

HH Sheikh Nasser
al-Mohammad
al-Sabah
Publication Series

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and the Middle East
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Irene Fernández Molina

Number 12: June 2014



About the Author

Dr Irene Fernández Molina is European Neighbourhood Policy Chair at the College of Europe, Natolin Campus.

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Morocco and the Middle East under Mohammed VI

Irene Fernández Molina

Abstract

This paper examines the broader picture of the Moroccan foreign policy towards the Middle East since the accession of King Mohammed VI to the throne in 1999. It empirically documents and analyses the overall continuity in the basic orientations of this policy, showing how stability and firmness at the level of agency have prevailed over the significant structural disruptions at the regional and global levels that occurred at the turn of the century, which also generated greater domestic tensions. Starting from the widespread perception of a certain Moroccan ‘withdrawal’ from the Arab scene and the mediation in the Middle East conflict, in comparison with the Hassan II era, the different sections address Rabat’s practices and priorities in bilateral relations with the countries of this region, including diplomatic tensions or crises with Saudi Arabia and Iran; its multilateral performance and approach to the reform of the Arab League; its stances on the Israel-Palestine conflict and ambiguous relations with Israel; the impact of the Iraq war (2003) and the increasing relevance of economic exchanges with this part of the world.

Introduction

The stubbornness of foreign policy sometimes defies intuition. At first sight, one might have expected that the 2011 Arab uprisings, which are said to have changed the face of the region, had a perceptible impact on national foreign policies and intra-regional relations in the Middle East and North Africa. If both the regional environment and the domestic constraints of foreign policy making had been altered, albeit to different degrees, how could the states’ external behaviour remain unchanged? In fact, forced to navigate an extremely fluid situation at all levels, the old and new leaders of these countries have opted in general to pursue essentially cautious and adaptive foreign policies. Slight, often just temporary readjustments in regional alliances could hardly overshadow the overall continuity in the basic external orientations of the different states.¹

The Moroccan foreign policy appears as an example of this somehow unpredictable predictability - although qualified by the absence of a genuine political transformation or regime change at the internal level. As far as relations with the Middle East are concerned, the three main developments as of 2011 were largely in line with previous patterns: reinforcement of the alliance with the Gulf Arab conservative monarchies, pro-Western and pro-Gulf alignment with regard to the conflict and the possible fall of a non-allied regime in Syria, and overt preference for the Egyptian military over the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood.



First, the clearest proof of the vitality and necessity of the Morocco-Gulf Arab link, for both sides, was the striking offer made to Morocco to join the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in May 2011, in spite of the geographical incongruity. The initiative was later watered down because of Rabat's hesitance to fully join a club that was politically at odds with the 'democratising' image it intended to project to the international community, as well as disagreements between the GCC members. But still, it led to a generous five-year economic development plan (\$5 billion to share with Jordan) and a symbolic upgrading of the relationship, which was labelled as a 'strategic partnership'.

Second, regarding to the Syrian conflict, the presence of Morocco in the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member in 2012-13 forced its authorities to assume a higher profile than usual. Rabat's diplomacy efficiently played the role of driving belt between the Western governments and the Arab League leadership in an issue in which they all held rather convergent approaches. Among the resolutions drafts it submitted or cosponsored as the only Arab representative at the Security Council was the one supporting the Arab League's peace plan that was vetoed by Russia and China in February 2012 and the one authorising the deployment of the first UN observers approved in April. In addition, Morocco joined from the beginning the French-initiated group of Friends of Syria and hosted its 4th summit in Marrakesh in December 2012, in which the Syrian National Coalition gained wide international recognition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

Third, the political evolution of post-revolutionary Egypt and the election as president of Mohammed Morsi, from the Muslim Brotherhood, in June 2012, increasingly revealed the profound discomfort of the Moroccan monarchy in dealing with such Islamist counterparts, to the extent that King Mohammed VI immediately supported the military coup - with broad popular support - that overthrew the Morsi administration one year later. At the same time, the events in Cairo of Summer 2013 also exposed the lack of domestic consensus in Morocco and substantial differences that existed between the head of state and the Islamist party leading the government coalition, i.e. the Party for Justice and Development (PJD), along with other Islamist groups.

