



MOROCCO

Quick Facts

Population: 33,986,655 (July 2017 est.)
Area: 446,550 sq km
Ethnic Groups: Arab-Berber 99%, other 1%
GDP (official exchange rate): \$110.7 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated May 2018)

INTRODUCTION

Unlike many other Arab and majority-Muslim states, Morocco has integrated Islamist political movements that oppose violence and support the constitutional order into its political process, while relentlessly prosecuting adherents to Salafist and other extremist ideologies. Not surprisingly, the U.S. State Department's 2016 report on global terrorism trends went out of its way to laud the country's "comprehensive counterterrorism strategy that includes vigilant security measures, regional and international cooperation, and counter-radicalization policies."¹ While the reformist course charted by King Mohammed VI has enabled Moroccans to avoid both the revolutionary tumult and violent repression which have characterized their neighbors' attempts to come to terms with the so-called Arab Spring, the North African kingdom nevertheless has been subjected to jihadist attacks and still confronts an Islamist movement that openly calls for the overthrow of the monarchy and creation of an Islamic state, as well as an Algerian-backed separatist group that, while previously secular, has increasingly been linked to al-Qaeda's regional affiliate. Thus, it remains to be seen whether the "Moroccan exception" is ultimately sustainable and, if so, what implications this might have for the region and the wider Arab and Muslim world.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

A number of Islamist groups and movements, either indigenous or foreign, are currently active in Morocco. Unlike in many other Arab or majority-Muslim nations, however, Islamism in Morocco is quite fragmented. It is also historic in nature, insofar as today's Islamists active in the Kingdom have roots in previous iterations of Islamist activism that has been endemic to the country for decades.

Ash-Shabiba al-Islamiyya ("Islamic Youth")

Founded in 1969, the Association of Islamic Youth (Shabiba, sometimes known by the French acronym AJI) was the first organization in the Maghreb region established with the explicit objective of advancing Islamist politics.² The group also opposed the political leftism then in vogue in many Arab countries. Led by Abdelkarim Mouti, a former education ministry inspector, the group attracted support among university and high school students for whom it ran vacation camps where they received training in propaganda and protest techniques. Shabiba also cultivated ties with clandestine Algerian organizations in the early 1970s.

Mouti fled into exile in 1975 following the murder of two prominent leftist political figures, journalist and Socialist Union of the Forces of Progress (USFP) party official Omar Benjelloun and Party for Progress and Socialism (PPS) secretariat member Abderrahim Meniaoui, for which he was blamed by authorities. The investigation of the assassinations revealed that Shabiba had built up a secretive military arm, the al-Mujahidun al-Maghariba (“Moroccan Holy Warriors”), which was headed by a onetime law student named Abdelaziz Naamani. Sentenced to death in absentia, Mouti spent time in both Saudi Arabia and Libya, but settled in Belgium where he continued to agitate against the Moroccan government, for a while publishing a small magazine, Al-Mujahid (“The Holy Warrior”) and garnering a few followers among the immigrant communities in Europe.

Meanwhile, back in Morocco, following the discovery in 1985 of arms caches near the Algerian border and the subsequent arrest, trial, and conviction of more than two dozen militants, including a number who admitted to *Shabiba* membership, authorities set in motion a crackdown that, for all intents and purposes, shut down the group.

Al-Islah wa't-Tajdid (“Reform and Renewal”) / At-Tawhid wa'l-Islah (“Unity and Reform”)

The Movement for Reform and Renewal was created in 1992 by former *Shabiba* members who came to reject the group’s embrace of violence and sought instead for a way to advance their objectives within Morocco’s existing political system; in 1996, they changed the organization’s name to the Association for Unity and Reform (at-Tawhid).³ While King Hassan II tolerated at-Tawhid, he did not accord it legal recognition. Consequently, Abdelilah Benkirane and other at-Tawhid leaders negotiated an arrangement with a longstanding, but minor, political party, the Democratic Constitutional Movement, that enabled them to participate in elections under the aegis of the latter. The merger took place in 1997, and the new political party changed its name the following year to the Justice and Development Party (generally known by its French acronym, PJD).⁴ (A full description of the PJD follows below)

Al-Adl Wal-Ihsan (“Justice and Charity”)

