

Morocco: Extremism and Terrorism

On November 14, 2020, the Polisario Front, a pro-independence group in the Western Sahara, declared war on Morocco, ending a ceasefire that has been in place for over three decades. The declaration of war came one day after Morocco launched a military operation in the U.N.-patrolled buffer zone as the Polisario Front allegedly blocked access to Mauritania, Morocco's neighboring country, preventing the transfer of goods and people between the two countries. About a month later on December 10, 2020, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that Morocco agreed to establish full diplomatic relations, including formalizing economic ties, with Israel. The move is a part of a deal that includes U.S. recognition of the disputed territory of Western Sahara as part of Morocco. Morocco joins Bahrain, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates in normalizing diplomatic ties with Jerusalem. (Sources: [Axios](#), [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#))

On October 6, 2020, Moroccan authorities arrested four men allegedly linked to ISIS in Tangiers. According to the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations (BCIJ), the four suspects planned to "destabilize security in the kingdom," by carrying out attacks similar to ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Similar raids were carried out by Moroccan authorities on September 11 in Rabat and July 7 in Nador, northeastern Morocco. The suspects in each raid were allegedly linked to ISIS and sought to carry out terror attacks against prominent figures and sensitive sites in the Kingdom. (Sources: [Associated Press](#), [Defense Post](#), [Defense Post](#))

On December 17, 2018, Moroccan authorities discovered the decapitated bodies of two female Scandinavian tourists at a campsite near Mount Toubkal. The victims were identified as Louisa Vesterager Jespersen of Denmark and Maren Ueland of Norway. Four days later, a video appeared online of four suspects in the murder pledging allegiance to ISIS and ambushing the two women. A voice in the video called the attack revenge for Syria. Images of the murder were also posted to social media, including to Ueland's mother's Facebook page. Authorities labeled the attack politically motivated and an act of terror. Moroccan police subsequently arrested several suspects, including the main defendants, Abdessamad Al Joud, Younes Ouziad, Rachid Afati, and Abderahman Khayali. The men were tried under the country's antiterrorism law. On July 18, 2019, Morocco's antiterrorism court sentences Al Joud, Ouziad and Afati to death, whereas Khayali was given a life sentence. Twenty other suspects were given sentences ranging from five to 30 years in prison. (Sources: [Independent](#), [News.com.au](#), [New York Times](#))

Since at least 2014, Moroccan security forces have worked to disrupt ISIS-linked cells throughout the country. In 2019, Moroccan law enforcement targeted and reportedly arrested 125 individuals and dismantled over 25 terrorist cells. The cells allegedly were in the early stages of planning and coordinating attacks against public buildings and tourist sites. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

Overview

Morocco has suffered fewer terrorist attacks over the last 15 years than Algeria, Chad, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Tunisia, according to an April 2017 study released by the Inter-University Center on Terrorism Studies. Nonetheless, Morocco has faced threats from [al-Qaeda](#)-linked groups and continues to identify and disrupt [ISIS](#)-affiliated cells. (Sources: [Business Wire](#), [Potomac Institute](#))

Morocco has experienced two largescale terrorist attacks. In May 2003, the al-Qaeda-affiliated Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (*Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain* or GICM) and its subgroup, Salafia Jihadia, killed 33 people and wounded more than 100 others in suicide bombings throughout Casablanca. In April 2011, militants set off remote-controlled bombs in the western city of Marrakesh, killing 17 people. The Moroccan government linked the attack to [al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb \(AQIM\)](#), though the al-Qaeda affiliate quickly denied responsibility. (Sources: [Stratfor](#), [ISS Africa](#), [Mapping Militant Organizations](#), [Reuters](#), [Associated Press](#), [BBC News](#), [Telegraph](#))

ISIS has not carried out an attack inside Morocco, though Moroccan security forces have disrupted a number of ISIS-linked cells since at least 2014. Morocco has also struggled with the flight and return of foreign terrorist fighters. As of March 2017, security sources estimated that approximately 2,000 Moroccans had left the kingdom to fight alongside extremist groups in Iraq and Syria. About 200 of those militants have reportedly returned to Morocco, where they have faced arrest. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#))

Morocco passed its first counterterrorism legislation package ten days after the May 2003 Casablanca bombings. In June 2015, the government amended the country's criminal code to address the issue of foreign fighters—making it illegal to join, attempt to join, or recruit others to join a terrorist group abroad. The government also launched a nationwide surveillance campaign, "Operation Hadar," in which members of the gendarmerie, police, and military are deployed throughout the country to monitor and prevent domestic terrorism. The kingdom has worked to empower female imams, launch peer education programs, and create counter-narrative comic books as part of the fight against extremist ideology. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [U.S. Department of State](#), [Foreign Affairs](#))

