital and family matters.

The push and pull in Morocco over political power, economic opportunity, and freedom of expression have played out in a shifting regional and international context. Western efforts to encourage political reforms in North Africa arguably waned after the 2013 leadership change in Egypt and the rise of the Islamic State (including its Libya offshoot) in 2014. The observation of violence and chaos in Libya and economic hardships in Tunisia may also have tempered domestic appetite for political change. As elsewhere in the region, Moroccans have continued to seek new ways to influence official decision-making, while state actors have toggled between responding to public demands and exercising more hardline approaches.[12]

**Morocco and COVID-19**

As of late September, Morocco had administered more COVID-19 vaccine doses per capita (112 per 100 people) than most other African countries.[13] Morocco also had reported the second-highest number of cumulative

(MIPA), August 2018.

[7] *Jeune Afrique*, "Le boycott des produits alimentaires est dirigé contre des personnes anti-PJD," May 12, 2018.

[8] See, e.g., Samia Errazzouki, "A young woman embodied Morocco's future. Instead she was shot while trying to emigrate [op-ed]," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2018.

[9] See, e.g., Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), "Morocco's new tactic to punish journalists: charge them with sex crimes," March 18, 2021; and Adel Abdel Ghafar, "The arrest of Maati Monjib and the continued retreat of human rights in Morocco," Brookings, March 9, 2021; Human Rights Watch (HRW), "Morocco: Crackdown on Social Media Critics," February 5, 2020, "Morocco: Trial Over Private Life Allegations," September 9, 2019, and "Morocco: Shocking Verdict Against Activists, A Journalist," April 10, 2019.

[10] Reuters, "Moroccan court jails Rif protest leader for 20 years," June 26, 2018; HRW, "Morocco: Another Crackdown on Protests," June 4, 2018, and "Morocco: King Brushes Off Evidence of Police Abuse," September 5, 2017. The king pardoned some jailed Rif protesters, but key protest leaders remain in prison.

[11] HRW, "Western Sahara: Morocco Cracks Down on Activists," December 18, 2020.

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

[13] CRS calculation based on World Health Organization (WHO) COVID-19 Dashboard data, as of September 28.

confirmed COVID-19 cases in Africa, behind only South Africa. Morocco experienced its largest wave of confirmed COVID-19 cases to date in July-August 2021, in parallel with similar trends across North Africa.

Like many countries in the sub-region, Morocco has imposed, lifted, and re-imposed various COVID-19-related restrictions since early 2020. In March 2020, Morocco closed its borders and suspended international commercial flights, prompting the U.S. State Department to evacuate stranded U.S. citizens. The government also invoked a national state of emergency, imposed nationwide restrictions on internal travel and movements, and closed schools, places of worship, communal steam baths, and nonessential businesses. Many Moroccans reportedly approved of such measures to limit spread of the virus.[14] Authorities began lifting some restrictions in June 2020, while maintaining the state of emergency. As of August 2021, a national curfew, internal travel restrictions, some business closures, and a mask mandate were in effect, and the state of emergency had been extended.[15]

The pandemic has negatively affected Morocco's economy, fueling a recession in 2020 and a rise in unemployment (see "The Economy" below). In early 2020, the government established an emergency pandemic fund of about $1 billion—financed by the state and voluntary contributions from private firms and citizens—to boost its health care capacity and assist economically vulnerable citizens.[16] The state also provided aid for businesses and formal sector workers who lost jobs or working hours, and regulated prices and distribution of facemasks and hand sanitizers. These efforts—and the government's financial resources more broadly—may not be sufficient to assuage household-level hardships or fiscal and trade imbalances attributable to the pandemic.[17]

**Figure 1. Morocco at a Glance**

**Population**: 36.6 million, of which 64% **urban**
**Ethnicities**: Arab and/or Amazigh (Berber) 99%
**Languages**: Arabic (official), Tamazight (official) and other Berber languages, French
**Religions**: Muslim 99% (official, virtually all Sunni), other 1% (including Christian, Jewish, Baha'i)
**Life Expectancy**: 73.6 years
**Median Age**: 29.1 years (2020)
**Literacy**: 74% (male 83%, female 65%) (2018)
**Access to electricity:** 100% of population (2020)
**Fertility Rate**: 2.3 children born/woman
**Women aged 20-24 who were married by age 18:** 14% (2018)
**GDP Growth / Per Capita**: -7% / $3,158 (2020)
**Inflation:** 0.6%
**Unemployment**: 11.9% (2020); **ages 15-24**: 22% (2016)
**Employment in agriculture:** 33% of total employment (2019)
**Key Exports / Partners**: cars, insulated wiring, fertilizers, phosphoric acid, clothing and apparel / Spain 23%, France 19% (2019)
**Key Imports / Partners**: refined petroleum, cars and vehicle parts, natural gas, coal, low-voltage protection equipment / Spain 19%, France 11%, China 9%, United States 7%, Germany 5%, Turkey 5%, Italy 5% (2019)

