

## **Morocco's Religious Diplomacy in the 2020s: Opportunities and Neo-Liberal/Neo-Colonial Challenges Facing the 'Moroccan Model'**

Amal El Founti

### *Abstract*

Following the Casablanca suicide bombings in 2003, King Mohammed VI of Morocco announced a series of reforms to restructure and reassert state control over the religious field. Religious reforms at home, which have emphasized Morocco's image as a beacon of moderate Islam, have been paralleled at the transnational and international levels by an ambitious religious diplomacy aimed at Morocco's European diaspora on the one hand, and at African countries on the other, though more recently in the latter case.

Based on Salim Hmimnat's work, this paper describes how in Africa and the Sahel region, Morocco's pragmatic religious policy has sought to provide an alternative approach to the hard power counterterrorism measures implemented by Western countries while striving to make religious affairs one of the tenets of the economic cooperation with African countries. This paper contends that Morocco's effort to enhance its international soft power by stepping up its religious diplomacy abroad has been part of a holistic policy in pursuit of the country's long-standing geopolitical and geostrategic interests. The paper concludes that the future of Morocco's religious diplomacy rests on its ability to operate independently from the pervading influence of these neo-liberal/neo-colonial challenges.

Keywords: Morocco, religious diplomacy, West Africa, Europe, neo-colonialism, neo-liberalism

### *Introduction*

Various concepts and terms have emerged over the last three decades to make sense of the increasing influence of religion in world affairs. From 'faith-based diplomacy' to 'spiritual diplomacy,' 'International Political Theology'<sup>1</sup> and 'religious diplomacy' (hereafter RD), a wide array of terms has been mobilized by scholars under what has been referred to as the 'post-secular turn' in International Relations.<sup>2</sup> Far from being limited to the Western world, this post-secular turn has not left the Muslim world unaffected. In this respect,

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'International Political Theology' was provocatively used by Vendulka Kubálková in a disciplinary context to remedy the neglect of religion in IR as a discipline. See Vendulka Kubálková, "International Political Theology," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 12, no. 2 (2006): 139-50.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Cox & Daniel Philpott, "Faith-Based Diplomacy: An Ancient Idea Newly Emergent," *The Brandywine Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 1:2 (fall 2003): 31-40; Douglas Johnston, *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Sarah Alaoui, "Morocco's Religious Diplomacy: To What End?," USC Center on Public Diplomacy (June 2018).

neoliberalist practices forced onto the West's former colonies and the persisting influence of the secular structures and modes of governance inherited from the colonial era have prompted faith-based resistance to 'this new form of colonisation' from many Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

Dubbed the 'missing dimension of statecraft,' religion has also gradually been increasingly researched less for its potential for generating violence than as a positive contributor to conflict resolution.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, Joseph Nye's soft power concept<sup>5</sup> has been increasingly applied by nation-states, not without controversy about an imminent 'clash of civilizations' between Islam and the West, to the transnational management of their religious field. By and large, religious soft power has indeed fallen victim to a 'dualistic characterization' as 'either *denying* or *reinforcing* the legitimacy of the world system,' which has only recently been challenged by the 'governance role of religion in world affairs.'<sup>6</sup>

Morocco can be categorized as one of those former colonial spaces that 'have been able to create a fairly vibrant synthesis of colonial era laws and customs with their own indigenous culture and legal norms.'<sup>7</sup> Even as it embraces the forces of neoliberalism and capitalist expansion and the challenges, Morocco has been successfully using religious cooperation to further its regional and international ambitions. As such, Morocco's use of religious soft power provides an interesting framework for a cross-analysis of the intertwining religious, economic and political dimensions that underpin the country's relations with both Africa and Europe, and the tension between them. This paper contends that Morocco's capacity to skilfully navigate through the challenges brought about by the asymmetric nature of its economic relations with its major European partners will help consolidate recent achievements in its religious diplomacy towards Western European and African countries, and thus determine the soundness of its approach as it enters the 2020s.

I will start this article by providing an overview of Morocco's religious diplomacy towards its African partners and European diaspora, and of the main features and actors involved. The methodology used for this section relies on a literature review drawing heavily but not exclusively on the works by political

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<sup>3</sup> Dustin J. Byrd, "The Globalized Post-Secular Society and the Future of Islam," in *Islam in a Post-Secular Society* (Boston: Brill, 2016): 285.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Luttwak, "The Missing Dimension," in *Religion: The Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, ed. J. Johnston and C. Sampson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 8-19.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Bound To Lead: The Changing Nature Of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Sherrie M. Steiner, *Moral Pressure for Responsible Globalization: Religious Diplomacy in the Age of the Anthropocene* (Boston: Brill, 2018): 53-55.

