



The Marrakesh bombings and Morocco's precarious security environment

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Morocco's stable security image shattered in April

Morocco witnessed a severe blow to its external image as one of the more stable and least dangerous North African Maghreb countries at the end of last month, when an apparent suicide bombing in the city of Marrakesh led to the deaths of 17 persons, including a number of foreign nationals. The fatal blast, which took place in a café in Marrakesh's iconic Djemaa el-Fna square (a Unesco World Heritage site popular with European tourists) on April 28, was the first major, apparent act of terrorism in the country since the 2003 bombings in Casablanca which killed up to 45 people. The day following the attack, which sparked outrage amongst Moroccans and led to domestic rallies against terrorism, the Moroccan authorities revealed that the Marrakesh bombing was "set off from a distance", adding later that the attack was "masterminded by an Al Qaeda member who joined terrorist groups in Chechnya and Iraq before targetting Morocco". These statements, issued by the Moroccan interior ministry, were accompanied by the arrests of three suspects (announced on May 5), all of whom are Moroccan nationals, allegedly with Al Qaeda links. Yet despite the arrests, no group has claimed responsibility for the bombings and just last

week (May 6) Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the terrorist group active across the Maghreb, has denied any links to the Marrakesh bombings.

Can Morocco still be considered as the Maghreb's "bastion of stability" ?

While we expressed a certain degree of cautious optimism about Morocco's domestic security landscape in our last writing on the country, we also warned that the fact that a large scale act of domestic terrorism has not been seen in Morocco since 2003 should not be taken as a sign that the threat of violence and other nominal risks have receded significantly in the country. The alleged act of terror in Marrakesh at the end of last month thus serves as a difficult and costly reminder of the fact that Morocco continues to share many of the similar risks and threats (as well as socio-political ailments) that continue to plague its neighbouring North African states, including Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, which have witnessed intense civil unrest, regime change and a form of civil war (respectively) during the opening months of 2011.

Morocco, therefore, whilst often presenting an outward image of stability and a regime-society relationship which has not necessarily led to the type of political strife experienced by its neighbours, should hardly be viewed as the Maghreb's "bastion of stability within an arc of turbulence". Despite many of the country's strengths, including the high esteem with which most Moroccans hold their ruler, King Mohammed VI, at the time of writing Morocco continues to face largely similar governance and security challenges to those gripping its neighbours. These include questions of regime legitimacy due to large scale corruption which remains prevalent in the country, significant social inequality, widespread poverty fuelled by unemployment and lack of social mobility, as well as the ongoing conflict over the Western Sahara. Such circumstances create a breeding ground for discontent, which, needless to say, are all too often harnessed by domestic and transnational terrorist groups and/or criminal organisations.

Civil unrest continued in March and April

We wrote in our last report on Morocco that the country has been lauded by the European Union for the apparent progress it has been making in reforming and modernising its society. That being said, however, it is also highly evident that this important Maghreb nation has not escaped the waves of anti-regime protests which continue to sweep the Arab street at the time of writing. Large-scale demonstrations commenced on February 20, 2011, in which approximately 37,000 people participated in protests in up to 57 Moroccan cities, according to the

Moroccan Ministry of Interior. Further protests were held on February 26, March 13 and March 20, with up to 35,000 persons marching on the last date given. As in some of the other Arab countries, social media networks also played a role in the Moroccan protests, as calls for new demonstrations in April appeared on Facebook. The protestors have been demanding an end to corruption, creation of employment opportunities and more civil liberties. There were a number of cases of violence during the first set of demonstrations, when 128 people (115 of whom were police officers) were reportedly injured in clashes between protestors and security forces. Additionally, 33 public buildings were set on fire, while five burnt bodies were found inside a torched bank. In the protests taking place on March 13, approximately 30 demonstrators were severely beaten by the security forces.

However, aside from these specific episodes, the character of the Moroccan unrest has not been particularly violent, nor has the demand for regime change been at the heart of the dissent. It is believed that groups of hooligans infiltrated the ranks of the protestors and were responsible for the incidents of arson. Further, many of the protestors stated explicitly that overthrowing the king or unleashing a civil war was not on their agenda. Thus both analysts and state officials have dubbed Morocco's protests as "the peaceful revolution". King Mohammad VI continues to enjoy strong support amongst the masses, who revere his three centuries-old Alaouite dynasty – which claims a direct link to the Prophet Mohammad. In recent years the king has managed to consolidate his popularity by introducing social reforms and plans to fight corruption as well as

encouraging political pluralism, including moderate Islamism.