**Source:** CRS graphic. Map from U.S. Department of State and ESRI. Fact information from CIA *World Factbook*, International Monetary Fund (2021); World Bank Development Indicators; 2021 estimates unless noted.

[14] Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA), "COVID-19: How Moroccans View the Government's Measures," March 25, 2020.

[15] U.S. Embassy in Morocco, "COVID-19 Information," updated as of August 24, 2021.

[16] See International Monetary Fund, Policy Responses to COVID-19: Policy Tracker, at https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19.

[17] Yasmina Abouzzohour, "Coping with COVID-19's cost: The example of Morocco," Brookings, December 23, 2020.

# Foreign Relations

Morocco's foreign relations focus on its Western partners (namely France, Spain, the European Union, and the United States); the Arab Gulf states; and sub-Saharan Africa. After the 2011 "Arab Spring," Morocco drew closer to the Gulf countries, which pledged aid and investment. Morocco initially participated in Saudi-led military operations in Yemen in 2015, but soon ended its involvement and has since exhibited periodic diplomatic friction with Saudi leaders.[18] In 2018, Morocco cut ties with Iran for the second time in a decade, accusing it of providing weapons to the Polisario Front via Hezbollah, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, and Algeria.[19]

Tensions between Morocco and Algeria—a regional rival that hosts and backs the Polisario—have long stymied security and economic cooperation in North Africa. In late August 2021, Algeria cut bilateral diplomatic ties, accusing Morocco of supporting an Algerian separatist group, surveilling Algerian officials, and other "hostile actions."[20] The move came in the context of Morocco's diplomatic rapprochement with Israel and renewed military clashes in Western Sahara between the Polisario and Moroccan forces since late 2020 (see "Western Sahara"). Morocco expressed regret and rejected the premise of Algeria's decision; in early August, King Mohammed VI had publicly called for Algerian-Moroccan reconciliation.[21]

In December 2020, Morocco pledged to normalize its diplomatic relationship with Israel and joined the Abraham Accords, which were backed by the United States. The two countries committed to establish formal diplomatic contacts—initially via the revival of liaison offices in Rabat and Tel Aviv—along with direct flights and bilateral economic and technical cooperation.[22] In August 2021, Israeli Foreign Minister visited Morocco, reportedly the first such visit since 2003, and announced the two countries would upgrade the liaison offices to full embassies.[23] At the same time, King Mohammed VI has expressed his continued support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the king chairs the Al Quds (Jerusalem) Committee of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which seeks to bolster Muslim claims to the city.[24]

Morocco's relationship with Israel dates to the 1960s, and prior to the current normalization process the two countries reportedly engaged in some security and intelligence cooperation.[25] Morocco and Israel established diplomatic liaison offices in 1994, but Morocco closed them in 2000 during the second Palestinian *intifada* (uprising). Israeli tourist visits to Morocco continued; hundreds of thousands of Israeli Jews trace their heritage to Morocco. Full normalization is widely believed to be unpopular in Morocco—for example, thousands of Moroccans protested the U.S. Embassy's move to Jerusalem in 2018—but the U.S. recognition of Morocco's claim to Western Sahara may have helped assuage public opposition.

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[18] Carnegie Endowment, "What Impact Will Morocco's Decision to Withdraw From the Anti-Houthi Coalition Have?" February 14, 2019.

[19] U.S. officials did not publicly comment on the allegation. Morocco previously severed diplomatic ties with Iran from 2009 to 2016, accusing Iran of fostering Shi'ite proselytization.

[20] Reuters, "Algeria cuts diplomatic relations with Morocco," August 25, 2021.

[21] Associated Press, "Morocco 'regrets' Algeria's decision to cut diplomatic ties," August 25, 2021.

[22] State Department, *Joint Declaration among the Kingdom of Morocco, the United States of America, and the State of Israel*, January 2021, at https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Joint-Declaration-US-Morrocco-Israel.pdf.

