



# America First ≠ America Alone

## Morocco as Exemplar for U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy

By James B. Cogbill

On October 4, 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the release of President Donald Trump’s new National Strategy for Counterterrorism (NSCT), stating that “the President’s strategy emphasizes the

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importance of diplomacy and the role of international partnerships in combating the terrorist threats we face.”<sup>1</sup> The first page of the NSCT includes the statement “America First does not mean America alone,” indicating the essential role of key international partners.<sup>2</sup> Morocco is such a partner. In the years since 9/11, Morocco has built an effective program for counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE), leading U.S. Africa Command

(USAFRICOM) to label Morocco “Africa’s premier security exporter.”<sup>3</sup> This article evaluates Morocco as a model for the NSCT objectives regarding partner-nation CT/CVE activities, while also noting where Morocco’s efforts could be improved.

### Background

Morocco is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy in which King Mohammed VI retains ultimate

power and authority. Following the 2011 Arab Spring protests, the king introduced a new constitution that increased the powers of parliament and permitted direct elections for regional councils. Despite this liberalization, the king still retains near-exclusive power over the military and religious and foreign affairs. The population is 99 percent Sunni Muslim, and the king derives religious legitimacy through his constitutionally enshrined title as Commander of the Faithful and by tracing his lineage to the Prophet Muhammad. During Mohammed VI's reign, the economy has experienced steady growth but still suffers from significant youth unemployment, especially in urban areas.<sup>4</sup>

Located in northwest Africa, Morocco represents a key gateway to Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. This also makes it a key hub for migration—mostly from Africa to Europe—which is a security concern for the European Union. Despite this concern, Morocco enjoys excellent relations with the international community. The U.S. diplomatic relationship with Morocco dates back to 1777, representing the longest unbroken relationship in U.S. history.<sup>5</sup> Separately, Morocco is a “major non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally” and a co-chair of the Global Counterterrorism Forum, and it has been a key military partner through its participation in the coalition to defeat the so-called Islamic State (IS) and by hosting multinational exercises including USAFRICOM's largest such exercise, African Lion.<sup>6</sup>

### **Morocco as a Model for NSCT Objectives**

The NSCT is divided into six lines of effort (LOEs). Morocco's example as a model CT partner is recognizable in the LOEs “strengthen the counterterrorism abilities of international partners” and “counter terrorist radicalization and recruitment.” Under the “strengthen abilities” LOE, the NSCT states that the United States will help “professionalize the military, law enforcement, judicial, intelligence, and security services . . . of

key partners.”<sup>7</sup> With the assistance of the U.S. Embassy in Rabat, Morocco is well on its way to accomplishing all of these goals.

In order to professionalize its military, Morocco has invested several hundred million dollars for modernization, purchasing U.S. F-16 fighter jets, M1A1 tanks, and helicopters.<sup>8</sup> As stated, Morocco participates in the coalition to defeat IS and committed its F-16s to combat operations in Syria and for anti-Houthi strikes in Yemen.<sup>9</sup> Morocco operates a field hospital in Jordan that has served more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees, and it also provided a field hospital in response to the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Morocco participates in peacekeeping missions, with more than 1,500 peacekeepers deployed to the Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of the Congo.<sup>11</sup> Morocco's military conducts partnership-building and professionalization activities with sub-Saharan militaries and trains more than 1,000 foreign officers and noncommissioned officers annually in its military academies and technical schools.<sup>12</sup> Such activities are the reason USAFRICOM has called Morocco Africa's premier security exporter.

In order to professionalize law enforcement, in 2013 Morocco established the Bureau Central d'Investigation Judiciaire (BCIJ, or Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations) as its elite crime fighting organization. Labeled the “Moroccan FBI” by the media, the BCIJ is the primary law enforcement agency responsible for CT.<sup>13</sup> It operates under the supervision of the public prosecutor of the court of appeals and reports to the General Directorate for Territorial Surveillance, whose agents have the rank of judicial police officers and can conduct investigations, question suspects, and make arrests. They also conduct electronic tracking and eavesdropping upon receipt of written approval from the court of appeals. The Moroccan government has pledged not to use such authorities to deprive citizens of their individual rights.<sup>14</sup> Regarding intelligence collection, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation provides Moroccan government officials

training on intelligence analysis, facial recognition, and management.<sup>15</sup>

As a measure of effectiveness, according to BCIJ data, Moroccan security services have interdicted 183 terror cells since 2002, prevented 361 terrorist acts, and arrested more than 3,129 terrorists.<sup>16</sup> The success of Morocco's CT/CVE programs is further indicated by the fact that the country has experienced only two terrorist attacks since 2012—the fewest in North Africa by far.<sup>17</sup> While impressive, human rights organizations have accused Moroccan security services of mass arrests, beatings, and even torture.<sup>18</sup> To avoid creating more terrorists and achieving tactical success at the expense of long-term strategic failure, Moroccans must redouble efforts to purge security services of such abuses.

