



Morocco 2011

Standard Note: SN/IA/5826

Last updated: 17 January 2011

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Section International Affairs and Defence Section; Economic Policy and Statistics Section

This note summarises recent developments in Morocco and the situation in Western Sahara, the disputed territory to the south which has been occupied by Morocco.

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1 Background

Morocco is a poor country, but it has a strong sense of national identity and historical continuity compared with some other North African states. In 1956, Morocco gained independence under Muhammad V, said to be descended from the prophet Mohammed. His son Hassan II ruled from 1961 to 1999 and created the Moroccan political system of “executive monarchy” that still exists largely unchanged today. The Monarch has extensive powers: he can appoint and fire Prime Ministers, dissolve the National Assembly and is supreme commander of the armed forces and spiritual leader of Morocco’s Muslims. The first part of Hassan II’s rule (known as the *années de plomb*, or years of lead) were a time of fierce repression, “disappearances” and torture of political opponents. At the end of the Cold War, Hassan II responded to internal and external pressure and made some moves towards liberalisation.

King Muhammad VI succeeded his father in 1999. On accession to the throne, Muhammad VI brought in more conciliatory policy towards opponents of the regime (both socialist and Islamist), allowing exiles to return. The elections in 2002 were the fairest and freest the country had ever seen. Human rights institutions were strengthened, an arbitration body, the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (IER), was established to determine compensation for the families of opposition figures who had “disappeared”, and thousands of prisoners were amnestied.



The King also introduced an important programme of social reforms, the most important of which would lead to an improvement in the position of women, notably the allocation of a third of the seats in parliament to women. Press freedom, though improved under the new King, is far from complete and coverage of the monarchy, the Western Sahara dispute and the army were still subject to strict controls. The officially recognised Islamic party, the Parti du Justice et du Développement (Party of Justice and Development, PJD), and the banned Al-Adl wa al Ihsan (Justice and Charity Movement) organised a demonstration against the reforms in Casablanca which was attended by hundreds of thousands.

Reform initiatives have been selected and driven by King Muhammad and the power to appoint the Prime Minister has been retained. Parliament is relatively weak and coalitions are necessary to form a government, since the system does not give rise to one party that is strong enough to form a government. In the present parliament, the top five parties only took about 50% of the vote between them.

Despite limitations to the democratic system in Morocco, there is more space for democratic debate in the country than in many other Arab states. The turnout at the 2002 election, at just over 50%, was noticeably higher than at recent elections in neighbouring Algeria and Egypt, perhaps reflecting rising hopes among Moroccan voters that the reforms introduced by Muhammad VI would lead to real public participation. At the 2007 election, turnout fell to 37%. Though the election was viewed as largely free and fair by most observers, the turnout was the lowest recorded and clearly reflected disenchantment with the political process.

The traditional nationalist Istiqlal party gained most seats in the election and Abbas el Fassi, a former minister with the outgoing Jettou government, was called to form a government.

2 Security

Morocco has not been as badly hit by violence as its neighbour Algeria, in part because the country was not traumatised by the independence struggle as was its neighbour. Nevertheless, there are occasional terrorist attacks and outbreaks of conflict between government forces and Islamic groups. The most serious terrorist attack came in 2003, when near-simultaneous suicide bombings killed 45, mainly at a Spanish-owned restaurant in Casablanca. In December 2010, the authorities announced the arrest of six individuals suspected of involvement in planning to bomb attacks on foreign interests in Morocco and abroad.¹ In January 2011, Morocco announced that it had arrested 27 in connection with an alleged al-Qaeda cell operating in Western Sahara.²

Commentators ascribe the fact that there has been no large-scale attack since 2003 to efficient intelligence-gathering and use, and cooperation with western agencies. Security consultants Jane's rate Morocco's counter-terrorism measures as moderately effective. The main problem areas, according to this source, are frontier security and unregulated migration.³