[23] Reuters, "Israel, Morocco to upgrade relations, open embassies, Israeli FM says," August 12, 2021.

[24] Morocco's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Phone Call Between His Majesty King Mohammed VI and His Excellency Mahmoud Abbas Abu Mazen, President of the Palestinian National Authority," December 10, 2020.

[25] *New York Times*, "Israel-Morocco Deal Follows History of Cooperation on Arms and Spying," December 10, 2021.

In part to cultivate regional support for its claim to the Western Sahara as well as economic opportunities for Moroccan firms, King Mohammed VI has launched diplomatic, investment, and trade initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa.[26] In 2016, Morocco joined the African Union (AU) having left the AU's predecessor organization in 1984 over the latter's recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the Polisario's self-declared state. Morocco has since sought to isolate the SADR (an AU member state) within AU institutions, with mixed success. Morocco also has requested to join the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), although it is not geographically contiguous with the bloc. Morocco has signed but has not yet finalized its ratification of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA).[27]

# 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, one of two chambers comprising the parliament. 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 has continued to shape policymaking and has regularly dismissed and reshuffled cabinet ministers. The king has undergone heart surgeries in Morocco and abroad in recent years, spurring concerns about his health among some observers.[28]

Morocco has dozens of registered political parties, reflecting a range of ideological persuasions. The moderate Islamist Party for Justice and Democracy (PJD) won a plurality in elections for the Chamber of Representatives in 2011 and 2016, and led a series of fractious coalition governments over the past ten years. In elections in September 2021, the PJD lost nearly all of its seats, while the centrist, economically liberal National Rally of Independents (RNI, after its French acronym) won a plurality of 102 out of 395 seats. Voter turnout was reported at 50%, up from 43% in 2016. RNI leader Aziz Akhannouch, a former cabinet minister and one of Morocco's most prominent businessmen, has since announced a coalition with the conservative Istiqlal party ("Independence," 81 seats) and the secularist liberal Party for Authenticity and Modernity (PAM, 87 seats), which was founded by royal advisor Fouad Ali el Himma.

The PJD spent two decades as an opposition party before winning its first electoral victory in 2011, and it has generally refrained from pressing for deep political changes, preferring to reassure the palace of its ability to function within the established order.[29] The party has nonetheless espoused an anti-corruption message that may be understood as a critique of the status quo. Some observers perceived the PJD's losses in 2021 as symbolic of a popular backlash against Islamist parties in the Middle East in recent years.[30] Perceptions that the PJD had failed to alleviate economic challenges may also have eroded its popularity, while Morocco's political system and electoral laws have arguably further constrained the party's influence.[31] Several other Moroccan Islamist groups, such as the Justice and Charity Organization (Al Adl wal Ihsan)—reportedly Morocco's largest grassroots movement—reject the religious authority of the

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

[27] African Union, African Trade Observatory Dashboard, https://ato.africa/en/, data as of August 26, 2021.

[28] *Middle East Eye*, "Mohammed VI, the absent king of Morocco," March 30, 2018; Associated Press, "Morocco's King, 56, Undergoes Successful Heart Surgery," June 15, 2020.

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

[30] *New York Times*, "Islamists See Big Losses in Moroccan Parliamentary Elections," September 8, 2021.

[31] Reuters, "Looming Moroccan election reveals parliament's dimming sway," September 4, 2021.

monarchy and have remained outside the political system. One Moroccan analyst assessed that the election in 2021 of parties with close ties to the palace would "reinforce the monarchy's stability and boost its image as the strongest – and smartest – political actor," while noting that, "With the PJD out of the picture, the palace no longer has a scapegoat if things go wrong."[32]

# The Economy

Morocco is a lower-middle income country with significant internal disparities; poverty and illiteracy rates remain high, despite sophisticated urban centers in Casablanca and Rabat. The economy is diverse, with agriculture, tourism, mining, and textiles and apparel comprising key sectors. Remittances from Moroccans living abroad provide additional foreign exchange and a social safety net. Morocco holds an estimated 70% of global reserves of phosphates, used in fertilizers, and was the second-largest phosphate producer in 2020.[33] State-owned enterprises and public investment play significant roles in the economy: the state is the controlling shareholder in the Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP), the country's largest exporter, and the palace reportedly owns stakes in domestic companies in a range of sectors.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected Morocco's economy through the global slowdown in trade and tourism, along with domestic restrictions on businesses and travel. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that Morocco's economy shrank by 7% in 2020, the country's first recession in decades.[34] The government has taken steps to cushion the blow, deferring some taxes, making direct payments to furloughed formal sector employees, and establishing an emergency response fund for vulnerable households (see COVID-19 text box in "Introduction"). The government also deferred social security and tax bills for some firms in 2020, while the central bank reduced interest rates, suspended loan repayments, and issued a new banking credit line to finance local businesses' operational expenses.[35]

