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Boussaid, F.

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Farid Boussaid

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# Brothers in Arms: Morocco's Military Intervention in Support of Mobutu of Zaire During the 1977 and 1978 Shaba Crises

Farid Boussaid

Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the Moroccan intervention during the Shaba crisis of 1977-1978 when invading rebels from nearby Angola were destabilizing the Zairean regime of Mobutu Sese Seko. The direct Moroccan military intervention prevented a collapse of Mobutu's rule. This article sheds light on the motivation of the Moroccan ruler, King Hassan II, to support a fellow African leader. Part of the motivation lies with the important historic role played by Morocco in the first year of independence of Congo. Morocco's involvement in 1960-61 extended beyond the delivery of a large number of troops for the UN mission, and included direct contact with key decision makers in newly independent Congo, chief among them, a young Mobutu. The analysis adds to the existing Cold war studies, by explaining how a non-Western actor behaved and what motivated this behavior. It helps in understanding the cooperation taking place between leaders in the Global South. It also places the intervention within the larger Cold War context. This comes at a time when Middle Eastern states, among them Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia were linking up with Morocco and France to fill the void left by the United States in the 1970s.



## KEYWORDS

Safari Club; Shaba Wars; King Hassan II; Morocco; Zaire; Congo; Cold War in Africa; Mobutu

## 1. Introduction

In 1997 Mobutu died in exile and was buried in Morocco. Thus, his thirty-two-year rule of Zaire came to an end. Few countries were willing to host him, despite advanced stage of prostate cancer. The exception was King Hassan II of Morocco. This underlined the personal relationship Mobutu had developed with King Hassan II over the years. King Hassan II also stood by his side twenty years earlier, in 1977 and 1978, by sending his own troops to help prop up Mobutu's regime. Zaire was twice shaken by an invasion of Katanga rebels from neighboring Angola who went on to occupy parts of what then was called Shaba province (formerly known as Katanga). Mobutu's army, in disarray, was unable to fight off the invading forces. But he survived the invasion through his appeal to international backers, chief among them King Hassan II. The arrival of the Moroccan soldiers in 1977 proved decisive in pushing the rebels back to Angola. A year later, in 1978, after yet another incursion, the French and the Belgians sent their troops to Shaba. The Moroccans provided the backbone of one of the first African international peacekeeping forces after the rebels were driven out the second time.

Much research has been done on this particular episode, also known as the Shaba wars. Yet most of it focuses on how this fits within the Cold War dynamics and the role of the United

**CONTACT** Farid Boussaid  [f.boussaid@uva.nl](mailto:f.boussaid@uva.nl)  Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam 1000 GG, Netherlands

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States, the USSR, Cuba<sup>1</sup> and France.<sup>2</sup> More recently others have approached this topic from the perspective of the Katanga rebels.<sup>3</sup> This latter article reflects the growing trend to emphasize the role played by countries, non-state actors and elites in the Global South in influencing actions of the Cold War superpowers.<sup>4</sup> It is in line with recent academic work on the Middle East in the Cold War context.<sup>5</sup> However, studies of Moroccan foreign policy are rare and focus on the Western Sahara conflict,<sup>6</sup> Morocco's relationship with Europe<sup>7</sup> or the dynamics of the Maghreb rivalry between Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.<sup>8</sup> Such analysis is valuable in increasing our understanding of the regional dynamics and the relationships with the developed world. But it falls short in helping us understand the policies towards Sub-Saharan Africa.

Regarding the interventions in 1977 and 1978, there are currently no studies on why Morocco would send its troops and be so involved in a conflict on the other side of the continent. And why Morocco would intervene in Zaire to that extent in particular and not in other conflicts. The articles on the Shaba invasions mention the importance of the Moroccan troops in saving Mobutu's regime and often refer to the motivation driving King Hassan II, specifically the Organization of African Unity's policy of territorial integrity,<sup>9</sup> his anti-communist stance,<sup>10</sup> and the drumming up of support among African states for Morocco's position on the Western Sahara.<sup>11</sup> These analyses, although brief, at least go further than the articles which just mention the sending of troops<sup>12</sup> or depict outsiders as mere puppets of Mobutu: 'by pulling the Moroccans and the French out of his diplomatic hat as a magician, Mobutu was able to survive'.<sup>13</sup> Others have argued that sending Moroccan troops to Zaire, contributed to overturning resistance within President Carter's administration for arms sales to Morocco.<sup>14</sup>

This article deviates from previous scholarship in that it puts the Moroccan-Zairean relationship center stage. The central argument in this article is that the particular Moroccan intervention in Zaire is rooted in the historic ties between the two nations that go back to the immediate post-independence period. The intervention is too often explained by the specific Cold War context, thereby completely overlooking the historic role Morocco played in Zaire/Congo. In order to understand the successful intervention, one needs to take this historic aspect into account. This is alluded to by Hull,<sup>15</sup> but not further elaborated upon. As will be shown later, Morocco's involvement extended beyond the delivery of a large number of troops for the UN mission in 1960, and included direct contact with key decision makers in newly independent Congo, chief among them Mobutu. Good understanding of Zaire was partly the result of the early Congo mission in 1960–61, in which newly independent Morocco participated.

This argument is not aiming to downplay the Cold War dynamics at play in 1977 and 1978. I argue that intervening in Zaire was feasible because Morocco knew the terrain and there was a certain sense of affinity between the leaders of the two nations. This obviously did not stop the Moroccan king utilizing this intervention in his dealing with the United States. But unless one acknowledges the historical dimension, one will fail to explain why Morocco intervened in Zaire and not in for example Angola. It would also explain why Morocco furnished the core of the Inter-African force in 1978, after the second Shaba war. This despite the continuous hesitance by Washington to provide Morocco with advanced weaponry it requested a year before. A close reading of US diplomatic archival material, especially with a closer eye for the chronology of events, shows that despite the efforts of Morocco in Zaire, the Carter administration remained hesitant about delivering the arms requested. It was only after the increased Soviet-Cuban activity in Ethiopia, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the fall of the Shah of Iran that President Carter reversed his decision. The unease in dealing with the United States is also reflected in new security cooperation solutions which bypassed Washington. One of these, the so-called Safari Club, has rarely received attention from scholars. This article aims to shed some light on how the Moroccan intervention fits in the context of the security cooperation between France, Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

This article thus explains Moroccan ruler King Hassan II's motivation to support a fellow African leader through the historical dimension. It therefore helps in understanding cooperation

between leaders in the Global South. An attempt is also made to explain the domestic Moroccan political ramifications this intervention had. It furthermore places the intervention within the larger Cold War context and the security cooperation through the Safari Club. It also enriches the historiography of Zaire and the Cold War, which so far has focused on either Zaire and its domestic issues within the Cold War context or the main Western and communist actors during the Shaba crises.

