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Moroccan Foreign Policy in sub-Saharan Africa

Tachfine Baïda

Introduction

Morocco's history is closely tied to sub-Saharan Africa. For many centuries, Morocco derived its wealth from controlling trade routes channeling gold, salt, and slaves from West Africa, *Bilad al-Sudan*, to North African urban centers. This pattern has radically changed in the past century. European colonialism destroyed Moroccan links with sub-Saharan Africa. Colonial powers erected artificial borders all over the Sahara, preventing trade, exchange, and the movement of people between northern and southern parts Africa.

The colonial era has had a considerable influence in framing current Moroccan foreign relations. Since its independence in 1956, the Moroccan state has focused much of its efforts on strengthening its relations with Europe and North America whereas sub-Saharan Africa received little attention from Moroccan policymakers. Historical, cultural, and economic opportunities with sub-Saharan Africa were largely ignored in Moroccan foreign policymaking. Instead, Morocco continued to follow the same structures and patterns inherited by the colonial era. This has also been reflected in the field of academia. As explained by Alain Antill, "in spite of the obvious connections with the Western Sahara issue, the Moroccan foreign policy in Africa, especially in the sub-Saharan region, is a field which is poorly discussed in Morocco, on which very few things were written, and which does not

really interests Moroccans, which sights disregard the black continent.”⁶⁶

Accordingly, this paper seeks to understand the Moroccan foreign policy with sub-Saharan countries in the post-independence Era. Ultimately, this paper argues that while Moroccan foreign policy generally neglected sub-Saharan Africa, the country recently engaged in many efforts to strengthen its diplomatic relations African countries. This new policy illustrates a strategy to get African states support for Moroccan position vis-à-vis the Western Sahara dispute.

This paper is organized in five main sections. The first part presents a brief overview of Morocco’s historical links with sub-Saharan Africa, from the establishment of the Moroccan state until the colonial period. The second part looks at Moroccan foreign policy in the aftermath of independence, particularly under the leadership of the Istiqlal party and Mohamed V. The third part considers how the emergence of the Western Sahara dispute role in changing Moroccan relations sub-Saharan African countries. The fourth part looks at some the major geopolitical changes of the early 1990s and their impact on the new approach in Moroccan foreign relations towards Africa. The last part looks at the growth of business and economic relations between Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa and contrasts them with the relations the country developed its European and North American counterparts. A conclusion summarizes the main points addressed in this paper and attempts to address some of the most significant

⁶⁶ Alain Antil, “Le Royaume du Maroc et sa politique envers l’Afrique subsaharienne,” *Institut Français des Relations Internationales*. (2003) : 17, accessed May, 15, 2012, www.dicod.defense.gouv.fr

challenges facing the Moroccan foreign policy strategy in sub-Saharan Africa.

Morocco's Historical Links with sub-Saharan Africa

Hassan II once declared that “Morocco is like a tree whose roots lie in Africa but whose leaves breathe in European air” Indeed, Morocco’s identity is deeply rooted in the African continent, as the latter nourished both the country’s history and culture. Since the foundation of the first Moroccan state in the 9th century, successive dynasties derived their power from maintaining close links with sub-Saharan Africa.

While it might appear today to be a totally deserted area, the Saharan region used to be for centuries a dynamic space for African populations. In the words of Nezha Alaoui, the Sahara represented an active medium for economic, intellectual, religious, and artistic exchange in the region.⁶⁷ Pastoral nomads have been continuously moving throughout the region stretching from the Atlas Mountains to the Niger River, seeking grazing lands for their livestock and following caravan trade routes. Islam spread to West Africa through continuous contact between North African merchants and sub-Saharan groups until the 16th century. Arabized Saharan tribes of Bani Hillal and Bani Hassan, established themselves in the Sahara, spreading Islam to nearby people.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Nezha Alaoui, “La projection économique des pays du Maghreb sur l’Afrique subsaharienne,” *Institut Français des Relations Internationales*. 2010 :3, accessed May, 15, 2012, www.ifri.org/downloads/noteocpalaouidef.pdf (

⁶⁸ Alain Antil, “ Le Royaume du Maroc et sa politique envers l’Afrique subsaharienne,” *Institut Français des Relations Internationales*. (2003) : 17, accessed May, 15, 2012, www.dicod.defense.gouv.fr

In the 12th century, the Almoravid dynasty was able to build a large empire which expanded from Andalusia in the Iberian Peninsula to the Niger River. Almoravids controlled key trans-Saharan routes and played a significant role in spreading Islam in West Africa. In Morocco, Almoravids adopted the Maliki *madhab*, or interpretation, as the official Islamic school of law. But the intensity of exchange between North and sub-Saharan Africa in this very period enabled Maliki Islam to spread in the continent⁶⁹. Today, most African Muslims follow the Maliki rite.

