

# Morocco's Escalating Protests Call for a Careful Response

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Brief Analysis

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**To help a key North African ally preserve its stability, Washington should quietly urge the kingdom to take measures that address the protestors' demands -- and reconsider cutting U.S. assistance.**

In recent weeks, Morocco has been rocked by its largest demonstrations since 2011, when hundreds of thousands of citizens took to the streets demanding jobs and an end to corruption against a backdrop of uprisings across the Arab world. The kingdom experienced occasional bouts of protest in subsequent years, which the government managed to contain. The latest demonstrations, originating in the traditionally restive northern Rif region, are once again testing the country's relative stability. With a nationwide protest planned for July 20, Rabat's next move may determine whether the movement morphs into a wider, potentially destabilizing phenomenon or dissipates as in past episodes.

## WHAT SPURRED THE PROTESTS?

The current unrest dates back to October 28, 2016, when protests erupted in the northern city of al-Hoceima following the death of local fish vendor Mouhcine Fikri, then spread to Tetouan, Casablanca, Marrakesh, and Rabat. Authorities had confiscated and discarded \$11,000 worth of protected swordfish that Fikri was selling illicitly. When he jumped into the garbage truck to retrieve it, he was crushed by the compactor. Graphic images of his death soon circulated on social media, with some accounts alleging that a policeman intentionally ordered the garbage collectors to turn on the compactor and kill him. The incident came to symbolize the widely reviled *hogra* (contempt) that many Moroccans ascribe to the police and other elements of the state.

Within days of Fikri's death, King Mohammed VI called for an investigation, and eleven individuals were ultimately charged with manslaughter and forgery. Likely as a result of the government's swift response, the mass protests

subsided. But Fikri's death galvanized residents of al-Hoceima, and a group calling itself al-Hirak al-Shaabi (The Popular Movement) began leading persistent, if small-scale, demonstrations demanding government investment in the mountainous Rif region, an end to corruption, and local jobs. The movement's leader, Nasser Zefzafi, is a thirty-nine-year-old unemployed activist whose uncle served in the cabinet of Abdelkrim el-Khattabi, the prominent Riffian political and military figure who led a rebellion against French and Spanish colonizers and established the short-lived "Republic of the Rif" in the 1920s. Zefzafi was also reportedly active in the February 20 Movement, the coalition behind the 2011 protests.

Up until last month, al-Hirak's protests were largely confined to al-Hoceima and rarely drew more than several hundred participants. Their demands focused on unemployment, lack of infrastructure development, and other local socioeconomic grievances, though they gradually began to invoke more overtly political themes such as police brutality and corruption attributed to state elites (the *makhzen* in Moroccan parlance). For its part, the government adopted a conciliatory tone, with Interior Minister Abdelouafi Laftit visiting al-Hoceima in April to praise al-Hirak's nonviolent nature and call for peaceful dialogue.

## MAY DAYS

Yet the situation shifted in early May after representatives of Morocco's governing coalition issued media statements suggesting that al-Hirak was a foreign-funded separatist movement. In response, roughly five thousand protestors took to the streets of al-Hoceima on May 18 in a general strike, chanting slogans equating the elected government with a gang and waving the traditional Berber flag. (Riffians are overwhelmingly Berbers, descendants of Morocco's indigenous inhabitants who came under Arab political and cultural domination centuries ago.) The scale of the demonstration prompted government spokesman Mustapha Khalfi, a member of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), to formally reject the accusation of separatism and acknowledge the legitimacy of the protestors' demands. It also led Laftit back to al-Hoceima to issue assurances that authorities would follow through on the five-year regional development plan they issued in 2015, which allocates \$6.5 billion dirham (roughly \$600 million) toward completion of a highway and infrastructure projects in the health and education sectors.

