

AFRICA RISK CONSULTING

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Morocco Summary 31 March 2019

Vatican City leader and leader of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis (2013-present) makes a two-day visit to Morocco. King Mohammed VI (1999-present) uses the visit to establish Morocco's credentials as a moderate Muslim state where Islam and Christianity co-exist in harmony. Security during the visit was heightened and coincided with the arrival of 1,000 United States (US) troops for the annual African Lion military exercise. The US State Department annual report on human rights has highlighted the negative effects of corruption in Morocco. The government has brought into force a freedom of information law, which will improve civil rights. Social unrest continues as a teachers' strike moves into its fourth week. The country has agreed a new fisheries agreement with the European Union (EU) to allow EU fishing boats into its and Western Sahara's waters. The agreement has rekindled the resistance of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), South Africa and Namibia to Morocco and their traditional support for Polisario Front independence movement in the disputed Western Sahara.

Morocco seeks to establish its credentials as a moderate Islamic country ...

King Mohammed VI's (1999-present) ambition to position **Morocco** as a moderate Muslim country at the gateway to **Africa** has won significant endorsement with a two-day visit from the **Vatican's** Pope Francis (2013-present) on 29 and 30 March.



Both King Mohammed VI and Pope Francis have dual roles as religious monarchs and as heads of state. Each met with an agenda: King Mohammed VI wanted to use the pontiff's visit to establish Morocco's credentials as a moderate Islamic country at the gateway between **Africa** and **Europe**. Mohammed VI claimed that as king, he was the guarantor of religious freedom in a country where Islam and Christianity co-exist in harmony. The king is reported to have said,

*"I protect Moroccan Jews as well as Christians from other countries who are living in Morocco."*¹

However, Moroccan Christians quickly responded on social media that they are not allowed to register children with Christian names.

Pope Francis used this first visit to a **North African** state by a modern pontiff to address the Africa-Europe migration crisis. He urged Morocco and other North African states to protect migrants from

¹ Morocco World News, 30 Mar 2019.

threat, exploitation and abuse and implored wealthy European countries to accept and integrate more migrants into their society.

Morocco has become a stepping stone destination for migrants from **sub-Saharan Africans** trying to reach Europe² and its role in the process is controversial. In a bid to stop the flow of people to a **Spanish**-owned island bordering Morocco, Moroccan forces with support from Spain and the EU have coordinated raids on migrants' centres in northern Moroccan towns. Human rights groups report that migrants were rounded up, herded into buses, and moved to villages hundreds of miles to the south of the country.³

... amidst tight security ...

Although Morocco's royal house and state run a highly effective security regime, security was tightened during the pope's visit. The visit coincided with the arrival of over 1,000 members of the **United States (US)** armed forces from all four branches – **US Marine Corps, Army, Navy, Air Force** – for the annual **African Lion** military exercise, which continues through to 3 April.⁴ African Lion is the largest annual US military exercise on the continent, and the US military describes it as

"...an annually scheduled, bilateral US and Moroccan sponsored exercise designed to improve interoperability and mutual understanding of each nation's tactics, techniques and procedures".

The US and Morocco have close security and military-to-military ties. The US has given Morocco "*major non-NATO ally status*", which qualifies Morocco for increased US military cooperation. Beyond joint exercises, cooperation includes intelligence sharing, measures to stop terrorist financing, law enforcement partnerships, and a number of other multilateral efforts.

The overall goal is to build combined military capabilities to strengthen cooperation and operational proficiency. The **US Marine Corps Forces Europe and Africa** are leading this year's exercise which **US Africa Command** sponsors. It includes military training in command-post activities and counter-violent extremist organisation and tactical training. US troops planned to carry out multi-lateral training with units from the **Royal Moroccan Armed Forces, Tunisia, Spain, Canada** and the **United Kingdom (UK)**.

... but are human rights practices all they could be?

