



PRESS RELEASE

According to a new FRIDE report

Morocco's religious diplomacy is booming but serious challenges remain to be addressed

- *After years of isolation from the rest of the African continent, Morocco is trying to raise its profile in West Africa and the Sahel through the use of religious diplomacy.*
- *Morocco has 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.*
- *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.*

Madrid-Brussels, 27 February 2015 – 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,”** writes Ghita Tadlaoui, junior researcher at FRIDE and author of the report. A radical shift in Morocco’s foreign relations with Africa took place when Hassan II, the father of the current King Mohammed VI, started opening up to the continent in the late 1990s by signing numerous cooperation agreements and deploying the diplomatic corps all over the continent.

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”**, argues Tadlaoui. To diversify its export markets, **“Morocco has started to reach out to southern countries such as Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, and Mali”**. While the country’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. Its 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.

To achieve its aims, 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, **“meant to both contrast with and limit the propagation of the ultraconservative 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 as a moderate Sunni leader.

Regional cooperation on religious matters is the most evident expression of the Moroccan king's religious diplomacy. In this vein, Morocco signed an agreement with Mali's new government to train 500 Malian Imams to promote a more tolerant version of Islam, and has engaged in the building of mosques in different Sub-Saharan countries such as Senegal, Niger, Benin, and Guinea. In addition, the peaceful inclusion of an Islamist party in the government – the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) – makes Morocco a potential model to emulate.

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”**, states Tadlaoui.

The insurgency of radical Islamist militias in Northern Mali in January 2012 was a wakeup call for Morocco, who supported the France-led *Operation Serval* in Mali in early 2013 and gave \$5million to the African-led International Support Mission to Mali. For Western governments, counter-balancing extremist Islamist ideologies across the region 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”**, writes the author. Moreover, the EU and Morocco cooperate to contain irregular migration towards the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla.

“Morocco's African diplomatic charm offensive is also geared towards strengthening the Moroccan economy”, says the report. It is the second-largest African investor on the continent after South Africa, and is seeking to position itself as a bridge between the West and Africa.

“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 and reposition itself geopolitically. But 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, which need to be effectively addressed”, the report concludes.

The full version of the report is available [here](#)

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