

Morocco's religious diplomacy in Africa

Ghita Tadlaoui

>> Over the past decade, Morocco has tried to diversify its traditionally northern-oriented foreign relations southwards. Developing closer economic and political relations with Sub-Saharan African countries, Rabat hoped, would help raise Morocco's regional profile and boost the Kingdom's exports. Hassan II, the father of the current King Mohammed VI, started opening up to the continent during the last years of his reign in the late 1990s by signing numerous cooperation agreements and deploying the diplomatic corps of the Kingdom all over the continent. This represented a radical shift in Morocco's foreign relations with Africa.

The current global financial and economic crisis has aggravated Morocco's considerable domestic economic and social challenges, especially since European demand for Moroccan export products has slowed down. In need to diversify its export markets, Morocco has started to reach out to southern countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Mali. Moreover, in August 2013 Mohammed VI formally announced that Morocco's foreign policy priority would henceforth be strengthening the economy, *inter alia* through closer ties with Africa. While Morocco's main diplomatic and economic partners remain the countries of the European Union (EU) and the United States (US), from 2008-2013 the Kingdom doubled its exports to Sub-Saharan Africa.

Morocco's efforts to step up its southern engagement, however, transcend merely economic interests. With the spread of arms across North Africa

HIGHLIGHTS

- After years of isolation from the rest of the African continent, Morocco has been trying to raise its profile in West Africa and the Sahel through the use of religious diplomacy.
- The Kingdom has also greatly boosted its economic ties with Sub-Saharan Africa and is now trying to position itself as an entry point to the African continent for Western investors.
- However, there remain many obstacles to Morocco's African ambitions, such as the unresolved Western Sahara conflict, rivalry with Algeria, and question marks over the sustainability of the Kingdom's model of democratisation.

»»»»» and the growth of jihadist groups in the Sahel following the ouster of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya in 2011, Morocco faces a new intensification of security threats at its doorstep, which can only be fully tackled by stronger regional cooperation. As a result, Morocco wants to end its relative diplomatic isolation in Africa – Rabat vacated its seat at the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor of the African Union (AU), in 1984, as the Kingdom was opposed to the OAU recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR – also known as Western Sahara). Morocco's static posture on the unresolved Western Sahara issue remains an impediment to a more comprehensive political rapprochement with its immediate southern neighbours.

However, Rabat has recently added a new element to its regional approach: the strategic use of 'religious diplomacy'. Presenting himself as a religious authority, Mohamed VI has sought to use a moderate discourse of Islam to help build new economic and political ties.

PROMOTING RELIGIOUS 'MODERATION'

Moroccan religious 'moderation' is meant to both contrast with and limit the propagation of the ultra-conservative brand of *Wahhabi* Islam sponsored by Saudi Arabia, which has inspired numerous extremist groups spawning instability in the region.

West Africa is home to 190 million Muslims, and for historical reasons many of them recognise the legitimacy of the Moroccan king's religious leadership. Mohammed VI uses the status of 'Commander of the Faithful', bestowed upon him by the Moroccan constitution, to assert his position of regional religious leader. His legitimacy derives from Morocco's relations with West Africa during the pre-colonial period, around the 11th century, when most of the region adopted Islam due to the *jihad* of the Almoravids, a berber dynasty of Morocco.

The *Tijaniyyah Brotherhood*, a Sufi group within Sunni Islam, is a legacy of this long-held

Moroccan-West African relationship. Today, there are millions of Tijane Muslims spread around Western African countries such as Senegal, Guinea, Mauritania, Gambia, and Côte d'Ivoire. The followers of this religious group still regard the Moroccan king as a religious leader, and Fez as a pilgrimage centre, thereby conferring legitimacy to Mohammed VI as a moderate Sunni leader.

Regional cooperation on religious matters is the most evident expression of the Moroccan king's religious diplomacy. In September 2013, Morocco signed an agreement with Mali's new government to train 500 Malian Imams in an effort to promote a more tolerant version of Islam in Mali. Following this initiative, the Moroccan Ministry of Islamic Affairs has received further requests for educating Imams from countries such as Guinea and Nigeria. In addition, Morocco is also planning on building mosques in different Sub-Saharan countries such as Senegal, Niger, Benin, and Guinea. On recent visits to African neighbouring countries, Mohammed VI has symbolically offered copies of the Koran to be distributed amongst the country's mosques.

In addition, Morocco has managed to peacefully include an Islamist party – the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) – in government (they are currently holding office). This peaceful accommodation with political Islam ostensibly recommends Morocco to Sahel and West African countries as a potential model to emulate, alongside the fact that it is one of the few countries that has managed to remain stable in a region of turmoil.