Socioeconomic hardships have driven emigration and periodic unrest. Annual GDP growth ranged from 1.0% to 5.2% between 2010 and 2019—in line with regional averages, but not outpacing population growth.[36] The official unemployment rate stood at 11.9% in 2020, per the IMF, and is reportedly higher among young people. Heavily reliant on fossil fuel imports to meet its domestic electricity needs, Morocco has sought to curtail costly domestic energy subsidies, a World Bank recommendation. This may have helped fuel popular economic frustrations in recent years and voters' backlash against the PJD in 2021.[37] Morocco also has pursued investments in renewable energy, including large-scale solar and wind power infrastructure.[38]

The American Chamber of Commerce in Morocco lists over 200 members, including local affiliates of firms such as 3M, Citibank, Johnson & Johnson, and Microsoft. The State

[32] Mohammed Masbah, "How Morocco's Islamist Party Fell from Grace," Chatham House, September 14, 2021.

[33] U.S. Geological Survey, "Phosphate Rock" Mineral Commodity Summary, 2021.

[34] IMF, World Economic Outlook database, April 2021.

[35] See IMF, Policy Responses to COVID-19: Policy Tracker.

[36] IMF, World Economic Outlook database, April 2021.

[37] World Bank, "Reforming Subsidies in Morocco," *Economic Premise*, No. 134, 2014; *Le Monde Arabe*, "Maroc : après un bilan maussade, les islamistes du PJD sanctionnés dans les urnes," September 28, 2021.

[38] The World Bank and African Development Bank—in which the United States is a top shareholder—are providing $535 million to support construction of a solar power electricity generation plant in southern Morocco that is reportedly the largest facility of its kind. Other donors are also supporting the project. See World Bank, "Morocco: Noor Solar Power Project," at https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P131256.

Department's 2020 *Investment Climate Statement* reported that Morocco "actively encourages and facilitates foreign investment, particularly in export sectors like manufacturing – through dynamic macro-economic policies, trade liberalization, investment incentives, and structural reforms." The report identified insufficient skilled labor, along with "weak intellectual property rights (IPR) protections, inefficient government bureaucracy, and the slow pace of regulatory reform remain challenges" as key business environment challenges.

# Terrorism and Foreign Fighters

The State Department has praised Morocco's "comprehensive" counterterrorism strategy, which includes "vigilant security measures, regional and international cooperation, and counter-radicalization policies."[39] Moroccan authorities regularly claim to disrupt local terrorist cells and plots, including some tied to Al Qaeda or the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL).[40] U.N. global terrorism sanctions investigators assessed in mid-2021 that Morocco faced "a growing threat" from Al Qaeda and IS supporters and reported that a U.S.-Morocco "joint operation" had recently dismantled a local IS cell.[41] Morocco is the only country in North Africa not to have suffered a major terrorist attack since 2012, although two European tourists were kidnapped and killed in 2018 by individuals who had reportedly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.[42] Previously, an Al Qaeda-linked bombing attack killed dozens of people in Casablanca in 2003, and a local terrorist cell assaulted a tourist-friendly café in Marrakesh in 2011, killing 17 people.

At the height of the Islamic State's territorial control in Syria and Iraq (2014-2015), Morocco was among the top known origins of Islamist foreign fighters in those countries.[43] Hundreds of Moroccans reportedly joined the Islamic State, while others—including three former U.S. Guantánamo detainees repatriated to Morocco during the George W. Bush Administration—reportedly joined or formed Al Qaeda-affiliated groups.[44] The head of Morocco's Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations stated in 2018 that the country had prosecuted and convicted more than 200 returning fighters.[45] Moroccan nationals were also reportedly among the thousands of alleged Islamic State fighters detained as of 2019 in Syria by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).[46] Individuals of Moroccan descent have been implicated in terrorist plots in Europe and the United States; many appear to have been radicalized abroad.[47]

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[39] State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*, "Morocco."