For judicial reform, the U.S. State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs works with Moroccan partners to increase the professionalism and independence of the judiciary, combat radicalization in prisons, and facilitate reintegration for rehabilitated detainees.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, since 2010, the bureau has worked through Morocco's prison administration, training Moroccan prison wardens to modernize prison management, keep terrorists segregated from the general population, and build more modern and secure facilities.<sup>20</sup>

Counterterrorism is not accomplished through security efforts alone. In addition to security force professionalization, Morocco has implemented an impressive CVE program through policies that ameliorate poverty, improve education, and promote a moderate and peaceful version of Islam. These programs mirror the NSCT's LOE to “counter terrorist radicalization and recruitment.”

Addressing poverty is particularly important as recent studies indicate the primary reason Moroccans join terrorist networks is because of economic—not ideological—factors.<sup>21</sup> The average monthly salary for an IS fighter is \$1,400, while Moroccans typically earn less than \$200 a month (if employed at all).<sup>22</sup> Hence in 2005, King Mohammed VI launched the National Human Development Initiative (NHDI), a



Alpha 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Fleet Antiterrorism Security Team from Yorkstown, Virginia, weapons training with Royal Moroccan armed forces during exercise African Lion, April 22, 2019, at Tifnit, Morocco (U.S. Army Reserve/Tynisha L. Daniel)

program that has invested more than \$6 billion in its first 10 years of existence and was lauded by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as a model for Africa.<sup>23</sup>

NHDI has served at least 7 million people, with more than 34,000 projects targeting youth and women and providing affordable housing and loans.<sup>24</sup> Despite its popularity, NHDI has been criticized for lacking transparency and encouraging patronage due to centralization of decisionmaking over funds disbursement. As such, some have called for greater transparency and involvement of regional councils in program execution.<sup>25</sup>

Regarding education, a recent study indicates the majority of the 1,600 Moroccans who joined IS and affiliated groups did not have more than a primary school education.<sup>26</sup> Primary and secondary school dropout rates remain high in Morocco (only 18

percent of first graders graduate from high school), and national literacy rates of 55 percent are among the lowest in the region.<sup>27</sup> In addition, low daily attendance rates and teacher absenteeism leave young people vulnerable to radicalization.<sup>28</sup> In response, the U.S. Agency for International Development works with civil society organizations to enhance reading instruction. In addition, the agency facilitated a Millennium Challenge Corporation compact (grant) for \$450 million to increase access to higher quality secondary education.<sup>29</sup>

Drawing on his religious legitimacy as Commander of the Faithful, King Mohammed VI has worked to promote moderate and peaceful interpretations of Islam.<sup>30</sup> Specifically, Morocco established satellite television channels that promote the official government version of Islam, including the Sufi and Maliki traditions, to counter Persian Gulf stations that

broadcast more extremist Wahhabist principles.<sup>31</sup> Representing a notable innovation, in 2015, Morocco's Ministry of Islamic Affairs created an imam training academy in Rabat that trains not only Morocco's 50,000 imams but also hundreds of imams from elsewhere in Africa, Europe, and Asia in moderate Islam.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the king created the Mohammedan League of Ulema to promote research in moderate Islam, ensure conformity in Moroccan school curricula, and conduct youth outreach.<sup>33</sup> Morocco also regulates fatwas (religious rulings) by requiring their issuance through a single religious authority—the Higher Scholastic Council.<sup>34</sup> Lastly, Morocco monitors all mosques within the country to deter preaching of radical sermons.<sup>35</sup> While government oversight appears to constrain freedom of religion, clearly some effort to intervene against militant Islam seems justified to address catalysts

for radicalization. However, such reforms must necessarily be undertaken by an actor seen to have religious legitimacy and not by an external power such as the United States, which would undoubtedly result in popular backlash.

Examining Morocco in the context of the new NSCT demonstrates the opportunities that exist in supporting and investing in partner nations' CT and CVE efforts. While problems still exist within Morocco, the effectiveness of its programs in limiting attacks and preventing radicalization is evident. The United States should uphold Morocco as an example for other countries in the region and capitalize on Morocco's status as a premier exporter of security. Encouraging and enabling the success of countries like Morocco is a powerful way to diminish the terrorist threat to the world and to convincingly demonstrate that "America First" does not equal America alone. JFQ

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, "Press Statement on President Trump's National Strategy for Counterterrorism," Department of State, October 4, 2018, available at <[www.state.gov/president-trumps-national-strategy-for-counterterrorism/](http://www.state.gov/president-trumps-national-strategy-for-counterterrorism/)>.

<sup>2</sup> *National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, October 2018), 1, available at <[www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NSCT.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NSCT.pdf)>.

<sup>3</sup> Jay Figurski, "Information Paper: Morocco Overview," U.S. Africa Command J52, June 4, 2018, 1.

<sup>4</sup> "Morocco," *The World Factbook* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2019), available at <[www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mo.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mo.html)>.

<sup>5</sup> "U.S. Relations with Morocco," Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Department of State, July 19, 2018, available at <[www.state.gov/r/pa/ci/bgn/5431.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ci/bgn/5431.htm)>.