ASPIRING TO REGIONAL LEADERSHIP, RIVALRY WITH ALGERIA

Morocco's religious diplomacy has not been limited to promoting religious cooperation. It has also been put to use to try to deepen security cooperation between the countries of the region and to raise Morocco's regional profile. In its efforts to thwart terrorism and ensure broader regional stability, however, Morocco also aspires

to supplant its long-term rival Algeria as a leader in the region. Rabat's geopolitical soft power efforts have been complemented by an intensification of diplomatic relations with Sub-Saharan Africa at a time of growing insecurity in the Sahel (as reflected, for example, in the accumulation of visits the Moroccan king paid to Sahel countries over the past year).

Algeria, historically the informal leader on security challenges such as countering terrorism in the wider region, but lacking Rabat's religious soft power, has recently appeared to lose some credibility and regional political standing. This is in part because of Algiers' failure to prevent a major terrorist attack on its own soil in 2013 – the hostage crisis at a gas facility at In Amenas. King Mohammed VI has also made use of his close ties and privileged

status as a religious authority to mediate in Mali – traditionally an Algerian client – between Bamako's central government and the rebel and Tuareg groups of Northern Mali. A newly self-confident Morocco may be able to take advantage of Algiers' weakened position also on other dossiers, such as the future of Western Sahara.

Algeria has been at the forefront of secu-

rity cooperation initiatives involving Sub-Saharan countries, most notably the Nouakchott Process (an African Union initiative to improve security cooperation across the Sahel-Saharan region). Due to their difficult bilateral relations, Algiers has always excluded Morocco from such regional frameworks. Over the past few years, however, Morocco has been pushing the alternative framework of the Community of the Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD – a regional economic commu-

nity initiated by former Libyan leader Gaddafi in 1998), and which does not include Algeria.

Unofficially assuming the leadership of the CEN-SAD, over the past few years Morocco has rekindled the organisation to expand security cooperation between its 28 member states, including creating a Permanent Council for Peace and Security. It is worth noting that the countries that form part of the CEN-SAD are mainly Muslim Sahel-African countries which respect the spiritual authority of the Moroccan monarch. The king's religious diplomacy hence indirectly helps him to consolidate Morocco's regional leadership on security matters, to the (potential) detriment of Algiers, Rabat's rival.

COUNTERING EXTREMISM IN NORTH AND WEST AFRICA

The insurgency of radical Islamist militias in Northern Mali in January 2012 was a wakeup call for Morocco. Rabat supported the France-led *Operation Serval* in Mali in early 2013 by sending humanitarian aid to Mali and establishing a military hospital in Bamako. Morocco also gave \$5million to the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). The Moroccan Royal Military Academy of Meknes also hosts military officers from West Africa, and has recently created an exchange programme for Malian officers to be trained in Morocco.

More generally, since the Malian insurgency, Rabat has put fighting violent jihadism – which may be detrimental to its own stability – at the centre of its regional efforts. Morocco's ambassador to the United Nations (UN), Mohamed Loulichki, called in 2012 for the 'development of a united and inclusive global cooperation between states of North and West Africa and the UN' to deal with security challenges in the Sahel. Morocco has also tried to revive the 'Tripoli Process' (a regional border security cooperation initiative originally created by Libya's Gaddafi), including organising a conference in Rabat in 2013 calling for stronger implementation of that grouping's agreements. In addition, Morocco has



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»»»»» proposed creating a 'Ministerial Conference of African States Bordering the Atlantic' to strengthen security cooperation between 22 countries.

For Western governments, counter-balancing extremist Islamist ideologies across the region – such as the Islamic State (IS), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or Boko Haram – is a priority since they also pose a direct threat to Western countries and their interests. As a result, Europeans and Americans perceive Morocco as a key ally in a region plagued by extremism. In addition, the EU, preoccupied with increased irregular immigration from North Africa and the Sahel, has pushed Rabat to strengthen its migration policies. For example, Morocco has adopted new legislation to regularise the influx of Sub-Saharan immigrants while collaborating with the EU to contain irregular migration towards the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla.

Morocco's opening to Africa is also partly driven by a desire to promote Rabat's plan to confer Western Sahara with the status of an 'autonomous community' within the Kingdom. Some African countries have become more sympathetic to Rabat's proposal. In the last few years, countries such as Burkina Faso, Benin, Togo, and lately Mali, have started to back the idea of autonomy instead of an independence referendum for the Western Sahara territories. However, given the growing security threats in the region, Western powers are pushing for a prompt resolution of the Western Sahara conflict, which Morocco has so far resisted. In 2013, for example, Rabat reacted forcefully against an American proposal to expand UN monitoring of human rights in the Western Sahara, which led to the abandonment of the proposal. Similarly, in 2014 Morocco rejected the idea of an AU envoy to the Western Sahara.