[40] State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019* (latest), "Morocco," released June 24, 2020.

[41] *Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities*, U.N. doc. S/2021/655, July 21, 2021. U.S. officials do not appear to have publicly confirmed such an operation.

[42] BBC, "Scandinavian Hikers Murder Trial Begins in Morocco," May 2, 2019.

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

[44] *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.

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

[46] *Washington Post*, "Thousands of Islamic State fighters captured in Syria face uncertain fate," December 27, 2019.

[47] In 2018, over U.S. objections, Germany deported to Morocco Mounir el Motassadeq, a member of the Hamburg-based terrorist cell that supported the planning of the 9/11 attacks in the United States (State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2018*, "Germany"). In 2012, U.S. federal law enforcement agencies arrested a Moroccan citizen whom they accused of plotting to attack the Capitol building. In other cases, Moroccan intelligence has reportedly helped foil terrorist plots in Europe; see, e.g., *The North Africa Post*, "Counterterrorism: France thanks Morocco for help in dismantling terror cell," April 9, 2021.

# Western Sahara[48]

Morocco and the independence-seeking Polisario Front have vied for control of the former Spanish colony known as the Western Sahara since the 1970s. Morocco refers to the area as the "Moroccan Sahara," or its southern provinces. In 1975, as Spain prepared to decolonize the territory, Morocco—which had obtained independence from France in 1956—launched a "Green March" of some 350,000 unarmed civilians to claim it. Mauritania also annexed parts of the territory, and the Polisario launched an insurgency to wrest control. Mauritania withdrew from the conflict in 1979, but conflict between Morocco and the Polisario persisted until the U.N. brokered a ceasefire in 1991. The U.N. Security Council then established the U.N. Mission for the Organization of a Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO) to offer Sahrawis—the self-described Indigenous inhabitants of Western Sahara—a referendum on "self determination" and to monitor the ceasefire. Successive U.N. efforts to advance a referendum or other resolution options failed to obtain the backing of Morocco, the Polisario, or the Security Council.[49] In the absence of a final settlement, the Council has continued to extend MINURSO's mandate (most recently in October 2020) to observe the 1991 ceasefire.[50]

Morocco administers some 85% of the territory, demarcated by a berm that it constructed as a barrier to Polisario incursions (**Figure 2**). In 2007, King Mohammed VI submitted to the U.N. a proposal to grant the area "autonomy" under Moroccan sovereignty, and he has pursued policies of political decentralization that he says are intended to empower Sahrawis and other residents.[51] The area east of the berm, which the Polisario refers to as its "liberated areas," comprises largely uninhabited desert with some small settlements. Algeria hosts and backs the Polisario and its self-declared government, the SADR, but contends that it (Algeria) is not a party to the conflict.

Since 2007, the U.N. Security Council has called for Morocco and the Polisario to engage in "negotiations without preconditions" to find a "mutually acceptable political solution."[52] Morocco states that it will accept only a solution that guarantees its sovereignty over the whole territory and will negotiate only on that basis—while the Polisario states it will accept only an outcome involving a referendum with the option of independence. In 2018-2019, pressure from the Trump Administration appeared to contribute to some momentum toward talks.[53] The U.N. Secretary-General's then-Personal Envoy on the Western Sahara, former German President Horst Köhler, convened two sessions of "roundtable" discussions among Morocco, the Polisario, Algeria, and Mauritania—the first time official representatives of Morocco and the Polisario had met since 2012, and the first time Algeria agreed to join the U.N. talks. No breakthrough was announced, however, and Köhler unexpectedly announced his resignation in May 2019, citing health reasons. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has not announced a replacement.

At Morocco's encouragement, at least 20 countries—mostly located in Africa—have opened diplomatic consulates in the territory, which may be viewed as a recognition of Moroccan

[48] For background, see CRS Report RS20962, *Western Sahara*.

[49] These included a 2003 peace plan proposed by James Baker, the former U.S. Secretary of State then serving as the Personal Envoy of the U.N. Secretary-General, involving a referendum on independence, which Morocco rejected.

[50] U.N. Security Council Resolution 2548 (2020). As of July 2021, MINURSO comprised 222 military observers.