In other areas the US-Morocco relationship is less cosy. The **US State Department** has published its annual report on human rights in Morocco, focusing on seven areas: integrity of the person, civil liberties, freedom to participate in politics, corruption, investigation of human rights abuses, societal abuses, and workers' rights. Of particular concern to businesses operating in Morocco were the state department's comments on corruption. The report observed that while corruption is punishable, the government does not implement the law effectively. There were reports of government corruption in the executive, judicial, and legislative branches during 2018. The report noted an imbalance in dealing with it and reducing it. Some 134 public officials faced corruption charges in 2018, but only 13 were convicted and 121 investigated.

On the up side, the report notes as an improvement the government's introduction of an information access law. The law – which will allow Moroccans to file complaints if they were denied transparency or access to information – was implemented on 12 March. Morocco's prime minister, **Saad Eddine El Othmani**, told government departments to comply with requests from business and citizens and to show people how to make freedom of information requests online. In terms of the law, all citizens have the right to access information to ensure transparency, to counter corruption, and to establish a culture of good governance and democracy. Government departments are bound to respond to requests within 20 days or, in an emergency, within three days.

² New York Times, 30 Mar 2019

³ New York Times, 22 Oct 2018

⁴ US Africa Command (AFRICOM), 25 Mar 2019

However, there are clauses that allow the government not to respond when it comes to "*safety reasons or life and freedom of individuals*", and while the civil service has to acknowledge a request in 20 days, it has a year to comply with these requests.

And domestic social unrest burbles on ...

Despite these high profile events, social disgruntlement continues to fuel popular protest. The simmering social discontent is currently manifest in a continuing teachers' strike that is now into its fourth week. Some 10,000 teachers and young people flocked to the capital, **Rabat**, to protest their status as contractual teachers or to support the teachers' protest. The teachers camped out in front of parliament on 25 March to show their determination. Police used anti-riot police water cannons and police motorcycles to disperse the protests, and teachers claimed there was some violence.

The source of the disgruntlement is a teachers' annually renewable contract that the government introduced in 2016 as the education and finance ministries sought to cut public debt. Although contract teachers are not officially part of the public sector, they receive the same salary, starting at MAD 5,000 (\$520) per month, but have reduced pensions. Education minister **Said Amzazi** said that contract teachers were informed of their contractual conditions but now demand equal treatment to their public sector compatriots.

A new fisheries agreement ... a diplomatic coup?

Morocco has signed a new fisheries agreement with the EU, which US-based ratings agency **Dun & Bradstreet** hailed as "*a diplomatic victory*" in Morocco's plan to become a prominent political and economic force in the rest of Africa. But is it?

The European Parliament on 12 February endorsed the new **EU-Morocco Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement** in apparent defiance of the **European Court of Justice**. The ECJ in June 2018 ruled that the fisheries agreement would not be valid if it included **Western Sahara**, because its offshore water status is disputed. The fishing grounds offshore the disputed territory are vast.⁵ The ECJ ruling had said that any future agreement between the EU and Morocco involving Western Sahara would require the consent of its **Sahrawi** people, and must directly benefit them. The petition to the ECJ had **Algeria** and **South Africa's** support.

Moroccan lobbying then concentrated on persuading European parliamentarians that this had been obtained. Pro-Rabat politicians and business leaders from the **Dakhla** and **Laayoune** regions of Western Sahara told **Brussels** how the fisheries pact would bring jobs and investment. The ECJ rejected the appeal of the **Polisario Front** independence movement against the new agreement on 13 February. The **European Parliament** approved the agreement, which the **European Council of Ministers** endorsed on 4 March. The new agreement states that it does not constitute recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara.⁶

Western Sahara is a long disputed territory in north-west Africa. It is a sparsely populated desert terrain. Morocco considers it a province with certain autonomous rights, while the Polisario Front claims the area as the **Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic**. A referendum to choose between the two options was proposed as far back as 1991 but never happened. In 2017, Morocco joined the **African Union (AU)** after a 33-year absence. Since Morocco joined, the AU has held back from playing a further role in the conflict.⁷

The four-year fisheries partnership agreement brings with it additional financial aid of €208m (\$233m) and will allow European fishing vessels to operate along the entire **Atlantic** coast of Morocco and the disputed Western Sahara region, down to the international border with **Mauritania**.