<sup>6</sup> *Integrated Country Strategy: Morocco* (Washington, DC: Department of State, August 15, 2018), 2, available at <[www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Morocco.pdf](http://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Morocco.pdf)>.

<sup>7</sup> *National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America*, 24.

<sup>8</sup> Figurski, "Information Paper: Morocco

Overview," 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Meeting with Colonel Andrew Hamann, U.S. Defense Attaché, U.S. Embassy Morocco, Rabat, Morocco, March 13, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Figurski, "Information Paper: Morocco Overview," 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Assia Bensalah Alaoui, "Morocco's Security Strategy: Preventing Terrorism and Countering Extremism," *European View*, July 1, 2017, available at <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1007/s12290-017-0449-3>>.

<sup>14</sup> *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015* (Washington, DC: Department of State, June 2, 2016), 205, available at <<https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/258249.pdf>>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "Tents: 57 Cells Have Been Dismantled and 643 Moroccans Killed in Iraq and Syria," *Lcom2.com* (Rabat), October 1, 2018, available at <<http://lakome2.com/societe/42581.html>>.

<sup>17</sup> Number of terrorist attacks in North Africa from 2012 to 2018 ranked from least to greatest: Morocco (2), Tunisia (89), Algeria (115), Egypt (1,991), and Libya (2,262). Data for 2012–2017 are derived from the *Global Terrorism Database*, a project of the University of Maryland and the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, available at <[www.start.umd.edu/gtd/](http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/)>. See also "List of Terrorist Incidents in 2018," available at <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_terrorist\\_incidents\\_in\\_2018](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_terrorist_incidents_in_2018)>.

<sup>18</sup> See "Morocco/Western Sahara: Events of 2017," in *World Report 2018* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2017), available at <[www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world\\_report\\_download/201801world\\_report\\_web.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/201801world_report_web.pdf)>; see also "Morocco: Dozens Arrested Over Mass Protests in Rif Report Torture in Custody," Amnesty International Web site, August 11, 2017, available at <[www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/08/morocco-dozens-arrested-over-mass-protests-in-rif-report-torture-in-custody/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/08/morocco-dozens-arrested-over-mass-protests-in-rif-report-torture-in-custody/)>.

<sup>19</sup> *Country Reports on Terrorism 2017* (Washington, DC: Department of State, September 19, 2018), 149–150, available at <[www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2017/](http://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2017/)>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Moha Ennaji, "Recruitment of Foreign Male and Female Fighters to Jihad: Morocco's Multifaceted Counter-Terror Strategy," *International Review of Sociology* 26, no. 3 (September 5, 2016), 552, available at <[www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03906701.2016.1244954](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03906701.2016.1244954)>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ahmed Charai, "Morocco's Role in Supporting Human Development in Africa," *Huffington Post*, May 25, 2016, available at <[\[roccos-role-in-supporti\\\_b\\\_7434738.html\]\(http://roccos-role-in-supporti\_b\_7434738.html\)>.](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ahmed-charai/mo-</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

<sup>24</sup> "Talking Points of Ambassador Nasser Bourita at the Open Briefing of the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee," New York, September 30, 2014, available at <[www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Statement-by-Secretary-General-Nasser-Bourita-MFA-Morocco.pdf](http://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Statement-by-Secretary-General-Nasser-Bourita-MFA-Morocco.pdf)>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Bahija Jamal, "Morocco Counter-Terrorism Policy: Case of Moroccan Female Migrants to ISIS," *International Annals of Criminology* 56, spec. issue 1–2 (November 2018), 3, available at <[www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-annals-of-criminology/article/moroccan-counterterrorism-policy-case-of-moroccan-female-migrants-to-isis/898D11702AE6B8AA66BD-3BA5B068A6C3](http://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-annals-of-criminology/article/moroccan-counterterrorism-policy-case-of-moroccan-female-migrants-to-isis/898D11702AE6B8AA66BD-3BA5B068A6C3)>.

<sup>27</sup> See "Morocco: Education," U.S. Agency for International Development, May 7, 2019, available at <[www.usaid.gov/morocco/education](http://www.usaid.gov/morocco/education)>.

<sup>28</sup> *Integrated Country Strategy: Morocco*, 32.

<sup>29</sup> "U.S. Relations with Morocco."

<sup>30</sup> Ahmed Abaddi, "Morocco's Deradicalization Strategy," Maghreb Roundtable Series, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 24, 2013, available at <[https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/attachments/130624\\_Summary\\_Abaddi.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/attachments/130624_Summary_Abaddi.pdf)>.

<sup>31</sup> Jack Kalpakian, "Current Moroccan Anti-Terrorism Policy," *Real Instituto Elcano*, May 13, 2011, 5, available at <[www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano\\_en/content?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano\\_in/zonas\\_in/international+terrorism/ari89-2011](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/content?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/international+terrorism/ari89-2011)>.

<sup>32</sup> *Country Reports on Terrorism 2017*, 149.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Abaddi, "Morocco's Deradicalization Strategy," 2.

<sup>35</sup> Jamal, "Moroccan Counter-Terrorism Policy," 6.