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Morocco: A Critical U.S. Ally in North Africa

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King Mohammed VI of Morocco will make an official visit to Washington this week and meet with President Obama for the first time. The hastily scheduled visit comes on the coattails of a series of diplomatic mishaps regarding Morocco by the Administration over the past year. For a country that continues to remain a committed partner, the Obama Administration is doing an excellent job of alienating America's longest standing ally in North Africa.

Morocco was the first sovereign state to recognize America's independence in 1777 and holds the longest unbroken treaty relationship with the U.S. While the relationship has ebbed over the course of more than 200 years, 9/11 forced the U.S. to refocus on the Middle East and North Africa, allowing for a strong U.S.–Moroccan partnership anchored in shared economic and security interests. Morocco is a designated major non-NATO ally (one of only 15 globally and two on the entire African continent), as well as a free trade agreement (FTA) partner with the United States.

President Obama should not take this relationship for granted—or even worse, squander it—by failing to account for the entire regional picture.

Morocco After the Arab Spring. Change had been under way in Morocco well before the Arab Spring, but the movement served as catalyst for King Mohammed to unveil a new constitution within weeks of the demonstrations.¹ Despite the political upheaval and violent repression that now defines much of the Arab Spring, the king has for the most part successfully navigated the waters of reform and democratic transition to ensure lasting stability and prosperity.

Morocco's constitution guarantees and protects the status of religious and ethnic minorities, legal protections that practically no other Muslim country in the Arab world secures for its citizenry. Yet a concerted effort to enact significant legal and judicial reforms still requires political will to guarantee greater political and economic freedoms. While Morocco still has a long way to go democratically, the country continues to serve as a model for reform in the Arab world.

Enhanced Security Cooperation. Insurgent conflicts and the growing number of terrorist organizations in North Africa and the Sahel, spanning from the Horn of Africa across the Sahara to West Africa, defines what is known as the “arc of instability” in Africa.² Morocco is uniquely positioned in this region to provide a voice of moderation and tolerance.

Morocco should be encouraged to continue to share advice on comprehensive counter-radicalization strategies that go beyond just forcefully confronting terrorists (i.e., the Algerian model). Morocco needs to get to the core of addressing false information and religious manipulation, legitimate political grievances, weak governance, and lack of economic opportunities.³

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Morocco has also taken the regional lead on strengthening border security between Sahel and Maghreb countries, helping to establish a border security training center to ensure an integrated strategy and reinvigorated regional cooperation.⁴

The U.S.–Morocco Strategic Dialogue was developed in 2012 to draw from Morocco’s experiences and help the U.S. address challenges beyond both countries’ borders. This initiative has yet to be fully realized due to a lack of focus and Secretary of State John Kerry’s postponement of the 2013 dialogue session.

Beyond supporting Moroccan counterterrorism assistance programs and focusing on ways to enhance intelligence collection and sharing, the U.S. should increase support for regional programs and local capacity building such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership.

Economic Partnership and Integration. The U.S.–Morocco FTA has been the cornerstone of bilateral relations since 2004, but the complete benefits of the FTA have yet to be fully realized. Greater focus should be given to capacity building and minimizing bureaucratic red tape to promote economic freedom and entrepreneurship. In light of the euro crisis, Morocco should consider expanded opportunities with partners in sub-Saharan Africa. Morocco, as a francophone country with strong links to Europe, is uniquely positioned to serve as an economic leader by building greater intercontinental trading networks.

During his tenure, King Mohammed has established over 15 bilateral trade agreements with Afri-

can countries and a free trade agreement with the West African Economic and Monetary Union, but more can be done. Economic security will ultimately determine regional peace and stability. The U.S. has an interest in not only broadening economic relations with Morocco but also promoting economic integration within the region to foster free-market policies that will enhance regional economic freedom.

Pragmatism Needed to Address Western Sahara Dispute. Morocco and the movement known as Polisario have struggled for control of Western Sahara since the 1970s. A cease-fire was negotiated by the U.N. in 1991, but a final settlement remains elusive. Morocco, attempting to break the stalemate in 2007, proposed increased autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, which the Bush Administration deemed “a serious and credible proposal.”⁵

Regional dynamics play heavily into the dispute. Algeria supports Polisario in spite of the group’s increasing extremist aspirations. Polisario provided mercenaries to defend Muammar Qadhafi in Libya and supported insurgents linked to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Mali. If security deteriorates further in the Sahel, Western Sahara could be the next hot spot in the arc of instability.⁶

Hopeful for conflict resolution, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton indicated in 2012 that the U.S. was supportive of the Moroccan autonomy plan,⁷ yet the row between the U.S. and Morocco on expanding the U.N. Mission to Western Sahara in April 2013 sent a mixed message to Morocco.

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1. *The Economist*, “Morocco’s Reforms: Power to Some Other People,” March 17, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21550294> (accessed November 19, 2013).
 2. Tristan McConnell, “In Africa, Al Qaeda Finds New Life,” *Global Post*, September 10, 2012, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/africa/120907/al-qaeda-africa-somalia-nigeria-mali-aqim-algeria-boko-haram-al-shabaab> (accessed November 19, 2013).
 3. For more information on Morocco’s domestic counterterrorism efforts, see U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2012*, May 30, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2012/209982.htm> (accessed November 19, 2013).
 4. Simon Martelli, “Sahel States Seek to Boost Security Against Jihadists,” *Agence France-Presse*, November 14, 2013, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5i_UpO5-xlq8dLEqKzNzf-t-F4uGw?docId=4cb0d8da-f885-44b0-b379-0f6d361a34df (accessed November 19, 2013).
 5. Alexis Arieff, “Western Sahara,” *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, April 14, 2013, p. 6, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS20962.pdf> (accessed November 19, 2013).
 6. J. Peter Pham, “Morocco’s Vital Role in Northwest Africa’s Security and Development,” *Atlantic Council*, November 2013, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Moroccos_Vital_Role.pdf (accessed November 19, 2013).
 7. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks with Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs Saad-Eddine Al-Othmani After Their Meeting,” U.S. Department of State, February 26, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/02/184667.htm> (accessed November 19, 2013).

To achieve peace and stability in the region and a robust relationship with Morocco, President Obama should assure King Mohammed that Washington supports those who are actively committed to that goal, not governments and groups that seek to subvert those efforts.

What President Obama Should Do. President Obama should:

- Continue support for the ongoing political, social, legal, judicial, and economic reforms.
- Expand military-to-military exercises and training with Morocco and increase opportunities for greater intelligence sharing.
- Assist and promote Morocco's successful model of ethnic and religious tolerance to encourage moderation and greater religious dialogue in the Muslim world.
- Commit to structure a trilateral U.S. relationship with Morocco, as the anchor, and the region to boost political and economic security through greater regional integration.

- Support the need for additional economic reforms that will advance Morocco's economic freedom and fully capitalize on the opportunities afforded through the U.S.–Morocco FTA.
- Prioritize resolving the Western Sahara issue in a way that accounts for Moroccan sensitivities and enhances regional stability. The Moroccan autonomy plan is a serious proposal that deserves further consideration by all interested parties.

A Stable Ally in a Dangerous Region. For U.S.–Morocco relations to mature into a truly strategic partnership, serious and meaningful attention on behalf of both President Obama and King Mohammed is required. President Obama should assure the king of Washington's commitment to partnership and recognize the efforts Morocco has made toward greater democratic rule, regional security, and counter-radicalization.

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