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Morocco is a founding member of the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF), belongs to the Global Initiative to Counter Nuclear Terrorism, and has hosted conferences led by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre. In addition, Morocco is a member of the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, and carries out airstrikes against the terrorist group in Syria and Iraq. The kingdom also cooperates with the United States on a number of domestic counterterrorism-related issues. For example, Moroccan police and prosecutors have received counterterrorism training from the U.S. Department of Justice and the FBI. (Sources: [GCTF](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

The Polisario Front, Hezbollah, and Iran

Moroccan control over Western Sahara has long been contested by the Polisario Front, a Western Sahara independence movement that emerged in 1973. Armed conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front persisted for sixteen years until the U.N. Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) brokered a ceasefire deal in 1991. Despite numerous U.N.-sponsored peace talks, the parties have not been able to reach a political solution and the Polisario Front has continued to pursue a campaign for independence. (Sources: [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#), [BBC News](#), [Deutsche Welle](#), [HuffPost](#))

The Polisario Front reportedly began receiving financial and logistical support from Iran via its proxy, [Hezbollah](#), as early as 2016. Hezbollah's involvement with the Polisario Front has since increased and, according to Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, in recent months "Hezbollah sent military officials to Polisario and provided the front with... weapons and trained them on urban warfare." According to several media reports, some observers have argued that Morocco's arrest of Lebanese-Belgian Hezbollah financier [Kassim Tajideen](#) in March 2017 may have driven Hezbollah to increase its support for the Polisario Front. The Moroccan government—holding Iran responsible for Hezbollah's activities—has accused Iran of attempting to destabilize the Western Sahara region and cut diplomatic ties with Iran on May 1, 2018. (Sources: [Atlantic Council](#), [The National](#), [Morocco World News](#))

On November 14, 2020, the Polisario Front declared war on Morocco, ending a fragile ceasefire that has been in place since 1991. Polisario Front officials have accused Moroccan security forces of indiscriminately shooting at civilians in the Western Sahara who were protesting Morocco's alleged "plundering" of resources from the Sahrawi—the indigenous people of the Western Sahara. The declaration of war was in response to Morocco launching a military operation in a U.N.-patrolled strip in the Western Sahara a day earlier. According to Moroccan authorities, the Polisario Front has allegedly blocked access to Mauritania, preventing the transfer of goods and people between the two countries. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#), [Axios](#))

The Muslim Brotherhood in Morocco

Morocco's ruling party, the PJD, was an official branch of the Muslim Brotherhood until 2013. That year, it formally cut ties with the international Islamist organization following the ouster of former Egyptian President and Brotherhood leader [Mohammed Morsi](#). Despite this break, PJD leader and former Moroccan Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane has publicly voiced support for Morsi, and the PJD has participated in at least one global Brotherhood meeting. (Source: [Al Arabiya](#))

Morocco's ruling party, the PJD, was an official branch of the Muslim Brotherhood until 2013.

When Morsi took office as Egypt's president in 2012, the PJD produced a written statement of approval for the Egyptian Brotherhood leader. Benkirane also congratulated Morsi's win saying, "any other news [would be] deception to the democratic pathway in the region." Following Morsi's ouster in July 2013, a group of Moroccan Islamist politicians—including several PJD members—attempted to sign a petition denouncing the coup. The petition fell short of 525 signatures to pass into law. (Source: [Al Arabiya](#))

Since then, the PJD has continued to have associations with the global Brotherhood movement. In 2013, the PJD composed a letter to a number of international bodies—including the U.N. Secretary-General, the U.N. Security Council, the European Union, and the European Parliament—calling on them to condemn Egyptian military leaders responsible for Morsi's ouster. Notably, in September 2013, PJD members reportedly attended a global Brotherhood meeting in Lahore, Pakistan, to discuss the correct response to the situation in Egypt. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Fair Observer](#), [Carnegie Endowment](#), [ACAS](#), [Al Arabiya](#))

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AQIM, GICM, and Salafia Jihadia

According to terrorism analysts, regional al-Qaeda affiliate AQIM has not gained a foothold in Morocco. The government, however, implicated the group in the April 2011 Marrakesh bombings—though AQIM denied responsibility. Furthermore, given the establishment of the country’s internal security forces, the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (BCIJ), in 2015, fledgling al-Qaeda cells are dismantled relatively quickly, and as of 2019, AQIM has not established itself as a significant threat to the country. Other al-Qaeda activity in the country is linked to the now-defunct GICM. Founded in the early 1990s by Moroccan veterans of the Soviet-Afghan war, the al-Qaeda-affiliated GICM operated until the mid-late 2000s when it was decimated by Moroccan security forces. At its inception, GICM members served as facilitators for al-Qaeda operatives passing through Morocco. Following the 9/11 attacks, however, GICM began to plot attacks in Morocco after the government started cooperation on counterterrorism efforts with the United States. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Asharq al-Awsat](#), [Parliament of Australia](#), [Associated Press](#), [BBC News](#), [Telegraph](#), [Stratfor](#), [ISS Africa](#), [Mapping Militant Organizations](#), [Jamestown Foundation](#))

