

# Morocco 101

Directly across the Mediterranean from Spain, with both Atlantic and Mediterranean coastlines, Morocco sits at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Beyond its reputation as a top tourist destination the world over, the country is a key US ally in North Africa. Morocco has proven itself committed to democratic reform and liberalizing policies and is an emerging political, economic, and security leader in the region.



## The US-Morocco Relationship

- ❖ Morocco and the US have had a special relationship since 1777, when Morocco became the first country to formally recognize the newly independent United States. In 1786, the US signed its first treaty of commerce and friendship with Morocco – the longest-standing such treaty with any nation. Morocco aligned with the Allied forces in World War I and aided American and British forces in World War II.
- ❖ More recently, the Morocco-US relationship, based on a common commitment to building stability and security in the region, has advanced on economic, political, social, and security fronts, with the 2004 Free Trade Agreement, the designation of Morocco as a major non-NATO Ally, and the signing of a \$697.5 million Compact with the Millennium Challenge Corporation to reduce poverty and increase economic growth.
- ❖ In recognition of this strong alliance, on September 13, 2012, Morocco and the United States launched a Strategic Dialogue—one of about two-dozen such agreements in existence. *(At right, Secretary of State John Kerry meets with his Moroccan counterpart, Minister of Foreign Affairs Salaheddine Mezouar, in April 2014, for the second meeting of the US-Morocco Strategic Dialogue.)*



## Moroccan Leadership in the Middle East and Africa

- ❖ Morocco continues to play a key role in socioeconomic development in both North and sub-Saharan Africa. Morocco has signed commercial accords with 18 countries, including Senegal, Gabon, Niger, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Cameroon, Mali, Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Chad, Guinea, Libya, and Tunisia.

- ❖ In the last decade, Morocco has taken the lead among its neighbors in promoting peace and stability across the Middle East and Africa. As of November 2013, Morocco had more than 1,500 troops, military observers, and police serving in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, most recently in the Central African Republic.

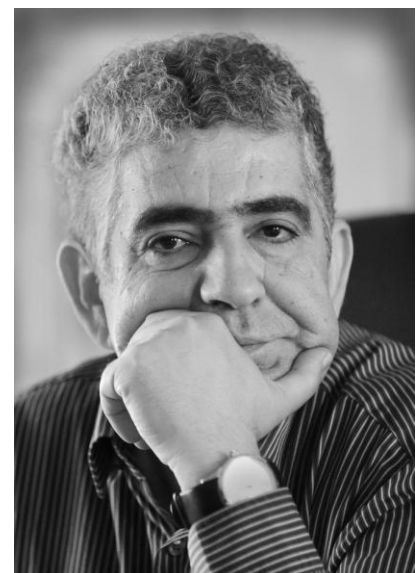
## Political Reform

- ❖ A constitutional monarchy with Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches, Morocco has been on a steady path of reform for more than two decades. Under the leadership of His Majesty King Mohammed VI, who acceded to the throne in 1999, the pace of reform has accelerated. A new Constitution, passed by referendum in 2011, broadens the legislative powers of the Head of Government and Parliament, provides for an independent judiciary, and mandates that the Head of State, King Mohammed VI, appoint a Head of Government/Prime Minister to form a new government from the party winning the most seats in Parliamentary elections.
- ❖ Since the late 1990s, Moroccan elections have been certified as free and fair by international observers. In the most recent Parliamentary election, 60 national seats went to women and 30 went to candidates under 40 years old. The moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) won the most seats, and King Mohammed VI appointed PJD leader Abdelilah Benkirane as Prime Minister.



## Human and Civil Rights

- ❖ Morocco is a leader among Arab countries on human and women's rights issues. The country boasts a dynamic civil society with tens of thousands of nonprofits and non-governmental organizations working on issues ranging from women's rights to the environment to youth education and everything in between.
- ❖ Morocco's Constitution guarantees civil liberties, including freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and association. Morocco's independent National Human Rights Council (CNDH) has the power to investigate all allegations of human rights violations, to summon people to give evidence, and to act as an early warning mechanism to prevent violations. (At right, Driss El Yazami, former political prisoner and current President of the CNDH.)
- ❖ Morocco has one of the most progressive women's rights laws in the Arab world, with a new *Moudawana*, or Family Law, enacted in 2004. The *Moudawana* raised the age of marriage for girls from 15 to 18 and gave wives joint responsibility for the family, notably in the area of equal rights to property upon divorce. Today, women hold leadership roles in all sectors of Moroccan society, including government and business.



## Human and Economic Development

- ❖ In 2006, Morocco launched the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), a multi-billion dollar, 5-year project to raise literacy rates, extend health services and access to power in remote communities, and promote economic growth. The INDH was so successful that it has been extended for an additional five years.
- ❖ Morocco is currently on track to achieve all of the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which focus on reducing extreme poverty, providing potable water to all parts of the country, promoting maternal and child health, and achieving universal primary education and gender equality. On June 16th, the UN honored Morocco, Chile, and China for meeting the MDGs for fighting hunger and malnutrition more than a year ahead of the target date.
- ❖ In 2013, Morocco became the second receiver of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa, and the first in North Africa. The Casablanca Stock Exchange has become the third-largest on the continent, and the city has received accolades from CNN and other sources as a “finance hub of the future.”

## Culture and Religion

- ❖ Morocco is a melting pot of cultural influences and is internationally recognized for proactively promoting peaceful coexistence among the country’s Muslims, Jews, and Christians. The 2011 Constitution formally recognizes the country’s Jewish, Berber and Andalusian heritage, and the country is home to the only Jewish museum in the Arab world.
- ❖ Islam in Morocco follows the Maliki school of thought, which advocates for moderation and modernity. The King—a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed—is “Commander of the Faithful,” and this legitimacy enables him to promote a moderate and stabilizing religious discourse.
- ❖ Morocco is seeking to promote moderate Islam throughout the region through a formal imam-training program that began in late 2013. Tunisia, Mali, Nigeria, Cote d’Ivoire, and several other African countries are sending imams to Morocco for this training.



## Western Sahara

- ❖ After gaining independence from France, Morocco sought to regain its southernmost provinces— then known as the Spanish Sahara— from the Spanish colonizers. By then, an Algerian-backed separatist group known as the Polisario Front was vying for control of the territory.

- ❖ The Western Sahara has remained an area of conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front since 1975. After fifteen years of war, a ceasefire was declared in 1991, and a UN peacekeeping mission known as MINURSO was established to end the fighting and organize a referendum to determine the future of the territory.
- ❖ Although the ceasefire has held, subsequent attempts to negotiate the terms of a referendum have failed, and tens of thousands of Sahrawi refugees who fled during the conflict have meanwhile remained trapped in desperate conditions in Polisario-run camps in Algeria for nearly 40 years.
- ❖ As it became increasingly clear that a referendum was unrealistic, in 1999 the United States adopted a policy to support a negotiated political solution based on autonomy for Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty. In 2007, Morocco proposed such an autonomy plan, which was endorsed by the Bush and Obama administrations as “serious, realistic, and credible.”
- ❖ In the meantime, Morocco has invested billions of dollars to build roads, schools, housing, hospitals and other infrastructure in Western Sahara to improve the lives of citizens living there. *(Below, a photo of Dakhla Airport. Credit: David Stanley/Flickr)*
- ❖ The Western Sahara conflict stands in the way of regional economic and security cooperation essential to fighting the dangerous expansion of terrorist activity in the region, as well as promoting much-needed regional development.



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