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## FUTURE NOTES

# MOROCCO'S AFRICAN FOREIGN POLICY

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**Nizar Messari<sup>1</sup>**

Morocco's African foreign policy is neither a new nor a recent phenomenon. Morocco was a founding member of the Organization of African Unity (1963); indeed, the congress that inspired that organization was held in Casablanca, Morocco, in 1961. Under Kings Mohamed V and Hassan II Morocco had strong links with several African states, prominent among which were Senegal and Gabon, as well as Guinea and former Zaire. Morocco supported those states and their rulers, including by military means, as when Morocco sent troops to Zaire in 1977 and 1978 in support of the Mobutu regime. At the non-governmental level, Moroccan universities have been hosting students from other African states since the mid-1980s, which has created solid personal and social links between Moroccans and people from those other states.<sup>2</sup> Last, but not least, on the religious level Morocco has had an important – and essentially spiritual – influence in Western African Islam, notably in the case of the Tijani branch of Sufi Islam, which has held Morocco in very high esteem.

### 1. NEW ASPECTS OF MOROCCO'S AFRICAN FOREIGN POLICY

Three elements distinguish Morocco's current African foreign policy from its previous policy. First is the emphasis on the economy. Between 2000 and 2015, Morocco's trade with sub-Saharan Africa grew by 12.8 per cent, and although in 2015 that trade represented only 3.4 per cent of Morocco's total international trade, it represented a profit to Morocco of around 1 billion US dollars per year in 2013, 2014 and 2015.<sup>3</sup> In parallel with increasing trade between Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa, Morocco's investments on the continent have also grown considerably during the last decade and in 2015 reached 40 per cent of Morocco's total foreign investments across many different sectors, from banking to mining, and from construction to the telecommunications sector. Moroccan banks have expanded throughout the continent, following the steps of the Banque Marocaine du Commerce Extérieur (BMCE), which became in November 2015 BMCE-Bank of Africa when it acquired 73 per cent of the capital of Bank of Africa. Another instance of the growing importance of the African market for Moroccan companies is that the share of the leading Moroccan telecommunications company, Maroc Telecom, in Morocco's investments in sub-Saharan Africa rose from 9 per cent in 2011 to 21 per cent in 2015.<sup>4</sup> In sum, despite the fact that Morocco can in no way compete with the major investors on the African continent (such as China, the United States, India and France), the high-profile and targeted nature of its investments have had a significant impact on the economies

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2 Johara Berriane, "La formation des élites subsahariennes au Maroc", in Mansouria Mokhefi and Alain Antil (eds.), *Le Maghreb et son Sud. Vers des liens renouvelés*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2012, p. 155-171.

3 Rim Berahab, "Relations between Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa: What is the Potential for Trade and Foreign Direct Investment?", in *OCP Policy Center Policy Briefs*, No. 17/04 (February 2017), <http://www.ocppc.ma/node/8372>.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

it has been investing in and mean that Morocco is recognized as an important economic player in those economies.

The second characteristic of the new focus of Morocco's African foreign policy is its reach far beyond the traditional francophone circles in which the country used to play. Indeed, Kenya, Ethiopia, Nigeria and more recently Zambia became political and trade partners of Morocco, were visited by the king – in some cases, more than once – and have developed significant economic projects in partnership with Morocco, such a major fertilizer production plant in Ethiopia worth 2.4 billion US dollars and a natural gas pipeline between Nigeria and Morocco across some 5,000 km, and potentially worth billions of dollars in terms of investments. The cases of Nigeria and Ethiopia are significant. Both states have recognized the Sahrawi Republic as an independent state, which, until very recently, would have represented a major obstacle in their relations with Morocco. However, under the new direction of Moroccan foreign policy, this has not been a handicap for substantial Moroccan economic projects, which have served to bring Morocco closer to those two states. In this sense, instead of strengthening links with friends, which used to be the dominating approach of Moroccan foreign policy, the new approach is to start with the economy, create strong links, and then use those links for eventual political purposes. The rationale is that it may well be more effective if Nigerian or Ethiopian actors, for example, who have strong economic ties with Morocco put pressure on their respective diplomats than for Moroccan diplomats to approach their Nigerian, Ethiopian or other counterparts. Interestingly, Morocco has been trying the same approach with both South Africa and Angola but has met with significant resistance in both cases. Nevertheless, Morocco is clearly reaching out to non-francophone African states and is deploying new means to achieve the rapprochement it seeks.