There is concern about the potential of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, an al-Qaeda-affiliated group with its roots in Algeria and with connections to smuggling networks through the Sahel to West Africa. In the barely-governed areas in the southern Algeria, Mali and Niger the group may be increasing its presence and its establishment in Western Sahara or Morocco would be worrying to western security authorities as well as to the Moroccan government. According to the UK Government, there are no reported links between the Western Sahara's Polisario Front and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.⁴

The UK undertakes "modest, but important" annual bilateral defence activity with Morocco.⁵

3 Economy

Economic problems have been building up for the countries of North Africa for some time. High birth rates have led to a very young population (over 60% of the region's population are under 25)⁶ and to rapid growth in urban areas. The demographic change has brought with it high levels of unemployment, as the Moroccan economy, like others in North Africa, has

¹ "Morocco: 6 Accused of Planning Attacks", *New York Times*, 28 December 2010

² "Morocco Arrests 27 Said to Run Terrorist Cell in Western Sahara", *New York Times*, 6 January 2011

³ Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, Morocco Counter Terrorism Environment [accessed 11 January 2011]

⁴ HC Deb 15 December 2010, c 758W

⁵ HC Deb 8 December 2010, c282-3W

⁶ "Rallying cry for youth sweeps the Arab world", *Financial Times*, 11 January 2011

failed to create enough jobs for the growing work force. Among other things, analysts blame rigidities in the economy for the failure.

Nevertheless, Morocco has pursued a privatisation programme and has achieved some liberalisation and, considering the fact that the country does not share in Algeria's hydrocarbon wealth, performs comparatively well. Patronage and corruption remain a problem, however. Many privatisations led to the transfer of companies from the state to a privileged elite enjoying close contacts in the government. Analysts suggest that the system of patronage is limiting overseas and domestic investment and recommend reforms to establish a more transparent and predictable legal framework.⁷

Morocco's poverty reduction programme has had considerable success. 1.7 million people have been lifted out of poverty in the last 10 years. In order to build on this success, Lahcen Achy recommended in a recent paper for the Carnegie Endowment for World Peace that the government should

- eliminate illiteracy
- reduce inequality through tax reforms and better public spending
- encourage the informal economy to join the formal economy and
- decentralise decision-making to local government and civil society⁸

Morocco was named as one of the countries most at risk in recent research into food supplies. Rising food prices are seen as inevitable and, despite its large agricultural sector, climate change, water scarcity, a growing population suffering widespread poverty and rising energy costs pose a threat to standards of living and may lead to political instability.⁹

Recent riots in Tunisia and Algeria, triggered by unemployment and price rises, underline the fragile stability in the region. In Tunisia, the disturbances have lasted for a month and Amnesty International said that 23 people were killed over the weekend of 9-10 January.¹⁰

3.1 Morocco's trade

In 2009, food was Morocco's main import (accounting for 22% of total imports) and agricultural products its main exports (accounting for 13% of total exports).¹¹ Morocco's main trading partners for the import of goods were France (accounting for 17% of Morocco's total imports), Spain (15%), China (8%), and Italy (7%) while its main trading partners for the export of goods were Spain (accounting for 22% of Morocco's total exports), France (20%), India (5%) and Italy (4%). The UK was the 7th most important destination for Morocco's exports and the 14th most important source of imports.

⁷ See for example Claire Spencer, "North Africa: The Hidden Risks to Regional Stability", Chatham House Briefing Paper, April 2009

⁸ Lahcen Achy, "[Morocco's Experience With Poverty Reduction: Lessons for the Arab World](#)", Carnegie Paper, December 2010, p2

⁹ "The coming hunger", *Independent*, 6 January 2010

¹⁰ "[Tunisian authorities urged to protect protesters following deadly weekend](#)", Amnesty International press release, 10 January 2011

¹¹ [WTO statistics database](#)