The article draws from diplomatic archival records in the United States, the United Kingdom, France as well as official and opposition newspapers in Morocco. Unfortunately, access to Moroccan diplomatic archives is not possible. However, the official newspapers provide an insight into the declared statements from officials and King Hassan II. The opposition paper provide a glimpse into the thinking of opposition forces, taking into account though that critical pieces on foreign policies were risky. The article is organized as follows. The next section delves into the historical connection, while the third section is devoted to the two Shaba interventions in 1977 and 1978. The fourth and fifth section puts this intervention in the wider Cold War context, the emergence of the Safari club and the US-Moroccan arms negotiations.

## 2. The historical connection, a tale of two regimes

Morocco and Congo became independent around the same period, Morocco in 1956 and Congo in 1960. The transition to independence was relatively orderly in Morocco compared to Congo, where a large UN force was needed to stabilize the country. It was through participation in this UN force that Morocco would play an important role during this episode of Congolese post-independence politics. In this section I will focus mostly on the first year of independence and how Morocco's UN troop commander played an instrumental role in strengthening the position of Mobutu in the fall of 1960.

The early years of Moroccan independence were dominated by a power struggle between the two forces, which led the independence fight against the French and the Spaniards. The monarchy was pitted against the *Istiqlal* (Independence) party. The monarchy, under King Mohamed V, managed to gain the upper hand against the nationalist movement by using two important tactics. The first was placing the monarchy at a central position within the newly created political institutions and keeping the palace above the fray of politics. At the same time, through appointments and careful maneuvering, the monarchy was able to split the nationalists into a more conservative wing and a more left-leaning wing.

The second tactic proved to be very important, with implications for the role Morocco would play in Congo. King Mohamed V took control of the means of violence, namely the police, the army and the ministry of interior. Within a month after independence the monarchy set up a police force stacked with former members of the colonial police force. It also put under its control the army, which was composed of both elements from the colonial army and elements from the Army of Liberation.<sup>16</sup> Among the colonial officers was General Ben Hammou Kettani, who was the highest-ranking Moroccan General in the French army.<sup>17</sup> The Royal Armed Forces (FAR) were headed by then Crown Prince Hassan. Together with his father and General Kettani, Crown Prince Hassan pursued a policy of strengthening the position of former colonial officers. A promotion freeze instituted by Kettani in the first three years after independence meant that junior officers, especially those coming from the Army of Liberation, could not attain senior positions within the army. The colonial officers, some of them tainted by their former role in fighting the nationalists, were loyal to the palace and eager to suppress any political or left-leaning tendencies within the army. The end result was an apolitical army led by an officer corps coming from the French colonial forces who were conservative in outlook and loyal to the monarchy.<sup>18</sup> It was General Kettani who would lead the Moroccan troops in Congo as part of the UN mission. The relationship he developed with the young and inexperienced Mobutu would turn out to be

important to the future rise of Mobutu as the ruler of Congo. The first five years of Congolese independence were marked by violence, outside interference and secessionist rebel uprisings, ultimately leading to the killing<sup>19</sup> of the first elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, in January 1961. The months between June 1960 and the murder of Patrice Lumumba proved decisive to the rise of Mobutu, who would finally take control in 1965.

Belgium left the Congo in the summer of 1960 without adequately preparing the Congolese for the impact of decolonization, let alone a plan for a proper transition to independence. The Congolese did not have experience in governance and had few university graduates. Given the lack of a cohesive nationalist movement and an independence struggle as a training ground for politicians, the few politicians who did emerge after independence did not have the same experience as some of their better-known African contemporaries. Within a week after independence parts of the army mutinied against their Belgian officers. With disorder in the country, the Belgians returned ostensibly to protect their citizens still present in the country. In the process they also helped Katanga, under the leadership of Moïse Tshombe, to secede, just eleven days after independence. UN troops were sent in July in order to deal with the insecurity in the country. Lumumba sought to keep the country united and suppress the rebel movements in various parts of the country and end the secession in Katanga. This put him at loggerheads with Tshombe. In addition, towards the end of the summer of 1960, Lumumba increasingly found himself locked in a dispute with President Joseph Kasavubu.<sup>20</sup> Lumumba's appeal to the Soviets for material to deal with the various uprisings rendered him a dangerous man in the eyes of the West and the UN Secretary General. Thus, the crisis not only pitted internal Congolese factions against each other, but it also became an international issue. The UN and the West increasingly sided against Lumumba.<sup>21</sup> The United States' main aim was to achieve a united Congo under pro-Western leadership, and therefore it provided most of the finances and logistical support for the UN mission. It was trying to use the UN to achieve its policy objectives or, in other words, 'to come out smelling like a rose'.<sup>22</sup> It did not turn out that rosy. After losing the political battle within the capital and trying to flee to his stronghold, Lumumba was captured in early 1961, transferred to Katanga and handed over to his foes, among them Tshombe. The United States' reputation was stained by its assumed indirect role and complicity in the brutal murder of Lumumba.

