

Twenty Years Under King Mohammed VI (Part 2): Foreign Policy Developments

[Sarah Feuer](#) and [Reda Ayadi](#)

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The king has invested considerable diplomatic capital in Africa, Europe, the United States, and China, but the longstanding Western Sahara dispute remains a source of tension with neighboring Algeria.

This PolicyWatch is the second in a two-part series assessing key developments during King Mohammed's reign to date. [Part 1 examined](#) domestic developments.

Over the past two decades, King Mohammed has reduced Morocco's footprint in the Middle East, preferring to invest in new relationships across Africa, fortify alliances in Europe, maintain productive ties with Washington, and seek investments from China. Hostile relations with Algeria remain a bleak spot, though, and while Mohammed has arguably registered successes on the Western Sahara portfolio, resolving the dispute remains elusive.

FROM THE GULF TO AFRICA AND EUROPE

Under the previous king, Morocco devoted considerable energy to developing ties with wealthy Persian Gulf states and mediating in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although Mohammed is keen to continue attracting Gulf investments, Morocco has been largely absent from the peace process since he came to power in 1999, and has sought to avoid undue entanglement in Middle Eastern affairs.

Several recent examples are instructive. In 2015, Morocco joined the initial Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, but then shortly drew down its involvement after one of its F-16s was reportedly shot down by Houthi rebels. In 2017, the kingdom pointedly did not pick a side in the Gulf dispute over Qatar, despite Rabat's ostensibly close ties with Riyadh and longstanding reliance on Saudi investments. Two years later, Morocco suspended its participation in the Yemen war altogether after the Saudi-owned television outlet Al-Arabiya aired a documentary seen as criticizing Rabat's position on Western Sahara. As for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, U.S. advisor Jared Kushner recently visited the kingdom to solicit its support for last month's multilateral peace conference in Bahrain. Ultimately, however, Morocco sent only a low-level Foreign Ministry staffer to the event.

In short, Rabat's Middle Eastern presence has not flourished under Mohammed. Instead, the king has focused his diplomatic energies on building ties across Africa and strengthening traditional alliances in Europe. The former effort is perhaps the most significant shift from his father's reign, and it has begun to yield dividends. The kingdom has increased its access to African telecom, mining, banking, and insurance markets, and expanded its regional clout following its readmission into the African Union in 2017. Morocco had left the organization in 1984 after the membership decided to admit the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the name given to Western Sahara by the Algeria-backed Polisario Front, Rabat's main adversary in that still-disputed territory.

The palace also has ample reason to deepen ties with Europe, where over 50 percent of the Moroccan diaspora community (around 4-5 million citizens) currently resides. In 2000, Mohammed inked an EU-Morocco Association Agreement that significantly expanded trade. Since then, the relationship has broadened to include parliamentary exchanges, EU assistance (200 million euros per year in 2014-2017 alone), and cooperation on security and migration. The latter issue has become especially pressing given last year's closure of central Mediterranean migration routes and the growing number of people seeking entry into Europe through Morocco.

Relations suffered a setback in 2015-2018 following a European Court of Justice decision to exclude Western Sahara from EU-Morocco trade agreements covering agricultural, agro-food, and fisheries products. Earlier this year, however, the European Parliament adopted a series of amended agreements incorporating the disputed territory, and relations have largely recovered.

GREAT POWER ENGAGEMENT

Though not as robust as its European alliances, Rabat's ties with the United States have made important advances since Mohammed ascended the throne. In 2004, Washington designated Morocco as a "Major Non-NATO Ally"; a year later, the two countries launched Flintlock, an annual regional military exercise focused on counterterrorism. Indeed, Rabat has established itself as a key counterterrorism partner in West Africa and the Sahel, where jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb have sought to exploit failing states in Mali and elsewhere. The

kingdom is a member of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, a U.S. program that helps regional governments strengthen their capacity to contain and defeat local terrorist organizations. Rabat was also instrumental in forming the Global Counterterrorism Forum with Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Meanwhile, Morocco and the United States have conducted an annual bilateral military exercise since 2008 known as African Lion, focused on improving interoperability. And since 2012, they have convened a Strategic Dialogue focused on enhancing military, economic, and counterterrorism cooperation. The kingdom was the first Maghreb country to join the U.S.-led coalition to defeat the Islamic State. And in 2018, the U.S. Navy conducted Lightning Handshake with Morocco's navy and air force, the most sophisticated bilateral military exercise ever conducted with an African partner.

