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THE ROAD TO AFRICA RUNS THROUGH MOROCCO

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The current visit by Moroccan king Mohammed VI to three countries in sub-Saharan Africa—Senegal, Gabon, and Ivory Coast—has opened new doors for the Moroccan-American partnership to fight jihadist groups on the continent. But will the White House seize the opportunity?

Since February 2005, the king has visited more than ten countries below the Sahara, bringing along Moroccan security and intelligence experts as well as entrepreneurs, specialists in political reform, and cultural ambassadors. They've swooped down on their sub-Saharan counterparts and created long-term projects that not only serve bilateral interests and help accelerate the partnering country's development but also foster greater integration among African states—including and especially in matters pertaining to security. In public statements across the continent, the king has expressed a unique vision for how to fight political violence and ensure security: state-of-the-art military operations, intelligence work, and policing must be combined with anti-poverty measures, a cultural strategy to counter extremist trends, and political reforms that fight corruption and foster opportunity.

This unique Moroccan strategy was on display last week during the king's three-country jaunt. Projects are underway, spearheaded by Morocco, to electrify 550 villages along the Senegal River and bring affordable medicine to fight cholera, malaria, and diarrheal diseases to Africa's poorest countries. At the same time, the king held brass tacks talks on boosting security cooperation—and in Senegal, the monarch convened a gathering of moderate Islamic leaders to talk about strengthening their role in providing an alternative to extremist ideologies.

The King has legitimacy to implement this vision; one of the reasons why is that the king, who maintains his position as the country's highest religious authority, serves to block any efforts at religious radicalization and protect the cherished traditions of tolerant Islam that have long reigned in Morocco. More importantly, the kingdom of Morocco has made a series of democratic constitutional reforms over the past decade. Opposition parties now control the government, Moroccan newspapers freely criticize the police and the new constitution has the strongest protections for women and religious minorities (including Jews and Christians) in the region.

The African tour comes at a time of heightened tension on the continent—largely centered around the conflict in Mali, where a pro-Al-Qaeda military coalition conquered a land mass the size of France late last year. Morocco was instrumental in pressing for a resolution to authorize the development of an African military force to intervene in Mali. Now the kingdom is entering the African Union, an old coalition strongly in need of renewed vitality and purpose. Morocco will boost the Union's fighting capacity by putting its army and strong alliances in Europe and the United States at the Union's disposal. From a Western standpoint, it is crucial for indigenous African forces to develop the capacity to hold their territory and fight terrorism on their own, rather than rely on the US and its NATO allies to deploy their own troops.

For the Obama Administration, Morocco's outreach to so many African countries can help advance American interests too. In a policy speech two months ago, US Assistant Secretary of State Johnnie Carson noted that Americans can't afford to overlook the business opportunities posed by emerging economies on the continent, but that American entrepreneurs lack the knowledge and networks necessary to enter African economies. With its banking industry's presence in 20 African countries and an expatriate business community throughout the continent, Morocco can be an entrepreneurial bridge for the United States to nations on both sides of the Sahara. On the security front, Hillary Clinton said on her final visit to Morocco as Secretary of State that America "looks to Morocco to be a leader and a model," and believes that bilateral cooperation will make the two countries "stronger, more peaceful, [and] more secure." She went on to note the value of integration among some African countries. But her prescriptions were short on specifics. Her remarks about integration, moreover, were limited to the countries of North Africa—whereas the north-south divide that the Sahara desert once was has long been breached by modern transportation and roads.

America's strong economic, political, and security ties to Morocco and strong economic, political, and security interests in greater Africa need to come together. It can be an economic boon at a time when a windfall is badly needed, and a boost to global security at a time when concerns about terror on the African continent are growing.

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