Morocco

Quick Facts

Population: 35,561,654 (July 2020 est.)
Area: 446,550 sq km
Ethnic Groups:Arab-Berber 99%, other 1%
GDP (official exchange rate): $109.3 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated June 2020)

Use of maps of Morocco does not represent a judgement regarding the legal status of the Western Sahara by either the chapter author or the editors of the Almanac.

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. Its government relentlessly prosecutes adherents to Salafist and other extremist ideologies. Not surprisingly, the U.S. State Department's most recent report on global terrorism trends lauded the country's "comprehensive counterterrorism strategy that includes vigilant security measures, regional and international cooperation, and counter-radicalization policies."[1] *The reformist course charted by King Mohammed VI has enabled Moroccans to avoid both the revolutionary tumult and violent repression characterizing their neighbors' experiences with the so-called Arab Spring; however, the North African kingdom endured* jihadist *attacks and still confronts an Islamist movement that openly calls for the overthrow of the monarchy and creation of an Islamic state. The crown must also manage an Algerian-backed separatist group increasingly 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.

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

Founded in 1969, Shabiba (sometimes known by the French acronym AJI) was the first organization in the Maghreb region 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 through 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 that authorities blamed on Shabiba. The investigation of the assassinations revealed that Shabiba had built up a secretive military arm, known as the al-Mujahidun al-Maghariba ("Moroccan Holy Warriors"), which was headed by a onetime law student named Abdelaziz Naamani. Sentenced to death *in abstentia*, Mouti spent time in both Saudi Arabia and Libya, but settled in Belgium where he continued to agitate against the Moroccan government. He published a small magazine, *Al-Mujahid* ("The Holy Warrior"), which garnered a modest following among the immigrant communities of Europe. After the Moroccan government discovered arms caches near the Algerian border in 1985, however, authorities set in motion a crackdown that all but 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 to advance their objectives within Morocco's existing political system; in 1996, they changed the organization's name to at-Tawhid (the Association for Unity and Reform).[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]

Al-Adl Wal-Ihsan ("Justice and Charity")

Al-Adl, (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. The Moroccan government refuses to recognize JCO as a political party.[5]

JCO advocates a restoration of *sharia* law, but asserts allegiance to democratic principles to differentiate itself from what it considers to be Morocco's authoritarian political system. JCO's leader and founder, Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine, has openly challenged the legitimacy of the Moroccan monarchy since the 1970s. For that stance, he was tried in 1984 and sentenced to house arrest — a sentence that remained in force until 1989.[6] JCO was officially outlawed in 1990 until the ban was modified by the current king, Mohammed VI, in 2004. Sheikh Yassine's daughter, Nadia Yassine, increasingly emerged as JCO's chief political organizational leader after her father died in 2012.

JCO is committed to the dissolution of the country's current constitutional system and its replacement by an Islamic republic. Nevertheless, JCO has publicly renounced the use of violence and armed struggle; it instead relies on protests and occasional civil disobedience to advance its goals. JCO's scope of support is a closely guarded secret, both by the organization itself and by the Moroccan government (some observers consider its support substantial given its extensive charitable and social network).[7] The JCO demonstrated some of this support during state unrest in June 2017: it organized an estimated 10,000 protestors for a march in solidarity with poor living conditions in the country's northern Rif region.[8]

JCO's leadership began exporting their movement to Europe beginning roughly in 1996, when it created the Muslim Participation and Spirituality (MPS) Association.[9] MPS has established chapters in various European cities, which are 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, eventually winning legal status for the JCO inside Morocco.[10] The French and Belgian MPS branches often organize demonstrations against Morocco.

The Party of Justice and Development (PJD)

In order to co-opt Islamist movements in Morocco, King Hassan II permitted new political movements that incorporated Islamist orientations — the most significant being the Justice and Development Party (PJD). While PJD draws on Islamic values and inspiration from Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), they share no official connection.