Throughout the Congo crisis, Morocco, as one of the leading military members of the UN force, remained committed to the UN, and thus indirectly to the US line. Through the Casablanca group\* it advocated a more activist role for the UN and the need to use UN forces to end the Katanga secession. The Casablanca group sided in this with Prime Minister Lumumba.<sup>23</sup> And even though Morocco was ideologically closer to Lumumba, it did not support him as strongly as other African nations did.<sup>24</sup> Its troops were stationed in different parts of the country, including in Katanga and, interestingly, the mining town of Kolwezi, which would become the hot spot during the Shaba wars of 1977 and 1978.<sup>25</sup> Besides providing troops to the UN mission, Morocco also sent experienced civil servants to help run the country after independence.<sup>26</sup>

With the arrival of foreign forces and advisers, and amid the continuing squabbling of the politicians, it was a young man, Joseph Mobutu, who would make the most out of the situation. He forged links with the United States, especially the CIA, Belgium, and some of the UN officers, chief among them the Moroccan General, Kettani. Mobutu was a former journalist and Lumumba's private secretary during talks in Brussels prior to independence. He served earlier in the *Force Publique*, rising to the rank of sergeant. Lumumba named him chief of staff of the new Congolese army after independence when he was just twenty-nine years old. As a protégé of

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\*This was a group of countries (Egypt, provisional Algerian government, Libya, Mali, Ghana, Guinea Tunisia) which met in Casablanca in 1961. The meeting was chaired by then crown prince Hassan. They were advocating independence and African unity. This meeting is often seen as the precursor to the Organization of African Unity.

Lumumba, he found it difficult to change sides and join President Kasavubu, despite his increasing worries regarding Lumumba's actions that summer of 1960. By September he had won the respect of the UN commander, General van Horn, and the commander of the Moroccan troops, General Kettani,<sup>27</sup> whom Lumumba had asked to reorganize the Congolese army.<sup>28</sup> Kettani's assignment was met with approval from the United States; he had been on the list of people the United States had wanted for the job.<sup>29</sup>

During the early months of his assignment, Kettani was able to develop a close relationship with Mobutu. The Americans were aware that Mobutu trusted and confided in Kettani. Mobutu referred to him as his military advisor and best friend, while Kettani regarded Mobutu almost like his son.<sup>30</sup> As his mentor, Kettani urged Mobutu to follow a course similar to the one he had followed after Morocco gained independence—namely to maintain the army's neutrality while trying to work out a stable political solution.<sup>31</sup> It seems that General Kettani did have influence over Mobutu, given that he initially followed up on Kettani's advice to keep the Congolese army out of the political crisis between Kasavubu and Lumumba.<sup>32</sup> While the struggle between the president and the prime minister was reaching a boiling point early September 1960, the UN was concerned that Congolese troops based in Leopoldville would take sides or go out looting. Kettani was instrumental in ensuring that their arrears in salaries were paid as a way to keep them off the streets.<sup>33</sup> Before releasing the funds, the United States was consulted as well and approved of the transfer.<sup>34</sup> Through these payments Mobutu managed to strengthen his position within the army and could start counting on allegiance based on not just shared ethnicity with certain sections of the army but also patronage. General Kettani attended an army ceremony on the 10th of September and the funds were disbursed. However, Mobutu still feared that some within the army could turn against him and therefore requested to be moved into the UN camp in a house next to General Kettani for security reasons. The latter agreed in the hope that proximity would lead to more influence over Mobutu.<sup>35</sup>

Contrary to the advice to stay out of politics, four days after paying the troops with UN money, Mobutu staged his first coup in order to break the deadlock between Lumumba and Kasavubu. Mobutu dismissed parliament and installed a college of commissioners, in an act he saw as 'neutralizing the politicians'. In effect he had set up a third pole of power, besides the Lumumba and the Kasavubu factions. His foray into politics faltered, because he lacked the strength to follow through and impose his solution.<sup>36</sup> A few days later he survived an assassination attempt after having been forewarned, probably by the CIA. Mobutu invited his would-be assassin to his house, and during a hand fight a gun was pulled. Moroccan and Ghanaian UN guards managed to come to Mobutu's rescue.<sup>37</sup>

Although he did not break through politically in 1960, by then Mobutu was becoming an important factor in Congolese politics. It is unclear how much the UN, and specifically Kettani, knew about his coup attempt on September 14th. In any case, 'it must be recognized that, whatever the intention, the United Nations action in paying the Leopoldville troops on 10 September went a long way towards strengthening Mobutu's authority and making the coup possible'.<sup>38</sup> It thus appears that 'Morocco, through its General Kettani, was the inspiration, if not the architect, of the attempted Mobutu compromise coup'.<sup>39</sup>

It wasn't until 1965 that Mobutu successfully installed himself as the undisputed leader of Congo. Like in 1960, he stepped in after another deadlock between president Kasavubu and this time Prime Minister Tshombe. Even though the UN and Congolese forces had expelled the Katangans in 1963,<sup>40</sup> Tshombe and his troops were called back in order to help the Congolese army deal with another uprising in a different part of the country. Tshombe was made prime minister in return. The Congolese army was able to suppress the rebellion with the help of mercenaries and the Katanga gendarmes. Only a small group remained in the east, led by among others Che Guevara and Laurent Kabila, who would overthrow Mobutu in 1997. The United States and Belgium approved this strategy and provided different types of support in the process.<sup>41</sup> Bringing back the Katanga rebels proved successful. However, Tshombe's presence within the government

became a liability. Different African nations opposed the idea of him attending an OAU summit. In a rare display of unity, both Algeria and Morocco were against Tshombe, with King Hassan, exclaiming in a broadcast to the nation, 'How could anyone imagine, that I, the representative of my country's national conscience, could sit at a conference table or at a banquet with the man who personifies secession? How could anyone even begin to imagine that I, Hassan II... could observe a minute of silence in memory of our African heroes when one of their murderers is seated among us?'<sup>42</sup> Western backers, including the United States and Belgium, started to lose patience as well and were worried that the political scene in Congo would become paralyzed. With President Kasavubu and his allies moving against Tshombe, who did not budge, the United States turned to Mobutu as the only one to save the situation. He eventually did in November 1965, this time successfully removing the president and 'neutralizing' other politicians, after which he proclaimed himself the leader of the Second Republic.<sup>43</sup> A repressive campaign in 1967 led many of the Katanga gendarmes to flee to neighboring Angola.<sup>44</sup>

Mobutu built a new regime after the chaos of the first five years. He renamed Congo Zaire as part of his authenticity policy. His rule was characterized by high centralization and patronage coupled with extreme corruption. His economic policies were often disastrous, leading to high external debts and low levels of economic development. One-party rule and suppression of opposition were cornerstones of his regime. The highly personalized nature of the regime led to inefficient policies and ever-decreasing levels of legitimacy. External backing by the United States and repression at home ensured his survival into the late 1970s, when he again faced the Katanga rebels.<sup>45</sup> Similar to his early rise to prominence, it was again Morocco that came to his rescue in 1977 and 1978, during the biggest crisis his regime would face.

