

The Moroccan Royal Institute for Strategic Studies' Round-Table on the Security Situation within the MENA Region, in the Presence of Major-General Tom Beckett, Chief Security Adviser for the MENA Region to the British Ministry of Defence, and of HE Mrs. Karen Betts, British Ambassador to the Kingdom of Morocco

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A Presentation on the Theme of Moroccan-British Security Bilateral Relations by Mohammed Belmahi, Moroccan Ambassador to the UK (1999-2009)

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Dear General, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before starting my presentation I would like to thank Mr Tawfik Mouline, Director General of IRES, for kindly inviting me to speak at this important round-table in presence of Major-General Tom Beckett and his team.

I take this opportunity to welcome Her Excellency, Mrs Karen Betts, and to wish her a most successful tenure in her position as the new British Ambassador to Morocco.

As you already know, I did serve in London as the Moroccan Ambassador for nearly ten years, from 1999 to 2009. Since I am now a retired diplomat all of what I am going to say here at this round-table does not necessarily reflect the official line of the Moroccan Government.

During a 2001 London meeting held at the Foreign Office (which I attended), the Moroccan Deputy Minister of External Affairs and Cooperation warned the British Foreign Secretary of the imminent build-up of dangerous international terrorist and organised criminal activities within the African Sahel region. Unfortunately, the British side did not take this information seriously, perhaps thinking that the Moroccan authorities were simply trying to artificially link the Polisario separatist movement as well as the Moroccan Sahara issue with this Sahel terrorist and criminal build-up.

It took the US Administration to convince the UK authorities that Morocco's warnings were actually real.

The IRES round-table of today 19 October 2015 should be seen as the proof that Morocco and the UK now enjoy much better and more trustful security and defence relations, especially "since 2013 when HM King Mohammed VI gave His approbation for a strategic partnership with the United Kingdom", (as stated in the 18 October 2015 e-mail addressed to IRES by the Defence Attaché at the British Embassy in Rabat, Lt.Colonel Charlie Warner, RA).

It is within this context that we may jointly examine the best ways to deepen Moroccan-British bilateral security and defence relations.

In order to do so, I would suggest focusing the attention of this round-table on the following points for our panel discussion :

1. British policy makers should be made aware of the fact that the Kingdom of Morocco always has been a close ally to the United Kingdom, and wishes to remain so. As a proof, the following historical facts deserve to be mentioned:

Moroccan-British diplomatic relations are 802 years old (they started in 1213); and the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 is indirectly due to the Moroccan Almohad sovereign's

refusal to provide military and political support to King John against his own country's baronage and lay people. The first strategic alliance between Morocco and the UK was forged mainly against Spain, by Queen Elizabeth I and Sultan Al Mansour, immediately after Felipe II's Armada failed to invade the British Isles in 1588 (this alliance lasted until 1904, interrupted only by the Anglo-French 'Entente Cordiale'). Morocco provided coastal maps and valuable logistical support to Admiral Nelson during the 1805 Battle of Trafalgar he led against Napoleon's navy. Moroccan soldiers fought together with British forces during WWI and WWII; and the Kingdom was firmly in the same Western camp as Britain all along the Cold War. No nation other than Morocco, belonging to the African, Mediterranean or the MENA regions could claim to possess longer, deeper and stronger ties with Great Britain.

2. In this regard, Mr. Jeremy Corbin (the newly elected Labour Party Opposition Leader) should be especially briefed of these deep bilateral Moroccan-British relations:

We all are sadly aware of his longstanding commitment to the Polisario separatist movement within the British Parliament, his support to the so-called SADR as well as his harmful views on British defence issues, nuclear weapons, NATO, the EU, migration policy, etc.

Therefore, Morocco's security could be seriously jeopardised by Mr. Corbin's ill advised hostile positions if they ever get to be implemented.

3. Because of the geographical position of Gibraltar, Morocco is *de facto* only 10 miles away from the UK. Therefore our country has a vested interest in the security of Britain:

Two issues need to be raised here: The political future of the Rock of Gibraltar will have a direct impact upon Morocco's security since it is directly related to the outcome of Spain's occupation of Sebta (Ceuta) and Melilla. Furthermore, a safe maritime navigation in the Strait of Gibraltar is paramount to Morocco's national security (see as examples the July 2002 crisis over the tiny Moroccan Leila [Perejil] Island, unjustly claimed by Spain; and equally that of the Tanger Med mega-port and its industrial zone, recognised as being of high strategic importance).

4. Morocco and the UK need to increase their mutual confidence levels in terms of security and defence but also to cement them by reinforcing their economic relations:

The UK should therefore strive to have Morocco as a reliable and credible hub for doing business with Africa (especially the French and Portuguese-speaking part of the continent). The City of London would gain in doing so mainly in terms of trading, banking, insurance, and legal services. Morocco would then economically benefit from Great Britain's close relations with Africa's Commonwealth countries.

5. One of Morocco's top priorities is Africa's security and political stability. The UK should consider joining and backing Morocco's efforts and endeavours in Africa, notably within the English-speaking countries:

Since the Kingdom of Morocco is part of this continent it has become (instead of Europe) a receiving end of sub-Saharan economic migrants and refugees from failed States fleeing the horrors of terrorism. Furthermore, Morocco is economically well involved in circa 20 African countries. Indeed, over one-third of Moroccan banks' revenues are today generated in Africa. Moreover, most of the Muslim communities of the continent look up to Morocco for religious guidance.