GICM and its subgroup, Salafia Jihadia, have planned and executed terrorist attacks. Most notably, the two groups carried out the May 2003 suicide bombings in Casablanca that killed 45 people, including 12 suicide bombers, and injured over 100 others. The GICM and Salafia Jihadia were also implicated in the March 2004 al-Qaeda-linked train bombings in Madrid that killed 191 people and injured over 2,000 others. Both groups were weakened and ultimately crushed by Moroccan security efforts in the mid-late 2000s, and are now believed to be inactive. (Sources: [Stratfor](#), [ISS Africa](#), [Mapping Militant Organizations](#))

In March 2007, Moroccan authorities arrested GICM co-founder Saad al-Houssaini. According to authorities, Houssaini—a Moroccan citizen—had trained in al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, and had built the explosives used in the May 2003 Casablanca bombings. Between March and April of 2007, following Houssaini’s arrest, a total of six suicide bombers blew themselves up in Casablanca, killing only themselves. Authorities believe these men were part of a cell that Houssaini had overseen before his arrest. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [New York Times](#), [Stratfor](#), [Washington Post](#), [Washington Post](#))

In 2009, professor of international relations Carlos Echeverría Jesús highlighted GICM’s insignificance and lack of capability in the *CTC Sentinel*. He noted that while Algeria’s Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group had merged with al-Qaeda, the GICM had made no such announcement. (Source: [CTC Sentinel](#))

On June 2, 2020, Belgian police arrested Khalid Bouloudo—one of the founders of the Belgian division of GICM—along with six others, for the 42-day-long abduction of a Limburg teenager. The teenager, who was the son of a drug trafficker, was released after a ransom of €330,000 was paid to the kidnappers. Bouloudo was previously convicted for terrorism in 2006 for links to the 2003 and 2004 bombings of Casablanca and Madrid, and again in 2015 for attempting to recruit ISIS fighters, but was released on parole in 2018. The suspects were discovered following an investigation in the Limburg and Antwerp areas. Bouloudo’s involvement has incited criticism from Flemish politicians as they believed law enforcement should have followed-up with Bouloudo’s actions more thoroughly following his release. (Source: [Brussels Times](#))

ISIS

Though ISIS-affiliated terrorist cells operate throughout Morocco, ISIS has not carried out a successful attack within the country. Moroccan security forces have worked to disrupt these cells since at least August 2014, when police arrested nine ISIS operatives in the northern cities of Tetouan, Fez, and Fnideq. According to authorities, the suspects had been working to recruit and facilitate the travel of Moroccan foreign fighters to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In 2019, Moroccan law enforcement targeted and reportedly arrested 125 individuals and dismantled over 25 terrorist cells. The cells allegedly were in the early stages of planning and coordinating attacks against public buildings and tourist sites. (Sources: [Associated Press](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

A joint operation between Moroccan and Spanish security forces in August 2015 resulted in the arrest of 13 ISIS suspects in northern Morocco and one ISIS suspect in the central Spanish town of San Martin de la Vega. The Moroccan and Spanish ministries said the suspects were recruiting fighters to join the terrorist group in Iraq and Syria, and were also plotting attacks within Morocco and Spain. That November, police in the central Moroccan city of Beni Mellal arrested four suspected ISIS operatives who had reportedly plotted to carry out domestic terrorist attacks using explosives. These operatives were believed to have been in close contact with Moroccans fighting for ISIS in Syria and Iraq. (Sources: [Associated Press](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Reuters](#))

In May 2016, Moroccan police arrested an ISIS-affiliated Chadian national suspected of plotting attacks on tourist sites and Western diplomatic buildings in Morocco. The suspect had reportedly flown from Chad to Morocco ten days prior to his arrest. On December 3, police arrested eight

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suspected ISIS recruiters in the cities of Fez and Tangiers—seizing a rifle, ammunition, and documents calling for jihad. In March 2017, police arrested 15 ISIS suspects in Casablanca, Marrakesh, Tangiers, and Agadir. Some of the suspects attempted to build explosives with which to target “sensitive locations” within the country, according to authorities. Other suspects acquired firearms and planned to attack public figures. (Sources: [Asharq al-Awsat](#), [Agence France-Presse](#), [Reuters](#))