### 3. Shaba I and II

By 1977 Mobutu had been in power for twelve years, but his grip on the country was weakening. Part of this was due to his style of leadership and his economically disastrous policies. Too dependent on the export of minerals, the Zairian economy was exposed to the volatility of, for example, copper or cobalt prices in the world market. In addition to his repressive leadership style and economic difficulties, Mobutu also miscalculated in his foreign policy decisions. One such decision would pit his forces against Katanga rebels, first in Angola and later when they invaded Zaire itself in 1977 and 1978. This section is devoted to these encounters and will shed light on how the Moroccan intervention was being portrayed by King Hassan and his government.

The Katanga gendarmes<sup>46</sup> found themselves pitted against Zairian forces in 1975. This was during the time in Angola when Mobutu backed the opposing side in the civil war that ensued between 1974 and 1976. The Katanga gendarmes, together with 36,000 Cuban troops, backed the Marxist MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), which eventually gained power, while Mobutu supported the FNLA (National Liberation Front of Angola). By this point the gendarmes had regrouped as the National Front for the Liberation of Congo (FLNC). The agreement was that after victory, the FLNC could use Angolan territory to overthrow Mobutu's regime.<sup>47</sup> The FLNC, under new leadership, deemed itself ready to take the fight to Zaire.\*\*

Mobutu's forces were weak and his regime under strain due to economic problems. However, the Cubans were not willing to provide military aid to the FLNC. They did not deem them ideologically committed enough to the communist struggle, and their secessionist past and role in the overthrow of Lumumba haunted the FLNC's reputation. Cuba was more interested in

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\*\*There were other opposition forces who could have joined the rebellion against Mobutu. Among them Laurent Kabila's People's revolutionary Party. Unity failed, partly due to ideology but also due to the authoritarian style of Mbumba, the new leader of the FLNC, who did not deem it necessary to share leadership. It was eventually Kabila, backed by mainly Rwanda and remnants of the FLNC, who overthrew Mobutu 20 years later.



consolidating the gains achieved in Angola. Despite this, the FLNC had enough battlefield experience and weapons in order to launch an attack against a weakened Mobutu.<sup>48</sup> By invading Shaba, they would not only strike at the province where their ethnic group dominated, the Lunda, but also at the economic heart of Zaire. Shaba contained the most important mineral wealth, with the large parastatal *Gecamines* dominating production. Around 3,000 expatriates worked and lived there, mostly in the mining town of Kolwezi.<sup>49</sup>

When the rebels crossed into Zaire, they did so with ease due to the weakness of the Zairian army. The reason for the disorganization of the Zairian military (FAZ) is related to Mobutu's fear of being overthrown by his own military, similar to his own coming to power. Therefore, a balancing act was needed to ensure protection from foreign enemies without allowing the FAZ to become organized enough to become an internal threat. The invasion of Shaba province revealed the weakness of this strategy; hence the need for external military support.<sup>50</sup> In addition, the FAZ was still recovering from its defeat in Angola in 1975. As part of a truce, Mobutu agreed to reduce his troop presence at the borders, which made Zaire even more vulnerable to an attack from Angola.<sup>51</sup> When the Katanga rebels did invade Zaire on 8 March 1977, they far outnumbered the FAZ and were able to easily overrun different towns and villages. When the invasion started, the FAZ was caught by complete surprise. The FLNC was able to advance rapidly and came close to the strategic mining town of Kolwezi. The outnumbered FAZ units on the spot were ineffective due to their low morale and problematic chain of command. Mobutu intervened regularly by appointing and dismissing Colonels and Generals involved in repelling the invasion. Balance on the battlefield and an effective counterstrategy was only achieved with the dispatch of 1,200 Moroccan troops and FAZ units from other regions in Zaire.<sup>52</sup> The Moroccan troops were led by Colonel Loubaris, who had served under General Kettani during the Congo mission in 1960–61.<sup>53</sup>

In drumming up support, Mobutu couched his narrative in a Cold War one, accusing Angola, and by proxy Cuba and the Soviets, of meddling in internal Zairian affairs. Even though the attack came from Angolan territory, the conflict seemed internal in nature. Mobutu's regime was weak and lacked support among the population in Shaba. But by internationalizing it, Mobutu tried to deflect attention from the internal causes of the rebellion. The former colonizer, Belgium, was not eager to come to his rescue given a lack of confidence in his regimes' survival and due to the sensitivity of the colonial legacy. Nor was the United States willing to come to his aid. In the post-Vietnam era, the United States, under President Carter, was trying to steer away from regional conflicts to avoid turning them into Cold War issues. The United States seemed less convinced of direct Cuban and Soviet involvement during Shaba I. All it did was send non-lethal aid in commercial flights.<sup>54</sup>

Mobutu requested help from the OAU on the 2nd of April, and on the 7th of April Mobutu phoned King Hassan and discussed the unfolding events during a twelve-minute conversation.<sup>55</sup> The king decided to intervene in support of Mobutu. In a letter addressed to the OAU and the UN, the Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmed Laraki, emphasized that Morocco would shoulder its responsibility and that a quick solution should be found. The official narrative stressed the need for African states to bear responsibility for African issues. As a founding member of the OAU, Morocco was willing to act in order to preserve the territorial integrity and independence of member states. Laraki also made allusions to earlier international efforts following the independence of Congo.<sup>56</sup> These statements seem to suggest that Morocco was not yet interested in couching its intervention in a Cold War context; instead they referred to earlier UN efforts in the 1960s and the responsibility of the OAU to seek an African solution to what they deemed a territorial integrity issue. When notifying the Secretary General of the UN about Morocco's intervention, emphasis was put on the fact that this came after a request from Mobutu through the OAU.<sup>57</sup> In a meeting between the Moroccan king and the ambassadors of the five permanent members of the Security Council, the first thing the king mentioned was a reference to the 1960 Congo crisis and emphasized the need to avoid instability on the continent.<sup>58</sup> In yet another

letter, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized that "...the solidarity which the Kingdom of Morocco manifests towards the Democratic Republic of Zaire is but an extension of the solidarity it had already shown when it responded to the appeal of the United Nations in 1960 to counter the same threats to its national unity and territorial integrity."<sup>59</sup> It thus reflects almost verbatim the statement made by King Mohamed V in the summer of 1960 in which he promised military and diplomatic support to maintain the territorial integrity and independence of Congo.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Mobutu also referred to 1960 and the support Congo received by Moroccan troops under the leadership of General Kettani.

