



*Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.*

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Morocco lies on the northwest corner of Africa across the Strait of Gibraltar from Spain. About the size of California, Morocco covers 172,413 square miles (446,550 square kilometers). The Western Sahara, a disputed region which Morocco claims and administers, has 102,703 square miles (266,000 square kilometers). Spain controls two coastal enclaves (Ceuta and Melilla) in the north.

Traversing the middle of the country from north to southwest are two snowcapped mountain chains: the Middle Atlas and the High Atlas, which includes Mount Toubkal, North Africa's highest peak at 13,671 feet (4,167 meters). South of the High Atlas Mountains lie the Anti-Atlas Mountains, and to the north, along the Mediterranean Sea, runs the Rif Massif range. Most of the country's agriculture is between the mountainous interior and the Atlantic coastal lowlands, into which flow the Oum er Rbia and Tensift Rivers.

To the south and east of the Atlas chains, the land becomes increasingly arid the closer it gets to the Sahara. The coastal north and west have mild winters and pleasant summers, while interior cities experience more extreme temperatures in both seasons. Winters in the mountains are cold and wet, but summers are pleasant. Towns closer to the Sahara can be hot in the summer and cool in winter.

**History.** The earliest known settlers of Morocco are believed to have come from southwestern Asia. Known collectively as Berbers, a more accurate indigenous term for them is Imazighen (meaning "free men"; Amazigh is the singular). Because of its strategic location, Morocco's history is replete with foreign invasion and rule, beginning with the Phoenicians in the 12th century B.C. and continuing with the Romans, Vandals, Visigoths, and Greeks.

The Arabs invaded in the seventh century A.D. and introduced Islam to Morocco. The Imazighen fought off direct Arab rule and established an independent kingdom in the eighth century. Two powerful Amazigh dynasties prospered until the 13th century, even expanding for a time into other regions. Following other invasions, the Alaouite Dynasty, which claims descent from the prophet Muhammad, took control in 1660. In 1787, Morocco signed a peace and friendship treaty with the United States. This treaty, which made Morocco one of the first independent nations to recognize U.S. sovereignty, is still in force.

European nations became involved in Morocco in the 19th century, and France made it a protectorate in 1912. The French ruled until Morocco's independence in 1956, when a constitutional monarchy was established. French and, secondarily, U.S. influence are still strong in Morocco. King Hassan II (who held power from 1961 to 1999) was a direct descendant of kings in the Alaouite Dynasty.

In 1975, Morocco occupied the Western Sahara and forced Spain to withdraw. Morocco began developing the region but was opposed by its neighbors, particularly Algeria, and other African states who recognized the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as the Western Sahara's government. The SADR's military arm, the Polisario Front, then waged an expensive and violent war against Morocco. Determined to retain the Western Sahara, Morocco built schools, hospitals, roads, and housing for the Saharan people.

Negotiations between King Hassan's government and the Polisario guerrillas opened in 1989 as part of a UN effort to solve the problem. A 1991 cease-fire ended 15 years of fighting and was to have preceded a UN-sponsored referendum in

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1992. In the vote, residents of the Western Sahara would be able to accept or reject annexation by Morocco. Unfortunately, the referendum has been repeatedly postponed because the sides cannot agree on who should be allowed to vote (i.e., all current residents or only those who were resident in 1974).

In 1996, a referendum in Morocco supported constitutional reforms that created a directly elected parliament and shifted some authority to local councils. Through elections in 1997, a Chamber of Representatives became Morocco's first freely elected legislative body. King Hassan II died in 1999; he was succeeded by his son, Muhammad VI, who has maintained royal authority and conservative values.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Morocco's population of about 31.7 million is growing annually at 1.6 percent. The population is composed of three main ethnic groups, the largest being the Imazighen and Arabs. Imazighen and Arabs interact, but generally not on an intimate level. The Haratin, descendants of slaves from West Africa, live throughout the southern part of Morocco. Among the Imazighen are a number of regional groups that call themselves by different names. For instance, people of the Rif refer to themselves as Irifin and people of the High Atlas refer to themselves as Ashilhayn.