The Saâdian Empire also extended its power and influence over a large part of sub-Saharan Africa. In 1582, Sultan Ahmed El Mansur Ed-Dahbi conducted military campaign against the powerful Songhai Empire in Mali. After having repeatedly fought Portuguese invasions in the Atlantic littoral, Morocco needed to refill its treasury. The Saâdians thus sought to invade the Songhai Empire in order to gain direct control of sub-Saharan gold, salt, and slaves. Due to the violence of the invasion, Ed-Dahbi's campaign led to the collapse of the Songhai Empire in Mali.

As a result of these events, many cultural connections developed between Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa through history. Repeated contacts between the two regions, both in the context of peaceful trade and military campaigns, enabled numerous cultural lineages to develop. The Tijaniyah Sufi *Tariqa* perhaps best represents one of the legacies of Moroccan religious ties with sub-Saharan Africa. Founded by Ahmad al-Tijani in the 18th century in Morocco, this order became particularly popular in West Africa, particularly in Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, Guinea, as well as northern Nigeria. Ahmad Tijani was buried in Fez and attracts numerous pilgrims from sub-Saharan Africa till

⁶⁹ Ibid.

today. For the followers of the Tariqa Tijanniyah, the medina of Fez represents a sort of holy city.⁷⁰

Starting from the 16th century however, trans-Saharan trade and exchange began to gradually decline. The great trans-Saharan routes which used to link Sijilmassa in eastern Morocco to Walata in Mauritania, and Timbuktu in Mali progressively disappeared.⁷¹ This decline was particularly accelerated with the establishment of Portuguese trade posts in key locations of the Atlantic littorals and in the Gulf of Guinea. In term, this resulted in changing trade route patterns. Consequently, as the maritime space took over the Saharan space, or as Nezha Alaoui describes it, “the Caravel replaced the Caravan.”⁷²

This process culminated in the 19th century. Colonial powers erected artificial borders in the Sahara, cutting the relations between the Maghreb and sub-Saharan African countries. Under the Convention of Fez, signed in 1912, Morocco was divided between French and Spanish zones of occupation. Moroccan ties with the continent were disregarded, and a colonial policy aiming at creating an economic dependency between Morocco and Europe was actively pursued. Moroccan ties with sub-Saharan Africa would never be the same again.

⁷⁰ Yahia Abou El Farah, et al., *La Présence Marocaine en Afrique de l'Ouest : Cas du Sénégal, du Mali, et de la Côte d'Ivoire*. Rabat : Institut des Etudes Africaine, 1997.

⁷¹ Nezha Alaoui, “La projection économique des pays du Maghreb sur l'Afrique subsaharienne,” *Institut Français des Relations Internationales*. 2010 :3, accessed May, 15, 2012, www.ifri.org/downloads/noteocpalaouidef.pdf

⁷² Ibid., 4

Morocco in the Aftermath of Independence

The “Greater Morocco” Myth

When Morocco officially accessed its independence from France and Spain in 1956, many claimed that the first priority of the nation was to recover the so-called “Greater Morocco”. The Istiqlal party in particular, sought to recover a large territory encompassing Mauritania, parts of Algeria and Mali. In June 19, 1956, Istiqlal leader Allal Al Fassi proclaimed: “While Morocco is now independent, it is not yet completely unified. The Moroccans will continue to fight until Tangier, the Sahara from Tindouf to Colomb Béchar, Touat, Kenadza, Mauritania are liberated and unified. Our independence will only be complete with the Sahara! The frontiers of Morocco end in the south at Saint-Louis-du-Sénégal.”⁷³

As such, Morocco in its early days of independence claimed that a large part of North Africa should be under its authority. Morocco even contested the existence of a separate Mauritanian entity, claiming that the former has been dismantled during the colonial period into seven separate zones.⁷⁴ Morocco argued that some Mauritanian tribal leaders, such as the northern *Adrar* and *Inchiri* tribes base their legitimacy on the Moroccan monarchy itself. Morocco based its claims on the historical contacts that the country had with Saharan populations, including the Almoravid conquests as well as the Saadian campaigns. Morocco also referred to the International Algeciras Act of

⁷³ Bertrand Fessard de Foucault, “La question du Sahara Espagnol,” *Revue Française d’Etudes Politiques Africaines* 119. 197 : 78.