The Justice and Charity Organization (al-Adl, or JCO), formed in 1988, has been the most virulent Islamist political and religious movement in Morocco. Considered illegitimate and barely tolerated by the Moroccan government, JCO has gained adherents through its role as the sole indigenous Islamist movement challenging the king’s political and religious roles and through its extensive social and charitable organizational network. The Moroccan government refuses to recognize JCO as a political party.⁵

JCO advocates a restoration of Islamic law (sharia), but asserts allegiance to democratic principles in order to differentiate itself as a political movement that opposes what it considers to be Morocco’s authoritarian political system. Since the 1970s, its leader and founder, Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine, has openly challenged the legitimacy of the Moroccan monarchy. For that stance, he was tried in 1984 and sentenced to house arrest—a sentence that remained in force until 1989.⁶ The following year, JCO was officially outlawed pursuant to a ban that would endure until modified by the current king, Mohammed VI, in 2004. Sheikh Yassine’s daughter, Nadia Yassine, increasingly emerged as movement’s chief political organizational leader as her father slipped into his dotage (he died in 2012).

Openly critical of the monarchy and in almost constant conflict with the Moroccan government, JCO is committed to the dissolution of the country’s current constitutional system and its replacement by an Islamic republic. Nevertheless, at least publicly JCO has renounced the use of violence and armed struggle, relying instead on protests and occasional civil disobedience to advance its goals. The scope of support for JCO is a closely guarded secret, both by the organization itself and by the Moroccan government, although some observers consider it to be substantial given the organization’s extensive charitable and social network.⁷ Unrest in June 2017 allowed the JCO to demonstrate some of this capability, organizing an estimated 10,000 protestors for a march in Rabat, ostensibly in solidarity with poor living conditions in the country’s northern Rif region.⁸

Given the Moroccan government's intense opposition to JCO within the country, the group's leadership decided – beginning roughly in 1996 – to export their movement to Europe through the creation of the Muslim Participation and Spirituality (MPS) Association.⁹ MPS has established chapters in various European cities, headed by JCO Islamist activists who have fled Morocco. The goal of MPS is to generate opposition to Morocco's king and government through political activities with the goal of winning legal status for the JCO inside Morocco.¹⁰ The French and Belgian MPS branches often organize demonstrations against Morocco. Nadia Yassine also visits Europe regularly to denounce the repression of JCO, and, in 2006 she created the “New Europe-Morocco Friendship”—an association based in Belgium which convened a conference on the theme “Human Rights Flouted in Morocco.”¹¹

The Party of Justice and Development (PJD)

In order to co-opt Islamist sentiment in Morocco, King Hassan II permitted the emergence of new political movements that incorporated Islamist orientations—the most significant being the Justice and Development Party (PJD), which draws on Islamic values and inspiration from Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), although there is no official connection between the two.

As previously discussed, the Islamist-inspired at-Tawhid entered a decline and fused with the Constitutional Democratic Popular Movement, emerging as the PJD. The merged group brought together a coalition of small, moderate Islamist organizations, including conservative Islamist, pro-monarchical political figures. In contrast to JCO, the PJD is a political party that has competed in Morocco's parliamentary elections since 1997. In the subsequent 2002 elections, the PJD emerged as the country's leading opposition party, winning 42 of the 325 seats in Morocco's parliament, making it the third-largest group in the national legislature. In the subsequent poll, in 2007, the PJD won the largest percentage of popular vote (10.9 percent on the local and 13.4 percent on the national lists) garnered by any single party.

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Unlike JCO, the PJD is non-revolutionary and does not call for the overthrow of the monarchy, and, consequently, does not directly challenge Morocco's constitutional system. Nor does it advocate the creation of an Islamist state, or caliphate, in Morocco. Indeed, PJD intentionally downplays any religious agenda. Nevertheless, it views itself as the guardian of Morocco's Muslim identity and conservative religious traditions, and opposes any effort that would compromise Morocco's Islamic character. Thus, it opposes further westernization of Moroccan society, but it pragmatically recognizes the importance of Morocco's ties to the West. The PJD also regards itself as a bulwark against radical Islamic groups such as JCO.

Since 1997, the PJD has gradually gained popular support throughout Morocco, and has become quite entrenched in Morocco's political process—balancing its participation in legislative affairs with its adherence to an Islamic political agenda. PJD legislators have won plaudits for focusing their attention on ameliorating Morocco's significant social and economic challenges—of course, once they became the governing party (see below), their failure to deliver on those promises also led to a resurgence of other parties to whom dissatisfied voters turned. Nevertheless, during its period in opposition, the party's ability to influence actual policy is limited, with only marginal ability to translate its agenda into meaningful programs that would obtain greater popular support.

