



Fear and Loathing in Morocco

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Why is Nasser Bourita worried? The soft-spoken 49-year-old career diplomat, who serves as the Kingdom of Morocco's minister of foreign affairs, already handles an exceedingly complex international portfolio — one encompassing Islamic radicalism in Libya, the status of the contested Western Sahara region and the potentially dire consequences of secession in neighboring Algeria. Of late, however, Mr. Bourita's attention has been consumed by another, largely unexpected issue: a growing Iranian effort to infiltrate his neighborhood.

Mr. Bourita first made this case on an April state visit to Washington. In meetings with experts and officials, Morocco's chief diplomat warned of growing signs that the Iranian regime had stepped up its involvement in North Africa, including through collusion with radical regional actors such as the leftist Polisario Front rebel group. But the White House, then in the throes of a major national security transition (with former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton in the process of replacing outgoing National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster), wasn't quite ready to listen.

Mr. Bourita clearly hopes they are more prepared to do so now. Over the past few months, the Moroccan foreign minister has taken to various media outlets, including Fox News, to press the issue. Most recently, he sat down for an exclusive interview with Breitbart News in order to make the case that Washington should pay greater attention to Iran's subversive activities beyond the Middle East.

Iran "would like to be in North Africa," Mr. Bourita argues. "They tried to develop a presence in Morocco [in the past]. Today they are repeating the efforts in other North African countries."

The kingdom should know. Nearly a decade ago, Iranian "soft power" efforts — ranging from the dissemination of subversive books to the encouragement of Shi'ite proselytization in the overwhelmingly Sunni state — caused Rabat to formally sever its ties to Tehran. Those contacts were re-established in late 2016, but evidence of Iran's provision of funds, weaponry and training to the Polisario led to another diplomatic rupture this spring.

From Morocco's perspective, an Iranian intervention in the Western Sahara, over which the kingdom claims sovereignty (and which both regional rival Algeria and its proxy, the Polisario, covet), would be bad enough. But Moroccan officials fear that Iran's flirtation with the leftist rebels represents just one prong of a larger Iranian strategic effort to penetrate the African continent.

"We think that what is happening with the Polisario is only part of an aggressive approach by Iran towards North and West Africa," the Moroccan foreign minister told Breitbart columnist Caroline Glick. "We noticed before some activities in Senegal, in Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, even in Guinea Bissau."

For its part, Morocco is responding in a number of ways. The kingdom, an important U.S. regional ally, has again severed its diplomatic ties to the Islamic Republic, expelling the country's formal diplomats and informal agents of influence in an effort to roll back their influence and activities. It has also begun to contemplate measures (such as the recent reinstatement of mandatory military service for citizens under 25) designed to better protect the country from external instability, not least of the type being generated by Iran.

Most of all, however, Mr. Bourita and his colleagues are banking on Washington to assume a more active role against Iran in Africa. As they see it, the Trump administration's new Iran policy, which is aimed in large part at rolling back the Islamic Republic's malign foreign activities, is tailor-made to combat Iran's recent inroads on their continent. Left unchecked, they fear, Iranian infiltration will lead to even greater instability among some of the world's most vulnerable — and volatile — states.

Given the past consequences of Iran's extra-regional meddling, those worries are well-founded. From high-profile bombings in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the 1990s (a product of Iran's longstanding strategic penetration of Latin America) to the extensive military aid currently being provided by Tehran to Yemen's Houthi rebels, the Islamic Republic's regional activism has tended to come at a high cost for local populations.

With that in mind, the Trump administration would do well to take Morocco's warning seriously. It would do even better to begin formulating concrete steps to prevent the Iranian regime from gaining a real, lasting foothold in North Africa.

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