⁷⁴ Alain Antill, “Le Royaume du Maroc et sa politique envers l’Afrique subsaharienne,” *Institut Français des Relations Internationales*. (2003) : 17, accessed May, 15, 2012 www.dicod.defense.gouv.fr

1906 which stipulated that the country was stretching up to the Senegal River.⁷⁵

As a result, as soon as it accessed its independence, Morocco quickly appointed representatives for its “southern provinces”, including Rio de Oro and Mauritania. Morocco also facilitated the creation of the pro-Moroccan political party *Nahda al-Watania* in Mauritania. This latter supported Moroccan claims and was subsequently forbidden by Mauritanian authorities in 1959. Many Mauritania which supported Morocco were also integrated to the Moroccan administration. Morocco also took the initiative to fund the construction of mosques in countries which it used to have under its influence, namely in Mauritania, Senegal, and Mali.

To assert its position, Morocco briefly attempted to isolate Mauritania from the international political scene, temporarily boycotting the Organization of the African Unity (OAU) and persuading Arab League members not to recognize its independence. In 1969, however, facing the inevitable wave of decolonization in the Africa, Morocco was eventually compelled to recognize the independence of Mauritania.

Moroccan Leadership in postcolonial Africa

After the short-lived period in which Morocco – largely under the influence of the Istiqlal Party -aspired to rebuild a “Greater Morocco,” the country engaged many actions in favor of accelerating the decolonization process in the African continent. Under the leadership of King Mohammed V, it actively supported the independence of African people and countries and immediately joined the

⁷⁵ Ibid.

non-aligned movement established in Bandung. In 1961, he hosted a major conference in Casablanca, which created the “Casablanca Group”. This organization sought to draw common foreign policy strategies for newly independent African states and militate for the right of self-determination. He also supported many independence movements in the continent, notably Patrice Lumumba of Congo and his struggle against Belgian colonial authorities. In 1960, he sent troops to participate to a United Nations peacekeeping operation in Congo (ONUC), to which a Moroccan general participated as an adjunct Commander.

The first years of Mohamed V’s son, Hassan II, in the throne were marked by a continuity of this policy. Morocco affirmed the African identity of the country in its constitutional framework. The first constitution of the nation, elaborated in 1962, define the country as an “African state” and describe the realization of African unity as one of the state’s “fundamental objectives”. In May 1963, a merger between the “Casablanca Group” and the “Monrovia Group” which was established led to the creation of the Organization of the African Unity, in which Morocco figured as a founding member.

Nonetheless, in the subsequent years, Morocco will become increasingly reluctant to be involved in African affairs. Foreign relations with the continent became generally shaped by Hassan II personality style. The latter typically developed friendship ties with African dictators such as Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba of Gabon Mobutu, and Sese Seko Nkuku of Zaire. As Alain describes, good relations with countries such as Senegal, Gabon, former Zaire, Guinea, and Mali are “explained by the extreme personalization of Hassan II African policy”. Indeed, the leadership figures in these countries had typically many similarities with the Moroccan king himself. They

generally shared similar political ideologies which consisted of adopting a pro-western, conservative, and economically liberal policy.

