
The Strategic Importance of Morocco and the Mediterranean Region

By

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Introduction

When I arrived in Rabat some fourteen months ago, I found the relationship between the Kingdom of Morocco and the United States of America to be strong and friendly. Two hundred and eleven years worth of history, and a growing mutual interest to strengthen those relations.

We are excited about His Majesty's new government, headed by long-time socialist opposition leader Prime Minister Abderrahman Youssoufi, as it represents the King's long-term vision for democratic and open Morocco.

I am here today to discuss why military relations and U.S. military assistance are important to what's going on both inside and outside of Morocco. By the end of this speech, I hope you will see why I believe military relations play an important role in maintaining and strengthening our bilateral ties with Morocco. I see such assistance as key to America's overall position in the Mediterranean region as we head into the new century.

I know that some of you in this room are involved with matters that currently eclipse the importance of this relationship but please remember that Morocco has been a good friend of the U.S. throughout our history. They supported Allied efforts in WW I and again in WW II, especially during the North African campaign. The same can be said for their heroic actions in Somalia where, despite taking casualties, they continued to assist the United Nations, even after U.S. military forces had departed the country. I also know the importance of loyalty to you, my military partners. So, as we reaffirm our long-term bilateral relationship with Morocco as it moves into the 21st Century, let us be reminded of the importance of loyalty to one another.

Loyalty should not be the only value, nor values the only reason for close allied relationships. America's strategic interests cannot be overlooked or underestimated as one of our most important reasons for foreign engagements. Morocco is 12 miles south of Spain, next door neighbors to Algeria and Libya, and atop a changing and uncertain continent. Few nations with such strategic location and importance have displayed such continual friendship and support.

The U.S.–Morocco Bilateral Relationship

The U.S. and Morocco have had a long and historic relationship. The Kingdom of Morocco was among the first outside powers to recognize America as a state. In fact, our 1787 Treaty of Peace and Friendship is the longest-standing U.S. treaty still in force.

Throughout his reign, His Majesty King Hassan II has been willing to engage us politically, diplomatically, militarily and economically. The Government of Morocco continues to support many of our most important foreign policy objectives. These include the Middle East Peace Process, Operations Desert Shield and Storm, and efforts to bring peace and stability to Somalia and Bosnia.

We are now on the eve of exploring a new and strengthened bilateral partnership between our two nations. The next few years could represent a defining moment in Moroccan history. For the first time in over 300 years of rule under the Alaouite Dynasty, there is a socialist opposition government in Rabat. Its leader, Prime Minister Youssoufi, has committed the government to a course of democratic and market reform. He has joined in solidarity with His Majesty King Hassan II to advance Moroccan policies on democracy and human rights, as well as social and economic development.

America has three interrelated goals in Morocco today: stability, prosperity and democracy. To address these goals, we have identified six basic program areas for our mission in Morocco. They include, trade and investment, social and economic development, democracy and human rights, professional and educational exchanges, foreign policy coordination, and most importantly for this audience today, military cooperation.

Our military assistance programs contribute significantly to these mission efforts. Whether it is an improved understanding of human rights or refurbishing a preschool on a Moroccan Air Force base, it supports our interests in Morocco. As Secretary of Defense Cohen recently stated in Seattle Washington, "...peace and stability are the very cornerstones of prosperity"¹.

For that, I am grateful to those of you in this room who support our many military assistance programs in Morocco. These include the recent reinstatement of Foreign Military Financing (the first time since 1993), the International Military Education and Training Program (IMET) which has sent nearly 3000 students back to the United States for training, the transfer of millions of dollars worth of excess defense articles under the Southern Region Amendment to the Forces Armees Royales, the combined exercises we hold each year inside the country, exercise-related construction at the Sidi Slimane Air Base, and the United States European Command's Humanitarian Assistance Program (HAP).

The Way Ahead

Our European allies and we have an interest in stability, prosperity and democracy in the Mediterranean region. This is a shared interest with our Moroccan partner. In this regard, we support several initiatives. First, there is the U.S.-North African Regional Economic Initiative, also known as "The Eizenstat Initiative" after its author, our current U.S. Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, Stu Eizenstat.

Second is the European Union's so-called "Euro-Med Initiative," or the "Barcelona Process."

And finally, NATO's parallel program, the "Mediterranean Dialogue".

The Eizenstat Initiative has four essential elements. They include enhanced high-level dialogue, accelerated structural reforms within each country, a greater role for the private sector through increased investment and promotion, and the removal of intra-regional barriers to trade

and investment. This proposal is driven by the private sector, with the support of the government of Morocco, in the hope of eventually developing broader and deeper regional economic integration.

Under Secretary Eizenstat said it best when he stated; "It should not be a spokes-and-hub arrangement, involving three separate bilateral economic relationships with the United States, as important as that is. Rather, this will be a dynamic, multilateral and integrated private-sector partnership based on a firm foundation of ever-strengthened economic ties between the United States and the Maghreb region."