The aim of this paper is to further understanding of recent and topical developments by empirically examining the broader picture of the Moroccan foreign policy towards the Middle East since the accession of King Mohammed VI to the throne in 1999. Both the factual account and the analysis are based on official documents, statements of the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation and speeches by King Mohammed VI, as well as news and comments from the national (mostly independent) press, and the author's own interviews with practitioners and observers, among other sources. Starting from the widespread perception of a certain Moroccan "withdrawal" from the Arab scene and the mediation in the Middle East conflict, in comparison with the Hassan II era, the paper will address Rabat's practices and priorities in bilateral relations with the countries of this region, including diplomatic tensions or crises with Saudi Arabia and Iran; its multilateral performance and approach to the reform of the Arab League; its stances on the Israel-Palestine conflict and ambiguous relations with Israel; the impact of the Iraq war (2003) and the increasing relevance of economic exchanges.

Withdrawing from the Middle East Scene?

Relations with the Middle East are certainly not among the three priority areas of Morocco's foreign policy under Mohammed VI, inherited from the previous reign, namely the international management of the Western Sahara conflict, the kingdom's vital association with



the European Union (EU) and its also staunch alliance with the United States. Yet still, they have remained significant because of, on the one hand, their linkage with the above-mentioned prevailing issues and, on the other, the persistently powerful identity-based 'norms' that multiply their impact in the domestic sphere.

Historically, Morocco's invariable alignment with the so-called 'moderate' Arab countries was due to domestic political reasons - the need to address the ideological threat of socialism and Arab nationalism, which had favoured the fall of other monarchies in the region - as well as the demands arising from relations with Washington and the Western Sahara conflict. Maintaining a relatively conciliatory attitude towards Israel and cultivating the friendship of Saudi Arabia, the smaller Gulf monarchies and, since the 1970s, Egypt were necessary conditions to count on US blessing and prevent eastern (Mashreq) Arab countries from supporting the Polisario Front and Algeria, as well as to secure their substantial financial contributions. So the triangles Morocco-'moderate' Arab countries-US and Morocco-Israel-US would remain fully operative during the stage starting from 1999, always with the Sahara question in the background. As Abdessamad Belhaj explains: "For Morocco, the solution of the Western Sahara issue is certainly a token [*gage*] of the moderating and pro-Western efforts if its diplomacy in Middle East issues... The maintenance of the link between the Sahara issue and the situation in the Middle East is favoured by the Moroccan diplomatic capital acquired during decades of initiatives".²

The difference is that, at this stage, the classic approaches of Moroccan foreign policy had to adapt to a particularly turbulent regional scene. The new US policy following the attacks of 11 September 2001 seriously disrupted the precarious stability achieved by the regional system in the 1990s, based on three pillars: US permanent military presence in the Gulf and strengthening of security ties with its monarchies, 'dual containment' of Iraq and Iran, and active support for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The Iraq War (2003) zapped one of the major regional players and unleashed Iranian ambitions to occupy the ensuing power vacuum. Further consequences included the rise of sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shiites (at both internal and regional level), the introduction of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the resurgence of Kurdish pro-independence movement, the departure of Syrian troops from Lebanon, increasingly aggressive Israeli military campaigns and Turkey's diplomatic activism and growing influence. Meanwhile, the outbreak of the Second Palestinian Intifada (2000), besides calling the viability of the peace process into question, was to intensify the tensions and halt mediation efforts for several years. The picture was further complicated by the victory of Hamas in the first Palestinian legislative elections (2006) and the subsequent political division (2007) between the West Bank and an internationally isolated Gaza Strip.

In this context, in Morocco the perception was spread that the country had lost specific weight or "withdrawn" from the wider Arab scene and the mediation in the Middle East conflict, especially in comparison with the outstanding involvement - also somewhat idealised - of the Hassan II era, or the new activism exhibited now by states like Saudi Arabia. The explanations for this lower initiative or visibility point either to the broader regional circumstances or the internal political constraints in Morocco itself. Among the arguments of the first category were the increasing complexity of the Middle East conflict and the internal difficulties of the Palestinian Authority,³ as well as the fact that the major international powers had taken over the leadership in the peace process and direct contacts between the parties were now prevailing, making redundant the former mediating role of certain Arab states.⁴