Consequently, Morocco gained during the first years of its independence an image of an imperial power in Africa. In spite of Mohamed V efforts to promote freedom and independence of African people, Istiqlal leaders' aspiration to recover a "Greater Morocco" and the aggressive attempt to annex Mauritania to the country generated some skepticism over the objectives of the Moroccan policy among African populations. These fears particularly increased when Hassan II accessed the throne.⁷⁶ Morocco's perceived aggression against Algeria in the context of the Sands War in 1963 coupled with its alliances with authoritarian regimes contributed in developing an image of a "supplement to neocolonial westerners" which still persists today.⁷⁷

The Western Sahara Crisis

The Emergence of the Polisario

The Western Sahara dispute probably marked a turning point for Morocco's relations with sub-Saharan countries in the post-independence period. In 1973, a nationalist movement, the *Frente Popular para la Liberacion de Saguia el-Hamra y Rio de Oro* (Polisario) started to ask for the independence of the Spanish Sahara. Fearing that the Spanish authorities comply with these demands, both Morocco and Mauritania began to claim that these regions as part of their territories.

⁷⁶ Alain Antil, "Le Royaume du Maroc et sa politique envers l'Afrique subsaharienne," *Institut Français des Relations Internationales* (2003) : 27, accessed May, 15, 2012, www.dicod.defense.gouv.fr

⁷⁷ Ibid., 28

The International Court of justice (ICJ) ambiguous assessment on the Moroccan claims to the Rio de Oro and Saguia El Hamra territories in 1974 widely divided opinions on the Saharan status. The ICJ ruling was unclear and left the floor to many interpretations. The 350,000 peaceful civilian march organized under the auspices of Hassan II south of Tarfaya in 1975 and the *de facto* Moroccan-Mauritanian occupation of the Sahara generated a lot of skepticism in the international arena. Starting the mid-1970s, the African continent split between those which supported the Moroccan claims and those which recognized the Arab Democratic Sahrawi Republic (SADR), self-proclaimed by the Polisario in 1976.

After a period of hostilities, Mauritania withdrew from the territory in 1979 and signed a peace treaty with the Polisario, relinquishing all its claims to the former Spanish Sahara. This move led to a quasi-diplomatic isolation of Morocco in Africa. African countries, which just liberated themselves from colonialism, were particularly critical of Morocco. As Akhadija Mohsen-Finan points: "It is in sub-Saharan Africa that the Moroccan Sahrawi policy was the most severely criticized. The occupation of Western Sahara was going against the principles consecrated by the OUA; that is, the right to self-determination and the acceptance of the borders inherited by colonial powers."⁷⁸ By 1981, 26 African countries already recognized the SADR. At the 18th OAU summit held in Nairobi in June 1981, King Hassan was thus almost compelled to agree to hold a referendum in the Western Sahara under the auspices of the pan-African organization. Consequent meetings of an OAU Execution Committee proposed a cease-fire and the implementation of a peacekeeping force to facilitate an OAU-United Nations-

⁷⁸ Alain Antil, "Le Royaume du Maroc et sa politique envers l'Afrique subsaharienne," *Institut Français des Relations Internationales*. (2003) : 25, accessed May, 15, 2012, www.dicod.defense.gouv.fr

supervised referendum on self-determination for the Sahrawi population. But these efforts turned out to be unsuccessful. Indeed, in February 1982, during the 69th Council of Ministers' Conference, the SADR is admitted to membership in the OAU. Morocco reacts by withdrawing from the pan-African organization.

Seeking New Alternatives

After it left the OAU, Morocco briefly adopted a hostile policy to the countries recognizing SADR, often through completely breaking diplomatic ties with them. But this policy did not last very long. After few years, Morocco decided to shift its foreign policy and seek friendly ties with African countries rather than radically breaking diplomatic relations with them. Indeed, suffering from the relative isolation resulting from the fact that it became the only African country which is not part of the OAU, and alarmed by an upsurge of recognition of the SADR by African countries, Morocco tried to focus on developing bilateral relations with specific countries. Relations with traditional allies were consolidated (Senegal, Gabon, Cameroon) and others were reactivated (Niger, Chad, Congo). A policy of lobbying was also enacted in order to put pressure on countries which recognized the SADR to retrieve their recognition.

In the 1980s, it became clearer that Morocco was adopting a different foreign policy approach with sub-Saharan African countries. Specific agreements on cooperation in various fields were drafted and many mixed-commissions were established. Some institutions were also established, such as the AGUIMCO (Guinean-Moroccan Agency for Cooperation) and the AMAMCO (Morocco-Mali Agency for Cooperation). Morocco also sought to establish positive relations with regimes that had a political

leadership very different of its own, a policy which was not favored by Hassan II initially: “If Morocco initially decided to break every relation with [African] countries recognizing SADR, it decides, in the opposite, starting 1985, to militate in each of these countries for the retrieval of their recognition.”⁷⁹ The establishment of relations with Angola in 1985, Cape Verde in 1987 and Benin in 1991 were made in this very context.