As previously discussed, the Islamist-inspired at-Tawhid fused with the Constitutional Democratic Popular Movement and emerged as the PJD. The PJD brought together a coalition of small, moderate Islamist organizations, including conservative Islamist, pro-monarchial political figures, and has competed in Morocco's parliamentary elections since 1997. In 2002, the PJD emerged as the country's leading opposition party and third-largest group in the national legislature with 42 of the 325 seats in Morocco's parliament. The PJD won the largest percentage of the popular vote (10.9 percent on the local and 13.4 percent on the national lists) garnered by any single party in the 2007 election.[11]

Unlike JCO, the PJD is non-revolutionary and does not call for the overthrow of the monarchy; consequently, it does not directly challenge Morocco's constitutional system. PJD does not advocate the creation for an Islamist state, or caliphate, in Morocco; instead it intentionally downplays any religious agenda while adhering to Islamic political values. It views itself as the guardian of Morocco's Muslim identity, opposing further westernization of Moroccan society but pragmatically recognizing 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. PJD legislators have won plaudits for focusing their attention on ameliorating Morocco's significant social and economic challenges. During its period in opposition, the party had only marginal ability to translate its agenda into meaningful programs that would garner greater popular support. Nevertheless, once they became the governing party (see below), their failure to deliver on those promises dissatisfied voters and led to a resurgence of support for other parties.

The PJD's agenda in parliament has occasionally taken it into pure *sharia* territory — including calling for prohibition against alcohol distribution and consumption, and challenging media that it views as defamatory of Islamic principles. On other occasions, however, the PJD has trended in the opposite direction. In 2004, the party actively participated in the adoption of the *Moudawana*, a new, more liberal version of the country's code regulating marriage and family life.[12] The revision of the *Moudawana* greatly improved the social status of women in Morocco, and was ridiculed by more conservative Islamists. 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.[13]

In the November 25, 2011 elections — the first held under the new constitution proposed by King Mohammed VI and approved by direct vote earlier that year — the PJD 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 11 of 30 ministerial portfolios.[14]

In the October 7, 2016 parliamentary elections, the PJD again emerged as the largest single party in parliament, with 125 seats. 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 102 seats in the legislature.

The 2016 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 17 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 39 ministerial positions, which has stirred ire within the party, generated criticism within Othmani's leadership, weakened the PJD, and called its future into question.[15]

Salafist Jihadism

Morocco has "numerous small 'grassroots' extremist groups" that collectively adhere to Salafi-*jihadi* ideology.[16] Spanish anti-terror judge Baltazar Garzon stated in 2007 that "Morocco is the worst terrorist threat to Europe."[17] At that time, he estimated that al-Qaeda-linked cells in Morocco numbered more than 100 and that at least 1,000 terrorists were being actively sought by Moroccan authorities.[18] Al-Qaeda's regional offshoot, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), has been recently successful in bringing these disparate groups (which number less than 50 members per grouping, on average) under its umbrella. In March 2017, four regional militant groups, including Ansar Dine and other elements of AQIM, merged to form the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM).[19]

AQIM formed from the reconstitution of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) 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 successfully target the country or compromise its institutions.[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.

Salafi *jihadis* as a whole remain a globally significant threat – one with high Moroccan participation. Scores of young Moroccans traveled to Iraq and Afghanistan to fight Americans in the first decade of the "War on Terror,"[21] and more recently Morocco's Central Bureau for Judicial Investigations estimated that over 1,600 Moroccans had joined ISIS.[22] If European citizens of Moroccan descent are included, the figure rises to between 2,000 and 2,500.[23] There also have been reports of considerable numbers of Moroccans traveling to Mali and Algeria to receive training from AQIM elements.[24] With the collapse of the ISIS "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria, Moroccan authorities anticipate a potentially significant number of extremists to return to the Kingdom in the years ahead.[25]

Salafis also represent a challenge to the Moroccan state, as underscored by a number of incidents over the past decade. For instance, on April 28, 2011, 17 people (among them 12 foreigners) were killed and at least 20 wounded in the bombing of a popular tourist café in Marrakech.[26] The government accused AQIM of the attack. More recently, in December 2018, two Danish tourists were murdered in the Atlas Mountains region.[27] Although Moroccan authorities determined that the incident was not directly coordinated by a terrorist group, the main suspects had pledged allegiance to ISIS.[28]

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Under Moroccan law, the country's monarch 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 explicitly acknowledges that the country's national culture is "enriched and nourished by African, Andalusian, Hebrew, and Mediterranean

influences."[29]

However, social and economic conditions, including institutional neglect, play a role in Islamist sentiment. Morocco's high youth unemployment rate and an influx of Europe-bound migrants from sub-Saharan Africa has transformed northern cities like Tangier, Tetouan, or Al Houcema into smuggling centers feeding criminal elements and opponents of the regime.[30] 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 local 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[31]), the region is still relatively underdeveloped and deeply dependent on charitable networks, some with extremist links, for services not provided by the government.