From the Moroccan internal perspective, it was usual to attribute the apparent foreign policy changes to the new authorities' will to focus primarily on the domestic problems,⁵ the reorganisation of the role of the king in foreign affairs, the marginalisation of the royal advisor André Azoulay⁶ and Mohammed VI's new personal style,⁷ less inclined to diplomatic pomp and characterised, according to sympathetic press, by an "outstanding verbal caution and calculated image economy".⁸ In his assessment of the Moroccan policy towards the Middle East during Mohammed VI's first decade in power, El Hassan Bouqantar combines both the regional and the internal rationales.⁹

What virtually all national actors or observers recognised was the reduced degree of freedom and independence of Morocco's foreign policy as a result of its unconditional alignment or bandwagoning with US positions.¹⁰ According to an analysis by *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*: "For years, Hassan II was able to give Morocco an essential role in the Middle East scene... Morocco was certainly an ally of Washington, yet however, its nodal role in Arab geopolitics did not diminish. Nowadays, Morocco's alignment with the unilateral policy of the [George W.] Bush Administration... leads it to be described by observers as a 'small' Arab country". Among the evidences of Morocco's "marginalisation" mentioned was its "forced distancing from the hard core of the Arab League".¹¹ Another additional factor was the increase in domestic constraints: The growing domestic impact and cost in terms of public opinion of any controversial action or stance regarding this region.

Finally, these interpretations were compounded with an 'economicist' discourse arguing that, for the sake of pragmatism and the general interest, Morocco had to focus on relations with countries with which it had stable economic ties, rather than continuing to obey the "demagoguery of the Arab unity", as was said¹² "The Moroccan diplomacy has worked to rationalise its relations with the Arab world and extract them from their affective context".¹³ The words of Taieb Fassi Fihri, Secretary of State (1993-2002), Deputy Minister (2002-2007), Minister of Foreign Affairs (2007-2011) and ultimately royal counsellor (since 2012), were eloquent enough: "Morocco is not less active than before in the region, but just we cannot continue to feed ourselves with politics alone. The world has changed; Arab countries must also develop bilateral or multilateral relations between themselves, looking for human, economic and social development. His Majesty, from his arrival to the throne, has always been in favour of this".¹⁴

Beyond the Arab space itself, and prolonging a pattern of the Hassan II era, the Moroccan foreign policy continued to give considerable rhetorical weight to the 'Islamic dimension', as allegedly corresponded to the dignity of 'amir al-muminin' (commander of the faithful) held by the Alaouite kings. Mohammed VI's will to stand as the representative of the Muslim *umma* and interlocutor of the leaders of other major religions became apparent, for example, in his message to Pope Benedict XVI in protest against the latter's controversial statements about the violent nature of Islam (lecture at the University of Regensburg, Germany, September 2006).¹⁵ The Moroccan ambassador to the Holy See, recalled for a few days to consult, returned soon to his post.¹⁶

In the field of public diplomacy, a remarkable effort was made to internationally spread the 'values' of the so-called 'Moroccan Islam' with the purpose of retaining some aura of leadership in the whole Islamic world. Furthermore, the post-9/11 context had increased the value - and the benefits - of this 'diplomacy of interreligious dialogue', which sought to project the image of a 'moderate', plural and open Muslim country, a space for peaceful coexistence between different faiths, and to extend that experience at the international level, promoting exchange



and rapprochement initiatives.¹⁷ The natural institutional space for such policy and discourse was the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation since 2011) and, more particularly, the Rabat-based al-Quds Committee and Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO). On a different note, the 'Islamic dimension' was also central in the activity of the various official institutions dealing with the Moroccan migrants throughout the world, such as the Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad (CCME) created in 2007.

