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Morocco's Religious Diplomacy Drives Its Expansion in Africa

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Under Mohammed VI, Morocco has developed an original way of gaining influence in Sub-Saharan Africa: religious diplomacy. Led by the king personally, it exploits traditional and new channels of influence and has proved effective in re-establishing Morocco's political role on regional and pan-African levels. It also strengthened the African vector of its economic expansion and may become an important part of the security equation in the Sahel.

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Morocco, a North African country with Berber and Arab populations, in the late 1950s advocated the establishment of a pan-African political forum. This led to the foundation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1961, which in 2002 transformed into the African Union (AU). However, the initially strong ties to Sub-Saharan Africa were severed as part of the fallout from crises in Western Sahara. Morocco annexed the majority of this formerly Spanish-colonised territory in 1976, but the OAU recognised Western Sahara's independence and accepted it as a member state despite the facts on the ground. This led Morocco to withdraw from the OAU in 1984 and strengthen its foreign policy focus on Europe and the Maghreb. However, its European Communities membership application was rejected in 1987 for not meeting the geographic criteria. On the other hand, Morocco's hostilities with Algeria, which supported Western Sahara's aspirations, led to the permanent closure of the Morocco-Algeria border in 1994. However, King Mohammed VI, who assumed the throne in 1999, found ways to overcome those geographic and political limitations to conduct successful foreign policy.

Morocco's Priorities in Africa

Morocco has treated violent jihadism as the prime threat to its national security ever since the 2003 bombings in Casablanca left 45 people dead and the ungovernable north of Mali became a safe haven for Islamic militants from across the region, including West Africans and Moroccans. Strengthening the resilience of Sahelian societies in the wake of pressure from militant extremism therefore serves as a pre-emptive measure for shielding the country from further attacks.

Morocco attempts to boost its diplomatic credentials by offering what it calls a culturally relevant formula for peaceful settlement in the region. Global demand for this approach arose after the unsuccessful French, UN, EU, and U.S. efforts to stabilise the Sahara-Sahel through military action following the Arab Spring and the 2012–2013 Mali war.

With Maghreb cooperation stalled, an economy over-reliant on trade with Europe, and EU membership beyond its reach, Morocco reorientated its regional aspirations. Mohammed VI acts as the patron of an economic and political pivot towards the AU and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This re-engagement, however, must avoid colliding with the stances of the AU or its key members on Western Sahara.

The King's Religious Diplomacy

Morocco's official, state-supported brand of Islam remains the country's prime soft-power asset. It combines adherence to the Sunni Maliki legal tradition (predominant in Muslim Africa), the Ash'ari theological school and support of Sufism, a mystical approach to the religion. Those are combined with recognition of the religious leadership of the monarch. His traditional title of Commander of the Faithful makes him the highest religious authority within Morocco and this has historically resonated in parts of Mauritania, northern Senegal, and Mali.¹ In Africa, some attributes of Moroccan Islam—even if made official and bound to the state—are seen as more indigenous than Wahhabi-jihadism, for which these elements are considered un-Islamic. Morocco has sought to increase its credibility by trying to contribute to diffusing conflicts of global concern: in 2015, it sponsored the Skhirat agreement between the Libyan factions to establish the Government of National Accord. Then, in mid-2020

Moroccan official, state-supported brand of Islam remains the country's prime soft power asset.

¹ B. Sambe, Y. Hamdaoui, "Des usages du soft power religieux du Maroc sous le règne de Mohammed VI," *Afrique en Mouvement*, 2019, pp. 19–29.

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Morocco attempted to mediate between the embattled Malian president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (later [deposed in a coup](#)) and imam Mahmoud Dicko, the Salafist leader of the opposition.²

Between 2002 and 2006, Mohammed VI appointed prominent Sufis to lead the country's Ministry for Islamic Affairs—Ahmed Toufiq as its head and Abdellatif Begdouri Achkari,³ an expert in African affairs, as his deputy—to strengthen the country's appeal to the 240 million Muslims⁴ of Sub-Saharan Africa. Some 25-30% of them belong to Sufi brotherhoods⁵ that reject violence and are built around loyalties to certain charismatic scholars, considered holy men and spiritual guides.

The *Tijaniyya* is the largest of the African Sufi brotherhoods, historically spread across the Sahara from Morocco. While in West Africa and parts of Central Africa *Tijaniyya* is a popular mass movement (accounting for half of Senegalese Muslims and over 30% in states like Chad, Niger, or Cameroon), in Morocco it evolved into an exclusive club associated with the royal family. Mohammed VI's notable preference for *Tijaniyya* reaps the benefits of being seen as its protector by powerful sub-Saharan Sufis.