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, as well as the continued activities of the JCO both inside Morocco and in Europe, highlight fractures in Moroccan society between those who favor a more moderate, tolerant Islam and significant elements that prefer stronger Islamic control over the nation's society and its political system.

The impoverished slums in Morocco's inner cities and northern regions have produced many extremists, and many 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 favor *Wahhabbism* and other extremist creeds over Morocco's more tolerant version of Islam.[32]

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Following the 2003 Casablanca bombings, the Moroccan government focused 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.[33]

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.[34] The Moroccan government sought to discredit the *fatwa* and ordered the immediate closure of 60 Koranic 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.[35]

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). 33,000 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*.[36]

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.

Unlike his father, the King has largely refrained from playing an activist role in Middle East diplomacy; rather, Mohammed VI focuses his diplomatic efforts closer to home in Africa, which the monarch has repeatedly characterized as the "top priority" of his country's foreign policy. He emphasizes that "this multi-dimensional relationship puts Morocco in the center of Africa" and "Africa holds a special place in the heart of Moroccans."[37] On January 30, 2017, Morocco joined the African Union, more than three decades after leaving its predecessor organization. Complimenting extensive partnerships with African countries on a variety of political and economic issues, Morocco's 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 are increasingly visible. 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.[38]

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. 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.

Since the Casablanca bombings in 2003, Moroccan authorities have maintained a vigilant and aggressive stance against any *jihadist* movement. Between 2002 and 2018, according to authorities, over 3,000 people have been arrested as part of the Kingdom's counterterrorism efforts.[39] As of 2018, the Moroccan Central Bureau for Judicial Investigations said it had broken up 57 militant cells, including 51 with connection to ISIS, since 2015.[40] Fighting with terrorist groups in other countries already constituted a crime under the Moroccan penal code, but authorities also adopted specific legislation criminalizing traveling abroad with intent to join terrorist groups like ISIS.[41]

At the same time, the Moroccan government for years has permitted Islamist parties that embrace more moderate Islamic principles and do not condone extremism and violence (such as the PJD) to exist and to participate in elections. 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.[42]

The Moroccan government has also implemented the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), a concerted, multibillion-dollar social development program aimed at generating employment, fighting poverty, and improving infrastructure in both rural areas as well as the urban centers susceptible to 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.[43] 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."[44]

Even the historically touchy issue of Moroccan sovereignty over the former Spanish Sahara has seen forward movement amid recent reforms.[45] 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, foreign affairs, and the currency. The regional authority, meanwhile, has 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 in 2011 as "serious, credible, and realistic."[46]

Nevertheless, now well into its fourth decade, the "question of Western Sahara," as it is termed in United Nations nomenclature, is one of those challenges which has defied multiple efforts by the international community to facilitate its "solution." Former UN Secretary-General Bank Ki-moon and others have warned 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."[47] Secretary-General António Guterres reiterated these concerns in January 2018, after tensions escalated near Guerguerat.[48] Yet the "question" remains unanswered.

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) demands territorial independence, even though the armed conflict of the late 1970s and early 1980s left Morocco in control of more than 85 percent of it. The Moroccan government constructed a "sand berm" (a defensive shield consisting of a series of barriers of sand and stone completed in 1987) and the UN deployed a monitoring force to the Western Sahara. Both have largely confined the Polisario Front to a small zone around Tindouf in southwestern Algeria. Tens of thousands of Sahrawi refugees in squalid camps have recently been the object of former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's concerns about conflict spillover.[49]

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. However, there are worrisome indications of growing linkages with AQIM 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.[50] Morocco cut diplomatic ties with Iran in May 2018, accusing the Iranian-backed Hezbollah of providing weapons, training, and financial support to Polisario fighters.[51] Should these trends continue, they will not only heighten the challenge of Islamist violence for Morocco, but also exacerbate an already volatile security situation for the entire region.

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