The United States seemed to follow a similar line of reasoning. In a press conference, after visiting King Hassan, Philip Habib, the US undersecretary for political affairs, emphasized that the Moroccan efforts came as a result of the bilateral Moroccan-Zairian relations and framed the issue as one of territorial integrity and one primarily concerning African nations.<sup>61</sup> In a sense, the United States was aiming for a similar outcome as in 1960–61, hoping that no direct US troops were needed and that instead it could rely on the UN or other pro-Western (African) nations.

In an interview with various French journalists, the Moroccan king reiterated that the intervention in Zaire should be seen as an effort to maintain territorial integrity. The hope was that an African country coming to the rescue would prevent the Shaba crisis from becoming part of the Cold War. In that light he understood the hesitation of the United States to get militarily involved, also given their involvements in other parts of the world. However, he did defend his intervention by pointing to the possible escalation of this crisis. If Zaire became unstable, it could increase instability in many other African states, given the size and centrality of Zaire. In addition, it could destabilize countries like Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. With the fragile situation in the Middle East, such destabilization was unwelcome at the moment. As far as direct Soviet influence was concerned, the king stressed that he had no evidence of such influence except that the invaders may have had ideological leanings close to Moscow. He did not think the Moroccan intervention would distort the bilateral relationship with Moscow.<sup>62</sup> As the fighting progressed in favor of the joint Morocco-Zaire operation, King Hassan expressed his satisfaction that this crisis was kept under control within an African context. However, he still claimed Cuban presence among the FLNC.<sup>63</sup>

The decision to intervene in Zaire came at a key moment in Moroccan political life in the second half of the 1970s. The king had survived two failed coup d'états by the military in 1971 and 1972. He was therefore eager to revive the political scene. The king managed to create a sense of national unity through the Green March in 1975 that was aimed to liberate the Sahara which was previously occupied by Spain and which was claimed by Morocco. The popularity the king derived from the success of the Green March proved short lived. This was partly due to guerilla attacks by the Polisario (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro) against Moroccan forces.<sup>64</sup> At the beginning of 1977, the kingdom was suffering from social unrest, increased external debts and high cost of the war in the Western Sahara. Political tensions were rising partly due to the sentencing of Marxist-Leninists on charges of wanting to overthrow the regime.<sup>65</sup>

In order to regain the political initiative the king called upon the leaders of the two main opposition parties to join the election supervisory committee in 1976. This paved the way for the participation of those two parties in the local elections in 1976 and the national elections in June 1977.<sup>66</sup> This meant that the Shaba intervention took place between the local and the national elections. The fact that there had been no national elections since 1970 meant that early 1977 was a heightened period of political action in an atmosphere of accommodation between the monarchy and the two main opposition parties. The redrawing of electoral districts and the two-tier electoral process at the end benefited the independents and pro-monarchy parties. However, it did lead to a split in the opposition front, with the *Istiqlal* party joining the government.<sup>67</sup> This strengthened the position of the monarchy.

Within this political context, the king took a risk committing troops to Shaba. However, casualties were low, with just eight officially declared dead soldiers. Opposition figures did not come out in public support for the operation, neither did they make critical comments in public. However, to the foreign diplomatic corps, they did express their skepticism regarding this foreign adventure embarked on by the king.<sup>68</sup> Even within the administration, there was concern regarding Morocco's military commitment in case the war would not be over quickly.<sup>69</sup> Despite the lukewarm attitude of the general Moroccan public, the king could still emerge with his position strengthened both internationally as well as domestically. The successful campaign in Shaba proved to be an "additional and extremely useful bonus in terms of domestic opinion at the time of the parliamentary elections."<sup>70</sup>

On the international front, the king found a useful ally in France. Like the Moroccan king, the link to the Cubans and the Soviets was also made by the French. In the French view, the Shaba invasion was mostly a Cuban-Soviet attempt to destabilize another moderate African country. The French sent in advisers to help streamline the FAZ's logistics, war planning and reconnaissance.<sup>71</sup> The French saw an opportunity in this crisis to extend their role to a francophone country that was not a former colony. They were furthermore worried that the United States was going to give up on countries in Africa, especially after the setback in Angola when the Cuban-backed MPLA gained control. Zaire's importance grew in light of the gains by the Soviet camp in Angola.<sup>72</sup> The Moroccan troops were flown in on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, with the French providing transport planes for the heavy material to be flown into Lubumbashi.<sup>73</sup> Within five days a countermove was underway. An additional fifty fighter pilots from Egypt were also sent to Zaire.<sup>74</sup> FAZ morale improved now that they could fight alongside experienced, well-equipped and disciplined Moroccan units. It was clear that the Moroccan troops proved decisive in turning things around on the ground.<sup>75</sup> It allowed Mobutu to keep some of his crack units in the capital ready to be deployed in case a rebellion started somewhere else in the country. By the end of May 1977 control over Shaba was reestablished. There was little actual fighting, some casualties on the Moroccan side were the result of fierce fighting between Mutshatsha and Dilolo.<sup>76</sup> The rebels fled back to Angola and Zambia. What has been dubbed the 'eighty-day war' proved a victory to Mobutu, in the sense that his regime survived thanks to foreign backing. The short and successful operation turned out to be a win-win for the external actors involved. The French increased their prestige among non-Soviet-aligned African nations, the Moroccans showed their ability to support pro-Western positions in Africa, and the United States gained popularity by not intervening.<sup>77</sup>