About half of Moroccans live in urban areas, and urban migration is swelling city populations. Casablanca and the metropolitan area of Rabat and Salé account for more than one-third of Morocco's urban population. About one-third of Moroccans are age 14 or younger. The Western Sahara has an official population of about 260,000, most of whom are ethnic Sahrawi. These are nomadic peoples who live by animal husbandry and subsistence agriculture. Morocco includes them in their official statistics.

**Language.** The main official language is Arabic, although French also has official status. French is used widely in business, government, and higher education. Moroccan Arabic, called *Derija* (literally, "dialect"), is the most widely spoken tongue. *Derija* is quite different from the classical Arabic of the *Qur'an* (Koran), the scriptural text of Islam. Imazighen peoples, or some 60 percent of the population, speak Amazigh dialects in addition to Arabic. Prominent dialects include Tashilhayt (spoken in the High Atlas and Sous Valley), Tarifit (Rif region), and Tamazight (Middle Atlas region). Hasaniya, an Arabic dialect, is spoken around Goulmima and in the south, including Western Sahara. Spanish can still be heard in the north, which was formerly under Spanish control. English is gaining popularity.

**Religion.** Islam is the official religion of Morocco. The king is both the political and spiritual leader of his people. All ethnic Moroccans are Muslim. Conversion to another religion is not recognized by the state. Popular religion mixes aspects of various folk beliefs with traditional Islamic practices. Many Moroccans, most of them Amazigh, are Sufi Muslims. Some Christians and Jews live in Morocco. Jews are mostly native to Morocco, while Christians have European roots.

Muslims believe in a monotheistic god (*Allah*). They accept most biblical prophets but consider Muhammad to be the last and greatest prophet. Muslims believe he received *Allah's* revelations through the angel Gabriel and recorded them in the *Qur'an*. Religion is a matter of daily practice. The Five Pillars of Islam that Muslims strive to accomplish are to pray five times daily, profess *Allah* as God and Muhammad as his prophet, give of their income to help the poor, fast each day

during the month of *Ramadan*, and make at least one pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia. Friday is the Muslim day of worship, when a sermon is spoken at the mosque during the noon prayer. Women are not barred from going to the mosque, but they usually worship at home.

**General Attitudes.** Moroccan culture is deeply rooted in Islam. When people suffer misfortune, they tend to attribute the cause to *Allah*, and the phrase *Insha'allah* (If God wills) is frequently heard. This belief is strongest in rural areas. Urban Moroccans, especially the more educated, do not adhere to it as much. Moroccans value family, honor, dignity, generosity, hospitality, and self-control (particularly of one's temper). A calm attitude gains respect. Women traditionally are restricted to domestic roles, but in urban areas they receive more education and may work outside the home.

**Personal Appearance.** The national garment is the *djelleba*, a hooded, ankle-length article of clothing with long sleeves. The *djelleba* is worn by men and urban women. Although Western-style clothing is common throughout Morocco, many people still wear the *djelleba*—particularly for special occasions. Amazigh men also wear them, but Amazigh women's dress varies by region. Western attire is modest. Moroccans believe it is important to be neat, well-groomed, and appropriately dressed so one will be treated with respect. Women may cover their heads with scarves, but some do not. When entering a mosque, Moroccans wear clothing that covers the entire body (except the head and hands), and they remove the shoes. One does not wear shorts or other recreational attire in public; shorts are reserved for the beach.

### CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Moroccans generally shake hands when greeting. One might touch the heart after the handshake to express pleasure at seeing the other person or to show personal warmth. Rural children conventionally kiss the right hand of their parents or elders to show respect when greeting. People might greet close friends or relatives by brushing or kissing cheeks.