The PJD's agenda in parliament has occasionally taken it into pure sharia territory—calling for prohibition against alcohol distribution and consumption, and challenging media that it views as defacing Islamic principles. On other occasions, however, the PJD has trended in the opposite direction. In 2004 for example, the party actively participated in the adoption of a new, more liberal version of the country's code regulating marriage and family life, known as the Moudawana.¹³ The revision of the Moudawana greatly improved the social status of women in Morocco, and was ridiculed by more conservative Islamists. However, the PJD's leader at the time, Saad Eddine el-Othmani, defended his party's approval of the

code's revision, asserting in 2006 that it had been approved by religious leaders, aided families, and was consistent with Islamic traditions.¹⁴

In the November 25, 2011 elections—the first held under the new constitution proposed by King Mohammed VI and approved by plebiscite earlier that year—the PJD won 27.1 percent of the vote and came away with 107 seats, making it by far the single largest party in the new legislature. Since the new charter stipulates that the monarch should appoint the prime minister from the largest party in parliament, the mandate to form a government was given to the PJD's Benkirane, who formed a coalition government with support from the venerable conservative nationalist Independence Party (Istiqlal) and two left-leaning parties. The new government was sworn in on January 3, 2012, with the PJD holding eleven of thirty ministerial portfolios.¹⁵

Five years later, in the October 7, 2016 parliamentary elections, the PJD again emerged as the largest single party in parliament, with 125 seats, after winning a slightly higher proportion of the overall vote at 27.88 percent. However, widespread dissatisfaction with the PJD's management of the government also manifested itself in an even stronger rally behind the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) which surged from a fourth-place finish in the previous election to second place with 20.95 percent of the vote and thus winning 102 seats in the legislature (up from the 47 it had).

The election results led to five months of parliamentary deadlock, which ended when Benkirane, unable to reconcile with the USFP, failed to form a coalition government and was subsequently dismissed by the King. Saad Eddine el-Othmani, who was most recently serving as the PJD's secretary-general, was appointed Prime Minister on March 17, 2017, and quickly conceded seventeen ministries to the bloc of parties led by conservative National Rally of Independents leader Aziz Akhannouch, including the powerful economy, finance, commerce, and agricultural portfolios. The PJD was left with eleven of thirty-nine ministerial positions, a result that has stirred ire within the party and caused criticism within its ranks of Othmani's leadership, weakening the PJD and calling into question its future.¹⁶

Salafist Jihadism

Morocco has “numerous small ‘grassroots’ extremist groups”¹⁷ that collectively adhere to Salafi-jihadi ideology. Indeed, Spanish anti-terror judge Baltazar Garzon has stated that “Morocco is the worst terrorist threat to Europe.”¹⁸ He estimated that al-Qaeda-linked cells in Morocco number more than 100 and that at least 1,000 terrorists are now being actively sought by Moroccan authorities.¹⁹ Al-Qaeda's regional offshoot, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), has had success in recent efforts to bring these disparate groups (which number less than 50 members per grouping, on average) under its umbrella, announcing the merger of four regional militant groups, including Ansar Dine and other elements of AQIM, to form the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) in March 2017.²⁰

AQIM, like its counterpart al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), constitutes a potent regional terrorist threat not only to Morocco but to Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Tunisia. Formed when the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) reconstituted itself into AQIM in early 2007, its goal has been to integrate all of the North African radical movements, including the small Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM). On September 11, 2013, AQIM released an unprecedented 41-minute video “documentary” attacking Moroccan domestic and foreign policy, especially its counterterrorism efforts. Analysts believe that the production was the result of the terrorist organization's frustration that, while it had recruited some Moroccans, it had largely failed to target the country successfully, much less compromise its institutions.²¹