The Sufi link historically is placed at the core of Morocco's special ties to Senegal, which in recent decades has been synonymous with the limits of its outreach towards Africa. After 2010, Mohammed VI's religious diplomacy first expanded this model into French-speaking Guinea and Côte

The Mohammed VI-Niass alliance provided a privileged access and influence over the local Muslim establishments in African countries useful for lobbying Morocco-friendly policies.

d'Ivoire, then to the whole of West Africa and parts of Central Africa. For that, the king deepened his personal relations with the dynastic leaders of the most internationalised *Tijaniyya* branch, founded by Ibrahima Niass (who died in 1975) and centred on the Grand Mosque in Kaolack in central Senegal. The Niass leaders are regarded as spiritual guides by millions of *Tijanis* from the Gulf of Guinea, across the entire Sahel zone, to Sudan and among the global diaspora, notably in Paris and Chicago. They are

also powerful independent political actors who could serve as promoters of Moroccan interests. The Mohammed VI-Niass alliance provides privileged access and influence over local Muslim establishments in African countries useful for lobbying Morocco-friendly policies. The religiously facilitated impetus in Muslim Africa helped to reach the rest of the continent on issues such as a return to the AU.

To boost his recognition as an African Muslim leader, Mohammed VI made close to 50 visits to Sub-Saharan Africa before 2017, placing the region as the main focus of his international activity. During those trips, the king cemented relations with the brotherhood's key figures, as well as leaders of other Sufi traditions, including *Qadiriyya* (Africa's oldest), *Muridiyya* (Senegal's most visible and wealthiest), and other *Tijaniyya* branches. He routinely led Friday prayers in prestigious, often *Tijani*-affiliated mosques. Visits also involved handing out free copies of the Quran, printed by the 2010-founded Mohammed VI Foundation for the Edition of the Holy Quran. Its texts are standardised accordingly to the *Warch*-school of writing and reciting, predominant in Morocco and different to the *Hafs*-school version found in the Middle Eastern (e.g., Saudi) editions.⁶ Visits also involved making donations to mosques (Benin, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and others) and social and developmental projects through the mainly Africa-oriented Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation (AMCI). While those activities largely served as vehicles of promotion of the king himself, they fitted well into the tradition

² "Maroc-Mali: le jour où Mohammed VI a évité le pire," *Jeune Afrique*, 17 July 2020, www.jeuneafrique.com.

³ Followers of the *Boutchichiyya*, an indigenous Moroccan Sufi brotherhood, and the *Tijaniyya* orders, respectively.

⁴ J.-L. Triaud, "La Tidjaniya, une confrérie musulmane transnationale," *Politique étrangère*, no. 4, 2010, p. 840.

⁵ *The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity*, Pew Research, 2012.

⁶ J.-Y. Moisseron, J.-F. Daguzan, "Morocco's Regional Ambitions in Sub-Saharan Africa: Royal Diplomacy," *Joseph Daher Obrevatoire du monde arabo-musulman et du Sahel*, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, February 2018.

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of an African Sufi reformist whose disciples naturally form structures of an organised following around the founder's authority. In this context, it could have been expected the king's legacy would take roots.

To bring African Muslims further under the king's influence, the Mohammed VI Institute for Training of Imams, *Morchidines* and *Morchidates* (male and female preachers) was founded in 2015. It hosts 1,300 rotating trainees, including 100 women, at once, coming from Mali, Senegal, Nigeria, Guinea, Gambia, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, and the African diaspora in France. Apart from strictly religious training, the trainees receive courses on geography, human rights, social sciences, and practical skills.⁷

Between 2012 and 2016, Morocco signed 36 agreements on faith matters with African states (an increase from 18 in 2000–2011⁸) and in 2017 it announced the launch of a €108 million fund for building and rehabilitating mosques in Africa.⁹ Apart from state-controlled institutions, grassroots religious arenas such as the Moderation Forum of Africa (reaching some Salafist circles) have also been enlisted to support Morocco's expansion.¹⁰