What wasn't achieved was an actual defeat of the rebels. Despite pressure to reform his political and economic system and actual external military support and advice, Mobutu didn't use the window of opportunity to strengthen his rule. Instead he ordered reprisals against supposed supporters in Shaba and even a complete purge within his army. After a supposed attempted coup in early 1978, Mobutu ordered the imprisonment and execution of officers, some trained by his foreign supporters. When the rebels launched a second invasion in 1978, Zaire was almost as ill prepared as it had been a year earlier.<sup>78</sup> The FLNC had gained in military strength largely due to the new recruits among those who fled Mobutu's reprisals.<sup>79</sup>

What some feared indeed took place within a year. The FLNC followed a different strategy the second time round. Their main focus was the mining town of Kolwezi, where many expatriates lived. Instead of approaching it from the west, using Angola as a launching pad, they opted to move through Zambian territory and attack from the south. By doing this they avoided the FAZ, which was expecting yet another invasion from Angola. In addition the rebels had started infiltrating the area in early 1978. By May 1978 they had amassed enough rebels within Shaba who were able to capture Kolwezi in a matter of hours following a surprise attack on the 13th of May 1978. The FAZ had only 700 soldiers to defend the town. However, Mobutu did manage to send in a French-trained airborne battalion, which eventually managed to regain the airport

together with other forces on the ground. Despite the FLNC being in town, Mobutu flew into Kolwezi on the 17th of May.<sup>80</sup>

Given the danger of undisciplined FAZ soldiers and the presence of rebels to Europeans living in Kolwezi, France and Belgium flew in paratroopers to protect and evacuate them. The Americans provided the necessary logistical support for this airborne assault. In total, eighteen long-range C-141 US transport planes were ordered by the US administration to help out the French and Belgians, who lacked such transport planes on such short notice.<sup>81</sup> The direct United States involvement signaled a policy shift by the United States compared to a year earlier. The United States wanted to show that it would stand by pro-Western countries, thereby assuaging fears of complete United States withdrawal.

In order to maintain stability in the aftermath of the evacuation of the Europeans and the departure of the French and Belgian elite units, an inter-African force was assembled. It drew mostly from Morocco, which was ready to repeat its contribution of 1977, but King Hassan insisted on other countries joining. Senegal, Gabon, Togo and the Ivory Coast sent small units, which were airlifted into Zaire by France and the United States and paid for by these countries and Saudi Arabia. Thus, a coalition was formed outside of the UN, OAU and NATO with troops mostly from former French colonies. France was key in mobilizing allies and former colonies, a marked difference from the role played by the United States thus far. It suited the Western nations that African nations took primary responsibility given the lack of public support for military involvement in Africa among Western nations.<sup>82</sup> The Moroccans needed the other nations as part of the force in order to avoid being seen as the "Cubans of the French".<sup>83</sup>

Twice Morocco came to the rescue of Mobutu's regime, once immediately and the second time as a stabilizing force. As the commander of the Moroccan forces, Loubaris, described it "last year it was a hunting expedition, this year it's a question of repairing a broken piece of machinery", the machinery being the FAZ.<sup>84</sup> This showed Morocco's commitment to maintaining Mobutu's regime. The justification of safeguarding Zaire's territorial integrity within the OAU framework was just part of the motivation. But the historic role, the connections with Mobutu and knowing the country well probably helped convince King Hassan to favorably and swiftly react to Mobutu's request for help. On the African continent, this led the king receiving more support from moderate African nations who feared Soviet encroachment on the continent.<sup>85</sup> The favorable outcome and the relatively small casualties list provided a boost to the king's domestic position in the midst of the preparation of parliamentary elections in which opposition parties agreed to participate. Internationally, it allowed the king to leverage this, partly historically motivated, intervention in his dealings with other nations within the Cold War context. The intervention took place amid more structured interaction between intelligence chiefs of France, Morocco, Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, otherwise known as the Safari Club, which is the subject of the next section.

#### 4. The emergence of the Safari Club

The only reference I found so far in diplomatic archives does not mention the Safari Club but instead refers to the Five Power Intelligence Committee. It was described as a 'multilateral effort ... to thwart radical initiatives, counter Soviet inroads in Africa and combat international terrorism'.<sup>86</sup> The other official mention was made by the former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki Al Faisal during a speech in the US in 2002.<sup>87</sup> This committee was set up in the mid-1970s, but by 1988 the CIA was already referring to it as defunct, most likely because the initial alliance comprised France, Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Iranian revolution in 1979 led to a disruption of this alliance. The revolution was also the moment its existence was revealed to the wider world. The new revolutionary forces in the Islamic republic of Iran gave an Egyptian journalist and confidante of former president Nasser access to the archives of the Iranian secret

services. The Safari Club seems to have been the brainchild of the head of the French secret services, Count Alexandre de Marenches. His personal relationship with world leaders and especially leaders in the Middle East and North Africa made him suitable for the task of encouraging the creation of such a security alliance. On 1 September 1976 the head of the intelligence services of Saudi Arabia (Kamal Addam), the Egyptian Mukhabarat (El Amma), the Iranian SAVAK (General Nematollah Nassiri) and the Moroccan secret services (Ahmed Dlimi) signed a secret agreement. Marenches signed on behalf of the French.<sup>88</sup> Haykal quoted the agreement: ‘recent events in Angola and other parts of Africa have demonstrated the continent’s role as a theatre of revolutionary wars prompted and conducted by the Soviet Union, which utilizes individuals or organizations sympathetic to, or controlled by Marxist ideology’.<sup>89</sup> The French saw this as an opportunity to seek inroads and strengthen their own position in Africa. Morocco, which was already firmly entrenched in the Western camp, was motivated by a desire to build on the ties with France as well as the strong ties with oil-rich Saudi Arabia. Post-1973, after the oil boom, Morocco would increasingly rely on subsidized oil imports from the Gulf as well as arms sales to Morocco financed by Gulf countries. The arms were procured from the United States and France and used in strengthening the Moroccan army—a task deemed even more important after the start of the Western Sahara guerrilla war in the late 1970s. Iran and Saudi Arabia, although regional competitors, were in the 1970s both firmly anti-communist and US allies. The Saudis were also instrumental in winning over President Sadat of Egypt to the Western camp. The intelligence chief of Saudi Arabia was reportedly very close to President Sadat, even before he took over after President Nasser’s death in 1970.<sup>90</sup>