<sup>7</sup> Byrd, "The Globalized Post-Secular Society and the Future of Islam": 283.

scientist Benjamin Bruce<sup>8</sup> and research fellow Salim Hmimnat,<sup>9</sup> who have extensively written about Morocco's religious diplomacy towards Western Europe and Africa, respectively. I will then turn to analysing RD's contribution to furthering Morocco's broader foreign policy objectives, which have long been centred around the country's diplomatic effort to secure international recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara and to consolidate its long-standing relations with Europe. In my third and last section, I will engage in a discussion on the challenges and opportunities facing Morocco's RD in the 2020s, including its ability to cope with growing religious rivalry from regional powers, provide an alternative to the increasingly challenged Western approaches to counterterrorism in the Sahel region and face the fallout from its economic and political dependence on Europe.

### *Morocco's religious diplomacy towards African countries*

Morocco's model of moderate Islam revolves around the three Islamic traditions that have been part of the country's history; 'the Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence (*maddhab*), the *Ash'ari* creed (*aqīda*), and the influence of various forms of Sufism.'<sup>10</sup> Thus, rather than being 'tied to a generic Islam', the Kingdom's religious legitimacy in West Africa lies in the regional popularity of the 'doctrines embraced by Morocco.'<sup>11</sup> This shared doctrine, along with the legitimacy associated with the King of Morocco's 'sharifian' lineage<sup>12</sup>, has made several West African countries, chief among them Senegal,<sup>13</sup> a natural extension for Morocco's bid for continental religious leadership.

Perhaps the most advertised and successful initiative as part of Morocco's RD in Africa has been the imam training program,<sup>14</sup> which attracted Guinea and

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Bruce, "Morocco on the Road to European Islam," *Oasis* 28, 27 March 2019, <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/morocco-on-the-road-to-european-islam>; Benjamin Bruce, 'Transnational Religious Governance as Diaspora Politics: Reforming the Moroccan Religious Field Abroad,' *Mashriq & Mahjar* 5, no. 1 (2018), Available at <https://lebanesestudies.ojs.chass.ncsu.edu/index.php/mashriq/article/view/159/220>.

<sup>9</sup> Salim Hmimnat, "'Spiritual Security' as a (Meta-)Political Strategy to Compete over Regional Leadership: Formation of Morocco's Transnational Religious Policy towards Africa," *The Journal of North African Studies*, 1743-9345 (Published online November 2018); Salim Hmimnat, "Morocco's Religious 'Soft Power' in Africa As a Strategy Supporting Morocco's Expansion in Africa," Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (June 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Bruce, "Morocco on the Road to European Islam."

<sup>11</sup> Ann Marie Wainscott, *Bureaucratizing Islam: Morocco and the War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 222.

<sup>12</sup> Sharifian rulers trace their lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>13</sup> Since the French Protectorate, Fez has been a city of pilgrimage for religious leaders from Senegal who have come 'to pay homage to the mausoleum of the order's founder, Sheikh Ahmed Tijani'. In 1985, religious bonds between Senegal and Morocco were given formal recognition through the creation of the *League of Moroccan and Senegalese Ulama* under the patronage of King Hassan II. According to Sarah Alaoui, this organization came to represent a strategic tool for the Moroccan kingdom to assert its religious leadership south of the Sahara. See Alaoui, "Morocco, Commander of the (African) Faithful?", *Brookings*, 08 April 2019, Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/04/08/morocco-commander-of-the-african-faithful/>.

<sup>14</sup> Hmimnat, "'Spiritual Security' as a (Meta-)Political Strategy to Compete over Regional Leadership": 22.

Nigeria<sup>15</sup> following an initial agreement with conflict-torn Mali in 2013 to train 500 Malian imams in Morocco.<sup>16</sup> Morocco's religious soft power has also included 'the construction and maintenance of Mosques, the provision of religious materials [...], the upgrading of Curriculum, capacity-building of administrative and managerial staff and the rehabilitation of educational religious and advocacy institutions.'<sup>17</sup>

Success stories on the ground soon paved the way for the institutionalisation of Morocco's religious diplomacy through the foundation of the *Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams Mourchidin and Mourchidate* in March 2015, followed in July of the same year by the *Mohammed VI Foundation of African Oulemas*, which was to serve as a platform for 'supra-national' collaboration between African religious scholars against radicalization and extremism.<sup>18</sup>

Morocco's religious soft power in Africa has found expression in the transnational transposition of long-standing royal religious activities with a hitherto domestic dimension. This strategy has been reflected, for example, in the increasing number of Friday prayers King Mohammed VI has performed in African capitals since a successful first event in Mali in 2014.<sup>19</sup> These high-profile events, where 'ten thousand copies of the Quran edited by Mohammed VI Foundation' are donated for distribution to the country's local mosques,<sup>20</sup> combine with the legitimacy of the King's charismatic religious figure in his capacity as Commander of the Faithful to form a proactive strategy that aims at exporting Morocco's practice of moderate Islam at regional level. In this regard, Morocco's religious engagement on the African continent displays the characteristics of a successful formula. While Western media's coverage of Islam has focused on stories of conflict, the national and regional media have rather showcased the values of peace and tolerance conveyed by King Mohammed VI's travels to African countries. Along with the presence of the Minister of Habous and Islamic Affairs Ahmed Toufik, among the Moroccan delegation traveling with King Mohammed VI during his numerous visits to African countries, these promotional efforts reflect Morocco's priority to make the religious dimension an integral part of its African policy.<sup>21</sup>