Case Studies: Nigeria and Algeria—Strengthening Against Regional Rivals

The growing religious ties between Morocco, Senegal and Nigeria have translated into the rise of the former's political influence in the latter, Africa's most populous (190 million) state, despite Nigeria's support for Western Sahara's independence and rivalry over economic domination in West Africa. The Nigerian *Tijaniyya* community, mostly found in the country's northeast, is unique, having at least 20 million adherents (in a country of 200 million).¹¹ Prominent members include the religious establishment of the Emirate of Kano, a centre of traditional authority, and the country's Grand Mufti, Sheikh Ibrahim Saleh Al-Husseini, a disciple of the Senegalese Niass leaders. Of them, Ahmad Tijani Ali Cisse, imam of the Kaolack Grand Mosque, is specifically influential, partly due to the popular belief that his family tree resembles that of imam Hussein (grandson of the Prophet), which positions Cisse as his modern "incarnation."¹² In 2011, the leading Nigerian *Tijani* scholar¹³ was seen as supporting the presidential bid of Goodluck Jonathan,¹⁴ who needed Muslim votes to move beyond his natural, South/Christian support base. However, during his term, support from the brotherhood waned and in 2015, Jonathan, facing once again competition from Mohammadou Buhari, a Muslim northerner, was desperate for *Tijani* votes. When Jonathan failed to find local *Tijani* supporters, he hoped to win them through the Moroccan king. Mohammed VI, with his influence over the Senegalese and Nigerian Sufis, was therefore seen as holding the keys to his electoral victory in Nigeria. However, in this case the king did not want his image to be instrumentalised and closed the communication channels with Jonathan. Despite that, the Nigerian MFA falsely claimed that the president spoke

Growing Morocco-Senegal-Nigeria religious ties translated into the rise of Morocco's political influence in Africa's most populous (190 million) state, despite Nigeria's support for Western Sahara.

⁷ N. Lamli, "Maroc: Institut Mohammed VI... International Imam Academy," *Jeune Afrique*, 17 June 2015, www.jeuneafrique.com.

⁸ Sambe B., Hamdaoui Y., *op. cit.*

⁹ "Le Maroc débloque plus de 100 millions d'euros pour la construction et la réhabilitation de mosquées dans des pays africains," *AfriqInfos*, 21 December 2017, <https://afriqinfos.com>.

¹⁰ S. Hmimnat, *Morocco's Religious 'Soft Power' in Africa As a Strategy Supporting Morocco's Expansion in Africa*, Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, 2018.

¹¹ *The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity*, *op. cit.*

¹² "Sheikh Tijani Cisse: Biography," *The Standard*, 21 July 2014, <https://standard.gm>.

¹³ Sheikh Dahiru Usman Bauchi, a charismatic preacher who married into the Senegal-based Niass family, in an interview to BBC Hausa service stated that he would rather vote for a Christian who sees him as faithful than an *Izala* [Nigerian fundamentalist Muslim sect, hostile to *Tijaniyya*] who would consider him a non-believer. In the 2011 elections, *Izala* supported Buhari against Jonathan.

¹⁴ M.N. Alkali, A.K. Monguno, B.S. Mustafa, *Overview of Islamic Actors in Northeastern Nigeria*, Nigeria Research Network (NRN) Working Paper No. 2, Oxford 2012.

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extensively to Mohammed VI. This caused a diplomatic row and Morocco quickly recalled its ambassador to Nigeria, leaving Jonathan to apologise for the embarrassment.¹⁵ Soon after, he also lost the elections.

Tijaniyya was also instrumental in the rapprochement between the two countries in 2016 facilitated by the Moroccan brotherhood's leader, Mohamed Kabir Ibn Mohamed, and supported by the pro-Moroccan Emir of Kano, Muhammadu Sanusi II (deposed in March 2020).

Tunisia and Algeria, similarly to Morocco, present their Sufi traditions as a politically relevant counterbalance to radicalisation in the region. For Algeria, it is also a means of keeping political influence south of the Sahara. However, in the last decade, marked by Mohammed VI's intensive African travels, Algeria's long-time leader Abdelaziz Bouteflika (resigned in 2019) was too ill to keep pace. Also, the legitimacy of the monarch, deriving from his lineage to the family of the Prophet, offered the Moroccan king a clear advantage over the secular politician. This proved critical as both countries claim ownership of the legacy of Ahmed al-Tijani, the 18th-century founder of the *Tijaniyya*. He was born in Ain Medi, present-day Algeria, and died in the Moroccan city of Fez. From the 1970s, the first branch of Senegalese *Tijaniyya* developed a custom of group pilgrimages to Fez. It was supported by Morocco offering special fees on Royal Air Maroc flights. Under Mohammed VI, the movement expanded, and Fez hosts a number of events dedicated to *Tijanis*, solidifying its reputation as the spiritual capital of African Sufis. Algeria's attempts to promote Ain Medi as an alternative pilgrimage destination have not brought comparable results.

