



NATO Foundation
Defense College

MAGHREB December 2019

Facing sensitive requests, Morocco draws red lines

Spared from the volatility that has affected the Maghreb in 2019 (emphasised by the upheaval in Libya and the tense situation in Algeria), Morocco represents an anchor of stability, on which Washington is eager to invest. The visit, on the 5th of December by the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, followed the proposed sale of 24 AH-64E Apache helicopters (with an option for 12), approved by the US State Department in November 2019 and worth US\$4,25 billion. The fact that the only other African country to purchase the AH-64E is Egypt shows the peculiar position of Morocco, a major-Non-NATO ally and a Mediterranean Dialogue partner. According to the Forum on Arms Trade, only in 2019 Rabat purchased arms from the US for approximately US\$10,3 billion, figuring as the primary recipient of US weapons in the region.

The purchases are part of a five-year plan launched in 2017 to modernise Morocco's military. Strengthening the air force of the Forces Armées Royales (FAR, the Moroccan armed services) is an important aspect of this strategy. Alongside the sale of Apache helicopters, in 2019 Morocco also negotiated the sale of 25 F-16 fighter jets for US\$.3,8 billion. The deal, finalised in March, also includes the upgrade of Morocco's existing fleet of F-16.

The extent of the military cooperation between Rabat and Washington has clear geopolitical implications, not only due to the traditional Maghrebi rivalry between Algiers and Rabat. The arms deals confirm the transactional approach of the current US administration to foreign policy, corroborated by the issues raised during visit. Alongside the conflict in Libya and the terrorist threat in the Sahel, Iran's outreach in the region was also discussed during the meeting between Pompeo and the Moroccan Prime Minister Saadeddine el-Othmani, the Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita and the general director of the Direction Générale de la surveillance du territoire (DGST) and the Direction Générale de la sûreté nationale (DGSN) Abdellatif Hammouchi. It is worth recalling that in 2018 Morocco severed diplomatic ties with

Teheran after accusing its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah of sending weapons to the Polisario Front in Western Sahara.

By rallying the maximum pressure campaign against Teheran, King Mohammed VI presumably expected the US President Donald Trump to return the favour when needed. However, further requests from Washington put him in a difficult position. Media reports about the normalisation of diplomatic ties with Israel and the unexpected meeting between Pompeo and the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Lisbon the day before the US Secretary's visit to Rabat, were likely the main reasons why the scheduled meeting between Pompeo and the king was called off. It made clear to an overdemanding US administration that relations with Israel are still a sensitive issue for the kingdom, representing a 'red line' that the kingdom is not ready to cross yet.

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