Friends, Foes and Distant Friends in the Bilateral Sphere

Though adopting a less personalistic and media-oriented style than that of Hassan II, the 'new' approach to Morocco's relations with Middle East countries under Mohammed VI continued to give priority to the bilateral track. Relations were formally based on the exchange of official visits, meetings of the different bilateral high joint committees and cooperation agreements and conventions that were concluded on these occasions. In the case of monarchies like Saudi Arabia, custom also prescribed that the Moroccan foreign minister was received in audience at least once a year, so as to convey a message from Mohammed VI to the hosting king, emir or crown prince.¹⁸

As far as state visits are concerned, the premiere of the new reign was the tour that took Mohammed VI to several Middle Eastern states between May and June 2002. The destinations were, in this order, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.¹⁹ This was complemented, later in November, with another official trip by the king to Kuwait for a meeting with the emir marked by good personal understanding.²⁰ A second royal regional tour took place in January 2004, including a stopover in Egypt and 'friendship visits' to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia.²¹ Mohammed VI returned to the UAE once more the following year with an essentially economic agenda, driven by the growing investment influx from the Emirates to Morocco.²² In late 2012, Mohammed VI toured again the Gulf monarchies (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar) with the purpose of consolidating political alliances and attracting financial aid and foreign investment.²³

As to the bilateral joint committees, usually chaired by the respective ministers of Foreign Affairs, they were the venues for institutionalised political dialogue aimed at giving concrete content to political or diplomatic statements and effectively advancing in cooperation by thickening the legal and regulatory fabric in diverse fields. Most of them were established in the late 1990s or early 2000s, such as the ones between Morocco and Lebanon (1997), Jordan (1998), Egypt (1999), Syria (2001) and Qatar (2002).

From the whole picture of Morocco's bilateral contacts in the Middle East, two Arab partners stood out in the first place for reasons of history and political affinity, these being Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Relations between Rabat and Amman were reinforced after the accession to the throne of Mohammed VI especially in the economic realm. The commonalities between the two kingdoms were very significant: Both had association agreements with the EU and free trade agreements with the US, and were involved in the Agadir Process which began in 2001; their economies were oriented towards export and focused on virtually the same products (mining, textile and agricultural/food products). The long list of agreements, protocols, implementation programmes and memoranda of understanding signed during these years demonstrates the shared will to promote bilateral economic cooperation.²⁴



In the case of Saudi Arabia, arguably, the historical relationship was more triangular than strictly bilateral, as since the Cold War, it had always been determined or ‘mediated’ by the common alliance with the US. The persistent strength of this link after 1999 was apparent, besides the extraordinary number of visits by Saudi officials to Morocco, in Riyadh’s unfailing support for the Moroccan position on the Western Sahara conflict, attempts to mediate in disputes with neighbouring Algeria and significant flows of tourism, investment and financial assistance. In return, among other things, Rabat’s diplomacy was one of the strongest supporters of the Arab Peace Initiative launched in 2002 by Saudi Prince Abdullah – acting as a regent during King Fahd’s illness.²⁵

However, this did not prevent some frictions and moments of distrust from occurring during the 2000s, to the extent that some observers warned that “mutations” were taking place in relations between the two ‘sister’ monarchies. Firstly, in June 2002, Riyadh did not appreciate the highly-publicised arrest by Morocco of three Saudis accused of plotting a suicide attack on ships of the US Sixth Fleet located in the Strait of Gibraltar. Discontent arose from form rather than content: The Saudi authorities, questioned by the international community after 9/11 for alleged collusion with international terrorism, viewed this operation as ‘security marketing’ and an act of disloyalty by an old ally like Morocco, which informed the US in the first place.²⁶

Secondly, in April 2004, Prince Abdullah quite surprisingly offered a dinner in honour of Moulay Hicham, Mohammed VI’s unruly cousin who had been ostracised from the Moroccan palace because of his outspoken pro-democratic activism (and who was at the same time related to the Saudi royal family). Rabat considered this ‘family’ event as carrying an unfriendly political dimension. The subsequent cooling of bilateral relations led Saudi Arabia to recall its ambassador to Morocco for consultations; the position remained empty until mid-July 2004.²⁷ In response to this gesture, in June Rabat supported the Turkish candidate to the General Secretariat of the OIC, opposing the Saudi interests for the first time in this body.