6. The Sahara issue needs to find a just and final solution that respects Morocco's territorial integrity. Solving this issue would notably need the support and understanding of Great Britain, a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council:

By contributing to solve the Sahara issue within Moroccan sovereignty, the UK would help reinforcing Morocco's political and economic stability. By doing so it would indirectly guarantee our country's continuous and steady supply to the World's agriculture of its much needed phosphate, phosphoric acid and fertilisers, and as an end result help preserve the planet's global food security. Indeed, according to a 2010 formal American report, Morocco holds about 85% of the World's known mining reserves of phosphate deposits (the same American report estimates that 98.4% of these reserves are in phosphate mines located within undisputed Northern Morocco). It is known today that our country has become among the World's leading producers as well as the first exporter of rock phosphate and its derivatives.

On the other hand, solving the Sahara issue within Moroccan sovereignty will avoid further destabilisation of the Sahel and Maghreb regions. It will keep at bay any so-called Islamic State, Al Qaida, Boko Haram and the likes away from Morocco and its European and African neighbours. Furthermore, this solution will guarantee a secure maritime navigation along Morocco's 2,000 km. of its Atlantic Ocean's coast line facing the Canary Islands and where major maritime routes linking Europe to the Americas are located.

Because of all these positive arguments, the UK might be convinced to play a role as a facilitator in fostering a more constructive Moroccan-Algerian dialogue, starting by calling for the re-opening of the borders between the two countries that have remained closed by Algeria for 21 years now, (since 1994).

(The only other sadly notorious example in the World is the closed borders between the two North and South Koreas).

7. The UK could also diplomatically help monitor the forthcoming transition of the Algerian regime in a post-President Bouteflika era since Morocco and the UK are both keen on having a peaceful, prosperous and politically stable Algeria.

8. Morocco's renowned and knowledgeable religious scholars could act as a helping hand with the aim of rooting out potential extremist ideology from Britain's large and diversified Muslim community:

They could offer advice in terms of the training of Imams and female Murshidates, educating Muslim youths, managing mosques as well as facilitating interfaith dialogue.

The UK is already well aware of the fact that a comprehensive and rational argumentation in terms of mainstream Muslim doctrine would need to be elaborated and fully explained.

This is in my opinion of prime importance in helping fight the extremists' rhetoric and radical views that breed terrorism.

9. Within this context, Morocco deserves all the support it could get from the UK in terms of obtaining advanced technology and know-how in the field of cyber-security related to counter-terrorism and fighting organised crime.

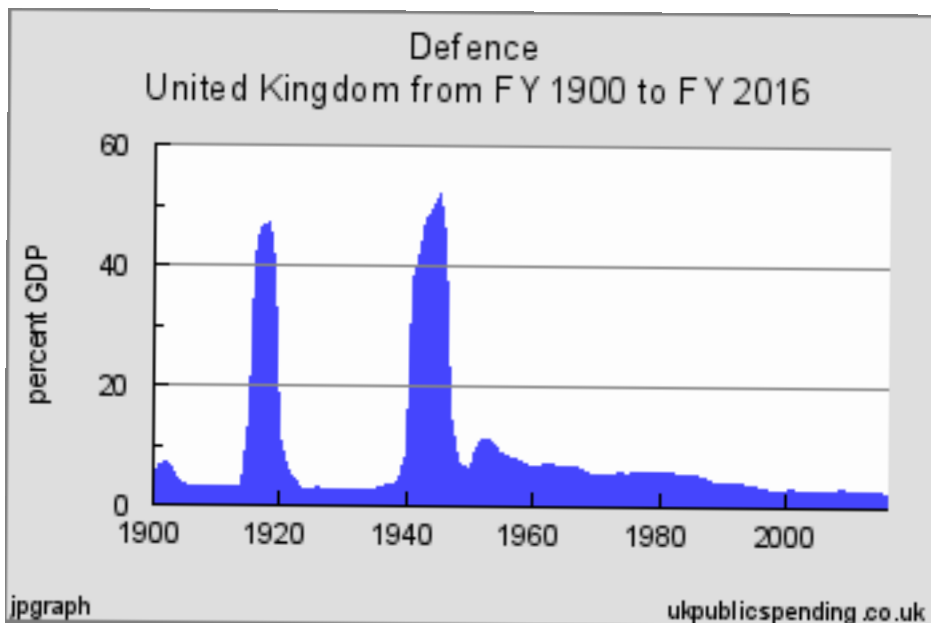
10. Also, an effective rapprochement between think-tanks from the UK and Morocco on security and defence issues would need to be encouraged:

Like for example setting up links between RUSI (created by Wellington in 1831), Chatham House and IRES. A similar rapprochement could also be favoured in academia as for example between Ifrane's Al Akhawayn University and Oxford's St. Antony's College or again Rabat's Institute for African Studies and London's SOAS.

A similar rapprochement could, on the other hand, be facilitated between well targeted NGOs representing the respective civil societies active in Morocco and Britain.

11. Finally, Morocco always wishes to see the UK as a strong ally. This seems to be possible if Great Britain would accept to further prioritise resources and financial means within its Defence budget in order to be able to fully cope with its commitments notably within the Mediterranean, MENA and African regions:

Indeed the chart below shows that defence spending in the UK has fluctuated during the last century, starting at 6.5% of GDP during the Boer War in South Africa, peaking at 46.5% all along WWII, declining from 10% in the early years of the Cold War to a meagre under 3% in 2015 (yet still complying with NATO's guideline minimum threshold: 2% of GDP).



Thank

you for your attention,

Mohammed Belmahi