Despite the presence of domestic ISIS-linked cells in Morocco, the terror group has reportedly struggled to embed its top operatives in the country. In addition, according to security firm Stratfor, the May 2016 call for domestic attacks within Morocco by ISIS’s leader in the Sahel may indicate ISIS’s inability to directly operate in the country. However, in December 2018, three men, Abdessamad Ejjoud, Younes Ouaziyad, and Rachid Afatti—who were allegedly inspired by ISIS but had no established contact with ISIS members in combat zones—beheaded two Scandinavian hikers in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. On July 18, 2019, the three men were sentenced to death in a Salé court. The assailants were allegedly taught how to use encrypted messaging services and how to use weapons by Kevin Zoller Guervos, a Spanish-Swiss convert to Islam who, in the same trial, was sentenced to 20 years in prison for “joining a terrorist group.” (Sources: [Stratfor](#), [Long War Journal](#), [BBC News](#))

Foreign Fighters

As of March 2017, approximately 2,000 Moroccans had traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight alongside extremist groups there, according to a Moroccan security source and reported by Reuters. Approximately 200 of those fighters have returned to Morocco, where they have faced arrest, according to the source. Moroccans have also reportedly attempted to join AQIM in recent years, though there is little publicly available information on these incidents. Moroccans have previously fought in international jihadist conflicts, including in Afghanistan in the 1980s, Bosnia in the early 1990s, Chechnya in the late 1990s, and Iraq in the mid-late 2000s. As of March 2020, estimates of Moroccan foreign terrorist fighters in Iraq and Syria remains to be around 2,000. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Stratfor](#), [U.S. Department of State](#), [European Eye on Radicalization](#), [Egmont Institute](#))

Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

April 2011 Marrakesh Bombings

On April 28, 2011, a Moroccan militant remotely detonated two pressure cooker bombs at the Argana Café in Djemma el-Fna Square, Marrakesh, killing 17 people and injuring 21 others. Moroccan authorities arrested three suspects the following week and reported that the men were linked to AQIM, though the al-Qaeda affiliate denied responsibility for the attack. In the following weeks, the Interior Ministry revealed that the prime suspect, Moroccan citizen Adel Othmani, had built the explosives and, dressed as a tourist, planted the bombs in the Argana Café before detonating them remotely using his cellphone. According to authorities, Othmani had previously been expelled from Portugal, Libya, and Syria while attempting to travel to Iraq and Chechnya to fight alongside jihadist groups. In October 2011, a Moroccan court sentenced Othmani to death and handed life sentences to his co-conspirators. The April 2011 Marrakesh bombings were the deadliest terrorist attack on Moroccan soil since the 2003 bombings in Casablanca. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Associated Press](#), [BBC News](#), [Telegraph](#))

May 2003 Casablanca Bombings

On May 16, 2003, in Morocco’s largest-ever terrorist attack, 14 suicide bombers targeted several locations in Casablanca, including the Belgian consulate, a Jewish community center, a Spanish restaurant, and a hotel. The explosions killed 45 people, including 12 suicide bombers, and injured more than 100 others. Two of the bombers were arrested before detonating their devices. The Moroccan interior minister Mostafa Sahel immediately told reporters that the bombings “bear the hallmark of international terrorism.” (Sources: [New York Times](#), [Human Rights Watch](#))

Authorities soon revealed that the bombers—who lived in the Sidi Moumen slum of Casablanca—belonged to the al-Qaeda-linked GICM and its subgroup Salafia Jihadia. Ten days after the bombings, the Moroccan government ratified new counterterrorism legislation that increased the punishment for terrorism-related crimes. In the following weeks, officials arrested and indicted 100 suspects related to the bombings. In February 2009, a Moroccan court handed a 15-year prison sentence to attack mastermind and bomb maker Saad Housseini. More recently, in October 2012, German police arrested a 37-year-old French national of Moroccan origin in connection with the bombings. (Sources: [Human Rights Watch](#), [Building Terrorism Resistant Communities](#), [S. Ekici](#), [PBS](#), [Mapping Militant Organizations](#), [Carnegie Endowment](#), [BBC News](#), [BBC News](#))

- **December 17, 2020:** A French court convicts Morocco-born Ayoub El Khazzani to life in prison for attempting to carry out an attack on a Paris bound train in 2015.