Moroccan religious diplomacy pushes Algeria into reactivity and limits its political appeal in the broader Morocco's neighbourhood as well as in African institutions.

In reaction to the creation of the Algeria-sponsored League of Ulemas, Preachers and Imams of the Sahel Countries in 2013, Morocco launched the pan-African Mohammed VI Foundation for African Ulema in 2016. It formed a broad structure for the promotion of unity and coordination of African Islamic scholars.¹⁶ Fez-based Al Quaraouiyine University, one of the world's oldest, was reorganised to support its mission.

Those actions have pushed Algeria into reactivity and limit its political appeal in the broader Moroccan neighbourhood, as well as in African institutions.

Economic Payoff

Mohammed VI's tours of Muslim Africa served as a door-opening exercise for multiple economic engagements. They helped win markets and investment opportunities for Moroccan companies. The king signed about 1,000 trade, security and cooperation agreements with Sub-Saharan African states. This translated into a rise of trade with this region by 60% between 2008 and 2018 and the channelling of about 80% of Morocco's FDI into the region.¹⁷ Morocco also became the biggest investor in West Africa, with Mali, Senegal, Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire—all key focus areas of Mohammed VI's religious diplomacy—receiving the greatest share of FDI.¹⁸ The country's push across Africa started to slowly reduce Morocco's over-reliance on exports to the EU, which still

Morocco became the biggest investor in West Africa with Mali, Senegal, Cameroon and Ivory Coast – all key subjects to Mohammed VI religious diplomacy – receiving greatest share of its foreign direct investments.

¹⁵ "Nigeria 'embarrassed' by Morocco royal phone row," BBC, 13 May 2015, www.bbc.com.

¹⁶ www.fm6oa.org.

¹⁷ Y. Abouzzohour, *Progress and missed opportunities: Morocco enters its third decade under King Mohammed VI*, Brookings Institution, 29 July 2020, www.brookings.edu.

¹⁸ J.-Y. Moisseron, J.-F. Daguzan, *op. cit.*

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accounts for about 80% of its output (mostly to France and Spain).¹⁹ From 2007 to 2017, the proportion of exports to Sub-Saharan Africa rose from 5% to 8.8%.

State-owned fertiliser giant OCP (Office chérifien des phosphates), whose board is headed by the king himself, now holds more than 65% of the rapidly expanding African market. It continues to expand in Nigeria, Rwanda, and Ethiopia—supporters of Western Sahara’s independence²⁰—as well as in Ghana, Kenya, and other states. Another giant, Attijariwafa Bank, expanded its Sub-Saharan branch network from 322 in 2011 to almost 600 in 2019.²¹ Moroccan telecommunications (Maroc Telecom) and chemical and insurance companies are also heavily involved in Africa.²² The Tangier port, on course to become the Mediterranean’s biggest, is orienting its development strategy towards channelling West African trade (40% of transiting goods).²³

Return to the African Union

Its Africa-oriented policies have allowed Morocco to strengthen its position towards continental intergovernmental institutions. Morocco, since 2001, has been a member of the 28-state Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), launched and long dominated by Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. After his death in 2011, Morocco hosted a number of the grouping’s events, including the 2013 CEN-SAD Regional Conference on Strengthening Border Security between the countries of the Sahel and the Maghreb and the 2014 summit.²⁴ The forum, which does not involve Algeria, proved useful in moving closer to the AU. Morocco’s pan-African image was strengthened with Royal Air Maroc maintaining flights to Ebola-hit Liberia throughout the 2014–2015 outbreak—the only African operator to do so. Finally, in 2016 Morocco requested full membership of the continental body. On 30 January 2017, African leaders attending the AU summit in Addis Ababa agreed to leave the question of Western Sahara for the future (while continuing to recognise the territory’s membership) and accepted Morocco’s return.²⁵

After re-joining the AU, Morocco created the special position of Minister-Delegate for African Affairs in 2018.²⁶ The next year, the MFA renamed itself the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, African Cooperation and Moroccan Expatriates, which further highlighted the importance of the African dimension in the country’s foreign policy. While making the Western Sahara problem indecisive in the AU context, Morocco simultaneously attempts to win direct support from African states on its position on the issue. This is envisaged by a growing number of foreign consulates locating in Laayoune, capital of the Moroccan-annexed part of Western Sahara. Out of more than 20 such offices,²⁷ 15 were opened by African states, recently by Zambia and Eswatini.²⁸ The Southern African countries benefited, along with 13 others on the continent, from Moroccan COVID 19-related medical assistance.²⁹

¹⁹ *Morocco-Africa Ties Set for Further Deepening*, Fitch Solutions, 27 July 2020, www.fitchsolutions.com.