On the economic front, Washington and Rabat signed a free trade agreement in 2006, the only one of its kind between the United States and an African country. The FTA has been something of a disappointment to Morocco insofar as the trade deficit with America has only grown. Still, the agreement had a substantial secondary effect of signaling a hospitable investment climate, and major U.S. companies such as Boeing have committed to projects in the kingdom as a result.

Such relations have not precluded Moroccan engagement with U.S. rivals, chiefly China. The king's 2016 meeting with President Xi Jinping led to several accords spanning the tourism, education, and infrastructure sectors. And earlier this month, Morocco's BMCE Bank and the state-owned China Communications Construction Company agreed to build a high-tech city near Tangier, which if completed could create 100,000 jobs and attract investments estimated at \$10 billion. Yet a previous deal in 2017 largely floundered, fueling skepticism about whether the new agreement will translate into actual investments on the ground.

STUBBORN SAHARA

Of all the king's foreign policy goals, the most highly prized yet most elusive has been international recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara. In 2006—a full fifteen years after a UN peacekeeping force began monitoring a buffer zone separating the Moroccan-controlled territory from Algeria and Mauritania—Rabat presented an autonomy plan in which Western Sahara would govern itself under the kingdom's sovereignty. France endorsed the proposal, while the United States deemed it “serious, realistic, and credible.” The Polisario rejected the plan, as did its longtime backer, Algeria, and their subsequent talks with Morocco largely petered out in 2012.

Since then, Mohammed has continued seeking support for his autonomy proposal wherever he can find it. Much of his outreach to Africa, for example, reflected a calculation that it would bring not only economic benefits but diplomatic progress as well. In some respects, the approach has worked—since the late 1990s, twenty countries worldwide have withdrawn their recognition of the SADR, and thirty-five African nations still do not recognize it. Furthermore, domestic policy initiatives like the “advanced regionalization” program have incorporated Western Sahara into Morocco's existing governance structures, tilting realities on the ground in Rabat's favor.

In other respects, however, Mohammed's Western Sahara diplomacy has come up short, as evidenced by tensions with Europe following the EU court decision on trade, and the African Union's insistence on allowing SADR participation in its summits. Washington has strongly hinted at its own frustration with the status quo, with National Security Advisor John Bolton expressing opposition to open-ended peacekeeping missions, and Rabat consequently facing UN pressure to return to the negotiating table. Meanwhile, Morocco's relations with Algeria have remained largely hostile, further precluding resolution of the territorial dispute. Still, Mohammed probably deserves much of the credit for keeping tensions in Western Sahara from erupting into large-scale violence.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

Morocco's foreign policy orientation under King Mohammed has largely advanced U.S. interests, and the country has proven itself a reliable ally in an increasingly unpredictable region. As the king enters his third decade of rule, Washington should ensure that Rabat has the tools needed to continue facilitating regional stability.

To that end, policymakers should devise ways to strengthen U.S. Africa Command. With more support from Washington, AFRICOM could build on the recent success of military and counterterrorism engagement with Morocco, serve as a hub for greater European cooperation with Rabat on migration-related challenges, and encourage Moroccan security coordination with Algeria (which AFRICOM officials have quietly and constructively done in the past). Washington should also consider targeting more of its bilateral assistance to Moroccan agencies responsible for managing migration flows, which challenge not only the kingdom's stability but also that of America's European allies. Finally, the myriad overlapping interests between the two governments require clear and high-level communication that can only come once Washington sends an ambassador to Rabat.

Sarah Feuer is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute, where Reda Ayadi was a research assistant from 2018 to 2019.