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- El Khazzani boarded the train in Brussels with an arsenal of weapons, but was tackled and knocked unconscious by two American servicemen and their friend before carrying out the attack. Source: [Fox 40](#)
- **December 4, 2020:** Moroccan authorities arrest three alleged members of an ISIS cell in Tetouan, southeast of Tangier. One of the detainees is a relative of an ISIS operative in Syria and Iraq. According to authorities, the three were reportedly in the final stage of preparing a series of attacks. Upon searching the suspects' apartment, Moroccan security forces found weapons, including chemicals used for making IEDs, and a pledge of allegiance to ISIS's leader. Source: [Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center](#)
 - **October 6, 2020:** Moroccan authorities arrest four men allegedly linked to ISIS in Tangiers. According to the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations (BCIJ), the four suspects planned to "destabilize security in the kingdom," by carrying out attacks similar to ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Source: [Defense Post](#)
 - **September 11, 2020:** Moroccan authorities arrest five people allegedly linked to ISIS in Rabat. The suspects allegedly were in the "advanced stages" of plotting suicide bombings targeting prominent figures and a security headquarters. Sources: [Associated Press](#), [Defense Post](#)
 - **July 7, 2020:** Moroccan authorities arrest four members of an ISIS-linked terror cell in Nador, northeastern Morocco. The suspects were allegedly in close contact with members of another cell that was dismantled in a joint operation with Spain in December 2019. The suspects reportedly sought to "carry out terrorist attacks targeting sensitive sites in the kingdom." Source: [Defense Post](#)
 - **June 2, 2020:** Belgian police arrest Khalid Bouloudo—one of the founders of the Belgian division of GICM—along with six others, for the 42-day-long abduction of a Limburg teenager. The teenager, who was the son of a drug trafficker, was released after a ransom of €330,000 was paid to the kidnappers. The suspects were discovered following an investigation in the Limburg and Antwerp areas. Source: [Brussels Times](#)
 - **May 20, 2020:** Spanish security services arrest four alleged terrorists, including a Moroccan national who is believed to be the cell's leader, in Bolanos de Calatrava, southern Spain. The suspect allegedly fled Morocco several years earlier and began recruiting ISIS sympathizers in Barcelona. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the suspect moved to Bolanos de Calatrava and began planning a terror attack. According to Spanish sources, the suspect maintained regular communication with ISIS fighters, however, no further information was released on the alleged attack plot. Source: [Morocco World News](#)
 - **May 8, 2020:** Spanish police arrest a Moroccan national in Barcelona. According to Spain's Civil Guard, the suspect allegedly planned either a knife or vehicle terror attack in the name of ISIS. The Civil Guard had allegedly been watching the suspect for four years, but it was not until Spain's lockdown to contain the COVID-19 pandemic did the suspect quickly radicalize. Investigators claim the suspect was motivated by ISIS's continued calls for supporters to carry out attacks during nationwide lockdowns. Additionally, the suspect made public declarations of support to ISIS and derided Western countries on his social media pages. Sources: [ABC News](#), [Telegraph](#)
 - Moroccan authorities dismantle a seven-person jihadist cell in Casablanca, Chechaouen, and Ouazzane. The cell allegedly supported ISIS and were preparing to target sensitive infrastructure and strategic sites. Source: [U.S. Department of State](#)
 - Moroccan authorities dismantle a nine-member ISIS cell in Tangier. According to authorities, the militants sought to carry out attacks in Tangier. Source: [U.S. Department of State](#)
 - **January 23, 2019:** Morocco's Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (BCIJ) dismantles a terror cell of 13 members in Klaat Srafghna, Sale, Mohammedia, and Casablanca. The BCIJ seized electronic devices, knives, text alleging support to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and a handwritten letter inciting terrorism. Source: [Morocco World News](#)
 - **December 17, 2018 - July 18, 2019:** Moroccan authorities discover the decapitated bodies of two female Scandinavian tourists at a campsite near Mount Toubkal. The victims are identified as Louisa Vesterager Jespersen of Denmark and Maren Ueland of Norway. Four days later, a video appears online of four suspects in the murder pledging allegiance to ISIS and ambushing the two women. A voice in the video calls the attack revenge for Syria. Images of the murder are also posted to social media, including to Ueland's mother's Facebook page. Authorities label the attack politically motivated and an act of terror. Moroccan police subsequently arrest several suspects, including the main defendants Abdessamad Al Joud, Younes Ouziad, Rachid Afati, and Abderahman Khayali. The men were tried under antiterrorism law. On July 18, 2019, Morocco's antiterrorism court sentences Al Joud, Ouziad and Afati to death, whereas Khayali was given a life sentence. Twenty other suspects were given sentences ranging from five to 30 years in prison. Sources: [Independent](#), [News.com.au](#), [New York Times](#)
 - **March 17, 2017:** Moroccan police arrest 15 individuals with suspected links to ISIS. The suspects had been operating out of Casablanca, Marrakesh, Tangiers, and Agadir. According to authorities, some of the suspects had been attempting to build explosives and target "sensitive locations" within the country. Other suspects had acquired firearms and were planning to attack public figures. Source: [Reuters](#)
 - **December 3, 2016:** Moroccan police arrest eight people with alleged ties to ISIS in the cities of Fez and Tangiers. During the arrests, officials seize a rifle, ammunition, and documents calling for jihad. According to authorities, the men had been recruiting and facilitating the travel of Moroccans to fight alongside ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Source: [Agence France-Presse](#)
 - **May 14, 2016:** Moroccan police in the northern city of Tangiers arrest an ISIS-affiliated Chadian national suspected of plotting attacks on tourist sites and Western diplomatic buildings. The suspect had reportedly flown from Chad to Morocco ten days before his arrest. Source: [Asharq al-Awsat](#)
 - **November 16, 2015:** Moroccan police in the central city of Beni Mellal arrest four suspected members of ISIS.