⁵ Africa Confidential, 9 Feb 2019

⁶ Dun & Bradstreet March 2019

⁷ Mena.FM.Com 25-26 Mar

The EU aid is intended for development projects in Western Sahara. This advantage comes at a sensitive moment in North African politics.

Morocco is in mid-pivot from a country whose political and economic life was in servicing Europe to one taking an influential role in the economic life of the continent. The fisheries partnership marks Mohammed VI's successful efforts to secure full African Union participation while outflanking Polisario on Western Sahara issues when needed. Morocco's strategy is to develop diplomatic missions across the continent, develop bilateral cooperation, and for direct investment via Mohammed VI and the state's joint-venture investment vehicle, the **Société nationale d'investissement (SNI)**.

Several African countries have abandoned their traditional positions on Western Sahara in favour of closer ties with the economically strong Morocco. The declaration confirms that the AU remains split on the matter. The visit of **Rwanda's** foreign affairs minister to Rabat illustrates perfectly the diplomatic and investment programme Morocco is effecting. Rwanda signed 12 bilateral cooperation agreements on energy, education, trade, environment and judiciary within the framework of a first **Joint Permanent Commission (JPC)** between Rwanda and Morocco on 19 March.⁸ This follows Mohammed VI's \$41m investment in **Cogebanque** – a Rwandan-owned commercial bank. The investment was made through **Attijariwafa Bank**, in which SNI has a substantial stake.

At the other end of the continent, however, resistance to the monarch and Morocco's moves is being rekindled. The **Southern African Development Community (SADC)**, South Africa and **Namibia**, joined together in conference in **Pretoria** (South Africa) on 25 and 26 March, re-iterated their traditional and historical support for Polisario and an independent Western Sahara. Billed as a "*solidarity conference with Western Sahara*", the summit opened with a call for unity in "*ensuring the right to freedom and self-determination of the people of the Western Sahara*".

Planner

2019: Scheduled election of the president of the **Chambre des Représentants** (house of representatives, lower house of parliament);

April 2019: National council of opposition **Parti Authenticité et Modernité (PAM)**;

October 2019: National congress of **Parti Authenticité et Modernité (PAM)**;

2019: Energy and mining minister will introduce a roadmap for the energy sector;

2021: Scheduled legislative, regional and local elections

Chronology

30-31 Mar 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** @*MarocDiplomatie* **King Mohammed VI**, himself a religious leader, meets the **Vatican's Pope Francis**;

25 Mar 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *World News* Approximately 10,000 students and teachers strike for a fourth week;

25-26 Mar 2019 **Pretoria (South Africa)** *Mena.FM.Com* **Southern African Development Community (SADC)**, South Africa and **Namibia** host a "*solidarity conference*" with **Western Sahara**;

26 Mar 2019 **Tifinit (Morocco)** @*US Embassy Morocco* **US Armed Forces in African Lion** live-fire exercises with the **Moroccan Special Operations Forces (MSOF)**;

22 Mar 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Agence Ecofin*. **Office Chérifien des Phosphates** announces the launch of an investment fund worth 500 million dirhams (\$52.2m) dedicated towards assisting

⁸ Rwanda Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release, 20 Mar 2019

SMEs;

20 Mar 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Financial Services Monitor* **Morocco** and **Rwanda** sign 12 cooperation agreements to promote energy, education, trade, environment and judiciary of both countries;

20 Mar 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Reuters*. Phosphate exporter **Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP)** reports a 19% year-on-year profit rise to \$562.7m;

18 Mar 2019 **London (UK)** *Financial Times* **Moroccan** and **Tunisian** olive oil producers are looking to pick up the slack in production and increase exports into the **European Union** as **Italian** olive oil prices jump and output falls after olive trees succumb to disease and frost;

12 Mar 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Dunn & Bradstreet* The **European Council of Ministers** on 4 March endorsed a 12 February **European Parliament** fisheries agreement;

25 Feb 2019 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Agence Gabonaise de Presse*. President **Ali Bongo** returns to **Gabon** from **Morocco** for the second time since suffering a stroke in October;

About Africa Risk Consulting:

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