In addition to the tensions caused by the new international situation after 9/11 and ubiquitous US pressures, the Moroccan independent press attributed this series of disagreements and mutual grievances between the two kingdoms to the bilateral communication deficit following the death of Hassan II and the lack of an undisputed interlocutor in charge of relations with the Saudis within Mohammed VI’s close circles, beyond Foreign Minister Mohammed Benaissa (1999-2007). A recurrent complaint in Riyadh was that “the Moroccan envoys [were] often young and French-speaking [*francophones*], so they ignored many of the Saudi particularities”.²⁸ There is empirical evidence for the relative bilateral distancing of the parties which could be detected in the slowing of the rhythm of high-level official and private visits between 2004 and 2007. It was not until May 2007 that trust was publicly re-established with an official visit to Morocco by Abdullah, who had by now been crowned as the new king of Saudi Arabia.

Beyond the Arab countries, other Middle Eastern states whose relations with Morocco were relevant were Turkey and Iran, albeit for quite different reasons. While in the former case the keynote in the 2000s was increased cooperation, especially in the economic sphere, in the latter it was political tensions that prevailed. The most decisive breakthrough in relations between Rabat and Ankara was the signing of a free trade agreement in April 2004, as part of the policy of strengthening trade cooperation between Mediterranean partner countries promoted in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). Rabat’s interest in embarking on such process of trade liberalisation, which had been considered since 1996, also arose from the exceptional closeness of the EU’s economic ties with this candidate for EU membership



(negotiations in this regard were to begin in 2005). According to a triangular logic, this bilateral agreement had the advantage of incorporating the Euro-Mediterranean protocol on accumulation of rules of origin for exports to the European Single Market.

The arranged conditions were that, as of the entry into force of the agreement in January 2006, the unhindered access of all Moroccan industrial products would be allowed into the Turkish market, in exchange for a gradual dismantling, over ten years, of customs duties and other taxes for imports in the opposite direction. Of the four trade agreements signed by Morocco during this decade, this was by far the one developed in a more open and participatory way, taking into account the preliminary impact assessment and the suggestions on implementation provided by the main employers' organisation, namely the General Confederation of Enterprises of Morocco (CGEM).²⁹

In the following years it was found, however, that the impact of these measures on the Moroccan economy was not as positive as had been expected. The volume of bilateral trade immediately and visibly grew - by 40% between 2005 and 2006³⁰ - rising above 8,000 million dirhams in 2007, but driven primarily by increased imports from Turkey. In the same year, Morocco's trade deficit with this country, which had been expanding since the late 1990s, reached 5,700 million dirhams. According to a study by the Ministry of Economy and Finance, the weakness of Moroccan sales was due to the inadequacy of its offer and the substantial similarity of the two economies, which were both largely EU export-oriented and specialised in the same sectors. The attraction of Turkish foreign direct investment (FDI), which in theory could have made up for the sharp trade imbalance, did not occur either.³¹

In the case of relations with Iran, completely interrupted for a decade after the revolution of 1979 and the exile of the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Morocco, the starting point of Mohammed VI's reign was the timid bilateral normalisation movement initiated in the 1990, which led to reopening of the Iranian embassy in Rabat in 1991. In exchange for its strict neutrality in the Western Sahara conflict, Morocco recognised the Islamic Republic's right to produce nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Besides being a suitable partner to try to establish trade relations with the EU, the strategic position of the North African kingdom made it an attractive destination for Iranian exports and investments. The successive cooperation agreements signed in different areas should have encouraged a rise in economic exchanges between the two states.³² However, the election as president of a hardliner like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2005 was to truncate this precarious bilateral rapprochement, which never completely dissipated historical misgivings. Morocco immediately aligned with the positions of the US and Arab countries which viewed with open suspicion Tehran's apparent will to extend its influence throughout the Middle East and beyond. This was perceived as an immediate threat, among others, by two old allies of Morocco such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt.³³ Furthermore, such loyalty was compounded with pressures by the Bush Administration, increasingly convinced of the need to stop the Iranian nuclear programme and the application of more coercive measures against the republic. Several cables sent from the US embassy in Rabat in 2008 - later leaked by Wikileaks - reflect US' persistent efforts to secure Morocco's support for its strong policies towards Iran.³⁴

This is the context in which the Moroccan-Iranian diplomatic crisis of February-March 2009 took place. After months of increased tensions, the direct trigger was a statement by Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri, former speaker of the Iranian Parliament and head of the office of the supreme leader, describing Bahrain as the "14th Iranian province". Mohammed VI expressed immediate condemnation, in line with most Arab leaders, sending a message of support to the King of



