

Morocco Upgrades Its Military Capabilities Amid Regional Tensions

Morocco is rapidly boosting its military forces with modern technology within an ever evolving geopolitical landscape.

[Jasper Hamann](#) Aug. 19, 2021 3:07 p.m.



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Rabat - Morocco's recent military expenditure is helping modernize the country's military capabilities, while entangling the country in new agreements and commitments.

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Morocco's recent efforts to upgrade its military has not gone unnoticed, prompting an analysis by US publication Defense News. The analysis by Agnes Helou [presents](#) an overview of Morocco's military investments from the US perspective that highlights Moroccan military advances but neglects to fully explain the context.

Modernizing the Moroccan Air Force

Helou outlines the results of years of investment in Morocco's military in her article titled "here are Morocco's top priorities for modernizing its Air Force." The piece describes Morocco's recent efforts to boost its capabilities in drone warfare as a key element of adjusting to new realities on the battlefield.

Morocco used a drone in April for an airstrike against Polisario operatives in the Western Sahara region, a new milestone in Morocco's aerial missions. While the country has used drones for surveillance, recent investments indicate the country is poised to expand its fleet of combat drones, with a particular focus on air-to-ground operations.

Morocco is actively courting both the US and Turkey for their advanced drone technology. The Moroccan air force already uses French Heron drones and is set to introduce both the [US MQ-9B SeaGuardian](#) drone and [Turkey's Bayraktar TB2](#) drone. Both new drones are designed for long-range missions, ideal in the vast expanses of the Western Sahara region.

Over the past years, Morocco has upgraded and expanded its fleet of F-16 jet fighters in addition to purchasing dozens of new AH-64 Apache attack helicopters. Morocco additionally purchased 2,400 anti-tank missiles and air-to-ground munitions for its growing fleet.

Diversifying arms purchases

Morocco's approach to its military purchases indicates a priority on air-to-ground capacities that is common in the region. With Polisario as its only declared foe, such a focus is understandable in the short-term.

However, when considering Morocco's arms race with its eastern neighbor and prominent rival Algeria, the Moroccan armed forces are likely to diversify this approach to include more air-to-air capabilities as well. Algeria's [recent decision](#) to purchase the top-of-the-line Russian Su-57 jets, is likely to prompt a response from Morocco.

Morocco could counter this potential threat of Algerian aerial superiority by investing in the Western alternative, the F-35, or an advanced ground-to-air missile defense system. When considering the options however, another need to "diversify" arises.

Morocco is currently highly dependent on US arms sales and maintenance contracts as the vast bulk of its forces use American military equipment. Besides European frigates and some French and Israeli additions to the airforce, Morocco remains dependent on the US for its modernization of the military.

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This brings with it key defense questions relating to the independence of Morocco's military. Upgrading key elements of the military need to be approved by the US congress, and many US allies have seen their efforts to do so blocked.

Military “cooperation”

In order to evaluate Morocco’s military cooperation with the US it is important to take into account recent developments with other strategic allies of Washington, in particular Turkey and Egypt.

Egypt’s army has a similar dependence on US military equipment as Morocco, and also features as a US ally in a highly tumultuous region. While Morocco has the Sahel in its backyard, Egypt has its decades-old geopolitical relations with Israel and a variety of unstable neighbors.

The difference in the relationship between the US and Morocco however is the US expenditure on its strategic ally. Egypt remains one of the US’ top recipients of foreign military aid, receiving over a billion dollars in US military assistance each year. The US effectively gives Egypt money to spend on US military equipment, while Morocco remains more of a bilateral “customer.”

The example of Egypt shows that the US could do much more to boost Morocco’s military without asking the kingdom to fund these expenditures. The US could show its commitment to Morocco by increasing its direct military aid and help fund Morocco’s military expenses..

Strings attached

The example of Turkey shows that US military cooperation is anything but unconditional. While the article in Defense News highlights that Morocco [considered](#) purchasing Russia’s advanced S-400 missile defense system, as Turkey proved, it could not.

Turkey enjoys a similar status of being a key strategic ally to the US. The country’s proximity to both Russia and the Middle East has made it a valued partner to the US.

That partnership has unraveled significantly in recent years after Turkey decided to expand its missile defense system by purchasing what many consider to be the best option currently available. That system is Russia’s S-400 missile battery, one of the few defensive systems that claims to be able to effectively combat the threat of stealth fighters.

Turkey’s decision instantly revealed that the global arms market is definitely not a [free market](#), where countries can shop at their pleasure. Turkey had in the past asked to buy the US Patriot missile system, but its requests were blocked.

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Turkey’s decision regarding the S-400 led to major repercussions from its key allies, the US and NATO. The S-400 is seen as a threat to NATO’s F-35 stealth fighters, and Turkey was told to abandon its Russian purchase, or lose the billions it invested in the [F-35 program](#).

Turkey’s decision to stand firm on its decision meant it was blocked from receiving the F-35 jets it had ordered from the US, and the country is still at a [stand-off](#) with both NATO and the US.

The US has since declared anyone willing to buy the S-400 system as a potential threat pressuring its key allies, including India and several [Gulf states](#) into abandoning their plans to acquire the system. Despite the US’ alternative in missile defense being inferior to the S-400, its allies have no choice in the matter.

Geopolitical considerations

Diversifying Morocco’s arms suppliers brings with it both potential risks and rewards. Chinese and Russian arms are often more cost-effective, easier to operate and maintain and cheaper to purchase. Chinese and Russian jets in particular show a promise to deliver similar capabilities as Western tech, at a significantly lower price.

Diversifying Morocco's arms suppliers could have both the different effects

Diversifying Morocco's arms deals could have two vastly different effects.

If executed poorly, Morocco could face repercussions similar to that of Turkey. This could threaten current cooperation with the US and lead to a more hostile stance in Washington when new arms deals are considered.

If done tactfully, diversifying Morocco's armament through smart but uncontroversial arms deals with both Russia and China could push the US to want to do more for Morocco. Showing a certain independence and maturity in diversifying Morocco's military tech could provide a powerful incentive to the US to consider granting Morocco vastly more military aid, as it does with Egypt.

The US pumps a billion dollars into the Egyptian military specifically to ensure its cooperation vis-a-vis Israel and regional issues. Morocco can achieve a similar status, especially if unrest in the Sahel continues to brew amid the constant regional threat presented by climate change.

In the end, the ideal solution would be much simpler than that. Billions of dollars in Moroccan military expenditure are mainly directed towards countering Algeria, and its militias that aim to frustrate Moroccan state-building efforts in the Western Sahara region. In the end, the most cost-effective military strategy is a rapprochement with Algeria.

Resolving issues with Algeria would mean Morocco can focus exclusively on its world-class anti-terrorism approach and supporting regional stability. It would allow both nations to divert billions into their healthcare system and boost their domestic public and private sector. Until such a detente is achieved however, Morocco is likely to continue to invest heavily in its military.