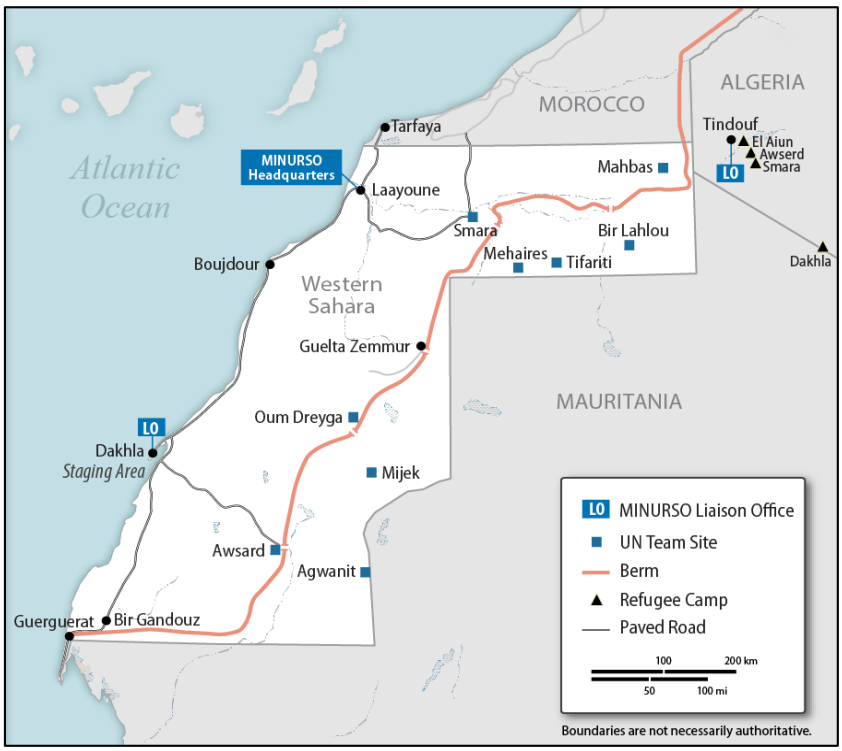
[51] King Mohammed VI, speech on the 33rd anniversary of the Green March, November 11, 2008.

[52] U.N. Security Council Resolution 1754 (2007) and subsequent resolutions on Western Sahara.

[53] During this time, the Trump Administration sought to increase pressure by shortening MINURSO's mandate from one year to six months. This approach was closely associated with then-National Security Advisor John Bolton. See U.S. Mission to the United Nations, "Explanation of Vote for MINURSO Renewal," April 27, 2018.

sovereignty.[54] President Trump pledged to open a U.S. consulate, but the timeline for doing so is uncertain. For its part, the Polisario has sought to challenge Morocco's ability to conclude trade and natural resource extraction agreements pertaining to goods sourced in Western Sahara.[55] European Union (EU) courts, among others, have occasionally ruled in the Polisario's favor; the full implications of the latest EU court ruling, pertaining to EU-Morocco tariff and fisheries agreements, remain to be seen.[56]

**Figure 2. U.N. Map of Western Sahara**




**Source/Note:** CRS graphic, adapted from U.N. Secretary-General reports.

## Ceasefire Rupture in 2020

In November 2020, the Polisario announced it was withdrawing from the ceasefire and launched small-scale attacks on Moroccan military positions, after Moroccan troops entered a demilitarized "buffer zone" to clear Polisario protesters who were disrupting Moroccan construction of a road connecting to Mauritania. Military tensions have periodically erupted over alleged incursions by

[54] Morocco Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Diplomatic Representations in the Southern Provinces of the Kingdom of Morocco," December 14, 2020; and subsequent news reports.

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

[56] General Court of the European Union, "The General Court annuls the Council decisions concerning, first, the agreement between the European Union and Morocco amending the tariff preferences granted by the European Union to products of Moroccan origin and, second, the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement," September 29, 2021.

one side or the other into the buffer zone, but international diplomatic pressure succeeded in deescalating previous stand-offs. The clashes in late 2020 were closely followed by the Trump Administration's change in recognition policy in Morocco's favor, which the Polisario likely viewed as decreasing the chance of international pressure on Morocco to make concessions. The Polisario has continued to claim attacks, but does not appear to pose a significant threat to Morocco absent greater Algerian military support. Morocco asserts that it remains committed to the ceasefire, although a reported Moroccan military strike killed a Polisario security official in April 2021.[57] The Biden Administration has not reversed the U.S. recognition of Morocco's claim of sovereignty to date, but has called for new talks and appointment of a new U.N. envoy.[58]

