

## 5th International Seminar on Security and Defence in the Mediterranean

### Multi-Dimensional Security

The practise of cooperation in security and defence issues.

The participation of the Moroccan royal armed forces in operation  
ALTHEA.

Mokhtar Marsou

## THE PARTICIPATION OF THE MOROCCAN ROYAL ARMED FORCES IN OPERATION ALTHEA

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The signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in November 1995 put an end to three years of genocidal conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina. From the start, NATO was given a mandate to implement the agreement's military requirements through the launching of its largest-scale peace operation ever. This resulted in the deployment of the IFOR (Implementation Force) in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In this context, a request for troops for the force was submitted to the Kingdom of Morocco, a nation considered to be a credible international actor in the framework of the United Nations, a strategic ally of NATO and a privileged European Union partner. So it was that in March 1996, a contingent of 1,300 troops of the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces (FAR), equipped with armoured vehicles and tanks, was sent to the theatre of operations in the area under French command, to become an essential element of the Southeast Multinational Division. On their arrival, the Moroccan troops were deployed in two areas: in Sarajevo and Mostar, the country's two emblematic cities. They were immediately entrusted with important missions along the Sarajevo-Mostar axis, as well as other missions to protect the IFOR headquarters and the electronic war emplacements.

A year later, once hostilities had finally been brought to an end, NATO decided to transform IFOR into a Stabilisation Force (SFOR), within which the FAR contingent would continue to operate. In late 2004, a multinational European Union force (EUFOR) replaced NATO's SFOR. This mission was called Operation ALTHEA.

Having presented this brief, yet highly evocative background description, I will now proceed to evaluate the FAR's performance in Operation ALTHEA, under EUFOR command.

With the aim of submitting an idea that supports an appropriate approach to the Moroccan contribution to debate, I invite you to reflect on it, in asserting that, in all senses, the participation of Moroccan troops in Operation Althea manifests the commitment of the Kingdom of Morocco to the EU efforts in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In

this sense, and with great diligence and determination, the Moroccan contingent has guaranteed a safe and favourable environment for the military headquarters and for the different components of Multinational Task Force South East (MNTF SE) that actively operate in the framework of EUFOR, for the purpose of achieving stability and a return to normal life in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

To put the Moroccan participation in context, I will begin by recalling the “transition phase” from SFOR to EUFOR, after which I will go on to demonstrate the commitment of the FAR contingent in the framework of Operation ALTHEA. I will end by examining the lessons learned from this experience.

## **From SFOR to EUFOR**

In late 2004, the objectives of SFOR were basically to establish secure conditions. Earlier, in June 2004, the EU and NATO had decided that an end should be brought to NATO’s participation in the form of SFOR, and that this force should be replaced (in accordance with the Berlin Plus agreement) by Operation ALTHEA. The new operation would be implemented by EUFOR in the framework of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

With the objective of constituting and organising the new force to be transferred to the EU, NATO enquired as to the intentions of the Kingdom of Morocco in relation to the Moroccan presence in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The EU, for its part, had requested that the contingent be placed under European control. Once the Royal Decision had been made to maintain the contingent *in situ*, the representatives of both parties signed the participation agreement in Brussels. On 2 December, 2004, a ceremony was held in Camp Butmir in Sarajevo that marked the historic launching of Operation ALTHEA, in which 22 European countries and 11 non-European countries are participating. It is worth mentioning that Morocco is the only African country to take part in this large-scale European operation.

The choice of the name ALTHEA for the operation was not mere coincidence; in Greek mythology, ALTHEA is the goddess of healing, a well-chosen name for an operation principally aimed at helping to ease the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and for the country’s ethnic populations.

To carry out this task, EUFOR, which had its headquarters in Sarajevo, has adopted the same structures and troop numbers as SFOR (7,000 troops). It has also maintained the same distribution for the new force across the three sectors of control, each of which included an MNTF: the North, Northeast and Southeast forces. The latter was named “Salamander”, and includes the Moroccan contingent.

I will now sketch out the details of Moroccan participation in the framework of Operation ALTHEA.

## The contingent in the framework of Operation ALTHEA

As part of Salamander, together with the German, Spanish, French, Italian and Albanian contingents, the Moroccan contingent has continued to be deployed at the Mostar-Ortiješ base.

### The organisation of the contingent

It must be remembered that as the forces changed from being Divisions to Brigades, to subsequently become MNTFs, the Moroccan contingent's organisation has developed in a parallel manner, with successive reductions in troop numbers; these decreased from 1,300 to 800, then to 350 and down to 240, before stabilising, in May 2004, at a figure of 130 soldiers, all of whom are deployed at the Mostar-Ortiješ base.

In its current form, the contingent (whose troops, for obvious reasons of cohesion, are from the same regiment), functions as a headquarters detachment responsible for administration and support duties, and as a guard company organised into two guard platoons and one intervention platoon.

The contingent's logistical support is organised by means of two complementary chains:

- a national chain that guarantees, through a monthly air link, the supply of spare parts and small calibre ammunition, when necessary;
- and a French chain which, in accordance with the military cooperation agreement between Morocco and France, provides quality logistical features that includes food and fuel supply, health support and miscellaneous running costs.

### The contingent's missions

With respect to missions, it should be emphasised that, just like at the other EUFOR bases, the Mostar-Ortiješ base is permanently at risk from attempts at intrusion and information gathering. To counter this, the guard company's main mission is to guarantee the security and protection of the base.