The governments of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia have each welcomed the Eizenstat Initiative. We are currently engaged in discussions on guiding principles, key elements, and bilateral action plans.

The second effort, that is, the Euro-Med initiative, parallels the Eizenstat Initiative. It was launched in Barcelona in 1995 and is an even more aggressive program encompassing everything from government-to-government dialogue to gradual progress towards free trade. It is aimed at building a European-Mediterranean partnership based on peace and stability, shared prosperity, and closer relations in social, cultural and human affairs. The involvement of the European Union, and in particular France and Spain, with Morocco promises to make this initiative even more intense than our own. We support this initiative and encourage the E.U.'s goal of achieving free trade regimes and social development projects with Morocco and its regional partners. America's bilateral program I described earlier, combined with the Eizenstat Initiative, mirrors and complements the Euro-Med Initiative.

The third effort is NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, an effort to bring to the Kingdom of Morocco and five other countries a better understanding of NATO's activities in the region. The other countries include Mauritania, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel and Jordan.

Morocco has something of a head start on that issue, since it currently has a mechanized infantry battalion deployed in and around Mostar, and has been supporting efforts to bring a lasting peace to Bosnia for some time. Its involvement speaks highly of Morocco's role in bringing peace and stability to troubled regions throughout the world. As a consequence, I believe that we should consider working with Morocco to develop a broader range of bilateral and multilateral military relationships.

As many of you probably know, Spain has been designated as NATO's contact point embassy in Morocco. We have been in touch with our Spanish counterparts in Rabat and have discussed cooperation with them. We share an enthusiasm for finding better ways to facilitate Morocco's dialogue with the Alliance and our role is one of supporting efforts to foster closer links among the countries within the region.

Let me summarize these regional initiatives by stating that America is not in competition with the E.U. or its members when it comes to Morocco or this region of the world. As I've said, the United States and the Kingdom of Morocco have forged a partnership based on mutual respect, with the goal to advance prosperous, democratic and stable Morocco. It is not only in Morocco's interest, but also in America's enlightened self-interest to extend this relationship to all our friends and allies who endorse the same objectives. We need to work more closely with our European allies to advance our shared and common interests with Morocco and the region.

We all want Morocco and this, His Majesty King Hassan II's experiment with "*alternance*," to succeed, as it copes with social, economic and democratic changes for the 21st century.

By now, some of you may be asking yourselves what this has to do with military assistance. I would like to refer to Secretary of Defense Cohen's remarks concerning the need for stability when he stated that "...when our diplomats and military forces combine to help create stability and security in a nation or a region, that same stability and security attracts investment."²

The Next Two Years

Looking forward, the U.S. Embassy in Rabat has established three objectives for military cooperation over the next two years:

1. To continue, and where possible, expand our military exercises and exchanges. The contact between our military personnel, along with the skill and technology transfers, are the most concrete display of our bilateral strength and friendship with each other.

2. To build on these tactical exercises and exchanges by encouraging a more high-level strategic dialogue. We have recommended that Morocco lead a high-level delegation to EUCOM and possibly the United States as a beginning to this new strategic relationship.

3. To pursue a clearly-defined NATO-Mediterranean Dialogue that respects the desires and needs of NATO members and the six Dialogue Countries. NATO suffers from a serious image problem in some of the Dialogue Countries, as it is sometimes viewed as a Cold War institution. As a consequence, Dialogue Countries may be weary of cooperating with it in the areas of security and defense.

For these reasons, NATO might consider pursuing a dialogue that focuses on soft security issues rather than hard security issues and a transparent bottom-up approach that emphasizes the building of trust and confidence through the use of bilateral assets and assistance. These areas of cooperation could include the following:

- Public information and outreach
- Educational courses and visits
- Civil emergency planning
- And finally, crisis management, peacekeeping, and peace support activities.³

Thanks to many of you seated in this room today we are working with the Kingdom of Morocco and our European allies to help address these issues to make these modest military goals in Embassy Rabat a reality.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by saying that our strategic partnership with Rabat has implications for more than just Morocco and the United States. Morocco serves as a bridge from the U.S. and a platform to European, Islamic, Arab and African countries. Our relations with Morocco can serve as an entree into several parts of the world, besides those in our respective capitals.

Morocco also plays an important role in the stability of the Mediterranean region, and in

efforts to bring a lasting peace to the Middle East. The Embassy's Office of Defense Cooperation, plays a vital role, not only in implementing security assistance programs, but also by building bridges of understanding between our two cultures. The military assistance programs that you and we are involved with will contribute substantially towards these efforts, to make the post-Cold War world more safe, and play a key role in a prosperous, democratic and stable Morocco.

End Notes

¹18 Feb 99 speech by SECDEF Cohen to Microsoft employees.

²Ibid

³*Mediterranean Initiative: Policy Issues and Dilemmas*, Rand Study prepared for the Italian Ministry of Defense, Santa Monica, CA, 1998.