*Assalam Oualaikoum* (Peace be upon you) is commonly used as "Hello." People also use *Sbah al Kheir* (Good morning) and *Msa al Kheir* (Good evening). More formally, one might say *Ahlan Wasahlan* (Pleased to see you). Friends may exchange the phrase *Labess*, which means both "How are you?" and "Fine." Greetings between friends also include inquiries about each other's well-being and that of their families. Hosts often extend repeated enthusiastic phrases of welcome. Less fervent greetings might be considered rude. It is polite to greet an acquaintance when passing on an urban street, but people do not greet strangers. In rural areas, most people know one another, so men greet men and women greet women when passing on the street.

Moroccans always use titles in formal situations and to address acquaintances. Friends address each other by first name. Elders might be referred to by a title such as *hadj* (an honorable title for those who have completed a pilgrimage to Makkah) or the equivalent of "aunt" or "uncle."

**Gestures.** Moroccans pass items with the right hand or with both hands, not with the left alone. It is impolite to point at people and improper to let the bottom of the foot point toward a person. Moroccans generally consider it improper to cross their legs. Some might cross their legs at the knees but would not place an ankle over a knee.

**Visiting.** Frequent visits to friends and relatives are considered necessary to maintain strong relationships. Visiting is most

popular on holidays but may occur at any time. Between family members, it is acceptable to visit unannounced. Whenever possible, friends make arrangements in advance. This is less common in rural areas, where telephones are not always available for calling ahead.

Moroccans are warm and gracious hosts. Social visits can last several hours. Guests invited for dinner in urban areas are not expected to take gifts. However, hosts will appreciate a gift of candy or a small toy for their children. If urban residents visit a relative or friend in a rural area, they are expected to take a gift (staple foods, clothing, household items). Guests invited to a wedding or special event may take gifts for the newlywed couple or person being honored.

Guests generally are offered refreshments. Refusing them is impolite, although guests sometimes give a token refusal before accepting the offered item. Milk and dates are served as a sign of hospitality. Mint tea is often offered to guests, business associates, or anyone with whom one might spend a few minutes during the day. It is considered a friendly, informal gesture that is affordable and easily prepared.

Guests please their hosts by complimenting them on their home. Men and women do not always socialize together. Rural couples more often socialize separately, while urban couples will socialize in mixed company. Men often associate in public coffeehouses, especially on weekends, holidays, or *Ramadan* evenings. At the end of *Ramadan*, heads of households give gifts of money or goods to the poor.

**Eating.** In most homes, the family eats the main meal of the day together. Before and after eating, people wash their hands. In rural areas, a basin of water is provided; urban residents wash in the sink. Moroccans eat with their fingers from a large communal dish, using the right hand only. Diners eat from the section of the dish directly in front of them.

Hosts encourage guests to eat as much as they like. If the hosts think guests have not eaten enough, they urge them to eat more. In traditional homes, it is impolite for guests to finish eating before the hosts, as this can imply the food did not taste good. Mealtime is an important time for conversation; guests who do not join the discussion embarrass the hosts. In restaurants, service typically is included in the bill, which usually is paid by the host.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** Moroccan social life centers on the extended family. One's family is a source of reputation and honor, as well as financial and emotional support. It is considered one's duty to provide financial support to other members of the extended family when it is necessary or requested. Families may live in the same house or build an addition for a son when he marries. The tie between mother and son is the most important relationship. Men are very affectionate with children. Children, especially boys, are indulged but are also expected to contribute to the family by attaining a respectable position in society. Girls begin working in the house at a young age. Adult children expect to care for their aging parents when it becomes necessary. Parents generally do not interfere with the domestic or private affairs of their children's families. Polygamy is legal but not frequently practiced. A man may have as many as four wives, but he must have permission from any wives he already has and must provide for each equally. Divorce, although frowned upon, is not uncommon.