Bahrain. The Iranian foreign ministry then summoned the Moroccan chargé d'affaires in Tehran, which was an “unfriendly” gesture in Rabat’s eyes because of its exceptionality (no other Arab diplomat had been called), as well as manner of his reception (he was received by a simple official).³⁵

The subsequent reaction of the Moroccan foreign ministry was to summon the ambassador of the Islamic Republic in Rabat, to recall the chargé d'affaires in Tehran for consultations³⁶ and to send an official message demanding an explanation for Iran’s action within a week. After this deadline expired without receiving any response, it was decided to break diplomatic relations with Iran. The statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation added as a supplementary justification, besides recent disagreements, the “proven activism of the authorities of this country [Iran], and especially of its diplomatic representation in Rabat, in order to alter the religious principles of the Kingdom [...] and try to threaten the unity of Muslim worship and the Sunni Maleki rite in Morocco [...]”. This alleged Shiite proselytisation was described as an “intolerable interference in the domestic affairs” of Morocco.³⁷

In turn, the Iranian foreign ministry replied with another statement which categorically rejected accusations of interference and went further in warning that “the Moroccan decision [was] against the unity of the Islamic world needed to defend the Palestinian people and Morocco [should] be careful with the traps laid by the enemies of the Islamic world, especially the Zionists”.³⁸ This was an obvious attempt to reframe this crisis in a new discourse and directly attack the Moroccan monarchy’s pan-Islamic legitimacy, capitalising on the region-wide solidarity movement sparked by the Israeli military offensive on Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009. Following the rhetorical escalation, Rabat’s answer was that: “Iran is evading its responsibilities and trying to extend a strictly bilateral issue to matters over which it has no monopoly or exclusive legitimacy. [...] The Kingdom of Morocco is, and always has been, in the first line of the defenders of the interests and causes of the Islamic ‘umma’ and the Palestinian question. Therefore, it does not need to take any lessons from anyone about these issues”.³⁹

Certainly, neither the “humiliation” (*hogra*) of being the only Arab state initially summoned by Tehran nor the alleged Shiite proselytisation in Morocco sufficiently explained such a virulent diplomatic crisis, not least because the incident between Iran and Bahrain which officially provoked it was solved in a few days without breaking relations. Many analysts attributed the diplomatic spat to recent developments in the Middle East regional system and the strengthening of a Sunni (anti-Iranian) coalition led by countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, with which Morocco would naturally tend to align.⁴⁰ The information handled by the US Embassy in Rabat (in this case, analysis or speculation from an unidentified source) also points in the same direction, namely that the rupture of relations with Iran and the campaign against Shiism in Morocco were mainly due to the “instigation” of Saudi Arabia, as well as the Mohammed VI’s need to reaffirm his position as a religious leader.⁴¹

Saudi factor aside, other more sinuous interpretations related this bilateral crisis to the Western Sahara conflict, as Iran’s formal neutrality was not without hesitation which could have aroused the usual Moroccan sensitivities. For example, the Iranian ambassador in Algeria had said in early February that “Iran [had] recognised the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and maintained this position” (a statement that he would deny later). According to Mohammed Darif, Morocco’s decision could be seen as a reaction, in general, to the reinforcement of relations between Algeria and Iran: “Rabat has always demanded that the Iranian policy in the Maghreb was balanced. The strengthening of a Tehran-Algiers alliance is done automatically at



the expense of Moroccan interests”.⁴² It was even speculated that there might be a ‘Venezuelan connection’, in view of the burgeoning alliance between Tehran and Caracas, and the recentness of the closure of the Moroccan embassy in the latter country (January 2009), which was openly linked to the Western Sahara issue.⁴³

Apart from that, it cannot be ignored that bilateral crises and ambassador withdrawals were part of the usual practices of the Moroccan foreign policy in the 2000s.⁴⁴ The same drastic decisions that some domestic voices attributed to the tension, impulsiveness and lack of strategy of the Moroccan foreign policy makers⁴⁵ were praised by others as a sign of a new firmness putting an end to “former passivity”.⁴⁶