While Morocco's religious cooperation with Sub-Saharan countries dates back to the mid-1980s, the modest, mostly reactive, and circumstantial form its

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<sup>15</sup> Ghita Tadlaoui, "Morocco's Religious Diplomacy in Africa", FRIDE Policy Brief n° 196, February 2015, Available at:

<https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/189093/Morocco's%20religious%20diplomacy%20in%20Afric.pdf>. Also quoted in Yasmina Abouzzohour and Beatriz Tomé-Alonso, "Moroccan Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring: a Turn for the Islamists or Persistence of Royal Leadership?", *The Journal of North African Studies*, 2018: 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*:5; Hmimnat, "'Spiritual Security' as a (Meta-)Political Strategy to Compete over Regional Leadership": 22.

<sup>17</sup> Hmimnat, "'Spiritual security' as a (Meta-)Political Strategy to Compete over Regional Leadership": 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: 22-30.

<sup>19</sup> Following this first 'experiment' in Mali, prayers were performed in 'Libreville (2014), Abidjan, Bissau, Dakar (2015), Dakar, Antananarivo, Zanzibar, and Abuja (2016)', See *Ibid.*: 13-15.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*: 15.

<sup>21</sup> Abouzzohour and Tomé-Alonso, "Moroccan foreign policy after the Arab Spring": 16.

religious policy took back then appears to have been exclusively driven by exogenous imperatives.<sup>22</sup> With the 'window of opportunity' opened by the Libyan and Malian crises, Morocco's religious diplomacy towards its African partners has witnessed a 'quantitative and qualitative leap,'<sup>23</sup> increasingly displaying the attributes of an unabashed, voluntarist, pragmatic and ambitious governmental strategy in the pursuit of the country's foreign policy goals.<sup>24</sup> In the following section, I will address how Morocco has been using RD to engage its European diaspora in the Kingdom's efforts to promote its values and practice of moderate Islam.

### *Engaging Morocco's European diaspora through RD*

A similar endeavour to that seen at African level has been aimed at Morocco's diaspora in Western Europe where diaspora politics have been efficiently oriented towards the transnational management of Morocco's religious field, especially in France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

On a political note, maintaining religious links with its European diaspora has initially been a matter of national security for Morocco. In this respect, awareness of the domestic repercussions of religious extremist movements organising abroad and the need to prevent Moroccans Living Abroad from organising into often religiously-motivated dissenting political groups challenging the Moroccan political regime<sup>25</sup> have been chief motives in Morocco's early efforts to manage its Western European diaspora's religious practices.

Economic considerations should also be factored in. Estimated at some five million people worldwide, the Moroccan diaspora population has been a significant source of income for the Moroccan state, under a home state policy shift from a strictly national security focus to a more economically- and politically-driven perception of its European diaspora occurring in the 1990s.<sup>26</sup> From MMAD 18,873,8 in 1996,<sup>27</sup> migrant remittances to Morocco rose to 24,287 in 2016, to 24,505 in 2017, and to a record high of 26,774 in 2018, before recording a slight fall to 25,895 in 2019 and to 22,678 by the end of May 2020 amid the Coronavirus pandemic.<sup>28</sup> These remittances, which have been shown to peak during religious events, are primarily sent through religious organizations,<sup>29</sup> showing the importance religion has played in fostering Morocco's development and economic links to its diaspora.

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<sup>22</sup> According to Hmimnat, the 'alternative or parallel diplomacy' of the mid-1980s was designed to break Morocco's continental isolation resulting from its withdrawal from the African Union in 1984: See Salim Hmimnat, "Morocco's Religious 'Soft Power' in Africa As a Strategy Supporting Morocco's Expansion in Africa," Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (June 2018): 6-7.

<sup>23</sup> Hmimnat, "'Spiritual security' as a (Meta-)Political Strategy to Compete over Regional Leadership."

<sup>24</sup> Hmimnat, "Morocco's Religious 'Soft Power' in Africa": 7.

<sup>25</sup> Bruce, "Transnational Religious Governance as Diaspora Politics."

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*: 37.