The Safari Club met regularly in cities like Riyadh, Paris and Cairo. An organizational structure was set up, with the main office in Cairo. A rotating chairmanship was instituted, with each member taking a turn for a one-year period.<sup>91</sup> Members of the Safari Club briefed US and Israeli intelligence regarding their activities.<sup>92</sup> Out of this alliance a division of labor emerged in which the finances were mostly provided by Saudi Arabia and the manpower provided by Egypt and Morocco, while France took care of logistics and technical advice. Between 1976 and 1979 the Safari Club was active on different fronts.<sup>93</sup> However, one needs to keep in mind that this alliance was relatively informal in nature and doubt exists in how much it has really functioned as a mechanism through which actions were coordinated. The fact that these intelligence chiefs met regularly and attempted to structure their cooperation should not be attributed too large a significance. It remained a “club”. Exchange of information and cooperation in specific fields were facilitated through this club. Despite that, the Shaba intervention is seen as one moment through which some of the contacts established through the Safari Club were put to work.<sup>94</sup> The French intelligence chief claims in his memoirs that during a private visit to King Hassan, he managed to convince him to send his troops. This anecdote couldn’t be corroborated by other sources consulted for this article.<sup>95</sup> In any case, the Safari Club provided some of the cooperation infrastructure that the king of Morocco could use to strengthen Morocco’s position. The intervention in Shaba did not however strengthen the position of the king in his dealings with the United States regarding much needed arms. The protracted negotiations and how the Shaba crisis was used in these bilateral talks is the subject of the next section.

## 5. Arms deal or no arms deal?

One major issue which dominated the discussions between Morocco and the United States in the years 1977-1979 was the sale of arms requested by Morocco. These meetings and discussions took place during the two Shaba campaigns. The guerilla war in the Western Sahara escalated and Morocco needed different military hardware in order to deal with the Algerian-backed Polisario. Whilst Morocco used its anti-communist stance and its recent Shaba interventions as arguments why it should receive these weapons, the US administration under President Carter

was slow to react positively. It was only after increased Soviet-Cuban activity in the Horn of Africa, the fall of the Shah of Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that prompted the United States to supply Morocco with these weapons. In addition, pressure from fellow Safari Club member Saudi Arabia, and financing, seemed to have helped in this turnaround of the Carter administration.

After the first successful Shaba intervention, Morocco requested extra arms from the United States. Morocco was eager to acquire OV 10- aircraft and Cobra helicopters. The main usage was clearly intended for the Western Sahara. These arms were needed given the heightened tensions and the recent arms purchase by Algeria from the Soviet Union and from Libya. Conventional fighter jets proved not very useful in anti-guerrilla warfare and thus helicopters and low-flying reconnaissance aircrafts were requested from the United States. This request was made in the fall of 1977 during a meeting between the Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs, Laraki and Secretary of State Vance.<sup>96</sup> Recall that this was just a few months after the first successful deployment of Moroccan troops to Shaba. The fall of 1977 witnessed a flurry of high level contact between Moroccan and US officials, ranging from US ambassadors meeting with the king to President Carter meeting with Morocco's prime minister. The Moroccans kept raising the issue of the need for arms and the US government not yet committing pending the need to sound off Congress. Morocco emphasized that what was taking place in Western Sahara was just part of a wider struggle for Africa. In the Moroccan view, they were "concerned by development of an axis linking Moscow, Algeria, Luanda and Havana and [Morocco] has tried in Shaba and elsewhere to use limited means at its disposal to counter this axis' activities."<sup>97</sup> The king saw himself as "the only one in whole area making serious effort to prevent collapse of moderate regimes in Africa and ward off creeping Soviet take-over of the continent."<sup>98</sup> The increased Soviet support to Algeria was putting Morocco at a disadvantage. In a meeting with President Carter, Prime Minister Ahmed Osman recalled Morocco's intervention in Zaire and reiterated the points made regarding the Algeria-Soviet axis. While appreciating the efforts in Zaire, President Carter just asked to be kept informed of Morocco's need without given Morocco any hint of a possible positive response to the arms request.<sup>99</sup>

After informal consultation with members of Congress, Secretary of State Vance wrote the Moroccan Foreign Minister that the US government thought it unwise at that moment in time to request formal permission from Congress. The opposition within Congress was deemed too strong to get it through successfully. The main sticking point was the definition of what constituted Moroccan territory, with Morocco seeing military action in the Western Sahara as self-defense, while the United States opposed usage of American weapons in the Western Sahara as long as the Western Sahara dispute was not resolved.<sup>100</sup>

Morocco was disappointed by the reluctance of the US government to sell the requested arms and looked for alternatives while buying time to find a workable solution. After jovially approaching the US ambassador at a dinner with a "well, I see you were not able to bring me back the OV-10's" the king proceeded to claim that the war situation was not alarming and that sixty-two Puma helicopters and seventy-five Mirages were underway from France, the Western Safari Club member. These were needed to defend Moroccan territory.<sup>101</sup>

It was clear that Morocco was unable to persuade the US government to furnish it with the appropriate weaponry. Despite using typical anti-communist rhetoric and using the Shaba intervention as an example of the sacrifices it made and the pro-Western stance it took. The only result was that these discussions prompted the US administration to take a fresh look at its strategy in North Africa. The President commissioned the Policy Review Committee to come up with a new strategy for this part of the world.<sup>102</sup> This review had not yet led to a conclusion by the time the king came to Washington on a state visit in November 1978. In a conversation with President Carter, King Hassan made a direct link between Morocco as a partner of the West in need of military equipment and the intervention in Zaire. In his view, his "... part of Africa will be an increasingly heavy burden for the defense of the free world. Suppose Zaire falls. Then

Sudan and Egypt will be vulnerable and Africa could be split in two. This would end the Suez Canal. This could pose a direct threat to Saudi Arabia." This did not convince President Carter as he was not forthcoming regarding the sale of arms.<sup>103</sup>

Despite these setbacks regarding the US government unwillingness to move on such an important issue, Morocco still committed troops in that same year of 1978 to Shaba for a second time. In this they were dependent on the United States to transport them in and out. It seems that the wasted year in terms of discussions regarding the arms deal did not deter Morocco from staying committed to its cause in Zaire. It is therefore not convincing to claim that Morocco intervened mostly to get a better standing with Washington. It seems therefore likely that the Moroccan support of Mobutu was genuinely based on an anti-communist stance and the idea of supporting a similar regime, partly for historical reasons, to maintain its territorial integrity.