A ‘Minimalist’ Arabism at the Multilateral Level

Morocco’s performance at the regional multilateral level in this stage of high fragmentation of ‘Arab politics’⁴⁷ was similarly defined by the adoption of a ‘moderate’ and conservative role, in line with the positions of Egypt and Jordan, and continued attention to US interests. In May 2001, Morocco was one of the countries that supported the candidacy of the Egyptian Amr Moussa to the General Secretariat of the Arab League, promoted by President Hosni Mubarak. Once he took up this position, Moussa chose Morocco for one of his first visits.⁴⁸ In 2003, after the difficult period of the Iraq war, Rabat joined voices demanding a reform of this regional organisation. According to Foreign Minister Benaissa, Hassan II had already raised the issue of such restructuring years before and Mohammed VI was insisting since the Amman summit (March 2001) on “the need for the Arab League to focus on issues that concern citizens directly, especially the fight against poverty and illiteracy, and the creation of the necessary infrastructure to ensure the integration of Arab societies in the world of today”.⁴⁹

However, a year later, amid intense debates on the US plans for political and economic reform in this region – Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) Initiative – Morocco positioned itself on the side of Arab countries most reluctant to a radical reshaping of the League which would lay the foundations of a true integration organisation (“Arab Union”). Hence the fact that its diplomacy supported the Tunisian authorities’ decision to postpone the crucial Arab summit scheduled for early April 2004 in the latter country – a measure which, according to Moussa, would have “dangerous consequences for common Arab action”.⁵⁰ This meeting was expected to focus on the presentation of a regional project alternative to that of Washington which originated in an unprecedented initiative of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria, then taken over by the Secretary General. The plan foresaw a full refounding of the League, so as to provide it with a new institutional structure – including a parliament, a court of justice and a security council – and a decision-making system in which consensus was not imperative. In other words, it was envisaged to turn the League into an international organisation going beyond mere cooperation and incorporating elements of integration, with the EU as the inevitable reference point. However, in the preparatory meetings for the Tunis summit, insurmountable differences arose between the plan’s sponsors and other countries like Qatar, Oman, Tunisia and Morocco.

The foundations of the Moroccan official position on Arab cooperation or integration at this stage had been presented by Benaissa at a previous meeting of the Council of the League. Morocco’s priorities and interests were listed as:



- Priority of socio-economic development and the fight against poverty and illiteracy: “We are called in the first place to respond to the needs of Arab citizens, before dedicating ourselves to abstract and unrealisable issues”.
- Primacy of economic cooperation: “Arab states should focus their joint action on strengthening Arab economic cooperation through the establishment of efficient mechanisms, the creation of a favourable climate to attract Arab investment, the encouragement of employment and the fight against brain drain”.
- The Agadir Agreement as reference model: “The objectives pursued with this agreement are an important indicator of the actions to be undertaken in the field of Arab cooperation”.
- Inadequacy of the EU model and caution against the “temptation” to go with the current fashion (*l’air du temps*): “The EU has sovereign powers transferred by the member states, while this not the case of the General Secretariat of the Arab League”.
- Gradualism: “Taking a stepwise approach to the development of joint Arab action and avoiding the creation of mechanisms whose costs will be hard to bear for the Arab states”.
- Evaluation of the action of the General Secretariat in order to establish its responsibilities for administrative and financial management, and review and modernisation of management mechanisms.
- Need to revise the charter of the League, considered to be “obsolete”, and resolve the anomaly of its appending texts, which have no constitutional basis and are therefore not legally binding.⁵¹

According to this official discourse, what Rabat advocated was a ‘minimalist’ Arabism – concerned to maintain intact the sovereignty of individual states.⁵² This was essentially pragmatic and ‘economicist’. Independent press analyses considered that Morocco’s “forced distancing from the hard core of the Arab League” largely resulted from the fear of alienating itself from the US, as evidently the proposed reenergising and reforms of the League were not to the liking of the Bush Administration. In addition to this, Rabat’s reluctance to endorse greater Arab integration arose from two more ‘national’ constraints. On the one hand, it was preferred to continue prioritising bilateralism “for obvious reasons of domestic politics”, as stated by diplomatic sources in reference to the Western Sahara conflict. On the other hand, Minister Benaissa argued that Morocco was already engaged in important institutional reforms and thus the future of the Arab League should not lead to the creation of a supranational institution with the capacity to “interfere” in the internal affairs of its member states.⁵³