²⁰ A. Boukhars, *Morocco and the African Union: Back into the Fold*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 25 February 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

²¹ S. Kede, “Morocco continues its push into Africa,” *Africa Business*, 8 May 2019, <https://africanbusinessmagazine.com>.

²² Eljehtimi A., “Morocco’s OCP plans African chemical plants, fertiliser blenders,” Reuters, 4 March 2013, www.reuters.com.

²³ A. Eljehtimi, U. Laessing, “Morocco’s Tangier port to become Mediterranean’s largest,” Reuters, 26 June 2019, <https://de.reuters.com>

²⁴ M. Jaabouk, L. Babas, “Africa: Since 2001, Morocco has been moving slowly up in CEN-SAD,” Yabiladi, 14 April 2019, <https://en.yabiladi.com>.

²⁵ H. Mohamed, “Morocco rejoins the African Union after 33 years,” Al Jazeera, 31 January 2017, www.aljazeera.com.

²⁶ Mohcine Jazouli, an expert with a business background, asserted this position.

²⁷ On 24 December 2020, the U.S. announced it would open a consulate on Western Saharan territory as Morocco recognised Israel. The earlier establishment of—mostly African—diplomatic posts on this occupied territory set the course that made it possible.

²⁸ “Morocco makes diplomatic breakthrough in southern Africa,” *The North Africa Post*, 28 October 2020, <https://northafricapost.com>.

²⁹ C. Mackay, “Moroccan medical aid is an example of true solidarity between African nations,” *The Parliament*, 19 June 2020, www.theparliamentmagazine.eu.

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Immediately after the AU readmission, Morocco set a new goal: joining ECOWAS, despite not sharing a border with bloc countries³⁰—only through the disputed territory of Western Sahara where Morocco borders Mauritania, which left ECOWAS in 2000 but has been associated with it since 2017. Therefore, the geography makes it difficult to think of ECOWAS membership as viable. Still, Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, and Senegal—countries heavily targeted by the religious soft power—strongly support Morocco’s aspirations. This, however, is met with scepticism from Nigeria, the powerhouse in ECOWAS, because it fears it could lose its dominant position within the bloc. Nevertheless, Morocco was able to participate in the bloc’s extraordinary summit devoted to the fight against terrorism in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) in September 2019.

Prospects

With limited hard-power and financial resources, Morocco succeeds diplomatically and economically through symbolic power. The ground, however, remains highly competitive, as Saudi, Emirati, Qatari, [Iranian](#), Egyptian, [Turkish](#), and Algerian religious entities continue attempts to win influence over African, including Sahelian, Muslims.

With a lack of prospects for success of a military-dominated approach to the Sahel, the pursuit of social and political solutions to the crisis is likely to intensify. While generally Morocco’s activities in the religious sphere are in line with wider European goals, such as countering radicalisation, they have

European policymakers should seek navigating independently in the changing constellation of religious actors.

limitations. The distinction between the “peaceful” Moroccan Islam and “violent” extremism, as promoted by the king, is oversimplified. Perceptions of religion in the region and the loyalties that come with it are very fluid. European policymakers should not therefore limit their interest in religious diplomacy to outsourcing it to partners like Morocco, which instrumentalises it for its own economic and political goals. Instead, they should seek to

navigate independently in a changing constellation of religious actors. Building relations with Mohamoudul Mahi Niass, who in August 2020 assumed the position of overall leader—the 5th *khalifa-general* of the Kaolack-Tijaniyya—should not be overlooked.

The November 2020 escalation between Moroccan forces and Western Saharan rebels³¹ reflected the importance of Morocco-Africa relations. The rebels attempted to put pressure on the Kingdom by blocking the only land route linking the Kingdom to Sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, Morocco used the confrontation to work to side-line pro-Saharan voices in the AU. This is likely to lead to ending the membership of Western Sahara, which would further weaken the prospects for any UN-led political process in the territory.

³⁰ O. Touré, “The Accession of the Kingdom of Morocco to the Economic Community of West African States—ECOWAS,” West Africa Institute, 2017, <http://wai-iao.ecowas.int>.

³¹ “Tensions flare in Western Sahara as pro-independents Polisario accuse Morocco of ending ceasefire,” France24, 13 November 2020, www.france24.com.