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The suspects had reportedly plotted to carry out terrorist attacks inside Morocco using explosives, and were in close contact with Moroccans fighting for ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Source: [Reuters](#)

- **August 25, 2015:** Moroccan and Spanish security forces cooperate in arresting 13 ISIS suspects in northern Morocco, and one ISIS suspect in the central Spanish town of San Martin de la Vega.

Both the Moroccan and Spanish ministries say the suspects were recruiting fighters to join the group in Iraq and Syria, and were also plotting ISIS attacks within Morocco and Spain. Source: [Al Jazeera](#)

- **August 14, 2014:** Moroccan police arrest nine ISIS suspects in the cities of Tetouan, Fez, and Fnideq.

The suspects had been recruiting Moroccans to join ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Source: [Associated Press](#)

- **April 28, 2011:** In the largest terrorist attack in Morocco since 2003, two bombs concealed in pressure cookers are remotely detonated at the Argana Café in Djemma el-Fna Square, Marrakesh, killing 17 people and injuring 21 others.

The following week, officials arrest three suspects including alleged attack mastermind Adel Othmani. Officials allege that Othmani is “loyal” to AQIM, though the al-Qaeda affiliate swiftly denies responsibility. In October 2011, a Moroccan court sentences Othmani to death and hands life sentences to several of his co-conspirators. Sources: [Reuters](#), [Associated Press](#), [BBC News](#), [Telegraph](#)

- - : On three separate occasions in March and April of 2007, a total of six suicide bombers detonate their devices in Casablanca, killing only themselves.

In the first incident, on March 11, a Moroccan jihadist detonates his explosives belt in a cybercafé to avoid arrest by police, killing only himself. Then, on April 10, three jihadists blow themselves up during a raid on a house by security officials. A fourth cell member is shot dead. Finally, on April 14, two suicide bombers explode near the U.S. Consulate. These incidents follow the March 6 arrest of Saad al-Houssaini, an GICM co-founder and the leader of an al-Qaeda-linked cell to which the six suicide bombers belonged. According to authorities, the cell had been planning a series of coordinated suicide bombings in Casablanca. Sources: [Reuters](#), [New York Times](#), [Stratfor](#), [Washington Post](#), [Washington Post](#)

- **May 16, 2003:** In Morocco’s largest-ever terrorist attack, coordinated suicide bombings in Casablanca kill 45 people—including 12 suicide bombers—and injure 100 others.

Officials hold GICM and its subgroup, Salafia Jihadia, responsible for the bombings. GICM co-founder Saad al-Houssaini is suspected of having built the explosives used in the attacks. Moroccan police arrest Houssaini in early March 2007. Sources: [Human Rights Watch](#), [Mapping Militant Organizations](#), [Washington Post](#)

- - : Moroccan authorities arrest and charge four Moroccans and three Saudis with plotting to use explosive-laden boats to attack American and British ships in the Strait of Gibraltar, the narrow strait running between Spain and Morocco.

The suspects are associated with al-Qaeda and are believed to have been ordered to carry out an attack similar to the USS Cole bombing in 2000 that killed 17 U.S. servicemen. Source: [New York Times](#)

- **August 24, 1994:** Suspected Islamists storm the Atlas Asni Hotel in Marrakesh and shoot dead two Spanish tourists. According to authorities, the suspects had been indoctrinated by a Moroccan professor and Soviet-Afghan war veteran, Abdelilah Ziyad. Source: [ISS Africa](#)

Domestic Counter-Extremism

Legislation

Morocco implemented its first counterterrorism legislation in May 2003, ten days after the GICM’s coordinated suicide bombings in Casablanca.