This mission requires maximum availability and a permanent state of vigilance. This translates into daily tasks consisting basically of:

- Guarding the main and secondary entrances of the base and certain sensitive points.
- Screening all staff and vehicles entering the base.
- Carrying out daytime and night-time patrols, in close collaboration with the *Guardia Civil* and the *Carabinieri*.
- Reacting to any action that might affect security at the base.

Participation in combined manoeuvres is another of the important aspects of our activities. The guard company's intervention platoon regularly takes part in simulation manoeuvres organised by the Base Commander, along with intervention forces from the other nations that comprise the southeast MNTF. These manoeuvres are aimed at familiarising the participants with security and defence procedures, as well as enabling them to develop reflexes and a capacity for rapid reaction in specific situations.

Meanwhile, apart from its routine medical activities, the Moroccan Level One Medical Unit has been incorporated in a professional manner into the multinational health care chain, in accordance with the synergic collaboration proposed for Salamander's various medical units. In this context, it guarantees (through a rotation system, one week per month) the MERT (Medical Emergency Response Team) service for treating MNTF patients.

In the same way, the Moroccan dental surgeon works at the French Level One Dental Surgery, providing assistance to Task Force patients. In addition, CIMIC (Civil-Military Cooperation) actions, in keeping with a spirit of multinational cooperation, play an important role in the work of the contingent. Thus the Moroccan dental surgeon and his French counterparts frequently make outside visits, to provide health care and promote awareness of dental hygiene to orphanages, refugee camps and among people with limited resources in different regions in the area of responsibility covered by "Salamander".

In the same way, the contingent's doctor is often required to accompany the Liaison and Observation Teams (LOT) to carry out medical-social work among people in rural areas who are living in a state of poverty.

The medical care provided by the contingent also takes a social-humanitarian form, with the occasional distribution of medicines and food.

## Lessons learned

My contribution will not be complete without a summary of the many, varied lessons we have learned from the experience.

### The importance of languages

To begin with, from the very first days of our deployment in the theatre of operations, the importance of communication has been greatly valued. The ability to speak foreign languages –and particularly English, the main language in EUFOR activities– can guarantee greater symbiosis and facilitate understanding and communication. In this sense, we have realised the importance of learning foreign languages, and particularly English, which is the *lingua franca* in the framework of the Peacekeeping Operations. One admirable example of such communication is that of the Spanish General Benito Raggio, commander of the Southeast MNTF, and

his chief of staff, the French Colonel Claude Minjoulat-Rey; each is able to speak the other's language, as well as English. This clearly reflects the multilingual communication skills that are increasingly required for these types of operations.

### **Strengthening military cooperation**

With respect to cooperation, Morocco, a member of both the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Barcelona Process, has demonstrated, through its participation in the management of the Bosnia-Herzegovina crisis since 1996, its firm desire to develop effective multilateral military cooperation with NATO and the EU. Thus, the incorporation of Moroccan officers into EUFOR headquarters may help to reinforce such associative actions in the field of officer training, as well as promoting the idea of interoperability between armies.

### **Capitalising on the experience**

Another important aspect in this learning process is capitalising on the experience. After having worked in a multinational environment and making contact with troops from other nations, the Moroccan soldiers have indubitably learned a new approach in the struggle for peace, particularly in terms of its humanitarian dimension. The joint manoeuvres and CIMIC actions have enabled Moroccan soldiers and officers to take their first steps in learning in the rules of international engagement. Some 500 Moroccan soldiers have benefited in this way from Operation ALTHEA, which has taught them to master the use of resources and rigor in their application of the rules of engagement.

### **Consolidating the image of the Moroccan soldier**

There is no doubt that the consolidation of the image of the Moroccan soldier represents an important part of the lessons we have learned. In this sense, given the multinational nature of the force, which is operating in a totally different setting, it is particularly important and gratifying for soldiers to enjoy the appreciation of local people and the staff of multinational forces. To achieve this great satisfaction, the members of the contingent have always adopted an approach of strict neutrality with respect to all the inhabitants, without making any distinction. This attitude of rigor, impartiality and transparency has, to date, helped the soldiers of the contingent to carry out their mission peacefully and without incident. Thus the prestige of the Moroccan soldier, while continuing to grow among the different participating nations, is also gaining official signs of recognition in the form of decorations and honourable mentions.

## **Conclusion**

Thanks to this participation, Morocco has reaffirmed its desire to strengthen its links of cooperation and friendship, which were already close, with European countries. While the experience and professionalism

of the FAR in Bosnia-Herzegovina has continued to arouse admiration and consideration among all concerned, it should be emphasised that the Moroccan contingent has become, over time, an important element in the military structure of Salamander MNTF in the framework of Operation ALTHEA, the final objective of which is to move from the stabilisation phase to the integration of Bosnia-Herzegovina into the European family.

Finally, I would like to read you some extracts from testimonies concerning the Moroccan troops provided by generals who have led the Southeast MNTF since the launching of Operation ALTHEA.

The French General, J. Michel Cherau, said: "The work carried out by the Moroccan detachment has been a deciding factor for the Southeast MNTF, and they have executed it commendably. This is the impression of all the [Moroccan] detachments in the country that I encountered in the various fields of operations. I was impressed by the rigor and professionalism of all the [Moroccan] troops I met".

Meanwhile, the Spanish General Benito Raggio said: "Being your TF Commander I started to feel proud of your achievements and your heritage of presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As your predecessors many years ago, I found good commandments, excellent discipline and proud of being a Moroccan soldier serving in EUFOR".