3.2 UK trade with Morocco

Morocco is a relatively small trading partner for the UK. From the (66) countries which can be identified from the *Pink Book*, in 2009, Morocco was the 48th most important destination for UK goods (£310 million or 0.1% of all UK goods exports) and the 53rd most important destination for UK services (£150 million or 0.1% of all UK services exports). Morocco was the 52nd most important source of goods for the UK (£336 million or 0.1% of all UK goods imports) and the 44th most important source of services (£269 million or 0.25% of all UK services imports). The UK had an overall trade deficit with Morocco of just under £30 million in goods and £120 million in services.¹²

The largest category of UK goods exports, by value, to Morocco in 2009 was “Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes” (£56 million or 19% of all UK exports of goods to Morocco in 2009). The largest category of imports by value from Morocco was “Articles of apparel and clothing accessories” (£177 million or 56% of all UK goods imports from Morocco).¹³

3.3 Standard of living

According to the World Bank ranking, Morocco’s per capita gross national income, adjusted for purchasing power, is \$4,400 per year, putting the country in 143rd position out of 213 countries. That makes the average Moroccan somewhat poorer than the average Sri Lankan and slightly richer than the average Bolivian.¹⁴

3.4 Cost of living

Official statistics on the ‘cost-of-living’ (and international comparisons) in Morocco are not available but the country is considered by the IMF as one of “low inflation”. Inflation has averaged around 2% per annum since 2000,¹⁵ the same as the latest estimate for inflation during 2010.¹⁶

4 European Union

Morocco has an Association Agreement with the European Union. The agreement came into force in March 2000 and provides for free trade in industrial products and other economic cooperation. The agreement also provides for regular dialogue at ministerial and senior official level between the EU and Morocco on matters such as democracy and freedom of speech. There is also an important chapter in the agreement that deals with migration. More information on the agreement is available on the EU External Action Service website [here](#).

5 Western Sahara

Western Sahara is a former Spanish colony situated to the south of Morocco whose future has been uncertain since it gained independence. While Spain promised to hold a referendum on the region’s future, this was blocked by the United States and France, for fear of the leftist Polisario Front gaining power. Morocco assumed de facto control of the territory, and armed conflict between the Polisario and the Moroccan armed forces ensued.

¹² ONS, *The Pink Book 2010*, 2010

¹³ [UKTradeinfo](#)

¹⁴ [Gross National Income per capita 2009](#), World Development Indicators database, World Bank, 15 December 2010

¹⁵ [World Bank](#)

¹⁶ [Africa News](#)

A ceasefire was agreed in 1991, including an agreement on holding a referendum on the future status of the territory. Sporadic negotiations were held under UN auspices, but the participation of Moroccan settlers, who moved into the area with Moroccan Government encouragement from the 1970s onwards and who now constitute a majority, has prevented agreement on the conduct of the referendum, which has been mandated by the United Nations.

The United Nations has a mission to Western Sahara: MINURSO, mandated by UN Security Council resolution 690 of 29 April 1991. The most recent UN Security Council resolution on the dispute, Resolution 1920 (2010) was passed on 30 April 2010. It can be accessed [here](#). It authorised MINURSO deployment until April 2011. See the mission’s website [here](#). MINURSO has a peacekeeping force that monitors the Berm or wall that separates the Moroccan-controlled part of the territory and the largely uninhabited part controlled by the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (the Polisario Front).



Map No. 3661 Rev. 63 UNITED NATIONS
December 2010 (October)

Department of Field Support
Geographic Section

A census, planned for 2000, to establish the basis for the referendum, was abandoned due to lack of agreement. In 2007, Morocco made a serious attempt to move negotiations forward by offering autonomy to the territory, under Moroccan sovereignty. Previously, Morocco had recognised no difference between Western Sahara and any other part of Morocco. The offer remains unacceptable to the Polisario.

In 2009, Peter Van Walsum, the then UN special envoy for Western Sahara, was replaced after he angered Polisario by stating that independence was an unrealistic option. The new envoy, Christopher Ross, was appointed in January 2009. He has recently described the present situation as “untenable” and has called for negotiations “without preconditions [and] in good faith” to find a mutually acceptable and lasting solution that would lead to self-determination for the Sahrawi people.¹⁷ The replacement of Mr Van Walsum by Mr Ross suggested that there was still some resistance in UN circles to recognising Moroccan sovereignty.