<sup>27</sup> Ninna Nyberg Sorensen, *Migrant Remittances as a Development Tool: The Case of Morocco*, IOM, No. 2 (June 2004):5, [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/migrant\\_remittances\\_morocco.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/migrant_remittances_morocco.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Morocco's Exchange Office, "Impact of the Covid19 Health Crisis on Tourism," May 2020, Available at [https://www.oc.gov.ma/sites/default/files/2020-07/IEE%20Mai%202020\\_0.pdf](https://www.oc.gov.ma/sites/default/files/2020-07/IEE%20Mai%202020_0.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Sorensen, *Migrant Remittances as a Development Tool*:6.

Here again, while Morocco's management of its transnational religious field is nothing new, the fundamental reforms announced by King Mohammed VI in the wake of the Casablanca terrorist attacks have led to a substantial increase in Morocco's involvement in the religious lives of Moroccans living abroad.<sup>30</sup>

In terms of policy content and vehicles, Morocco has been mobilizing the Hassan II Foundation, the Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs (MHAI) and the Foreign Affairs Ministry and operating mainly on two fronts; by sending religious personnel abroad, especially during the month of Ramadan, and providing financial support through direct funding of religious associations.<sup>31</sup> Benjamin Bruce explains how the agreement signed with France 'to send a contingent of thirty imams for a four-year period' for which the MHAI contributed 'over four million euros ... to pay their salaries', the 'two to three million euros' funding the conferences held by the European Council of Moroccan Ulama on an annual basis and the funding of the Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad's activities have enabled Morocco to play a role in 'the development of Moroccan Islam in Western Europe.'<sup>32</sup>

While the size of the diaspora has traditionally been a major factor in assessing the relevance of implementing religious cooperation in European countries, Morocco's RD has more recently sparked interest from less traditional partners, including the United Kingdom. In his reply to the Conservative MP for South West Wiltshire Andrew Murrison, who would later become Minister of State for the Middle East and North Africa, Prime Minister David Cameron confirmed at the British Parliament that the United Kingdom could 'learn the lesson from Morocco' which had just 'signed an agreement with France to train imams and preachers, including women, in the moderate mainstream tradition.'<sup>33</sup> This statement was made in the month following Lord Speaker Frances D'Souza's official visit to Morocco in September 2015 where she discussed prospects for the UK to benefit from Morocco's imam training experience with the Speaker of the House of Councillors Mohamed Biadillah, met with the Minister of Habous and Islamic Affairs Ahmed Taoufik and took the opportunity to visit the *Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams Mourchidin and Murchidate*.<sup>34</sup> In 2017, under an initiative that was reportedly highly welcomed by the UK's Moroccan diaspora, the United Kingdom also experimented with Morocco's established practice of sending religious personnel during the month of Ramadan by hosting two Moroccan imams in London and Townbridge.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* : 37.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* : 50-56.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* : 57-59.

<sup>33</sup> House of Commons Hansard, "G20 and Paris Attacks", 17 November 2015, Volume 602, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2015-11-17/debates/15111751000004/G20AndParisAttacks>.

<sup>34</sup> "Exclusive. London Takes an Interest in Morocco's Imam Training Model," 24 September 2015, in *le 360*, Available at <https://m.le360.ma/politique/exclusif-londres-sinteresse-au-modele-marocain-de-formation-des-imams-52285>.

<sup>35</sup> "Ramadan in England : Moroccan Imams in London and Trowbridge », in *MAP Express*, 1 June 2017, Available at <http://www.mapexpress.ma/actualite/societe-et-regions/ramadan-en-angleterre-des-imams-marocains-a-londres-et-trowbridge/>.

Building upon its four-decade experience in exporting its values of religious tolerance and moderate Islam, Morocco has strived to make the religious component of its diplomacy relevant to the expectations of its partners and to the current international challenges while seeking to further its interests at regional and international levels. In France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and the United Kingdom, RD has been leveraged by Morocco to influence the religious lives of its diaspora in an effort to consolidate their national attachment to Moroccan Islam, while also looking to uphold its reputation as a beacon of moderate Islam among host countries. In West Africa, Morocco's RD has been deemed successful based on its perceived 'historical and cultural legitimacy,' the 'pre-existing institutions' on which it rests, and its combination with 'renewed economic collaboration.'<sup>36</sup> While acknowledging the significance of these recipient-based success factors, analysing RD's success from Morocco's vantage point is important in determining the extent to which religious soft power has contributed to advancing Morocco's cross-cutting foreign policy goals.

#### *Assessing RD's contribution to furthering Morocco's broader geostrategic purposes*

Morocco's long-standing foreign policy objectives outlined above have been more recently complemented by a willingness to diversify alliances and consolidate its regional leadership on the African continent, especially since 2012. When considering this broader foreign policy agenda, Morocco's RD is to be construed as one of a vast array of tools, which along with economic diplomacy, migration diplomacy and social engagement are leveraged towards broader foreign policy goals. Interestingly, the Kingdom's 'long-term Eurocentric economic dependence,'<sup>37</sup> along with its geographic position between Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe, add both inter- and intra-regional interconnection, complementarity and interdependence into all its foreign policy orientations and objectives.