The strength of the king's position is further underscored by his behaviour in the course of the current crisis. On March 9 King Mohammed VI delivered a speech in which he announced the immediate introduction of a reform programme to meet the people's demands, which included the appointment of a panel of experts-officials to review the Moroccan Constitution. The panel is due to provide its preliminary recommendations in June of this year. Remarkably, the king even showed willingness to give up some of his powers, in particular the right to appoint the prime minister and to dissolve the government. The king also granted an official pardon to 190 detainees, many of whom were of Salafi Islamist background, in a move designed to reduce existing tensions between repressed Salafi groups and the regime. A human rights activist was also released. While the persistence of demonstrations throughout March and into April indicated that many Moroccans remain unsatisfied with the concessions made thus far, it seems likely that a dialogue between the king and the Moroccan people will continue and that violence will be comparatively minimal.

Corruption remains a key governance challenge

As already mentioned above, widespread corruption remains one of the core governance challenges which King Mohammed VI needs to address. In October 2010, several months before the beginning of the current civil unrest, the king announced the launching of a two-year plan to fight corruption, accepting that

the phenomenon not only undermines the cultural values of the country, but also destroys two per cent of Morocco's gross domestic product (GDP). Up to 43 measures were included in the plan, which also mentioned the establishment of classes to raise awareness about the dangers of corruption and public channels to report such practices. The government reiterated its commitment to eradicate corruption in the wake of the current spate of civil unrest taking place in the country.

However, there are several deeper factors suggesting that neither the October 2010 plan nor the more recent promises made by the king will significantly improve the country's corruption landscape. Transparency International, the Berlin-based corruption watchdog, pointed out that the government did not consult any civic or business groups while drafting the October plan, thus questioning the sincerity of the government's commitment to the root of the problem. Furthermore, aside from the forms of grass-roots corrupt practices which are influenced by cultural and local circumstance, there is also a strong element of top-down corruption with links to the king himself. King Mohammed VI is Morocco's top businessman and is believed to control SNI, a holding company with assets worth some \$13 billion. Amongst its multiple holdings, SNI owns a majority stake in Omnium Nord Africain (ONA), a company benefitting from preferential treatment with respect to concessions obtained in the Moroccan real estate business. SNI also has a significant presence in many other sectors of the Moroccan economy, including food & agriculture, cement and sugar sectors, therefore casting a major shadow over the freedom of the

country's business environment according to both local and international sources.

While the theme of King Mohammed VI's commercial interests has been raised by the Moroccan protestors, it would be somewhat myopic to assume that the king will either surrender his commercial interests or undertake serious efforts to dismantle the existing "business favouritism" networks which penetrate Morocco's real estate sector. Rather, the government's anti-corruption strategy is likely to mirror those revealed in some of our other recent country writings – the government will target corruption at the lower end of the state spectrum, and promote the results of such initiatives amongst the public at large in an effort to deflect public attention away from ONI or SNI-related commercial interests and alleged business nepotism. Such a strategy is likely to continue testing the nerve of the protestors, however.

New scope for terrorism in Morocco's Western Sahara

Morocco continues to be entangled in a messy state of affairs in the Western Sahara, where an unresolved conflict between Rabat and separatists of the so-called Polisario Front has been ongoing for decades. While a UN peacekeeping mission has long been deployed in the area, skirmishes are ongoing at the time of writing. In November 2010, new clashes resulted in up to 13 casualties among Moroccan security forces and local civilians. Moroccan security forces retaliated and fresh violence continued during November. UN officials describe the situation as "worrying" and internationally supervised

negotiations between the Moroccan state and the Polisario separatists have made little progress towards a resolution to the conflict. The latter have refused Moroccan government proposals to preserve the region's autonomy under Morocco's sovereignty. Furthermore, there is concern that terrorist networks such as AQIM might exploit the disputed territories in order to construct a springboard for a regional terror campaign in a similar way to other Jihadist groups employing the territories of Yemen, Somalia or Afghanistan.

There is concern that Jihadist groups may also seek to penetrate the Polisario organization as a possible source of new recruits for the Jihadist cause, or for the purpose of illegal trafficking activities. In November 2010, 34 Moroccans with ties to AQIM were arrested while transporting cocaine from neighbouring Algeria and Mauritania. In December, a new terror cell was dismantled in the Western Sahara and six persons were arrested and charged with planning car bomb attacks and bank robberies to finance their terrorist activities. The cell had links with other terrorist groups in Europe, according to Moroccan authorities. Yet even more worrying may be recent claims by the Algerian authorities of newly discovered links between AQIM cells and the Polisario Front. Algerian authorities have recently alleged a finding of weapons, explosives and letters addressed to AQIM cells in the house of a Polisario imam (ie, Arabic: religious scholar), while many Polisario members have already made explicit statements in favour of AQIM's presence in their territory. The prospect of the Western Sahara becoming a safe haven for regional terrorist groups and organizations of transnational crime appears to be very real in the

near-to-medium term, while some analysts have already pointed to a(n unconfirmed) link between the

Marrakesh (April 28) blasts and this disputed territory.

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