MOROCCO'S NEW BUSINESS GATEWAY IN WEST AFRICA

On top of improving regional security cooperation, Morocco's African diplomatic charm offensive is also geared towards strengthening the Moroccan

economy. Having consolidated his standing in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region, *inter alia* thanks to his religious credentials and Morocco's historic and cultural ties with West Africa, King Mohammed VI has taken advantage of these good relations to conclude various economic cooperation agreements. Morocco's choice to invest in its links with West Africa seems to be a sound strategic move, since that region is currently home to most of the fastest growing economies on the continent, with a projected economic growth in the region of 7.4 per cent in 2014 (see also FRIDE policy brief number 176 – *West Africa: continental engine or brake?*).

During his recent visits to Mali, Gabon, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, accompanied by hundreds of Moroccan businessmen, Mohammed VI and his ministerial delegation signed some 118 business agreements over 20 days. Morocco's state airline, *Royal Air Maroc*, and the spiritual guides of the *Tijanya Brotherhood* in Bamako signed a business agreement in February 2014, giving preferential rates to the members of the Brotherhood for trips linking Abidjan to Fez. Since 2008, Morocco has also been negotiating a preferential Trade and Investment Agreement with the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) and strategic partnership accords with ECOWAS and the Economic and Monetary Community of Central African States (CEMAC), with the aspiration of eventually establishing free trade zones.

Morocco's trade volume with Sub-Saharan Africa has more than tripled during 2003-2013, increasing from 4.7 Moroccan Dirhams (MAD; €434.1 million) in 2003 to 14.4 billion MAD (€1.3 billion) by late 2013. In spite of this impressive relative increase, Africa still only represents between 5-7 per cent of Moroccan exports. Nevertheless, it is Rabat's declared objective to quickly increase this percentage by gaining shares in African markets. Morocco's investments in the African continent have been on the rise, accounting for 44 per cent of total Moroccan foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2013 (worth €127.2 million) according to the Moroccan *Office des Changes*, making Morocco

the second-largest African investor on the continent after South Africa. Amidst unrest and insecurity across North Africa, Morocco's relative stability might work to its commercial gain. Rabat seeks to position itself as an entry point to Africa, especially as a bridge between the West (Europe and America) and Africa. To this end, Morocco has been developing a 'Casablanca Finance City', which aims to position Casablanca as a regional financial hub in Africa and a gateway for Western investments.

CONCLUSION

Morocco's African vision is helping the Kingdom to make a stronger contribution to dealing with trans-national security challenges, to revamp its domestic economy, reposition itself geopolitically, and raise its profile in relations with key Western allies on which Morocco's economy and security still largely depends. Morocco's religious diplomacy, including the king's legitimacy as a religious leader in West Africa, has been a critical element for the success of this regional strategy. However, two major challenges remain: resolving the Western Sahara question; and avoiding increased tensions with regional rival Algeria.

Morocco's regional strategy could prove beneficial to US and EU interests in several ways. For example, if Morocco became a financial hub and gateway to African growth, it could serve as a business and trade facilitator for US and European investors (who already have a privileged relationship with the Kingdom). From a security standpoint, Morocco, Europe and the US could try to reduce insecurity in the Sahel region through deepening their joint cooperation. In addition, Morocco's 'religious diplomacy' should help promote religious moderation and greater security cooperation across North and West Africa, including in the Sahel.

At the same time, some factors may limit the extent to which the Kingdom's goals can be effectively achieved. In some respects, Morocco is

not the model of peaceful moderation and democratic inclusion of Islamists that its leadership likes to portray. Morocco's religious moderation and stability mainly function thanks to a heavy political monitoring of domestic Islamists. While the Islamist PJD forms part of the current governing coalition and provides the incumbent prime minister, the party's political margin of manoeuvre is quite limited (see also FRIDE policy brief number 182 – *Morocco's Islamists: bucking the trend?*). In contrast, *Al Adwal Ihsane* (Justice and Spirituality), the second-largest Islamist formation, which is more radical ideologically and very popular among the broader population, has been marginalised from the political game (it is currently not recognised as a political party).

Furthermore, Morocco's approach to counter-terrorism has hardly been so much more successful than those of its regional peers, at least not as much as Rabat presents. For example, Moroccan secret services dismantled more than 18 jihadist cells between 2011 and 2013, while around 1,500 Moroccans are estimated to be fighting with IS in Syria and Iraq. True, Morocco currently appears more stable than most other countries in the region, and Rabat understandably would like to take advantage of this positive image to develop a stronger African role. But there remain large question marks over just how transferrable the Moroccan approach to political Islam is in practice.

Ghita Tadlaoui is a programme associate with FRIDE.

e-mail: fride@fride.org

www.fride.org