

Morocco's King Comes to Washington: Resetting with an Arab Ally

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Brief Analysis

President Obama should use this week's visit to revitalize the bilateral partnership, offering careful assurances and encouragement on issues such as countering violent extremism, resolving the Western Sahara dispute, and pursuing reform.

When President Obama hosts Morocco's King Muhammad VI on November 22, he will have an opportunity to repair the damage from an ill-advised initiative on Western Sahara earlier this year, compounded by the sudden postponement of Secretary of State John Kerry's scheduled visit to Rabat earlier this month. Lacking a surfeit of strong Arab allies these days, the administration should go beyond the ceremonial importance of the monarch's visit -- his first to Washington since 2004 -- and underscore in substantive ways America's commitment to a strong partnership with the surprisingly resilient North African state.

OVERCOMING DISAPPOINTMENT

Many observers had hoped that Kerry's visit to the Maghreb region -- and the bilateral strategic dialogues with Morocco and Algeria he was scheduled to lead -- would help challenge the prevailing wisdom in the Moroccan foreign policy community: namely, that Washington chases crises, spends more time negotiating with enemies, and takes the friendship with Morocco for granted. Yet Kerry seemed to validate this critique when he abruptly flew off to Geneva for Iran nuclear talks, leaving Rabat and Algiers at their respective altars.

While the kingdom did not express public disappointment about the cancellation, Moroccan officials had looked forward to the visit as a chance to take two big steps: closing the unhappy chapter of this April's abortive effort to impose a human rights monitoring mechanism on disputed Moroccan-held territory (as reportedly led by Susan Rice, Washington's ambassador to the UN at the time), and defining a forward agenda with Kerry focused on policies that have promoted stability inside the kingdom and northwestern Africa more generally. Now the stakes are higher,

as responsibility for those objectives falls to President Obama.

EXTREMISM TOPS THE AGENDA

At a time when many regional states are seeing a worrisome resurgence of radical activism, recognizing Morocco's shrewd preventive strategies in countering violent extremism should be at the top of the agenda. Over the years, Morocco's leaders -- often acting through the Ministry of Islamic Affairs -- have strengthened moderate strains of Islam in order to counter the radical influence of Salafism and Wahhabism. In particular, they have reformed mosque administration, placed religious facilities under the state's purview, and reformed the prison and justice systems to provide amnesty for Salafists who have supported radical ideologies. More recently, Rabat has invested considerable effort in taking this model to Mali, where Moroccan religious ties are being leveraged to minimize the growing radical strain in the north. A few months ago, the kingdom pledged to bring 500 Malian imams to Morocco to undergo religious training. And last week -- as part of the "Rabat Declaration" issued after the latest regional conference on border security -- officials signed a religious accord designed to propagate Morocco's moderate, state-led vision of Islam in Mali.

Strikingly, Rabat has pursued these initiatives despite not sharing a border with Mali. Geographic distance aside, Morocco possesses strengths that other countries -- Western and regional -- lack. It has its own Islamic history and identity, which the government uses as a bulwark against extremists, effectively characterizing radicalism as a foreign import. Such measures are never flawless, of course, and it remains an open question whether they can be applied outside the kingdom. But Morocco's model deserves a closer look by U.S. officials concerned about the spread of extremism.

POLITICAL REFORM ISSUES

Given Washington's troubled relations with most "Arab Spring" states, the administration should devote more effort to understanding how this complex country of 32 million has weathered the regional tumult since 2011. Morocco's various coping mechanisms -- such as co-opting a large and popular Islamist faction, the Justice and Development Party (PJD), into the governing system -- no doubt offer lessons that could be applied elsewhere.

Of course, the kingdom is not without its own political problems, and U.S. officials should not hesitate to bring them up in direct discussions with their Moroccan counterparts. Unemployment is dangerously high, state resources are stretched thin, and too many economic opportunities are reserved for the tiny, privileged elite who surround the palace, limiting the potential for any real growth. Politically, press and speech freedoms remain circumscribed, while the co-optation of Islamists has stymied democratic development and the expansion of women's rights, which many progressive Moroccans had hoped the king would prioritize. At the same time, it remains illegal to discuss taboo topics such as the king's own wealth and health. All in all, there is room for constructive discussion about pursuing greater reform on these issues while preserving the stability that has become Morocco's hallmark.

FROM THE SAHARA TO HUMAN RIGHTS

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance Moroccans attach to Western Sahara, the disputed region that has been a perennial afterthought in U.S. policy despite the tensions it has caused between the kingdom and Algeria. Rabat has long sought to win Washington's support for its policy of extending autonomy to the region while keeping it within sovereign Morocco, though it has grudgingly accepted successive administrations' noncommittal stand on the issue. But given the tempest over human rights monitors earlier this year -- which nearly ruptured relations with one of the first countries to recognize American independence -- the king can be expected to make a more concerted push for clear U.S. support of his "sovereignty, autonomy, and decentralization" plan. Many Moroccan civil society leaders believe that the United States should stop trying to "manage" the Sahara issue and instead actively seek to resolve it, in a way that benefits both a close U.S. partner and the people who live in the disputed region.

President Obama is keen to strike a balance between calming aggrieved partners in Rabat and maintaining important security relations with Algeria. His challenge this week will be to project sympathy, understanding, and support on the Sahara issue while affirming commitment to a negotiated solution, and without specifically endorsing Morocco's sovereign claims.

Beyond the Sahara dispute, the king will likely push for increasing U.S. investment in Morocco given the kingdom's greater political stability compared to other countries in the region. On a related note, the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation is currently developing a second compact with Rabat that could provide significant aid.

Democracy and human rights did not make the revised list of administration priorities outlined in the president's September UN General Assembly speech, so it will be interesting to see whether those issues appear on the agenda for his meeting with the king. This question has been complicated by the administration's backpedaling on attempts to require the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) peacekeeping force to monitor human rights in Moroccan-controlled areas. Rabat tends to reject U.S. critiques of the kingdom's human rights situation on three grounds: (1) Morocco has already greatly improved its record relative to both its past and its neighbors; (2) Washington fails to recognize the capriciousness of Morocco's security situation, and thus the leeway the government needs to respond quickly to changing circumstances; and (3) a U.S. administration that spies on its allies and citizens should not be casting stones at other countries.

Even so, Rabat has ample domestic political reasons to heed concerns about its human rights situation. Lately, the government has labeled any and all dissidents as "terrorists," thereby isolating a secular constituency that would otherwise be entirely supportive of its counterterrorism partnership with the United States.

CONCLUSION

With so many regional crises competing for the limited attention of U.S. decisionmakers, stable Morocco barely gets a glance. Yet such indifference can come at a price -- one paid in both bilateral and regional coin. That is precisely why President Obama would be wise to take advantage of the king's visit to invest in revitalizing the partnership. U.S.-Moroccan relations had a champion when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was in office, but since her departure, Rabat has seen the elevation of officials whom it believes have questionable track records on the hot-button Western Sahara issue. These include Susan Rice, for her alleged support of human rights monitors, and John Kerry, for his past endorsement of a referendum on independence for residents of the disputed region. Under such circumstances it falls on the president to clarify the strategic direction of U.S. policy. In an environment where few Arab leaders are eager to come to Washington and call themselves America's friend, it behooves the White House to find substantive ways to return the king's favor.

Vish Sakthivel is a Next Generation Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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