The legislation, dubbed Law to Combat Terror (Bill 03.03), had been introduced to parliament in 2002 and was pending ratification. The law added new counterterrorism measures to Morocco’s criminal code and provided a definition for terrorism, namely, acts that “are deliberately perpetrated by an individual, group or organization, where the main objective is to disrupt public order by intimidation, force, violence, fear or terror.”

According to the law, such acts might include theft, extortion, and the “dissemination of propaganda or advertisement in support of such acts.” The law increased the length of prison sentences for terrorism-related crimes. According to Human Rights Watch, “...a life sentence for a given offense [became] a death penalty if the act [was] deemed an act of terror.” (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Human Rights Watch](#))

In June 2015, the Moroccan government amended its criminal code to address the issue of foreign fighters. The new legislation made it illegal to join, attempt to join, or recruit others to join a terrorist group abroad, as well as receive training. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#))

Government Agencies

Founded in 2015, the Morocco Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (BCIJ) is the kingdom’s equivalent of the United States’ FBI. The BCIJ reports to the General Directorate for Territorial Surveillance (DGST), whose members conduct investigations and arrest suspects. DGST personnel are also authorized to carry out telephone surveillance and electronic tracking of suspects after receiving permission from the Court of Appeals or a

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judge. The U.S. Department of State has noted that Morocco’s government “has publicly committed itself not to use the struggle against terrorism to deprive individuals of their rights.” (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#))

In October 2014, the government launched Operation Hadar (“vigilance” in Arabic), a nationwide surveillance campaign that deployed law enforcement and security units throughout the country. As part of Operation Hadar, the gendarmerie, police, and military are tasked with monitoring and preventing domestic terrorism. They are also encouraged to report on regional security conditions to the national government. (Sources: [Vice News](#), [Washington Institute](#), [Wall Street International](#))

CVE Efforts

Since the 2003 Casablanca bombings, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the Rabita Mohammadia of Ulamas—a council of religious scholars appointed by King Mohammed VI—have sought to change the way Islam is taught to and interpreted by Moroccan citizens. The government has worked to delegitimize fundamentalist interpretations of Islam via comic books and games for children as well as peer education programs for teenagers. The government has also trained female religious scholars in preaching a tolerant version of Islam, and has worked to reintegrate former extremists into society by providing them with academic and employment opportunities. According to one unnamed Moroccan religious scholar, in the context of CVE efforts, the kingdom “sees itself as a natural leader” in the Muslim world. (Sources: [Morocco on the Move](#), [Foreign Affairs](#), [Washington Institute](#))

In 2019, the U.S. Department of State provided support for Morocco’s General Delegation for Prison Administration and Reintegration (DGAPR) in an effort to modernize prison management, develop prisoner classification tools, and construct more secure facilities. Additionally, the DGAPR provides a deradicalization program called *Moussalaha* for prisoners. The program will be offered to female prisoners as well in 2020. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#))

Combatting Terrorist Financing

Morocco participates in the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF), a regional group that seeks to combat terrorist financing in the Middle East and North Africa. MENAFATF is modeled after the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a separate intergovernmental organization that sets “standards and promote[s] effective implementation of legal, regulatory and operational measures for combating...terrorist financing,” according to the organization’s website. (Sources: [MENAFATF](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

Morocco’s financial intelligence unit—the Unit de Traitement du Renseignement Financier (UTRF)—is a member of the Egmont Group, an international network of national financial intelligence units. In 2015, the UTRF signed a memorandum of understanding in which it pledged to share information with regional financial intelligence units. (Sources: [UTRF](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

Military Operations

On November 13, 2020, Morocco launched a military operation in a U.N.-patrolled strip in Western Sahara. The operation targeting the buffer strip, the Guerguerat zone, was in response to growing hostilities between the Polisario Front, a pro-independence group in Western Sahara, and Morocco. According to the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Polisario Front has allegedly blocked access to Mauritania, preventing the transfer of goods and people between the two countries. Additionally, the group reportedly carried out acts of “banditry” and has harassed U.N. peacekeeping forces in the region. On November 14, the Polisario Front declared war on Morocco, ending a fragile ceasefire that has been in place since 1991. Polisario Front officials have accused Moroccan security forces of indiscriminately shooting at civilians in the Western Sahara who were protesting Morocco’s alleged “plundering” of resources from the Sahrawi—the indigenous people of the Western Sahara. However, on December 10, 2020, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that the U.S. would recognize the Western Sahara as part of Morocco, despite international opposition and resistance from the indigenous population of the area. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#), [Axios](#))

International Counter-Extremism

Morocco is a founding member of the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF), an international body launched in September 2011 that aims “to reduce the vulnerability of people everywhere to terrorism” by convening international counterterrorism experts to share counterterrorism strategies, according to its website. In addition, Morocco belongs to the Global Initiative to Counter Nuclear Terrorism, and has hosted conferences led by the