In 1986, determined to reestablish its influence in the African continent, Morocco created the Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation (AMCI). The organization, which reports to the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was assigned the mission of promoting international cooperation, with a particular emphasis on sub-Saharan African countries. For instance, in the educational field, it offered between 1,500 and 2,000 scholarships to students seeking to study in Morocco⁸⁰, most of which come from French speaking areas of Africa. With the AMCI, Morocco aspired to provide training to future generations of the African elite, with the purpose of strengthening the image and prestige of the country in the continent. Morocco also created in 1989 the Institute of African Studies, a research institution based in Rabat which intends to promote research and produce experts in African studies.

⁷⁹ Alain Antil, “Le Royaume du Maroc et sa politique envers l’Afrique subsaharienne,” *Institut Français des Relations Internationales*. (2003) : 17, accessed May, 15, 2012, www.dicod.defense.gouv.fr

⁸⁰ Petra Patty, “Maghreb Turning South: New Initiatives and Challenges, the Case of Morocco,” Eds. Tarrosy, Istvan, Szabo, Lorand, Hyden, Goran in *The African State in a Changing Global Context: Breakdowns and Transformations*. (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011): 148.

The Renewal of the Moroccan Position in Africa

A New Political Geography in Africa

By the mid-1990s, Morocco greatly intensified its relations with sub-Saharan African countries. Three factors contributed to this. First, as mentioned previously, Morocco was resolved to find new alternatives to its isolation from the OAU. In 1989, Hassan II initiated efforts to create the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) as a way to overcome the Sahrawi Issue and promote North African integration. The AMU did not include the SADR and its founding Charter did not mention anything about people's right to self-determination. In 2001, Morocco also joined the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (Cen-Sad), a group of 18 countries in the Sahel region established in 1998. With the failure of the AMU to give concrete results after more than one decade, Morocco intended to show its interest to cooperate with African states, without having to be necessarily part of the OAU. The Cen-Sad was also particularly appealing to Morocco because it did not have either SADR or Algeria as members.

A second factor contributed to the new Moroccan political strategy in Africa. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, many African countries started giving up socialist ideologies and adopt free-market economies instead. This opened new prospects for Morocco, which was able to sign numerous new agreements with formerly hostile African countries. Under Prime Minister Abderrahmane Yousfi's administration in 1996, no less than 20 diplomatic agreements were signed in one year. By the end of the decade, Morocco was able to sign a total 270 agreements, which corresponds to an

increase of more than 40% compared to the 1980s.⁸¹ In parallel, Morocco established 17 new embassies distributed all over Africa and 20 African embassies were opened in Moroccan soil. As Alan explains, “This growth demonstrates Morocco’s willingness to expand its influence in sub-Saharan Africa through strengthening its presence in the continent.”⁸²

Thirdly, Algeria became by 1991 absorbed in a violent civil strife between Islamists and government forces. This made Morocco able to reassert its leadership in Africa which without suffering the risk of being undermined by the Algerian diplomacy. In the military field, Morocco thus reinvested in peacekeeping operations, starting in 1992 by sending a contingent of 1250 soldiers to the Operation Restore Hope in Somalia (UNISOM II) Under the United Nations supervision Morocco also participated to operations in Angola between 1991 and 1998 (UNAVEM) as well as in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1999 (MONUC).⁸³ Therefore, as Petra Patty describes, “Morocco in the past decade has been intensifying its relations with sub-Saharan African countries. This new policy indicates that Morocco established a new strategy for its relations with the continent.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ Jeune Afrique, “L’Appel du Sud,” *Jeune Afrique*, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articles/Dossier/ARTJAJA2547p064-066.xml0/afrique-diplomatie-mohammed-vi-rasdl-appel-du-sud.html>

⁸² Alain Antil, “Le Royaume du Maroc et sa politique envers l’Afrique subsaharienne,” *Institut Français des Relations Internationales*. (2003) : 39, accessed May, 15, 2012, www.dicod.defense.gouv.fr