Given these disappointments in 1978 Morocco also turned to Italy to buy Chinook helicopters which were made under US license. The United States tried to block even this using the same excuse regarding where the helicopters were going to be used. The conditions placed meant that Morocco could only use it to defend Morocco's territory against foreign aggression based on the 1960 US-Morocco bilateral agreement. By referring to the 1960 agreement, the thorny issue of the Western Sahara was avoided. However, King Hassan would have none of it. He made again the explicit link with his intervention in Shaba and the lack of United States cooperation, stating, "...how can I intervene in Zaire if I make such a commitment?"<sup>104</sup> ... the United States were prepared to fly Moroccans to Shaba and let them use American weapons to support American interests there, but the United States were not prepared to let them have unarmed helicopters to defend their homeland.<sup>105</sup> By raising the stakes the king achieved his objectives. In January 1979, President Carter personally approved the sale of the Chinook helicopters through a response on a memorandum of his NSC, by writing "I think we should approve the sale."<sup>106</sup>

However, the Carter administration stalled on dealing with the earlier request for the OV-10 aircraft and the Cobra helicopters. It took a full two years after the first request and after Morocco had again committed troops for the second time in Shaba before the Americans reviewed their policy and changed it in favor of Morocco. Given the escalations in the Western Sahara, the more sophisticated attacks by Polisario, and the increased pressure put on the United States by France, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the United States finally decided to supply Morocco with the weapons requested, even to be used in the Western Sahara under the condition that the Moroccans were willing to come to the negotiating table to solve the Western Sahara issue.<sup>107</sup> In a personal letter by President Carter to King Hassan, the change of policy was announced in light of the difficult military situation of Morocco.<sup>108</sup> Through an intermediary the Moroccan king notified the United States that it can use Moroccan bases for transit and support facilities in light of the new developments regarding the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>109</sup> A few days later, the US government requested Congressional approval for the sale of 20 F-5 fighter jets.<sup>110</sup> The international situation had changed dramatically with increased Soviet-Cuban activity in the Horn of Africa, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the fall of the Shah of Iran the same year. These developments helped in reducing opposition in Congress. It was now more sympathetic to the sales of arms to Morocco. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee did acknowledge that such weapons could end up being used in the Western Sahara conflict. As long as this was not seen as US approval of Morocco's Sahara policy.<sup>111</sup> The Saudis were putting strong pressure on the United States to come to the aid of King Hassan.<sup>112</sup> The Saudis were willing to furnish the costs of new arms sales to Morocco.<sup>113</sup> Towards the end of his tenure, President Carter finally sided with his National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and approved the sale of the weapons to Morocco.<sup>114</sup> In front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Assistant Secretary of State Harold Saunders, defended the arms sale on the grounds that "... terrorism in Iran and invasion in Afghanistan have increased the importance to us of countries which broadly support our objectives in the world. Morocco is such a country ... With

Southwest Asia in turmoil, we need to nurture our relations as never before with all Islamic and non-aligned states.”<sup>115</sup> The sale of arms to Morocco was one of the early indications that President Carter had shifted his Africa policy towards a more aggressive stance. One could argue that 1979 proved a decisive year in shifting the balance towards a more hawkish approach of US foreign policy culminating in President Carter’s 1980 state of the union. This came at the expense of the policy which was adhered to during President Carter’s first three years of seeking to keep Cold War calculations out of US policy towards Africa.<sup>116</sup>

## 6. Conclusions

Research on the history of international relations in North Africa tends to emphasize the role of North African states within the international system and more specifically the role of the United States. Similarly, much of the discussion of the foreign policies of North African states is focused on their links to the European Union. Relatively little has been written that emphasizes the agency of North African states and their ties to other nations in the Global South and how these policies are often rooted in historic ties. This article is a modest attempt to broaden the scholarship regarding the foreign and security policy by a state in the Global South during the Cold War. It connects the historic role played by Morocco during early independence in Congo. One cannot understand the interest in and the feasibility of intervening in 1977 without taking into account Morocco’s role in the UN mission in 1960–61. The intervention by the Moroccan king on behalf of Mobutu provided an interesting case study for this type of research. By emphasizing the importance of a historical approach, it was possible to reveal old links between the two regimes. It also reveals an overlooked alliance, the Safari Club, officially referred to as the Five Power Intelligence Committee. It was partly through this alliance that the intervention took place. More research needs to be done in order to understand the committee’s role in this regard. Such research should focus on how this committee bypassed the United States or worked on behalf of US interests—that is, how much agency was there for the Middle Eastern and North African states to carve out a position for themselves within the Cold War context. However, such research should not overlook the historical ties and interests the members of this committee forged. This article showed that the Moroccan intervention was not just a product of the Committee’s coordination, but that it had a more historical background going back to the early independence period of both Morocco and Congo. At the same time this article argues that one should be more cautious in assuming that such an intervention, which served Western interests, automatically led to a more favorable relationship with the United States. In the case of the sale of arms to Morocco, this was clearly not the case. The sequence of events and discussions seem to suggest that broader global developments in 1978 and 1979 were more decisive than the Moroccan intervention in Zaire. While this limits the agency of the Moroccan king in influencing internal debate within the US administration, it also suggests that the intervention needs to be seen separately from what could be achieved in Washington. It perhaps means that the intervention served more African purposes for Morocco and should thus be placed within the historic role Morocco played in Africa, both in Congo and elsewhere. This will enable contemporary researchers and analysts to understand better the role Morocco is currently seeking for itself in Africa by recently rejoining the African Union and expanding its economic, religious and political links with Sub-Saharan African countries.

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## Notes on contributor

*Dr. Farid Boussaid* is a University lecturer at the Political Science Department of the University of Amsterdam and Director of the Amsterdam Centre for Middle Eastern Studies. He specializes in the political economy of the Middle East and North Africa with a particular interest in state-business relations and the history of international relations of this region.