At the interregional level, the economic, political and cultural 'convergence of interests' promoted by Morocco's African policy with its continental counterparts and its soft power approach to countering radicalization in the region are likely to enhance its regional leadership in the continent. This in turn has the potential not only to make individual African countries more likely to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, but also to consolidate Morocco's image as a 'model student' of Europe.<sup>38</sup> By transcending transnational boundaries, Morocco has indeed been drawing on its image as a guarantor of moderate Islam to establish itself as the privileged partner with the required

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<sup>36</sup> Ann Marie Wainscott, "Religious Regulation as Foreign Policy: Morocco's Islamic Diplomacy in West Africa," *Politics and Religion* 11, no. 1 (March 2018): 1-26.

<sup>37</sup> Abouzzohour and Tomé-Alonso, "Moroccan Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring":2.

<sup>38</sup> The term 'model student of Europe' is borrowed from Irene Fernandez-Molina, *Moroccan Foreign Policy under Mohammed VI, 1999–2014*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

capacity and expertise to address Western countries' increasing concerns with the expanding terrorist threat.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, both Morocco's image as a 'model student' of Europe and its efforts to boost and diversify its economic and political ties with Africa, where it spends 85 per cent of its foreign direct investment and where an increasing number of 'Moroccan businesses, banks and telecom operators' have been established since 2015,<sup>40</sup> are likely to appeal to other European actors with an economic interest in Africa beyond Morocco's more traditional partners. This is exemplified by Morocco's increasing economic cooperation with the United Kingdom, whose officials have repeatedly voiced an interest in the 'complementarity' of which their country and Morocco as a 'gateway to Africa' could benefit.<sup>41</sup> As underlined above, this economic interest has been matched by an interest in Morocco's exported religious 'formula.'<sup>42</sup> Seen in this light, RD, not taken in isolation but as part of a holistic and proactive strategy, appears as a powerful foreign policy tool with the potential to directly impact Morocco's foreign policy objectives, given the complementary and mutually reinforcing nature of any regional and international diplomatic achievements by Morocco.

This complementarity and interdependence can also be felt at intraregional level, as evidenced by the diplomatic achievements Morocco has secured over Western Sahara<sup>43</sup> since re-joining the African Union in 2017. In this respect, the autonomy plan Morocco has been championing towards the resolution of this protracted territorial conflict between the North African Kingdom and the Algeria-backed Polisario Front has found increasing echo among a number of African countries, as has its long-standing demand that the Western Sahara conflict be exclusively resolved through the United Nations.

On the ground, these diplomatic achievements have been reflected in the accelerating pace at which Sub-Saharan countries have opened diplomatic representations in the cities of Laayoune and Dakhla since December 2019. These two cities combined are now host to fourteen African consulates; Laayoune hosting the consulates of Comoros, Gabon, São Tomé and Príncipe, Central African Republic, Ivory Coast, Burundi, Zambia and Eswatini, and Dakhla those of Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea Conakry, Djibouti, Liberia and Burkina Faso. The somewhat ambivalent positions of a number of African countries observed

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<sup>39</sup> Abouzzohour and Tomé-Alonso, "Moroccan Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring": 16.

<sup>40</sup> Yasmine Hasnaoui, "Morocco and the African Union: A New Chapter for Western Sahara Resolution?," Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2017:11, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep12679>.

<sup>41</sup> Under this 'triangular' cooperation, Morocco is expected to help improve market access for the UK in Francophone countries in West Africa, while in turn benefitting from the UK's economic ties with Commonwealth countries.

<sup>42</sup> House of Commons Hansard, "G20 and Paris Attacks", 17 November 2015, Volume 602, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2015-11-17/debates/15111751000004/G20AndParisAttacks>.

<sup>43</sup> Morocco's reference to the religious allegiance borne by the Saharan tribes to the Moroccan Sultan under Islamic law to demonstrate its historical and territorial rights over Western Sahara before the International Court of Justice in 1975, is evidence of the religious foundations underlying the North African Kingdom's national sovereignty.

earlier in 2019 with regard to the conflict<sup>44</sup> have thus given way to a more clear-cut, straightforward approach to supporting Morocco's sovereignty over its Southern provinces, which a number of observers have construed as testifying to the increasing perception of the Western Sahara conflict, both in Africa and elsewhere, as an artificial dispute that is a remnant of Cold War dynamics.<sup>45</sup>

Attributing these highly political diplomatic gains to the religious factor alone would give RD a predominance in Morocco's African policy that would fail to take account of the bigger picture, where political and economic considerations take centre stage.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, how exactly Morocco's successful RD is correlated to these political achievements is difficult to determine reliably, as it cannot be dissociated from its entire African policy 'package'. It, however, certainly demonstrates that the Kingdom has got its African approach anything but wrong, especially since RD is a common thread in Morocco's foreign policy towards most African countries with a Muslim majority.