Salafist jihadis as a whole remain a significant threat to Morocco and the West. Scores of young Moroccans have traveled to Iraq and Afghanistan to fight Americans, and there are continuing arrests of extremists by authorities.²² Salafis also represent a challenge to the Moroccan state, as a number of incidents have underscored. On May 16, 2003, terrorists claiming to be members of the GICM launched a series

of five coordinated suicide attacks in Casablanca, killing more than 40 people and wounding more than 100. In April 2007, a series of suicide bomb attacks occurred in central Casablanca, one taking place near the U.S. Consulate and one near the American Language Center. In February 2008, Moroccan authorities arrested nearly 40 members of an alleged terrorist network, led by Abdelkader Belliraj, a Belgian-Moroccan suspected of committing multiple assassinations in addition to arms smuggling and money laundering for al-Qaeda.²³ Belliraj was subsequently convicted and sentenced to life in prison. Press reports have at times asserted that more than 100 al-Qaeda-linked cells exist in Morocco, and that Moroccan police have either imprisoned or placed under house arrest/police surveillance over 1,000 Salafist jihadists either openly sympathetic to AQIM or part of other hard-core underground Islamist movements.²⁴

On April 28, 2011, the bombing of a popular tourist café in Marrakech left seventeen people dead and at least twenty wounded. Among those killed were eight French nationals, a Briton, an Israeli-Canadian, a Swiss, and a Portuguese. The government accused AQIM of the attack.

In recent years, Islamist activity has generated scores of arrests. In July 2008, Moroccan security services arrested 35 members of an alleged terrorist network specializing in the recruitment of volunteers for Iraq.²⁵ In August of the same year, another 15-person network calling itself “Fath al-Andalus” was reportedly disbanded in Layoune, the capital of the Western Sahara, for planning attacks on the UN peacekeeping force there.²⁶ There also have been reports of considerable numbers of Moroccans traveling to Mali and Algeria to receive training from AQIM elements.²⁷ In more recent years, Moroccans have also traveled to Syria and Iraq—and, more recently, Libya—to join the Islamic State (ISIS). It is estimated by the Moroccan Central Bureau for Judicial Investigations that by July 2017, over 1,600 Moroccans had joined ISIS.²⁸ If European citizens of Moroccan descent are included, the number rises to between 2,000 and 2,500.²⁹

Although Morocco has so far fortunately not seen a successful assault on its soil by ISIS, since 2013, authorities have dismantled more than three dozen cells plotting attacks both within the kingdom and abroad. In July 2016, fifty-two people were arrested and various armaments seized. According to authorities, the militants were planning a string of attacks to inaugurate a “province” (wilayat) of the Islamic State in the country.³⁰ With the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria in 2017, the group’s ideological cachet will be reduced. However, with an estimated 6,000 African militants expected to return from the Middle East, ISIS’ Greater Sahara franchise and other existing groups will receive an influx of experienced fighters, raising security threats in North Africa, the Sahel, and Europe.³¹

The impoverished slums in Morocco’s inner cities and northern regions have produced many of these extremists, and many of the Moroccan extremist groupings are composed of family members and friends from the same towns and villages. Indeed, the north of Morocco has become an especially fertile ground for Salafists who favored Wahhabism and other extremist creeds over Morocco’s more tolerant version of Islam.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Under Moroccan law, the monarch is revered as the “Commander of the Faithful” and traces his lineage back to the Prophet Mohammad. Consequently, the majority of Moroccans take great pride in their nation’s embrace of moderate, tolerant Islam. It is worth noting that the reformed Moroccan constitution of 2011, unique in the Arab world, explicitly acknowledges that the country’s national culture is “enriched and nourished by African, Andalusian, Hebrew, and Mediterranean influences.”³²

Social and economic conditions, however, play a role in Islamist sentiment. Given Morocco’s high unemployment rate, year after year thousands of Moroccans risk their lives attempting to illegally immigrate to Europe across the Straits of Gibraltar.³³ Many, however, are left behind, transforming cities like Tangier, Tetouan, or Al Houcema into smuggling centers feeding criminal elements and opponents of the regime. Despite the current king’s efforts to promote a legislative agenda to modernize Islamic laws

governing civil society in Morocco (detailed below), the continued growth of political parties such as the PJD and continued political activities by JCO, both inside Morocco and in Europe, point to the fractures in Morocco's society between those who favor a more moderate, tolerant Islam and significant elements of Morocco's populace which prefer stronger Islamic control over the nation's society and its political system.