⁸³ United Nations, *Peacekeeping Operations*, accessed May, 15, 2012, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/operations/>

⁸⁴ Petra Patty, “Maghreb Turning South: New Initiatives and Challenges, the Case of Morocco,” Eds. Tarrosy, Istvan, Szabo, Lorand, Hyden, Goran in *The African State in a Changing Global*

Mohamed VI's Good Neighbors Policy

This new foreign policy approach adopted by Hassan II since the late 1980s and sustained with the new geopolitical context in the 1990s was reinforced under Mohamed VI. One year after his accession to the throne, in 2000, during the first Africa-European Union Summit, Mohamed VI signaled Morocco's determination to renew ties with Africa. Referring to the concept of "South-South cooperation", he announced Morocco's decision to cancel Least Developed African states debt.⁸⁵ He also decided to lower tariffs for products exported by these countries to Morocco. In February 2002, in an effort of mediation, King Mohamed VI has succeeded in gathering President Lausana Fonté of Guinea, Charles Taylor of Liberia, and Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of Sierra Leone in Rabat. This was seen a premiere, as most previous efforts to mediate this conflict that is ravaging the region failed in the past.

King Mohamed VI also visited no less than 12 different sub-Saharan African countries, including Benin, Cameroon, Gabon, Niger, and Senegal in 2004 as well as Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Niger. In this context, several bilateral agreements were signed involving specific fields of cooperation, such as education, agriculture, health, tourism, and research.⁸⁶

Context: Breakdowns and Transformations. (Berlin: Lit Verlag 2011): 147.

⁸⁵ Ba Bassirou, "Relations Maroc – Afrique Sub-Saharienne : L'Amorce d'une Nouvelle Ere," *Yabiladi*, 2006, accessed May, 14, 2012, <http://www.yabiladi.com/article-analyse-115.html>

⁸⁶ Pascal Airault, "Le Maroc à la conquête de l'Afrique," *Jeune Afrique*, 2009, accessed May, 14, 2012, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articles/Dossier/ARTJAJA2547p064-066.xml0/afrique-diplomatie-mohammed-vi-rasdl-appel-du-sud.html>

On his address to the nation of July 30, 2004, Mohamed VI proclaimed that Morocco is “committed to make the African continent at the focus of our foreign policy, through strengthening our relations with all African countries, in particular with the least developed among them, achieve the NEPAD initiative (New Partnership for African Development), and participate to UN operations for preserving peace, security, and stability in the Sahel region and all over the African continent.”⁸⁷ In the same speech, Mohamed VI stressed that West Africa and the Sahel region are strategically important for Morocco. He emphasized the historical and cultural links that Morocco has with the countries in this region and stressed on Morocco’s determination to strengthen economic and cultural ties with them. Referring to terrorist threats, he also pointed that solidarity between African states is crucial to overcome the risks that threaten the stability and security of the region.

The Dawn of a New Era?

The efforts Morocco engaged since the mid-1980s in order to renew its leadership position in Africa eventually paid off. No less than 15 African countries which initially recognized the Sahrawi Republic changed their position. Examples include Madagascar, Seychelles, Cape Verde, Sierra Leone, and Malawi. Today, only 10 out of 54 African countries continue to recognize the SADR. This number significantly dropped compared to that of the 1980s. Even with the most hostile states, Morocco continues to deploy efforts with the aim of developing friendly relations. With South Africa for instance, Morocco

⁸⁷ Gouvernement du Maroc, “Discours du Roi à l’Occasion de la Fête du Trône,” 2004, accessed May, 15, 2012, <http://www.maroc.ma/PortailInst/Fr/Liens/Discours++de+SM+le+Roi+%C3%A0+l+occasion+de+la+F%C3%A0te+du+Tr%C3%B4ne.htm>

multiplied diplomatic advances with President Jacob Zuma, who seemingly wishes to establish good diplomatic relations with Morocco in spite of his country's recognition of the SADR.⁸⁸ Morocco also became increasingly closer to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) with which it signed a preferential partnership on trade and investment, which aims to partially abolish tariffs with its member states.