In October 2010, Morocco banned al-Jazeera, the Qatar-based satellite news service, was banned from operating in Morocco after the Moroccan authorities said that it had “seriously distorted Morocco's image and manifestly damaged its interests, most notably its territorial integrity”.¹⁸

In November 2010, protests erupted and turned violent, leaving between nine and 11 Moroccan security officers dead and two civilians. There were rumours of a massacre by Moroccan security forces, but there is little evidence to support this so far, despite stories in the Algerian and Spanish press. Moroccan forces did arrest and beat several Saharawis in retaliation. It was the worst violence in Western Sahara for decades. Morocco subsequently broke up a protest camp near the city of Laayoune.¹⁹

Shortly afterward the disturbances, representatives of the Moroccan government and the Polisario Front met under UN auspices in New York, observed by officials from Algeria and Mauritania, met to try to find a solution. The talks ended in failure, with participants only able to agree to hold further talks in 2011.²⁰

The dispute over Western Sahara has a serious affect on relations with neighbouring Algeria, which has supported the Polisario against Morocco; indeed many see the Western Sahara conflict as a “cold war” between the two countries. The border between Algeria and Morocco has been closed since 1994 and trade between the two countries is minimal: a severe constraint on economic growth in the region. The dispute has also hindered the development of the Arab Maghreb Union trade agreement.

Some say that real independence is not an option for the territory: the realistic options being for an autonomous region within Morocco or an Algerian satellite state. The US and France are said to argue this in private and to support regional autonomy within Morocco. The official British position follows the UN's: that the territory is disputed and its status is undetermined. The British embassy in Rabat, Morocco, handles questions about Western Sahara.

The UK's aid relationship with Western Sahara was described in a parliamentary answer in December:

¹⁷ “Status quo in W. Sahara 'untenable': UN envoy”, *Agence France Presse*, 18 October 2010

¹⁸ “Morocco: Ministry bans al-Jazeera for 'damaging' coverage”, *Guardian*, 30 October 2010

¹⁹ “Morocco breaks up protest camp”, *Daily Telegraph*, 9 November 2010

²⁰ “Talks on Western Sahara's future run into the sand”, *Financial Times*, 28 December 2010

O'Brien, Stephen: The Department for International Development (DFID) does not have a bilateral aid programme in Western Sahara and has not provided direct emergency funds to the country in the last five years. We support Western Sahara through our share of the budget of the European Community Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO). ECHO'S funding currently goes to the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria. ECHO has provided €165 million in humanitarian aid since it was established and allocated €10 million in October 2010.²¹

Alistair Burt MP, minister responsible for the Middle East and North Africa at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, visited Morocco and Algeria in 2010. He pressed the two governments to continue their negotiations, and stressed the importance of independent monitoring systems to support the negotiations. He called on both sides to use the good offices of the United Nations.²²

There is a campaign organised in the UK to boycott Morocco as a tourist destination because of the situation in Western Sahara- the Don't Go to Morocco campaign.

6 Conclusion

In her recent briefing paper for Chatham House, Claire Spencer criticised authoritarianism in North Africa and called for political and economic reform that would allow for the societies in the region to develop. To support such reform, she said that the EU and the US should modify their concentration on terrorism:

Success depends on renegotiating the social contracts on which North Africa's states are based. A broadening of participation, above all through the extension of legal employment, targeted investment on education, health and skills, and the establishment of independent legal and regulatory frameworks, will go some way towards addressing socio-economic stresses.

A change in the political environment, however, requires a re-evaluation of how the region's security climate is seen from outside, with adjustments in the kind of support given to regional governments by its key international partners, the European Union and the United States.²³

²¹ HC Deb 21 December 2010, c1141W

²² HC Deb 14 December 2010, c814

²³ Claire Spencer, "North Africa: The Hidden Risks to Regional Stability, Chatham House briefing paper, April 2010

Map of north west Africa



Source: Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas