

# Partners Against Terror: Opportunities and Challenges for U.S.-Moroccan Counterterrorism Cooperation<sup>1</sup>

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As Moroccan officials are quick to tell visitors, the United States and Morocco have a long history of working together, stretching all the way back to America's founding when the sultan of Morocco was one of the first heads of state to recognize the breakaway British colonies as an independent nation. As recently as 2004, President George W. Bush designated Morocco a major non-NATO ally in recognition of the kingdom's deep relationship with the United States.

The bilateral relationship is particularly strong in areas of military and law enforcement cooperation. The United States annually conducts a joint bilateral exercise, AFRICAN LION, with Morocco (although it was suspended this year); provides financial assistance to Morocco for its correctional systems, border security, and police forces; collaborates to develop countering violent extremism (CVE) programming; and conducts training for Moroccan security and law enforcement personnel. In return, Morocco aids the United States with gathering

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intelligence, interdicting contraband and criminals, and formulating responses to regional terrorist threats. One area of frequent cooperation between the two countries is counterterrorism (CT)—a collaboration that the U.S. State Department has characterized as “robust.”<sup>2</sup> One of the most fruitful programs, according to one State Department official, has been Morocco’s participation in the longstanding Antiterrorism Assistance Program. According to one observer, the Moroccan units that have received CT training under this program have become so proficient that they would be well-suited to becoming trainers for less proficient forces in other countries.<sup>3</sup> Morocco also cooperates with the United States in many multinational CT efforts, such as NATO’s OPERATION ACTIVE ENDEAVOR in the Mediterranean and the Global Counterterrorism Forum.

Although the CT partnership between the United States and Morocco is strong, there is room for improvement. By examining Morocco’s current CT priorities—as represented by its actions inside and outside the country—and U.S. CT priorities in North Africa and the Sahel region, it becomes clear that the United States and Morocco can fruitfully increase collaboration in several areas. These include blunting the appeal of extremist ideologies, prison deradicalization, intelligence sharing, and, perhaps even one day, trilateral security cooperation with Algeria.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, we provide an overview of Morocco’s approach to counterterrorism, its current partnership with the United States regarding counterterrorism, and opportunities for closer bilateral and multilateral cooperation for countering terrorist organizations and ideologies.

## **Morocco’s approach to counterterrorism**

Since 9/11, Morocco has had several terrorist attacks, most of which were perpetrated by jihadis. Its largest attack, the May 2003 Casablanca bombings that killed 33 people, was carried out by jihadis from a poor part of Casablanca. The attack targeted areas frequented by Moroccan Jews and Europeans. Subsequent attacks in 2007 and 2011 also targeted foreign interests and nationalities. According to Morocco’s interior ministry, over the past 10 years, 113 terrorist cells have been dismantled and 1,250 suspects have been arrested in connection with 266 foiled terror plots.<sup>5</sup>

Moroccan officials are careful to point out that they do not consider countering terrorism as just a security matter that solely requires a security response.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> State Department, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism, Chapter 2: Middle East and North Africa*, State Department, May 30, 2013.

<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2012/209982.htm>, accessed June 10, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with senior State Department counterterrorism official, 14 November 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Our analysis is informed by field research in the country, U.S. government assessments, and media reports.

<sup>5</sup> Mohamed Saadouni and Hassan Benmehdi, “Morocco looks to modernize counter-terror methods,” *Magharebia.com*, May 19, 2013,

[http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/features/2013/05/19/feature-01](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2013/05/19/feature-01).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with the head of the CNDH, June 25, 2013.

Morocco has a three-pronged approach to countering jihadi terrorism. First, it deals with jihadis primarily as a law enforcement matter, relying on its internal security services rather than its military to disrupt plots and capture perpetrators. Morocco also has a strong capability for domestic surveillance and intelligence gathering. Morocco's security services monitor both groups suspected of extremist activity in Morocco and similar groups in nearby countries. To this end, it works closely with United States and its regional and international partners to identify suspects entering Morocco and stop their transit. The U.S. Department of Justice (DoJ) has assisted the Moroccan police and security forces in expanding capabilities and capacities. For example, the DoJ's International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program has provided training and technical assistance to Morocco's Royal Gendarmerie Laboratory and the National Police Laboratory to facilitate their pursuit of international accreditation. Also, the DoJ and the FBI have trained Moroccan police and prosecutors on the use of online investigations and electronic evidence, under the Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training (OPDAT), one of the DoJ's primary counterterrorism assistance mechanisms.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the Moroccan government has sought to alleviate what it believes to be the root causes of terrorism by using what one official called "soft power" in society. By providing healthcare and job training to the poor, expanding rural infrastructure, and improving the overall livelihood of Moroccans, the Moroccan government hopes to counter the appeal of extremist messages and ideologies, especially among the poor and disadvantaged. The Moroccan government considers U.S. development assistance to be supportive of that effort. An example of this assistance is the Millennium Challenge Compact for Morocco, which includes investment in expansion of fruit tree agriculture (including olives, nuts, and dates); support for small-scale fisheries and fish markets; enhancement of the artisanal sector in the city of Fes; and training for small-scale businesses across all these sectors, with an emphasis on training (including literacy training) for women and youth.<sup>8</sup> The Moroccan government also considers political reforms and increased attention to human rights issues as additional components of its efforts to combat the root causes of terrorism.

Third, the Moroccan government seeks to counter the jihadi ideology inside the country by reinforcing the influence of Morocco's traditional school of Maliki Islamic law. It does this by upgrading places of worship, closing unregulated mosques, rehabilitating those who have been convicted of a terror-related crime, promoting Moroccan religious values on television and radio, and modernizing

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<sup>7</sup> The United States Department of Justice, Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training, "Across the Board," <http://www.justice.gov/criminal/opdat/achieve/across-board.html>, accessed August 2, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Morocco," <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5431.htm>, accessed August 2, 2013.

the teaching of Islam.<sup>9</sup> To that end, the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs has developed a curriculum for Morocco's imams for countering violent extremism and advancing tolerance. To counter radicalization of Moroccans abroad, the kingdom established the Moroccan Council of Ulama for Europe and the Minister Delegate for Moroccans Living Abroad to promote religious moderation among Moroccan expats in Europe. The king plays a direct and personal role in this effort as the “commander of the faithful” in Morocco. As such, he has the authority to issue official fatwas (rulings on points of Islamic law) for Morocco’s Muslims.<sup>10</sup> The king has also started an Islamic satellite channel, al-Sadisa, which advocates Islamic ideals of tolerance, taking direct aim at jihadist clerics and their media. While individual jihadis in Morocco may not recognize the king’s authority as commander of the faithful, the vast majority of Moroccans do, enabling the state to directly contest and overrule jihadi edicts in the eyes of most Moroccans.

## Collaboration on counterterrorism

In 2010, Morocco developed an action plan in collaboration with the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to counter terrorist financing. The provisions of Morocco’s plan include extending judicial authority to prosecute money-laundering crimes committed within the country and abroad and expanding the list of people and organizations obliged to report on suspicious financial activities. In 2011, the FATF urged Morocco to criminalize terrorist financing in line with international standards. In February of this year, the Moroccan Parliament adopted a draft law which makes the financing of terrorism a criminal offence.<sup>11</sup>

Morocco also has important bilateral counterterrorism partnerships with African and European nations. It is a member of the Mediterranean 5+5 Defense initiative, developed in 2004 with the goal of increasing security cooperation in the Western Mediterranean. In addition, Morocco has conducted exercises with U.S. and European partners in North Africa as part of PHOENIX EXPRESS. That said, Morocco’s relations with its most significant neighbor, Algeria, are extremely limited.

To augment Morocco’s counterterrorism efforts, the United States provides a variety of assistance. The State Department’s Bureau of Narcotics and Law Enforcement funds a program to improve overall management of Morocco’s corrections system, which is aimed at alleviating recruitment to extremist ideology

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<sup>9</sup> Alexis Arieff, *Morocco: Current Issues*, Report for Congressional Research Services, June 2012, RS21579, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> “Morocco’s High Council of Ulemas’s Death Sentence Fatwa on Apostates Sparks Controversy,” *Morocco News Tribune*, April 19, 2013, <http://morocconewstribune.com/moroccos-high-council-of-ulemass-death-sentence-fatwa-on-apostates-sparks-controversy/>, accessed August 6, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Siham Ali, “Morocco toughens terrorism financing laws,” *Magharebia*, 28 February 2013, [http://magharebia.com/en\\_gb/articles/awi/features/2013/02/28/feature-02](http://magharebia.com/en_gb/articles/awi/features/2013/02/28/feature-02), accessed August 3, 2013.

among Morocco's prison population. Morocco also receives assistance with border security and police training. In the September 2012 Bilateral Strategic Dialogue, launched one day after the attacks on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Secretary Clinton and Moroccan Foreign Minister Saad-Eddine Al-Othmani signed a memorandum of understanding that spells out "broadly defined spheres for cooperation, including political, security, economic, and education and cultural affairs." On security matters, the United States and Morocco pledged to continue cooperating "to bolster democratic criminal justice institutions and to counter the threat of violent extremism in Morocco and in the region."<sup>12</sup> Both sides decided they would work together to craft cooperative CVE programming. Both sides also determined that the United States should continue to "implement training programs and to provide equipment relating to border and port security and customs controls" and continue "close cooperation" in the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), an international multilateral body of which Morocco is a founding member.<sup>13</sup>

## Challenges to deeper cooperation

Despite Morocco's success in interdicting terrorists and working with its partners, it has been criticized for human rights abuses. Some of this criticism has come from the United Nations. In September 2012, the UN special rapporteur on torture said that the practice is most frequently linked to perceived threats to national security, including terrorism.<sup>14</sup> The U.S. State Department has also been critical of Moroccan human rights practices. Its 2012 report on Morocco cited "widespread disregard for rule of law by security forces."<sup>15</sup>

In response to such criticisms and to popular demonstrations against the Moroccan government, King Mohammed VI established the National Council of Human Rights (CNDH) to report on and investigate abuses. According to the organization's leader, the council is able to visit prisons and detention centers, and publishes a yearly report on human rights. Members of the council are a mix of experts and prominent human rights activists, some of whom are appointed by the parliament.<sup>16</sup> The council has reported on the "abusive use of administrative transfer as a disciplinary measure" for Salafi jihadi detainees.<sup>17</sup> The head of the

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<sup>12</sup> Morocco Tomorrow, "Joint Statement USA—Morocco Strategic Dialogue First Session," <http://www.moroccotomorrow.org/remarks-at-the-opening-plenary-of-the-u-s-morocco-strategic-dialogue-2/>, accessed August 6, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> UNHR, *Morocco: "Culture of human rights emerging, but more needed to eradicate torture"* – UN Special Rapporteur, September 22, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labor, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012: Morocco*, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2012&dclid=204376>, accessed June 10, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with the head of the CNDH, June 25, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labor, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012: Morocco*,



council also noted in an interview that there is no effective prison deradicalization program for Salafi jihadis,<sup>18</sup> although the head of Morocco's Ulama Council observed that the government had recently began to allow scholars into prisons to engage with jihadis.<sup>19</sup>

The overriding concern of the council—and, indeed, of the Moroccan government writ large—is to prevent outside interference regarding the status of the Western Sahara, which Morocco claims as its own. Moroccan officials do not want any outside entity to take actions or make statements that might jeopardize Morocco's claim to the territory or empower counter-claimants. Thus, in response to a recent effort by the State Department to establish an independent UN monitor for human rights in the contested region, the head of the CNDH claimed that his organization's oversight of human rights abuses in the Western Sahara was sufficient to meet U.S. concerns.<sup>20</sup> Demonstrating how seriously it takes perceived outside interference in the region, in April 2013 the Moroccan government canceled the bilateral U.S.-Moroccan military exercise, AFRICAN LION, in response to the U.S. State Department raising the issue of human rights monitoring in the Western Sahara. While the U.S. government was deeply disappointed by the cancellation of the exercise, the United States subsequently attenuated its effort to establish an independent UN human rights monitor for the Western Sahara.

The concern with Western Sahara also colors Moroccan perceptions of the regional security threat from jihadis and impacts its relationships with other regional countries. Senior officials in the Ministry of Defense recently expressed concern that the Western Sahara was being used as a staging ground by jihadis in the region.<sup>21</sup> A Moroccan intelligence analyst expressed a similar concern, but it is difficult to find analysts outside of Morocco who share this view.<sup>22</sup> Morocco's ability to deal with the jihadi threat emanating from other nearby areas, such as the Sahel, is limited by its disagreement with other North African nations—in particular, Algeria—over the status of the Western Sahara. Moroccan officials expressed frustration at their inability to coordinate more closely with Algeria on security issues that affect them both, particularly with regard to the threat from jihadis.<sup>23</sup> The Algerian government considers the presence of Moroccan forces in

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<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2012&dclid=204376-wrapper>, accessed June 10, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with the head of the CNDH, June 25, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with the head of the Ulama Council, June 26, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with the head of the CNDH, June 25, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with senior Ministry of Defense officials, June 25, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Moroccan analyst, June 25, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with senior Ministry of Defense officials, June 25, 2013; interview with deputy minister of foreign affairs, June 25, 2013.

Western Sahara to be an illegal occupation<sup>24</sup> and is resistant to engaging in significant cooperation with Rabat as a result.

Partly because of the lack of potential for coordinated action between the North African countries in the face of threats to the stability of the region, Morocco welcomed France's intervention in Mali in early 2013, although Moroccan officials expressed a desire that the United States not leave Mali to the French alone. The deputy minister of foreign affairs, for example, asserted that the United States needs to stay involved in order to stabilize the country.<sup>25</sup> Moroccan security officials remain very concerned that undergoverned space in Mali, Libya, and elsewhere in the Maghreb and Sahel may pose a long-term threat to Moroccan security if jihadists use these regions to build networks, infiltrate local communities, and launch future attacks into neighboring countries.

### **Assessing progress**

Morocco's government believes it is having some success with its "soft power" approach to countering domestic jihadi radicalization, but Moroccan officials continue to worry about Moroccan citizens being radicalized. The deputy minister of foreign affairs was particularly troubled by the prospect of Moroccans being radicalized in Europe and stirring up trouble in their home country.<sup>26</sup> One Moroccan official noted, "No one controls the religious domain in Europe, and this is where radicalization takes place, in small mosques beyond anyone's control."<sup>27</sup> Even so, senior defense officials are also worried about the hundreds of Moroccan citizens who have gone to fight in Syria, at least 60 of whom were released from Moroccan prisons (which again speaks to Morocco's need for a more effective deradicalization program in prison).<sup>28</sup> One Moroccan analyst noted that that several Moroccans are also fighting in northern Mali.<sup>29</sup>

Moroccan officials we spoke with expressed satisfaction with Morocco's counterterrorism cooperation with the United States and believed that the Strategic Dialogue framework is the best way to address mutual concerns (the Strategic Dialogue is an annual, high-level diplomatic discussion between Morocco and the United States on several issues of mutual concern).<sup>30</sup> Morocco sees its greatest CT assets as its intelligence networks in North Africa, its ability to build