Morocco's urban slums and rural north continue to be fertile ground for extremism and its recruiters to AQIM. Indeed, hundreds of Moroccans have volunteered to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan against the United States.³⁴ Morocco's north, especially cities such as Tetouan and the surrounding Rif Mountain villages have at times been centers of jihadist agitation. It is in Morocco's north that such sentiment has most successfully taken root, as a result of institutional neglect. Following a Berber rebellion against his rule in the early 1980s, King Hassan II largely abandoned the northern tier of Morocco to its own devices. The King rarely visited the north during his reign. Consequently, government services were severely cut, and Islamists filled the void with a social and charitable network offering food and medical treatment to the population. While King Mohammed has reversed his father's policy of abandonment of the north (and even conducted an ancient traditional ceremony of mutual allegiance there),³⁵ the region is still relatively underdeveloped and deeply dependent on charitable networks, some with extremist links, for services not provided by the government.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Following the 2003 Casablanca bombings, the Moroccan government focused increasing attention on modernizing Islamic teaching and Islamic infrastructure and adopted laws liberalizing civil marriage and the role of women in Morocco's society. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs was provided with new funding and authority to train more moderate Islamic clerics and to expand its programs in Morocco's educational system.

In 2004, King Mohammed VI pushed through a reform of the family code (Moudawana), overcoming conservative opposition and mass demonstrations in part by invoking his religious authority as Commander of the Faithful. Among other provisions, the legislation significantly advanced women's rights by elevating the minimum age of marriage to 18, limiting polygamy, granting couples joint rights over their children, and permitting women to initiate divorce proceedings.³⁶

One incident in particular points to Morocco's more aggressive stance against ultra-conservative Muslim clerics who oppose the government's efforts to modernize Morocco's Islamic infrastructure and its religious teachings. In September 2008, Sheikh Mohamed Ben Abderrahman Al Maghraoui issued a highly provocative fatwa legitimizing the marriage of underage women as young as nine years old.³⁷ The Moroccan government sought to discredit the fatwa and ordered the immediate closure of 60 Quranic schools under his control. The government also launched an inquiry into Sheikh Al Maghraoui's competence as an Islamic scholar, and the public prosecutor's office initiated a criminal case against him for encouraging pedophilia.³⁸

Following the incident, King Mohammed unveiled his "proximity strategy," which represented a modernization program for Islamic institutions in Morocco. Under the program, 3,180 mosques were designated to be "modernized," (essentially a wholesale replacement of imams deemed by the regime to be opponents of moderate Islamic principles). Thirty-three thousand new imams were to be trained and the number of regional ulama councils (charged with overseeing Islamic teaching and the competency of imams) was increased from 30 to 70. Exceptionally for the Arab world, women also have a place in Morocco's official religious establishment with mourchidates, or female religious guides, trained alongside more traditional male imams.³⁹

To counter violent Islamist extremist ideologies, Morocco has developed a national strategy to reaffirm and further institutionalize Moroccans' historically widespread adherence to Sunni Islam's Maliki school

of jurisprudence and its Ashari theology, as well as to the mystical spirituality of Sufism.

The aborted terrorist plot in 2007 and the continuing threat of jihadi sentiment in the country's north only briefly arrested the pace of King Mohammed's reform agenda with respect to rights of women and the judiciary, including enacting legislation in 2014 to end the use of military tribunals to try civilians.

Unlike his father, the King has largely refrained from playing an activist role in Middle East diplomacy, focusing his diplomatic efforts closer to home in Africa, which the monarch has repeatedly characterized as the "top priority" of his country's foreign policy, emphasizing that "this multi-dimensional relationship puts Morocco in the center of Africa" and "Africa holds a special place in the heart of Moroccans."⁴⁰ On January 30, 2017, Morocco joined the African Union, more than three decades after leaving its predecessor organization, uniting the African continent from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea to its southernmost tip at Cape Agulhas. In addition to extensive partnerships with African countries on a variety of political and economic issues, Morocco's influence is increasingly seen in its efforts to train religious leaders and preachers from across the continent—and, indeed, even some from Europe and beyond—in the kingdom's moderate form of Islam. The Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidines, and Morchidates, established in 2015, has enrolled hundreds of students from Mali, Tunisia, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and France.⁴¹

