

Morocco's UN Speech Addresses an Enduring American Debate

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Oct 3, 2013

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In an address otherwise filled with platitudes, Morocco's foreign minister signaled his government's belief that the United States and its Western allies are more deeply invested in security partnerships than in human rights issues.

A longstanding debate among U.S. policymakers is which policy interests in Morocco (and surely, the Middle East more broadly) should be prioritized: nudging it toward an improved human rights record, or pursuing a stronger partnership in the war on terror. While different agencies in the U.S. government will likely approach policy interests from varying perspectives, many working in this field and region acknowledge some tradeoff.

In an address to the United Nations General Assembly on Monday, Morocco's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Saad Eddin al-Othmani, provided insight into how Morocco perceives the international community's policy objectives. While mostly platitudinous, the speech also confirmed the Moroccan state's own rather obvious stance on the tradeoff.

THE CASE OF ALI ANOUZLA

Most strikingly, after listing several policy priorities, Othmani gave a nod to Morocco's commitment to the advancement of human and civil rights, citing its improved record. At any other time this year, in spite of any potential grievances, the North African country would likely have seen no pushback against this part of the speech. Given the current context, however, the statement is surprising as the Kingdom has recently come under international scrutiny for its jailing of leftist journalist Ali Anouzla.

Anouzla is the Arabic editor of the bilingual independent Moroccan news outlet Lakome.com. Weeks ago, Anouzla was arrested for linking to a [video \(/policy-analysis/view/weathering-moroccos-syria-returnees\)](#) by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) calling Moroccans to 'jihad' in an article that, in actuality, criticizes the video. Charged with "inciting sedition" and participating in the call to jihad, the rather secular Anouzla remains in custody.

The arrest reflects a multitude of things, not least of which includes making an example of Anouzla, who is a known

critic of not just the governing coalition, but the King and his Makhzen. It is also indicative of a pre-existing crusade against Anouzla, who has previously been arrested and tried for publishing articles questioning the king's health, a taboo and illegal topic in Morocco. However, the government's response to Anouzla's most recent infraction, and Othmani's blunt but predictable silence on the issue, also demonstrate to international onlookers that Morocco is asserting its domestic policy as one that will sacrifice its human rights record for the war on terror.

MOROCCAN DOMESTIC POLICY - REFLECTING FOREIGN INTERESTS

The "cognitive dissonance" within the foreign policy community on the counterterror-human rights tradeoff is tangible. For example, on the issue of the Western Sahara, a security-focused U.S. government department is inclined to value the U.S. alliance with Morocco, necessitating some recognition of Morocco's "territorial integrity," while other government offices charged with oversight of governance, democracy and civil rights are often seen pushing to send human rights monitors to the disputed region, much to the Moroccan government's dismay.

Both 'sides' see themselves as having a pragmatic view of, and approach to, their assigned issue. From a counterterror perspective, in order to quell extremism in places where it is not yet endemic or "homegrown," some ideals must be sacrificed. This perspective is also inclined to be under the conviction that Morocco's actions are a manifestation of its longstanding alliance with the United States, and that such a tenacious union is to be valued and maintained. The 'other' perspective will likely argue that Morocco cannot advance, by way of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), regional clout, or as a regional model, if human rights issues are not resolved. The latter, according to this view, is a fundamental attribute of a developed society, and ought to undergird its progress.

European governments are similarly torn. The Spanish and French governments may feel compelled to denounce the Moroccan (and other North African) authorities' abuse and mistreatment of undocumented Sub-Saharan migrants en route to Europe. Nonetheless, they are simultaneously relieved that the problems end outside their own borders. To be sure, both countries have agreements with North African governments and security agencies to capture and repatriate Sub-Saharan Africans, often captured in Ceuta and Melilla (a Spanish protectorate in Northern Morocco) in attempts to 'harag' to Europe (to travel by makeshift rafts).

From a stability angle, Othmani's speech was otherwise comprehensive: professing a commitment to counterterror, condemning the acts of violence in Nairobi, reaffirming Morocco's diplomatic ties to Mali, calling on neighbors (ostensibly Algeria) to "ally" in security cooperation, emphasizing Morocco's role as a reliable island of stability in a sea of insecurity, restating Morocco's commitment to the MDGs, underscoring Morocco's desire for greater regional economic integration, pushing for a solution to the Syrian civil war, recognizing the aspirations of all Syrians while still respecting Syria's "territorial integrity" (a nod to its own fear of a breach of its sovereignty over the Western Sahara), restating the desire to increase bilateral cooperation on all fronts with other African countries, decrying the meager international aid to Africa, and the list goes on. He spoke in some considerable detail on each point.

With Othmani having avoided now world-famous Ali Anouzla issue in his soliloquy (he didn't even attempt an explanation for the detention), the Moroccan government has resolved the question of which policy objective trumps the other in the Kingdom. Yet given Morocco's steadfast alliance to its western partners, its policy is undoubtedly a reflection of what it sees as American and European foreign policy interests as well.

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