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<sup>24</sup> Letter from the Permanent Representative of Algeria to the United Nations H.E Abdallah BAALI addressed to the President of the Security Council, New York 18 July 2002, available at <http://www.algeria-un.org/default.asp?doc=57>, accessed November 13, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with deputy minister of foreign affairs, June 25, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with deputy minister of foreign affairs, June 25, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with deputy minister of foreign affairs, June 25, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with senior Ministry of Defense officials, June 25, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with intelligence analyst, June 25, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with senior Ministry of Defense officials, June 25, 2013; interview with deputy minister of foreign affairs, June 25, 2013.

civil society institutions, and its business connections throughout the region.<sup>31</sup> This perception was also held by U.S. officials we interviewed in Morocco. The same officials, however, worried that Moroccan sensitivities surrounding the Western Sahara would harm future coordinated counterterrorism activity with the United States and its other partners in the region. The primary U.S. strategy of empowering its local partners to deal with the jihadi threat to the region can easily be disrupted or diluted by diplomatic rows over such matters.

## **Opportunities for closer cooperation**

Looking ahead, there are a number of ways in which the United States and Morocco can expand their cooperation on counterterrorism. There is a broad set of diplomatic and security issues in the region that, if addressed effectively, can serve to mitigate the terrorist threat to both Morocco and the United States and enable broader regional cooperation on security issues. One such issue is expanding governance in Libya. While the United States has been somewhat “gun shy” of expanding engagement with the Libyan government following the Benghazi attack, the growing role of jihadis in Libyan politics and the continued safe haven for jihadis in such places as Derna gives Al Qaeda affiliates, such as Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), a fertile ground for planning and launching attacks in the region and beyond. The flow of fighters to and from Libya also poses a persistent threat to Morocco and its neighbors. The United States and Morocco can collaboratively address issues of Libyan security and stability by coordinating diplomatic initiatives in such multilateral fora as the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue, the 5+5 initiative, the UN, and FATF. Bilaterally, the annual Strategic Dialogue provides an enduring framework for Washington and Rabat to cooperatively resolve regional issues.

Another diplomatic area where the United States may find an opportunity to expand CT cooperation with Morocco is in renewing its efforts to help resolve the status of the Western Sahara. As demonstrated by this year’s cancellation of the AFRICAN LION exercise, the Western Sahara issue can be a “third rail” in U.S.-Moroccan relations; however, if an eventual peaceful and enduring resolution of this conflict can be found, Morocco will be able to redirect significant portions of its intelligence and security budget to other matters—including CT efforts—and will be in a position to begin to cooperate more effectively with its North African and Sahel neighbors on a range of security and border issues.

In terms of specific areas of potential expanded bilateral CT cooperation between the United States and Morocco, the latter’s most urgent need at the moment is an improved deradicalization program. The United States now has a lot of experience in helping other countries develop effective prison deradicalization programs, which it can draw on to assist Morocco in designing its own program. The United States has also organized the collection of good deradicalization practices in

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with deputy minister of foreign affairs, June 25, 2013; interview with Moroccan businessmen, June 26, 2013.



countries ranging from Saudi Arabia, to Malaysia and Thailand, and can help facilitate a dialogue between Moroccan officials and key government and non-government experts in these states.

The cyber domain is an area of prospective counterterrorism collaboration between the United States and Morocco. The U.S. sees the cyber domain as an important component of its countering violent extremism efforts, and Morocco has expressed interest in expanding bilateral cyber cooperation. Cyber collaboration entails a host of complexities regarding technology transfer, privacy concerns, third party data sharing, counterterrorism versus law enforcement data, and further complications, so it would be worthwhile for the United States and Morocco to begin a discussion of the broader framework for cyber cooperation sooner rather than later. In the absence of a shared framework, disjointed or informal efforts to expand cyber cooperation will likely founder on these complexities.