### *Challenges and opportunities for the 2020s*

Morocco's RD will be facing a number of challenges and opportunities in the 2020s that will require it to skillfully mobilise its national role conception as a religious mediator towards juggling the competing interests at play at both regional and international levels.

First, when it comes to the religious competition Morocco has been facing from countries like Algeria, Turkey and the Gulf region, the North African Kingdom seems better equipped to provide a lasting alternative that is likely to appear more appealing to both its African and European partners. In this respect, Morocco's RD has been identified as a means to counter the growing influence of Wahhabism in West and North Africa, where it has not left Moroccan society unaffected.<sup>47</sup> Containing Wahhabism has thus been a matter of national and regional security, as well as one of regional competition for leadership. However, despite forty years of religious 'riyal politik' from the Gulf countries, Morocco's 'Malikism/Ash'arism/Sufism formula,' coupled with the notion of 'spiritual security' under the leadership of the Commander of the faithful or *Amir al-Mu'minin*, appears as a more attractive alternative to Morocco's close West

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<sup>44</sup> This ambivalence was reflected in the attitudes of a number of African countries during the two conferences on the Western Sahara issue concurrently held by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Morocco in March 2019. To avoid the political predicament of having to take sides, a number of member states 'such as Angola, Burundi, Burkina Faso, the DRC, Eswatini, Malawi, Tanzania, Central African Republic, Ghana and Nigeria' chose to attend both conferences. See PSC Report, "Africa's Divisions over Western Sahara could Impact the PSC," Institute for Security Studies, 17 April 2019, [https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/africas-divisions-over-western-sahara-could-impact-the-psc?utm\\_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm\\_campaign=PSC\\_Report&utm\\_medium=email](https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/africas-divisions-over-western-sahara-could-impact-the-psc?utm_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm_campaign=PSC_Report&utm_medium=email).

<sup>45</sup> Hubert Seillan, "[Tribune] Sahara occidental: une discorde inutile," *Jeune Afrique*, 28 February 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/903308/politique/sahara-occidental-une-discorde-inutile/>.

<sup>46</sup> This is all the more evident in the cases of Burundi and Sao-Tomé and Príncipe, where Islam accounts for 2,5 and 1 per cent of the population, respectively.

<sup>47</sup> Cédric Bayloq and Aziz Hlaoua, "Spreading a 'Moderate Islam'? Morocco's New African Religious Diplomacy", *Afrique contemporaine* 257, no. 1(2016): 114-115.

African neighbours faced with terrorist movements and lacking Morocco's experience in religious governance to tackle them.<sup>48</sup> In this respect, prospects point to a consolidation of this intra-regional religious cooperation into 'an objective "Maliki alliance" against the spread of Hanbali-Wahhabism' in countries like Mali, Ivory Coast, Guinea, and Senegal or Niger.<sup>49</sup>

Another regional power that has been making considerable efforts to provide 'a more tolerant, less extreme Sunni alternative to Saudi Wahhabism' has been Turkey,<sup>50</sup> whose transnational religious field has been intersecting and overlapping with Morocco's both in Europe<sup>51</sup> and Africa. However, the international suspicions generated by the 'nationalist tinge' in which Ankara has shrouded its RD<sup>52</sup> leads us to dismiss it as a serious challenger to Morocco's religious leadership.

Last but not least, Morocco's long-standing competition with Algeria over regional and transnational leadership has, unsurprisingly, also pervaded the religious field. In this respect, while France has seen increased competition with Algeria over the control of mosques,<sup>53</sup> the North-West Africa region has been the theatre of religious rivalry with Algeria for leadership of Sufi orders, in particular the religious community *Tariqa Tidjanya* that is shared by all the countries of North and West Africa.<sup>54</sup> In particular, the significant role of religion in the politics of the Maghreb has been evidenced by the importance support from the *Tidjanya's* religious leaders has had in securing regional political benefits for the Western Sahara conflict over the decades by both rival countries.<sup>55</sup> Here again, Morocco's religious model has been identified as having the upper hand over Algeria's both in West Africa<sup>56</sup> and Europe, where religious diversification has consolidated Morocco's presence in the lives of Moroccan Muslims in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and Spain.<sup>57</sup>

### *Prospects for Morocco to emerge as a religious reference in Africa*

Morocco's RD has sought to provide an alternative to the shortcomings identified in Western countries' hard power approach to countering the terrorist threat in Africa. In the Sahel region, local resistance to the multiple Western-led

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* :114-115.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* :114.

<sup>50</sup> Gonul Tol, "Turkey's Bid for Religious Leadership: How the AKP Uses Islamic Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs*, 10 January 2019, Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2019-01-10/turkeys-bid-religious-leadership>.

<sup>51</sup> Bruce, "Transnational Religious Governance as Diaspora Politics":43-44.