The third characteristic of Morocco's new African foreign policy is the dominant role played by King Mohammed VI. The king has spent much time in many African states, with over 51 visits to 26 African states since he acceded to the throne. During his visits he generally holds high-level talks, inaugurates development projects – in general, projects with Moroccan funding – and also undertakes trips of a personal or even touristic nature, which grabs the headlines. Indeed, whereas most Moroccan decision-makers and investors cut short as far as possible their visits to other African states, the king makes a point of visiting for long periods, as well as mixing with the people on the streets. By way of illustration, in an unprecedented act marking a significant break of protocol, for the Green March celebration of November 2016 King Mohammed VI officially addressed the Moroccan people from Dakar, the capital of Senegal, instead of from Moroccan soil. It was hence no surprise that he personally led the Moroccan delegation to the African Union summit of January 2017 that welcomed Morocco to the organization. Another illustration of the substantial focus on Africa during the reign of Mohammed VI is the substantial increase in the number of bilateral agreements between Morocco and other African states: there have been 952 such agreements and partnerships since his accession to the throne, in sectors as diverse as education, agricultural development, the economy and religious affairs, to cite just a few. In sum, the thaw in Morocco's relations with many other African states is the result of the king's initiatives and personal heavy involvement more than a general realignment of Moroccan diplomacy.

## 2. CHALLENGES TO MOROCCO'S AFRICAN FOREIGN POLICY

Why has Morocco adopted this new African foreign policy? Is it merely to defend its presence in the Western Sahara, or is it to obtain economic and trade benefits for its public sector and private companies? Historically, the country's ruling dynasties saw Africa as a natural extension of their own territories. The current Moroccan constitution also gives a prominent role to Morocco's African heritage and identity and emphasizes the country's deep roots in the continent. As for the Western Sahara issue, Morocco was very comfortable with the United Nations Security Council being the main, if not, the sole diplomatic player in the dispute: the players in that council are predictable, and the issue is irrelevant enough for the five permanent members of the council to allow Morocco to keep the status quo, which is not necessarily an optimum outcome, although it is an acceptable one from a Moroccan perspective. All of this seems to indicate that Morocco's new African foreign policy is not limited to the issue of the Western Sahara, and aims more broadly at making of Morocco a key and influential player in African politics.

Morocco's renewed interest in intensifying partnerships in Africa takes place within a discourse that brings an increasingly rebellious, anti-colonial and pro-South tone. This is not new for Mohammed VI, since his doctoral dissertation on Maghrebi-European Union relations, published as a book in the mid-1990s, already contained heavy criticism of the EU and underlined the structural imbalance in the Maghreb's relationship with it. Today Mohammed VI articulates a view in which he insists on the weight of colonialism and its impact on the development of the former colonies.<sup>5</sup> He also accuses some Western countries of hypocrisy and calls for more balanced duties among the parties to international relations agreements. In these speeches, Mohammed VI presents South-South relations as an alternative to the dependent relations southern economies have with their northern counterparts, which are often their former colonizers.

This renewed African orientation of Morocco's foreign policy will inevitably meet some important challenges and show the limits of the win-win narrative Morocco advocates about its African foreign policy, the most important of which relates to migration. Indeed, while Morocco claims its African identity and heritage and looks to reinforce its links with African partners, its existing links with the EU make it the *gendarme* of Europe, or some sort of gatekeeper for Europe. Morocco cooperates closely with European authorities in general, and with Spanish authorities in particular, in order to stop migrants from entering the cities of Ceuta and Melilla or from crossing the strait of Gibraltar and land in Europe. Spanish and EU authorities have repeatedly expressed their gratitude to Moroccan authorities for this cooperation, without which Spain would have to deal with a far bigger number of migrants than it currently does. This is clearly shown by the fact that, according to Frontex,<sup>6</sup> there were over 31,000 migrant crossings to Spain in 2006 to barely 874 in 2015.<sup>7</sup> As

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5 This was the case, for instance, at the UN Climate Change Conference in Durban in 2011, and at the UN General Assembly in 2014 and at COP 22 in Marrakech in 2016, when Morocco hosted the UN conference of the partners on climate change.