Countering terrorism in the maritime environment is another area of potential bilateral cooperation. While the presence of terrorist threats in the maritime environment is open to debate, the Moroccan government has expressed its interest in contributing to collective counterterrorism efforts in the Straits of Gibraltar, such as its commitment to support OPERATION ACTIVE ENDEAVOR. However, Morocco has limited experience in this area. The U.S. Navy and Coast Guard have vast experience in maritime counterterrorism, developed in coalition environments in the Arabian Gulf, Gulf of Aden, and North Arabian Sea, that could be shared with Morocco. Moroccans could benefit from increased cooperation with the United States in terms of skills and capabilities required for maritime CT operations—for example, maritime infrastructure protection, tracking and monitoring of illicit shipping, boarding and search operations, and maritime law enforcement. These same skills and capabilities have utility beyond the CT mission and can contribute to broader maritime security in the region.

Morocco would also benefit from increased intelligence sharing with regard to its citizens being radicalized abroad, particularly in Europe and in war zones such as Syria. The United States and its European partners are watching the situation in Syria very closely, and, given their experience tracking the flow of foreign fighters into both Iraq and Afghanistan, it is highly likely that United States and European intelligence services are monitoring similar flows to Syria. While Morocco has capabilities to monitor and combat radicalization at home, it has limited ability to monitor Moroccan fighters traveling abroad. In return for U.S. assistance in this area, Morocco could increase the availability of its intelligence reporting on jihadi threats in North Africa and the Sahel to the United States. For several reasons — the continued instability in Mali, the prospect for U.S. forces to provide some support to the UN mission in Mali, the AQIM and other jihadi threats to U.S. embassies and U.S. citizens throughout the Sahel, and the presence of U.S. forces on the ground in such countries as Niger — the United States is keenly interested in jihadi, criminal, tribal, and other networks in the region that may enable attacks on Americans. Moroccan intelligence services have a deep understanding of these

networks and could likely supply a range of insights and information to help the United States understand, and deal with, threats in the region. Even the unclassified work that the government of Morocco commissions from analysts inside Morocco would be extremely valuable to the United States, based on our conversations with those analysts. This kind of information could easily be shared with U.S. officials.

Morocco has developed significant expertise in the development and expansion of “rule of law” in undergoverned spaces, and has become a leader within the GCTF countries in promoting the rule of law as a pillar of international counterterrorism efforts. The expansion of the rule of law is central to U.S. efforts to promote security and stability and combat terrorism in such places as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen. There are several locations around the world, most notably in Middle Eastern, African, and/or Muslim countries, where Moroccan expertise—and perhaps practitioners and trainers—in rule of law matters could become a “force multiplier” for U.S. or international efforts to expand rule of law in undergoverned regions. Additionally, Algeria plays a leading role in GCTF counterterrorism activities, such as co-chairing the GCTF’s Sahel Regional Capacity Building Group. With some adroit diplomacy, the United States may be able to use Moroccan and Algerian commitment to participation in GCTF activities as a basis for finding areas where the two regional countries could one day collaborate on counterterrorism.

Finally, Morocco offers the United States a potential valuable “laboratory” in which to observe the mechanics of alternative approaches to counterterrorism. For example, the United States has the opportunity to observe, evaluate, and ask hard questions about the efficacy of Morocco’s “soft power” methods of countering jihadist messages and its law-enforcement approach to domestic counterterrorism. While the United States probably cannot directly apply these lessons itself, it could keep them in mind as it seeks to support other governments’ CT efforts in places from Pakistan to Afghanistan, Jordan, and Yemen.

Although the enduring bilateral relationship between Washington and Rabat has a solid foundation, periodic challenges such as the recent tiff over the UN observer mission in the Western Sahara will surely arise. Nevertheless, counterterrorism is one area where U.S. and Moroccan interests clearly match, where their capabilities and capacities strongly align, and where their continued and expanded cooperation can provide potential direct and enduring benefits to both countries, even beyond the realm of counterterrorism.