# U.S. Relations

The United States and Morocco have longstanding, warm relations.[59] As noted above ("Introduction"), the Biden Administration has referred to Morocco as a "strategic partner," while expressing some human rights concerns. The Administration has maintained, to date, the policy instituted by President Trump of recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. In mid-2021, the Biden Administration repatriated Guantánamo detainee Abdul Latif Nasser to Morocco, the first such detainee transfer from Guantánamo since 2016.[60]

U.S.-Morocco cooperation aims to promote regional stability, counter terrorism, strengthen trade and investment ties, and support Morocco's development and reform efforts.[61] Congress has supported these objectives on a bipartisan basis, enacting the 2004 U.S.-Morocco Free Trade Agreement, approving proposed arms sales to Morocco, and appropriating bilateral economic and military aid. Members of Congress have nonetheless expressed divergent views on the Western Sahara issue. Some Members have supported recent foreign aid appropriations measures favoring Morocco's position (see below), while some Members have called on the Biden Administration to reverse the Trump Administration's decision to recognize Morocco's claim to the territory.[62]

Morocco and the United States have built strong military-to-military ties through regular training engagements, a large annual exercise hosted by Morocco and known as African Lion, and Moroccan acquisitions of significant U.S.-origin defense materiel. Such purchases have grown in recent years: in 2019 alone, the U.S. government approved up to $10 billion in new arms sales to Morocco, including 25 new F-16s, 36 Apache attack helicopters, TOW missiles and missile launchers, and an upgrade of Morocco's existing 23 F-16s.[63] Morocco's Major Non-NATO Ally status grants it priority in the grant-based delivery of U.S. excess defense articles (EDA), and

[57] *Defense Post*, "Has Morocco Carried Out Its First Drone Strike In the Western Sahara?" April 12, 2021.

[58] State Department, "Secretary Blinken's Meeting with UN Secretary-General Guterres," March 29, 2021.

[59] 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. Per the State Department, "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." State Department, "A Guide to the United States' History of Recognition, Diplomatic, and Consular Relations, by Country, since 1776: Morocco."

[60] Nasser was never charged by the United States, and his transfer was reportedly approved during the Obama Administration. *New York Times*, "Biden Administration Transfers Its First Detainee From Guantánamo Bay," July 19, 2021.

[61] State Department, "U.S. Relations With Morocco," November 5, 2020 (latest).

[62] Senator James Inhofe, "Inhofe, Leahy Lead 25 Colleagues to Urge Biden to Reverse Misguided Western Sahara Decision," February 17, 2021.

[63] Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) notifications, available at https://www.dsca.mil/.

Morocco is a significant global EDA beneficiary.[64] The Utah National Guard maintains a State Partnership Program with Morocco's armed forces.

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. In recent years, African Lion has expanded to include troops from other countries in North and West Africa.[65] The United States has been supportive of Morocco's efforts to train imams from other countries in North and West Africa in its traditions of religious moderation. In 2017, Morocco arrested a U.S.-designated Hezbollah financier who was reportedly en route to Lebanon, and transferred him to U.S. custody to face trial.[66] Morocco hosted Libyan talks that produced the 2015 agreement to establish a Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), which the United States backed.

## U.S. Foreign Aid

U.S. bilateral aid, totaling $41 million in FY2021 appropriations (**Table 1**), aims to help Morocco improve its education system, local governance, livelihood opportunities, and military capabilities. In line with its broader budget proposals, the Trump Administration proposed large cuts to U.S. bilateral aid for Morocco; Congress did not enact these proposals. The Biden Administration has proposed a slight decrease in aid for Morocco to $36 million in FY2022.

**Table 1. U.S. Bilateral Aid to Morocco, State Department and USAID**

allocations by year of appropriation, current $ millions

| | FY2017 | FY2018 | FY2019 | FY2020 | *FY2021 (request)* | FY2021 (enacted) | *FY2022 (request)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| DA | - | - | - | 10.0 | - | 10.0 | - |
| ESF | 20.0 | 20.0 | 20.0 | 10.0 | 10.0 (ESDF) | 10.0 | *20.0* |
| INCLE | 5.0 | 5.0 | 5.0 | 5.0 | 1.5 | 5.0 | *3.9* |
| FMF | 10.0 | 10.0 | 10.0 | 10.0 | - | 10.0 | *10.0* |
| IMET | 2.1 | 2.1 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 2.0 | *2.0* |
| NADR | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 4.0 | - | 4.0 | - |
| **TOTAL** | **38.6** | **38.6** | **38.5** | **41.0** | ***13.5*** | **41.0** | ***35.9*** |

**Source:** State Department annual Congressional Budget Justifications (FY2019-FY2022); explanatory statement accompanying P.L. 116-260, Division K (FY2021).