Despite such assurances, the general strike was followed by daily protests across the Rif and solidarity demonstrations in the kingdom's major urban centers. Images on social media soon revealed a military presence in al-Hoceima, and protestors across the country began adding "demilitarization" of the area to their list of demands. Meanwhile, the protests inspired a group of prominent Moroccan intellectuals, civil society organizations, and human rights activists to issue a communique on May 25 throwing their support behind al-Hirak and calling on the government to demonstrate its seriousness in addressing the movement's demands.

On May 29, however, the government arrested Zefzafi and charged him with threatening national security and accepting foreign funding -- crimes that can lead to a long prison sentence or even capital punishment. Authorities justified the move in part by noting that Zefzafi had interrupted a sermon the day before and accused the imam of using his position to discredit the protest movement. The arrest spurred outpourings of social media support and swelling demonstrations around the country, reportedly including clashes between protestors and police in the north. A second general strike took place on May 31; as of June 1, forty activists and a prominent journalist had been detained, and thirty-two faced criminal charges.

## THE STAKES

The government's increasingly aggressive response and the resultant spike in tensions illustrate the high stakes the situation holds for one of the few remaining stable countries in the region. Since the tumult of 2011, Morocco has been able to avoid the extremes of violent upheaval and reactionary authoritarianism gripping much of the Arab world, mainly through a combination of proactive palace moves, constitutional reforms that expanded the elected

legislature's purview, efforts to devolve authority from Rabat to the localities, and a widespread desire to avoid the chaos seen in other countries. But if Morocco's implicit bargain involved citizens choosing stability in exchange for slow but demonstrable improvements in economic opportunities and basic service provision, then the recent unrest suggests a growing belief that the government has not held up its end of that bargain. Even the head of the palace-friendly Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), Ilyas al-Omari, acknowledged on June 1 that not a single dirham of the national budget was spent on his native town of al-Hoceima last year.

The palace has yet to issue a formal statement on recent developments, though the king's decision to skip recent international meetings suggests he is concerned about further escalation (he did not attend the May 20 Arab and Islamic summit in Riyadh; and while his official reason for skipping the June 3-4 summit of the Economic Community of West African States was to boycott Israel's attendance, the major unrest at home could have been the real impetus). The troubles may carry particular significance for the king given where they originated. Upon ascending the throne in 1999, he sought to distinguish himself from his late father, who had not visited the Rif since quashing a rebellion there in 1959 and had largely neglected the region in the ensuing decades. The current protestors have not directly criticized the monarchy, but their grievances suggest that the king's early reconciliation efforts did not sufficiently improve daily life in the Rif. Over the weekend, he summoned the heads of the leading political parties to Rabat for a meeting dedicated to charting a path forward.

## U.S. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

If Morocco's contemporary history is any guide, the king's direct intervention may be enough to restore calm and produce a mechanism for addressing the protestors' demands. Still, the threat of ongoing strife cannot be dismissed. For U.S. officials, the prospect of a stable Arab ally coming under increasing strain points to the need for continued support and **attention to the bilateral relationship (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/strengthening-stability-in-northwest-africa>)**.

In this vein, the Trump administration should reconsider the negative symbolic message of its proposed 33 percent cut in development assistance (from \$15 million to \$10 million) at a time of major tension and uncertainty. In addition, Washington should leverage its recently improved ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, encouraging them to follow up the \$5 billion assistance package they gave Morocco in 2012-2017 with a similarly generous new commitment. The downward spiral of the past few weeks also underscores the urgency of naming a new U.S. ambassador to Morocco (the post has been vacant since January 20). Lastly, U.S. officials should clearly, if quietly, indicate that they stand ready to assist Rabat in carrying out its promised reforms.

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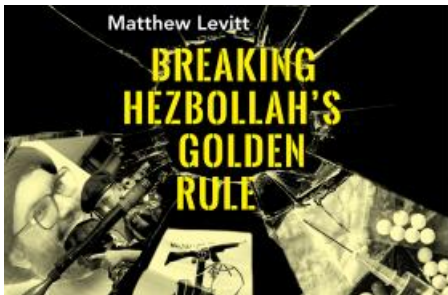
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