Nonetheless, these efforts remain mitigated. Morocco continues to focus most of its efforts towards developing its foreign relations with Europe and North America rather than with Africa. Trade with sub-Saharan Africa is almost insignificant when compared to that with Europe. 75.23% of Moroccan exports go to Europe, compared to only 4.46% for Africa.⁸⁹ In the 1980s, a free trade zone was established between Morocco and the European Economic Community. In 1996, an Association Agreement was signed between Morocco and the European Union. Morocco committed itself to lower trade tariffs to the advantage of European companies which could easily export their products in the Moroccan market. Morocco also signed in 2004 a free trade agreement with the United States. In reverse, Moroccan trade with sub-Saharan Africa has remained undermined by many factors, including narrow markets, inadequate infrastructures, and the persistence of strong structural and political links that bound most African economies and their former colonial masters.

⁸⁸ Pascal Airault, "Le Maroc à la conquête de l'Afrique," *Jeune Afrique*, 2009, accessed May, 14, 2012
<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articles/Dossier/ARTJAJA2547p064-066.xml0/afrique-diplomatie-mohammed-vi-rasdl-appel-du-sud.html>

⁸⁹ Ibid.

The Growth of Business Relations

It remains that the new approach initiated by Hassan II and consolidated under Mohamed VI has been reasonably fruitful in the business field. Indeed, the amount of trade and investment between Morocco and Sub-Saharan African countries has significantly increased in the past decade. Between 1998 and 2008, trade augmented from some \$529 million to nearly \$1 billion, which represents an increase of almost 50%.⁹⁰ Nearly 60% of this trade occurs with South Africa and the ECOWAS. The main export markets for Moroccan products are Senegal, Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria, Ghana, and Angola. Exports involve foodstuff, textiles, and manufactured products. Imported products are principally wood, petroleum, tobacco, spices, and palm oil.⁹¹

The Banking Sector

Business relations were particularly successful in the banking sector. For instance, the multinational Bank of Africa (BOA) became in 2010 owned at 55.77% by the Moroccan Bank for External Commerce (BMCE) group in Morocco.⁹² Based in Bamako in Mali, and established in 1982, this bank has today a large network in many African countries. The control of the BOA by BMCE enabled many

⁹⁰ Petra Patty, "Maghreb Turning South: New Initiatives and Challenges, the Case of Morocco," Eds. Tarrosy, Istvan, Szabo, Lorand, Hyden, Goran in: *The African State in a Changing Global Context: Breakdowns and Transformations*. (Berlin: Lit Verlag 2011): 153

⁹¹ Pascal Airault, "Le Maroc à la conquête de l'Afrique," *Jeune Afrique*, 2009, accessed May, 14, 2012, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articles/Dossier/ARTJAJA2547p064-066.xml/afrique-diplomatie-mohammed-vi-rasdl-appel-du-sud.html>

⁹² Groupe Bank of Africa. *Rapport Annuel*, 2010, accessed May 15, 2012, <http://www.bank-of-africa.net>

Moroccans businesspeople to have an influence over the bank's board of trustees as well as for Morocco to increase its presence in about 15 African countries with some 350 agencies, mostly in francophone West Africa, such as Benin, Mali, Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Burkina Faso, and more recently in East African countries, including Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, and Madagascar⁹³ Besides the BOA Group, BMCE was also able to extend its activities in a number of other African countries. In Senegal it participates in the projects of extension of the city's port and airport with providing funds of about 50 million Euros. BMCE also controls the Congolese Bank at 25%. In Mali, it controls the Development Bank of Mali at 27.38%.⁹⁴

Attijariwafa Bank, part of the Moroccan royal holding ONA (*Omnium Nord Africain*), has also been heavily investing in sub-Saharan Africa in the recent years. In 2009, it opened agencies in Gabon, Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, and Senegal. The Bank also gained ownership of two thirds of the Senegalese-Tunisian Bank and 51% of the International Bank of Mali. More recently, the bank has been deploying many efforts to invest in Cameroon. In 2010, Attijariwafa Bank organized the first African Development Forum in order to promote investment in Africa. This forum received very positive feedback and the participation of over 900 people was commended by Moroccan officials.