<sup>52</sup> Tol, "Turkey's Bid for Religious Leadership."

<sup>53</sup> Bruce, "Morocco on the Road to European Islam."

<sup>54</sup> Kaouar Rachid, "Religious Diplomacy in the Foreign Policy of the Moroccan Kingdom," International Conference on Religion, Culture and Art, 2019: 172.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*:172.

<sup>56</sup> See Sarah Alaoui, "Morocco, Commander of the (African) Faithful?"; Kaouar, "Religious Diplomacy in the Foreign Policy of the Moroccan Kingdom."

<sup>57</sup> Bruce, "Morocco on the Road to European Islam."

external military interventions by the EU, the UN, France and the United States<sup>58</sup> seems to lend support to Morocco's alternative approach. Against this background, Morocco is well positioned to provide a serious alternative to the contradictions 'between long-term engagements and direct counterterrorist operations' currently at play among Western countries in the Sahel<sup>59</sup> by offering a synthesis between religious diplomacy and its proven ability to take an active role in the defence of its regional environment. This smart power approach to 'disentangling the security traffic jam in the Sahel'<sup>60</sup> should enhance the country's regional profile while also increasing its international leverage.

By and large, prospects for Morocco to emerge as a religious reference in Africa seem rather promising in light of the combination of regional economic, political, cultural and social collaboration the country has mobilised under its South-South cooperation. One consequence of Morocco's successful approach in West Africa resulting from the Kingdom's asymmetric dependence on Europe is that Morocco's Western traditional allies are now expecting the Kingdom to use its position as the portal to African markets to their advantage. Given its 'pivotal role in restoring Morocco to its former ranking within the African continent,'<sup>61</sup> France is the first concerned with Morocco's economic diversification.

These economic expectations from Morocco's Western allies also confer a neo-colonial and neo-liberal dimension upon the challenges facing the Moroccan model in the 2020s. In other words, Morocco's enhanced leadership in West Africa may occasionally be at odds with the behavioural expectations its dependence on the European Union raises among its traditional European allies.

### *Neoliberal challenges to Morocco's RD in Western Europe*

The main challenge to Morocco's religious diplomacy towards its European diaspora results from the tension between the country's religious diplomacy and the constraints imposed by its neo-colonial dependence on France. Incidentally, this state of affairs underlines the limitations of transnational religious cooperation with a Western European country where Islam has occasionally been subject to instrumentalization for political or economic purposes. In this regard, the recent setback recorded in Morocco's religious cooperation with France speaks for itself. In a recent speech in Mulhouse, President Macron announced that he would gradually put an end to the system of seconded imams; i.e. imams appointed and trained by other governments, in an effort to remove the foreign influences of 'consular Islam' and

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<sup>58</sup> Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, "Disentangling the Security Traffic Jam in the Sahel: Constitutive Effects of Contemporary Interventionism," *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (July 2020): 857.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*: 857.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Mohamed Taifouri, "Paris and Rabat in Diplomatic Stand-off," *Qantara.de*, 10 February 2020, Available at <https://en.qantara.de/content/paris-and-rabat-in-diplomatic-stand-off-is-france-losing-its-backyard-in-north-africa>.

to fight 'Islamic separatism.'<sup>62</sup> Instead, Emmanuel Macron announced that imams would be trained in France through the French Council of Muslim Faith (CFCM), providing for enhanced control over Islamic teachings. While not the only country that has been targeted by the president's decision, which also applies to Algeria and Turkey, Morocco accounts for the highest number of seconded Imams sent to France under their religious cooperation. Traditionally hailed as an advantage not only for being paid by the home states, but for not being a source of radicalization precisely because of the control their respective states exerted upon them,<sup>63</sup> 'consular' imams are now perceived as a threat to the local development of Islam.

One could be tempted to attribute such a shift in France's attitude towards Morocco's Islam to the personality of the current French president, or to the game of politics in which French officials have circumstantially engaged in response to mounting pressure from voters, or even to a genuine concern that Morocco's religious interference in the lives of its diaspora might get in the way of successful integration, as has been the case for Turkey.<sup>64</sup>

While not dismissing the potential influence of the former factors, the key to this riddle could be more economically driven in the case of Morocco. France is becoming increasingly concerned with 'China and Spain's growing economic presence' in Morocco, to the point where relations have turned into a 'veritable cold war.'<sup>65</sup> Much of the tension has been said to be due to 'the news that China is expected to win the anticipated high-speed rail project between Marrakesh and Agadir [...] after Beijing made a low-cost offer of around 50% of Paris' bid, [thereby posing] a direct threat to France and its historical control over the railways market.'<sup>66</sup> Compounding these difficulties, Spain has been encroaching upon France's 'backyard' by also substantially increasing its market shares in Morocco's urban transport.<sup>67</sup> Thus, to the observation that 'when religion is tied to the state it is just as beholden to the changing contingencies of state interests as any other element of public policy,'<sup>68</sup> I will add that its success also fluctuates with receiving state factors including the government of the day, pressure from voters and not least importantly, changing circumstances in home-receiving states' economic or political relationship especially in a context of asymmetric dependence.