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United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre. (Sources: [GCTF](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

Morocco is the co-chair of the GCTF along with Canada for the period of 2019-2021. In June 2019, Morocco hosted a GCTF event called the “Initiative on Improving Capabilities for Detecting and Interdicting Terrorist Travel through Enhanced Terrorist Screening and Information Sharing.” The event was an Africa-focused regional workshop that was supported by the United States. Morocco has also worked with the United Nations to prevent terrorist travel and other European partners such as Belgium, France, and Spain to prevent terrorist threats in Europe. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#))

Morocco continues to cooperate in international counterterrorism efforts as it agreed on December 9, 2020 to exchange personal data and information on organized crime with Europol, the EU’s law enforcement agency. (Source: [Financial Times](#))

Cooperation with the United States

Morocco and the United States have shared a robust counterterrorism relationship since at least 2004, when then-U.S. President George W. Bush designated the kingdom a non-NATO ally. Today, Morocco participates in the U.S. Department of State’s Antiterrorism Assistance (ATA) program, which provides Moroccan security forces with training in investigating terrorist incidents. Morocco and the United States also cooperate on improving Moroccan security forces’ collection and analysis of forensic evidence. Moroccan police and prosecutors have participated in counterterrorism training led by the GCTF, U.S. Department of Justice, and FBI. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [News24](#))

In March 2017, the U.S. government banned passengers from bringing certain electronic devices on nonstop flights from Casablanca’s Mohammed V International Airport, as well as airports in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. The ban—which prohibits passengers from carrying laptops, tablets, and other items—was prompted in part by intelligence gleaned during a U.S. Special Forces raid in Yemen in late January 2017. The information suggested that AQAP was actively attempting to build explosives for use on commercial flights. (Sources: [Washington Post](#), [Newsweek](#), [Daily Beast](#))

Cooperation with Spain

Moroccan and Spanish security forces have cooperated in carrying out counterterrorism raids in both Morocco and Spain. In August 2015, for example, security forces from both countries arrested 13 ISIS suspects in northern Morocco as well as one ISIS suspect in central Spain. The Moroccan and Spanish ministries said the suspects were recruiting fighters to join the group in Iraq and Syria, and were also plotting ISIS attacks within Morocco and Spain. In March 2016, Moroccan and Spanish security officials praised the “excellent and exemplary cooperation ties [in counterterrorism]” between the two countries, citing the close relationship between Moroccan King Mohammed VI and Spanish King Felipe VI. (Sources: [Al Jazeera](#), [North Africa Post](#))

During a joint security meeting in December 2016, the Moroccan and Spanish Interior Ministries vowed to strengthen cooperation on counterterrorism efforts. After the meeting, Spanish Interior Minister Juan Ignacio Zoido told reporters that “the relations and the flow of information between the security forces of Morocco and Spain are bearing fruit. We can hardly find a close, loyal and trustworthy collaboration like that of our two countries.” (Source: [Xinhua News](#))

ISIS

Morocco was the first country in the Maghreb to join the U.S.-led global coalition to counter ISIS.

Morocco was the first country in the Maghreb to join the U.S.-led global coalition to counter ISIS. As a coalition member, Morocco carries out airstrikes against the terror group in Syria and Iraq. The kingdom also participates in the Counter-ISIL Finance Group, a forum in which “members seek to understand [ISIS’s] financial and economic activities and to develop and coordinate countermeasures internationally,” according to the U.S. Treasury. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [U.S. Treasury](#))

In September 2013, Morocco and the Netherlands launched an initiative under the patronage of the GCTF to address the issue of foreign terrorist fighters. The initiative convenes international practitioners and policymakers to share lessons and best practices in dealing with foreign fighters. In December 2014, Morocco hosted the first meeting of the GCTF’s Foreign Terrorist Fighters Working Group, which similarly seeks to address the issue of foreign terrorist fighters. The Working Group met again in Morocco in May 2016. (Sources: [U.S. Embassy in Syria](#), [GCTF](#), [GCTF](#))

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Public Opinion

While public opinion polls are rare in Morocco, statistics released in February 2017 provide a glimpse into public attitudes toward extremism. Polling by the International Centre for Counterterrorism in The Hague revealed that 9 percent of Moroccans believe suicide bombing in defense of Islam is “often/sometimes justified,” whereas 74 percent of Moroccans believe it is “never/rarely justified.” When asked about ISIS, only 5 percent of Moroccans said their view of the terrorist group was “positive to some extent,” whereas 3 percent of Moroccans had a “very positive” view of the group. Percentages of negative views toward ISIS were not published in the study. (Source: [ICCT](#))