Investments in sub-Saharan Africa

Other Moroccan investments in Africa include maritime construction, with SOMAGEC, the leading Moroccan company in this area. The company is principally involved

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

in building port facilities in Equatorial Guinea and Senegal. Royal Air Maroc, the Moroccan primary airline, also plays a significant role in sub-Saharan Africa. While facing significant financial problems, the company continues to hold 22 regular flights to 16 different African destinations. In 2006, it formed partnerships with Air Senegal International and Air Gabon International and acquired 51% of Air Mauritania. Royal Air Maroc became the second largest airline in Africa after South African Airways.⁹⁵

Maroc Telecom, the leading Moroccan company in telecommunications, is also progressively conquering African markets. Through the past few years, it has increased its control over many local telecommunication companies. It has a significant control over the operator Mauritel in Mauritania, Onatel, in Burkina Faso, Gabon Telecom in Gabon, and Sotelma in Mali.⁹⁶ On another ground, another company of the ONA, MANAGEM has several mineral exploitations in sub-Saharan Africa. It exploits gold in Gabon, as well as cobalt and copper in Congo in which it developed a partnership with Costamin, a Congolese company.

Conclusion

Moroccan history is deeply rooted in sub-Saharan Africa. Since the foundation of the modern Moroccan state, Morocco continuously cultivated economic, cultural, and diplomatic relations with various groups living south of the

⁹⁵ Pascal Airault, "Le Maroc à la conquête de l'Afrique", *Jeune Afrique*, 2009, accessed May, 14, 2012, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articles/Dossier/ARTJAJA2547p064-066.xml0/afrique-diplomatie-mohammed-vi-rasdl-appel-du-sud.html>

⁹⁶ Ibid.

FOUNDATIONS OF MOROCCAN FOREIGN POLICY

Sahara. Nonetheless, European colonialism in the 19th century radically changed this pattern by cutting most ties that connected the country to its African neighbors.

Efforts to renew ties with sub-Saharan Africa were in the 1950s and 1960s very limited, in part because of the colonial legacy, but also because they were hindered by Moroccan aspirations to rebuild the “Greater Morocco” that former dynasties once controlled. As a result, the current Moroccan foreign policy in sub-Saharan Africa really took birth in the 1970s with the outbreak of the Western Sahara dispute. Fearing a possible loss of the territory, Morocco first pursued an aggressive policy to assert its claims on the Sahara, often through cutting diplomatic relations with countries which recognized the Sahrawi Republic. However, when it withdrew from the OAU in 1984, Morocco started realizing that its isolation in the African continent could not bring any good. To legitimize its claims, Morocco needed the support of as many international actors as possible. Because the Western Sahara dispute is inevitably connected to the African continent, the support of African countries was crucial in this respect.

The 1990s opened new opportunities for Morocco to freshen up its position in Africa. Many factors contributed to this. The first is Morocco’s political desire to get over the African Union impasse and renew its influence in Africa. Secondly, the end of the Cold War resulted in many African sub-Saharan countries giving up their socialist ideologies and building up market oriented economies. Thirdly, is the absorption of Algeria in domestic problems in the 1990s which resulted in it taking its attention away from sub-Saharan Africa.

FOUNDATIONS OF MOROCCAN FOREIGN POLICY

Therefore, in the 1990s, sub-Saharan Africa began to be a major focus for Moroccan diplomacy. Morocco invested heavily in this context, especially in francophone parts of Africa, with which it shared numerous linguistic, religious, and historical features. Many agreements as well diplomatic visits were conducted and Morocco progressively regained the trust of many sub-Saharan countries. As such, although Morocco was no longer a member of the African Union, it remained actively involved in African affairs as well as an important economic player in the continent.

The greatest barrier that the Moroccan state has yet to overcome is its tendency to favor pursuing diplomatic relations with western countries, particularly the European Union and the United States, rather than with other African countries. Morocco was not able overcome over a colonial legacy which still affects the way foreign policy is made in the country. Worse, Morocco signed in the past decades several cooperation and economic with European and North American countries which increased the level of uneven dependency of the country with the West. The preferential trade agreements Morocco has with the European Union and the United States are in this sense quite destructive because they enable powerful firms to access the Moroccan market, destroying its infant industries, and causing high levels of unemployment as a result. In this sense, it would have been much more beneficial for Morocco to enact similar policies with sub-Saharan countries, in which there are better opportunities than in the West. A stronger political will is thus needed to give much more importance to the African continent in foreign policy schemes; and end up with the persisting isolation of Morocco in the continent.

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