### *Conclusion*

Over the last decades, Morocco has implemented a pragmatic, holistic soft power approach to its religious cooperation towards African countries on the one hand, and its European diaspora on the other. The West's multiple and

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<sup>62</sup> "Transcript from the French President's Opening Statement at the Press Briefing in Mulhouse," the Elysée Palace, 18 February 2020, Available at <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-15216-fr.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup> Bruce, "Transnational Religious Governance as Diaspora Politics": 60.

<sup>64</sup> Tol, "Turkey's Bid for Religious Leadership."

<sup>65</sup> Taifouri, "Paris and Rabat in Diplomatic Stand-off."

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Bruce, "Morocco on the Road to European Islam."

uncoordinated interventions in the Sahel region provide an opportunity for Morocco to step in as a serious and credible partner and create the conditions for the lacking synergy and coherence to emerge, through a combination of economic, military and cultural cooperation, including through RD. In terms of religious rivalry, Morocco's 'advantage in the religious diplomacy arena of sub-Saharan Africa' over its competitors has been widely recognised.<sup>69</sup> Morocco seems thus well on track to emerge as a religious reference in Africa for a unified, tolerant approach to Islam, which would also consolidate its standing as a religious mediator with the West.

The fact that the former should not be regarded as a means to an end has been fully embraced by Morocco, as evidenced by the fact that the country has made its pan-African agenda a key priority in Moroccan foreign policy in recent years. This applies even more now that Morocco's recent setback in its religious cooperation with France has shown that, if anything, the Kingdom's asymmetric dependence on Europe makes Western political support fluctuant with the economic issues of the day. Only time will tell whether RD has been the collateral victim of an economic cold war or if the coincidence in time between the current chill in French-Moroccan relations and President Macron's announcement has been a fortuitous circumstance.

Given the strong interaction and interdependence between Morocco's African and European foreign policy goals, Morocco should be careful not to allow the type of complication it is experiencing in its religious cooperation with France to affect its regional profile in Africa, nor its religious cooperation with other European countries, for that matter. Morocco's intensifying economic diversification strategy is assuredly a good start not only to decrease the economic vulnerabilities resulting from its asymmetric dependence on Europe, but also to mitigate the impact of any circumstantial reversal of fortune with its traditional European partners whenever the latter do not feel 'satisfied' with the Kingdom's role as a 'model student' of Europe.<sup>70</sup> While epitomizing the importance of 'not putting all one's eggs in one basket' and potentially encouraging other countries to follow suit, the United States' recent recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara<sup>71</sup> is another significant step in that direction.

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<sup>69</sup> Alaoui, "Morocco, Commander of the (African) Faithful?"

<sup>70</sup> Morocco's growing economic relationship with Russia is also part of this diversification strategy and has also included a religious component. In March 2016, a memorandum of understanding whereby Morocco committed to training Russian imams was signed by King Mohammed VI and President Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin, along with various bilateral cooperation agreements. See Larbi Arbaoui, 'Morocco to Train Russian Imams,' *www.morocoworldnews.com*, 19 March 2016, Available at <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2016/03/182434/182434/>.

<sup>71</sup> As part of the agreement, Morocco became the fourth Arab country to normalize relations with Israel in 2020, though informal bilateral relations had persisted over the years. The Kingdom, which is home to North Africa's biggest Jewish community and the ancestral homeland of some 700,000 Israelis, will also 'start teaching Jewish history as part of the school curriculum,' making it 'the first modern Arabic state to embrace its tradition of religious pluralism.' See Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, "Islam must adopt the Moroccan model," *The Spectator*, 16 December 2020, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/islam-must-adopt-the-moroccan-model>

In an international system where the forces of neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism have been met with a reactive turn to religion, religious diplomacy can easily be held hostage to competing economic and political interests. While this article has sought to engage in a preliminary discussion on RD's vulnerability to the pervading influence of neoliberalism and neo-colonialism, further research is required to explore potential ways to increase the resilience of religious soft power to current international challenges. Only its ability to operate independently from competing national interests will ensure its sustainability as a powerful tool for peacekeeping and conflict resolution.

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During World War II, when the Nazi-controlled Vichy government sought to impose anti-Jewish legislation and deport the country's 250,000 Jews, King Mohammed V protected Morocco's Jewish community, famously declaring: 'There are no Jews in Morocco. There are only Moroccan subjects.' See Richard Hurowitz, "Op-Ed: You must remember this: Sultan Mohammed V protected the Jews of Casablanca," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 April 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-hurowitz-moroccan-king-mohammed-v-20170425-story.html>.