**Dating and Marriage.** Dating in the Western sense does not occur in Morocco. In rural areas, young men and women often

do not meet their mates until they are to be married. Urban couples meet in various situations, ask permission of their parents to marry, and have time to get acquainted before they get married. When a couple is engaged, the man pays the woman's father or eldest brother a sum of money to meet her wedding expenses. This payment sometimes inhibits a man from marrying because he cannot afford it. Women usually bring a dowry into the marriage. A woman is expected to be a virgin before marriage. Most women marry by their early twenties.

Weddings signify a new union between families and are celebrated as lavishly as possible. A wedding usually lasts two days. The first day is for the bride's female relatives and friends to come together and sing and dance. They decorate the bride's hands and feet with henna (a red plant dye). On the second day, the groom's family and bride's family celebrate the wedding together to show they are one family.

**Diet.** Mutton, beef, and chicken are the principal meats in the Moroccan diet. Popular dishes include *kefta*, ground beef or mutton seasoned and cooked over charcoal; *tajine*, a meat-and-vegetable stew; and *harira*, a tomato-based soup with beef or mutton, chickpeas, and lentils. *Couscous* (steamed semolina made from wheat) is usually eaten on Fridays. Coastal Moroccans cook fish in a variety of ways. Mint tea is the national drink. Islam prohibits the consumption of pork and alcohol. Although some men drink alcohol, it is not socially acceptable.

**Recreation.** Soccer is by far the most popular sport in Morocco. Many Moroccans also enjoy basketball and athletics; runner Hicham el Guerrouj set the world record in the mile in 1999. Leisure activities include visiting friends, relaxing at coffeehouses (men only), and going to the beach. Families or groups of girls or boys often take a stroll at dusk. Beach volleyball is gaining popularity.

**The Arts.** Forms of traditional music include Berber, Gnaouan, and Arab-Andalusian. Rhythmic Gnaouan music, originally from sub-Saharan Africa, features musicians that often do acrobatic crouching and whirling dances while playing. Arab-African *Rai* (opinion) music is an increasingly popular art form, especially among young people.

Morocco is famous for its pottery and ceramic tile. Artisans (especially Imazhigen) create silver jewelry, drums, carpets, hand-tooled leather, and wooden tables and boxes. Fine art forms such as painting and sculpture have developed significantly since Morocco gained independence in the 1950s.

Traditional literature includes histories, essays, and poetry, but other styles have been adopted. Poetry is often improvised and accompanied by a single-stringed instrument (*ribab* or *amzhad*) and a three-stringed banjo-like *lotar* or *kanza*.

**Holidays.** Each year, Muslims observe *Ramadan*, a month of fasting and prayer, when no eating, drinking, or smoking is permitted from dawn to sunset. In the evenings, families eat together and visit relatives or friends. Business is slower than usual during this month. Children, pregnant women, travelers, foreign visitors, and the ill are exempt from the fast.

Religious holidays include *Aid al Saghir* (the three-day feast at the end of *Ramadan*), *Aid al Kebir* (the feast at the end of the pilgrimage to Makkah), and *Mouloud* (celebrating the birth of Muhammad). Because Muslims use a lunar calendar (28-day months), the dates of these holidays constantly change in relation to the Gregorian calendar. In addition, numerous *Moussems* (religious festivals) are held throughout the year. Official public holidays include International New Year (1 Jan.), Throne Day (3 Mar.), Youth Day (9 July), Green March Day (6 Nov.), and Independence Day (18 Nov.).