6 John Cosgrave et al. "Europe's Refugees and Migrants: Hidden Flows, Tightened Borders and Spiralling Costs", in *ODI Reports*, September 2016, p. 23, <https://www.odi.org/node/30551>.

7 Having said that, due to the high level of insecurity in Libya as well as to the tightening of the crossing conditions from Libya by European authorities, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports that 30,300 migrants

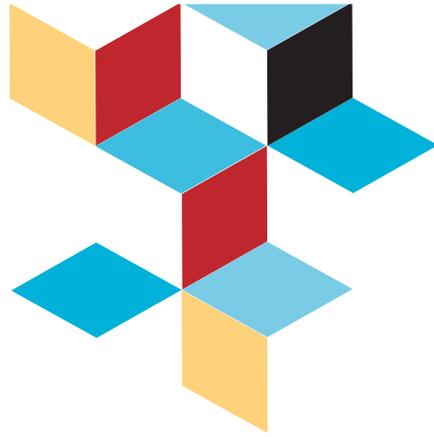
a consequence of this cooperation, many Africans trying to migrate to Europe through Morocco find themselves stuck in Morocco and blame Morocco for their deplorable situation. After years of abuse and violence by Moroccan police, Morocco has tried to develop a more migrant friendly policy and has opened two periods of legalization for migrants who find themselves illegally in Morocco. Although this new approach has brought some concrete relief to many individuals who were illegally residing in Morocco, allowing them access to education and health services and providing them with the protection of the law, its conditions and restrictions limit its applicability to most paperless migrants who entered Morocco on foot and are looking for ways to reach Europe.

One of the questions that come to mind is whether the shift in focus to Africa represents a deeper move than a mere tactical shift in Moroccan foreign policy. If the king's doctoral dissertation saw in the strengthening of the Maghreb an asset for the development of its countries in general, and of Morocco in particular, Africa seems to have replaced the Maghreb in that role: this was explicitly spelled out in the speech he made in January 2017 in Addis Ababa, when Morocco was admitted to the African Union.<sup>8</sup> The king affirmed that the Maghrebi ideal was dormant and that it was being replaced by an African ideal. Applying for ECOWAS (that is, for a membership in a Western African organization in lieu of a North African one) clearly underlines that prospective shift and thereby Mohammed VI indicates that Morocco, whose 2011 constitution mentions both its Arab-Islamic identity and its African identity, seems to be leaning towards reinforcing the latter rather than the former. Whether such an identity switch will be accepted and assimilated by the people and how it resonates with the Amazigh movement are another issue; but the directions from the highest authority in the country are to follow that route.

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and refugees crossed the Mediterranean and landed on European soil during the first 147 days of 2018, with nearly 75 per cent arriving in Italy and Greece and the remainder reaching Spain (25 per cent). Moreover, the number of arrivals in Spain had doubled in 2017 as compared with 2016, and those numbers are continuing to grow in 2018. This is taking place despite the fact that until April 2018 the number of Mediterranean arrivals was about half that of 2017 at the same time of year, and about 10 per cent of 2016's volume at this same time of year. See International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Mediterranean Migrant Arrivals Reach 30,300 in 2018; Deaths Reach 655*, 29 May 2018, <https://www.iom.int/node/87142>.

8 Full Speech of HM the King at 28th African Union Summit, Addis Ababa, 31 January 2017, <http://www.maroc.ma/en/royal-activities/full-speech-hm-king-28th-african-union-summit>.



**Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA)** is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

**MENARA** maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

**MENARA** is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.



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