**Notes:** Excludes funds provided via global programs or by other federal entities (e.g., the Millennium Challenge Corporation or Department of Defense). DA = Development Assistance; ESF = Economic Support Fund; ESDF = Economic Support & Development Fund (a Trump Administration-proposed account); INCLE = International Narcotics Control & Law Enforcement; FMF = Foreign Military Financing; IMET = International Military Education & Training; NADR = Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, & Related Programs.

In addition to bilateral aid funds administered by the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Morocco began implementing a five-year, $450 million U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact in 2017, the country's second such

[64] 22 U.S. Code §2321j. Recently EDA-authorized deliveries to Morocco include C-130H and F-16 training aircraft.

[65] U.S. Africa Command, "Plans underway for African Lion, Africa's biggest military exercise," February 4, 2021.

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

program.[67] 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."[68] The State Department, USAID, and the Department of Defense (DOD) also have allocated funds for Morocco under global programs established by Congress, such as the Relief and Recovery Fund (RRF) for countries affected by the Islamic State, USAID's Countering Chinese Influence Fund (CCIF), and DOD's "Section 333" global train and equip security program (authorized under 10 U.S.C. §333).[69] The State Department and USAID have provided at least $11.4 million in COVID-19-related health aid for Morocco since March 2020, in addition to 302,400 Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine doses donated in July 2021; the State Department also has allocated funds to refurbish Morocco's Pasteur Institute.[70]

## Western Sahara in Foreign Aid Legislation

Prior to the Trump Administration's decision to recognize Morocco's claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara in late 2020, it had been the policy of successive Administrations that funds appropriated for bilateral aid to Morocco could not be implemented in Western Sahara. (The impact, if any, of the recognition policy on this approach has not been publicly articulated.) Starting in 2013, some Members of Congress backed provisions in annual State and Foreign Operations (SFOPS) appropriations measures that sought to overturn this approach and thereby presumably encourage the executive branch to alter its policy in Morocco's favor. Final enacted bills contained more flexible provisions that required some aid to be implemented in Western Sahara, while deferring to the executive branch on the source of those funds.

In the 113th Congress, the House Appropriations Committee reported an FY2014 appropriations measure providing that bilateral economic assistance appropriations "available for assistance *to Morocco* shall be made available for any region administered by Morocco, *including the Western Sahara*" (§7042[g] of H.R. 2855; italics added). The Senate bill did not contain an equivalent provision. The final enrolled bill contained a provision similar to the one reported by the House committee, but with the word "should" substituting for "shall" (§7041[h] of P.L. 113-76, Division K). The following year's appropriations measure provided that funds appropriated for *global* bilateral economic assistance, "shall be made available for assistance for the Western Sahara" (§7041[g] of P.L. 113-235, Division J). Subsequent enacted appropriations measures have contained substantially similar provisions, including, most recently, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (§7041[g] of P.L. 116-260, Division K).[71]

[67] Morocco's $697.5 million 2008-2013 MCC compact sought to alleviate poverty through targeted investments in fruit tree productivity, fisheries, artisan production, financial services, and private enterprises.

[68] MCC, "Morocco Employability and Land Compact," at http://www.mcc.gov.

[69] Recently planned Section 333 activities would support Moroccan capabilities related to counterterrorism, maritime security, counter-narcotics, and countering weapons of mass destruction, as notified to Congress by DOD.

[70] State Department data on COVID-19 response aid provided to CRS, as of April 25, 2021; "COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution" data via https://www.state.gov/countries-areas/morocco/; and congressional notifications.

[71] The House Appropriations Committee's accompanying report stated: "Subsection (g) includes similar language from the prior year. The committee recognizes the longstanding partnership between the United States and the Kingdom of Morocco based on mutual interests of stability, tolerance and economic prosperity in the Middle East and Africa. The committee encourages the Secretary of State to strengthen this partnership to defeat terrorism and violent extremist groups, namely in the Sahel region, as well as to counter Iran's malign influence in the region" (H.Rept. 116-444).

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