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**Commerce.** A weekly *souk* (open-air market) is held in nearly every town. For rural residents, it is often the only source of basic foods, clothing, crafts, household items, and personal services such as haircutting. Urban residents have access to many shops and stores and can shop on a daily basis if necessary. A very basic convenience store called a *hanoot* is found in most areas. Almost all shops and offices close for about three hours during lunch. In the summer, government and bank offices often skip the three-hour break and close early to avoid the worst of the heat.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** Morocco is a constitutional monarchy, but King Muhammad VI has broad powers as head of state. He appoints the prime minister (currently Driss Jettou) and retains authority to dissolve the legislature or revoke its decisions. The legislature has a 270-seat upper house (Chamber of Counselors) that can cast a no-confidence vote against the prime minister or overturn legislation from the 325-seat lower house (Chamber of Representatives). Counselors are indirectly elected to nine-year terms by an electoral college of local leaders and professionals. Representatives are directly elected to five-year terms. Elected regional councils have authority and funding to conduct some development projects. The voting age is 21.

**Economy.** Agriculture is the backbone of the economy, employing about 40 percent of the labor force. Most agricultural production is carried out by subsistence farmers, but a small modern sector produces enough food to account for 30 percent of all export earnings. Morocco has the world's third largest deposit of phosphate, which accounts for about 20 percent of export earnings. Other significant industries are food processing, leather goods, textiles, construction, and tourism. Morocco's small manufacturing sector is growing. Morocco has a small stock market, one of the first in the Arab world.

About 15 percent of the labor force works abroad, primarily in western European countries such as Belgium, France, and Spain. The money these workers send back to Morocco helps offset the country's foreign debt. Chronically high unemployment, illiteracy, a large government bureaucracy, and inefficient state-owned industries remain challenges to Morocco's economy. The currency is the Moroccan *dirham* (MAD).

**Transportation and Communications.** Paved roads connect all major cities and provide excellent access to the rest of the country. Public buses and interurban taxis are available almost everywhere. Rural people walk, ride bicycles or motorcycles, or use mules when carrying loads. Urban dwellers use the public transit system. Seven airports offer national service. A rail system connects the major cities of the north.

The government provides basic telegraph, telephone, and postal services throughout the country. Service is considerably better in urban areas than in rural regions. There are two television stations; the government-owned station broadcasts nationwide, while the private station serves major urban areas. Two national radio stations and eight regional stations serve the country as well. Newspapers are common, though several have been banned; the government tolerates little criticism of its policies. Many Moroccans use shortwave radios and satellite television to listen to news or watch shows from other

## DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	126 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	102 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$3,600
Adult literacy rate	63 percent (male); 37 (female)
Infant mortality rate	45 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	66 (male); 70 (female)

countries. Internet access is growing; internet cafés are found in all major cities and some towns.

**Education.** Since the 1980s, the government has devoted considerable resources to improving Morocco's education system. And while the adult literacy rate is low, literacy among the youth (ages 15–19) is rising due to government efforts to build schools and train teachers. Still, less than two-thirds of all eligible children actually attend school. Many cannot afford it. Only 20 percent of rural women are literate. Girls and rural children are less likely than boys and urban residents to attend school. Of those who begin primary school, about 60 percent go on to secondary school. Preschool offers religious and patriotic instruction. The primary (six years) and secondary (seven years) levels are patterned after the French system; instruction is in Arabic. Private school instruction is usually in French. Students who complete secondary education may seek further education; there are 13 universities and many colleges and training institutes.

**Health.** Morocco lacks a comprehensive national healthcare system, but the Ministry of Health is trying to provide services to every region of the country. Each province has at least one hospital and some clinics, but these generally do not meet the needs of the entire population. Facilities are severely limited in rural areas. Rural women often will not go to a hospital or clinic because there are no female doctors or nurses. While water in urban areas is usually potable, rural water supplies are not as clean.

## AT A GLANCE

### Events and Trends.

- In October 2003, King Muhammad VI announced a number of reforms to Morocco's family law. These include granting women greater property rights, raising women's legal minimum age of marriage from 15 to 18, making it easier for women to obtain a divorce, and increasing the stringency of the requirements that permit a man to practice polygamy.
- Islamic militants launched a series of suicide attacks in Casablanca in May 2003, killing 45 people. Hundreds of people were arrested under anti-terrorism laws in the months following the attacks.

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