For many years, Morocco has permitted mainstream Islamic political parties that do not condone extremism and violence to exist and indeed, to participate in elections, although it continues to deny legal status to the JCO. Since the Casablanca bombings in 2003, Moroccan authorities have maintained a vigilant and aggressive stance against any jihadist movement. Moroccan authorities currently have almost 1,000 prisoners considered to be Islamic radicals in jail.⁴² And in July 2007, Moroccan authorities jailed six Islamist politicians who were accused of complicity in a major terrorist plot.⁴³ On the other hand, the Moroccan government has rewarded Islamist parties that have embraced more moderate Islamic principles, such as the PJD. Notwithstanding the ever-present scourge of jihadi operatives in Morocco, the Moroccan government has demonstrated ingenuity in its "divide and conquer" strategy against Islamists who challenge the state. In addition to adopting the above-referenced "proximity strategy" to replace recalcitrant imams, authorities have established a grassroots police operation to report on any suspicious activities by Islamists.⁴⁴

The Moroccan government has also implemented a concerted social development program, the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), a multibillion-dollar undertaking aimed at generating employment, fighting poverty, and improving infrastructure in both rural areas as well as the sprawling slums on the outskirts of urban centers that have been susceptible to Islamist-oriented charities nurturing radicalism. In the largest "bidonvilles" (shantytowns) in Morocco's cities, significant social welfare, health and education programs have been instituted and many families have been relocated to new affordable housing units.⁴⁵ Overall, the U.S. State Department has applauded Morocco for having "a comprehensive strategy for countering violent extremism that prioritizes economic and human development goals in addition to tight control of the religious sphere and messaging."⁴⁶

Amid the reforms that have been adopted in recent years,⁴⁷ even the historically delicate issue of Moroccan sovereignty over the former Spanish Sahara has seen progress.⁴⁸ In 2007, the government advanced a proposal to break the longstanding impasse over the issue by offering generous autonomy to the area (including not only an elected local administration but also ideas about education and justice and the promise of financial support). Under the plan, the only matters that would remain in Rabat's control would be defense and foreign affairs, as well as the currency. The regional authority, meanwhile, would have broad powers over local administration, the economy, infrastructure, social and cultural affairs, and the environment. Then-Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton described the autonomy proposal as "serious, credible, and realistic."⁴⁹

Nevertheless, now well into its fourth decade, the "question of Western Sahara," as it is termed in

the nomenclature of the United Nations, is one of those challenges which, defying multiple efforts by the international community to facilitate its “solution,” despite increasingly dire warnings, recently reiterated by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and others, that “the rise of instability and insecurity in and around the Sahel” and the risk of “spillover” from the fighting in Mali requires “an urgent settlement” of this “ticking time bomb.”⁵⁰ Secretary-General António Guterres reiterated these concerns in January 2018, after tensions escalated near Guerguerat.⁵¹

Supported by Algeria, the Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro (“Popular Front for the Liberation of Saqiet al-Hamra and Río del Oro,” commonly known as the Polisario Front) continues to demand the complete independence of the territory, even though the armed conflict of the late 1970s and early 1980s left Morocco in control of more than 85 percent of it. The construction by the Moroccan government of a “sand berm,” (a defensive shield consisting of a series of barriers of sand and stone completed in 1987) and subsequent deployment of a UN monitoring force has largely confined the Polisario Front to a small zone around Tindouf in southwestern Algeria where it has sequestered tens of thousands of Sahrawi refugees in the squalid camps which have recently been the object of former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon’s concerns about conflict spillover.⁵²

While for most of its history the Polisario Front has been avowedly secular and, indeed, leftist in its political orientations—many of its leaders studied in the Soviet bloc and fighters received training in Cuba well into the 1990s—there are worrisome indications of growing linkages with AQIM⁵³ and other Islamist groups in the Maghreb and the Sahel, including providing AQIM’s allies in northern Mali with both fighters and, in one notorious case, Western hostages to trade for ransom.⁵⁴ Nor are Sunni jihadists the only extremists with whom the Polisario have lately consorted: in May 2018, Morocco broke diplomatic relations with Iran, closing down its embassy in Tehran and ordering the closure of the Iranian mission in Rabat, amid Iran and its Lebanese Shi’ite ally, Hezbollah, were supporting the Polisario by training and arming its fighters via the Iranian embassy in Algeria. According to Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, “Hezbollah sent military officials to Polisario and provided the front with... weapons and trained them on urban warfare.”⁵⁵ Should this trend continue, it would not only heighten the challenge of Islamist violence for Morocco, but also exacerbate an already volatile security situation for the entire region.

ENDNOTES

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