In January 2005, Morocco submitted its own document on the review of the Charter of the Arab League on the eve of an extraordinary session of the organisation’s Council (foreign ministers) focusing on this topic. Minister Benaissa seized the opportunity to remind his counterparts that in previous decades the kings Mohammed V and Hassan II had already advocated the reform of this organisation, and that “Morocco’s positions and initiatives [had] always been balanced, moderate, flexible and concerned [about the development] of common Arab action”.⁵⁴ Discussions on how to “rationalise” and “invigorate” this joint action continued until the Algiers summit (March 2005), which was presented as a meeting intended to relaunch it, but ultimately did not bear any concrete results.⁵⁵

In any case, the delayed effect of these divergences on the future of the Arab League was that countries like Morocco gradually withdrew from, or lost interest in, this regional sphere, increasingly monopolised by those states who were trying since 2001-2002, even timidly, to conduct foreign policies that were less dependent on the US, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar.



The desire to distance themselves from US policies towards Iran, Lebanon and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict displayed by some of Washington's oldest and staunchest allies in the Middle East, in view of the serious deterioration of the regional situation, had led to an unprecedented period of diplomatic activism⁵⁶ and the revival of a certain pan-Arab discourse, in tune with the expectations of a large part of the population.

The fact that Morocco stayed on the edge of this movement and Mohammed VI did not even attend the key Arab summit held in Riyadh in March 2007, for reasons that were not clarified, did not go unnoticed by the national press, especially the most critical papers: "The speech by King Abdullah has the advantage of being in tune with a highly consensual pan-Arab sentiment. A formula that was once highly appreciated by Hassan II, when Morocco played (certainly in a very different context) a leading role in the Arab diplomacy, and that currently does not appear to be among [Morocco's] main concerns, while the political situation in Iraq and Palestine is considered by the Moroccans (as proven by opinion polls and popular mobilisation) as an identity issue as important as those relating to their everyday concerns".⁵⁷ Evidently, in one way or another, the centre of gravity of what remained of 'Arab politics' was increasingly shifting to the East.

Conflicting 'Norms' and Interests in the Middle East Conflict

Besides developments at the bilateral and multilateral levels, much of Morocco's interest for the Middle East under Mohammed VI inevitably focused on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. As if the issue was not complex enough, the new Moroccan head of state was surprised by the start of the Second Intifada just one year after his accession to the throne. The stances of the North African kingdom on this conflict had always been awkward, due to the difficulty of reconciling consensual identity-related loyalties with other less popular relations which were still driven by non-negligible state interests. That is to say, on the one hand, solidarity with the Palestinian people and opposition to Zionism were one of the powerful 'norms of Arabism'⁵⁸ that still constrained the states' behaviour throughout the region (even when they were cynically manipulated). But on the other hand, within the hierarchy of foreign policy interests of Rabat, relations with Israel obeyed to the demands of the alliance with the US and the international legitimation of the Moroccan positions on Western Sahara, two equally vital issues.

The apparent success of the peace process had mitigated or muted these tensions during the 1990s. The Oslo Accords (1993) allowed granting the Moroccan-Israeli relations a semi-official character and respectively opening liaison offices in Tel Aviv and Rabat. The gradual bilateral normalisation process became apparent in increasing trade flows and even in the attitude of public opinion. According to a survey published in late 1998, for example, 49% of Moroccans favoured complete normalisation of relations with Israel, and 63% approved of the existence of an Israeli liaison office in Rabat.⁵⁹ However, the election as prime minister of conservative Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996 spread pessimism about the peace process and put an end to the 'honeymoon' between Morocco and Israel. Public hostility towards the Jewish state and internal opposition to maintaining political and economic relations with it resurfaced in the kingdom.⁶⁰ At the end of the decade, attempts by Netanyahu's successor, Ehud Barak (1999-2001), to revive the peace process fuelled rumours that Morocco had been requested to play again a "leading role" as an intermediary.⁶¹ Finally, Barak's expected visit to Rabat would not take place until the funeral of Hassan II (July 1999), which was attended by a large Israeli delegation in recognition of the mediating role played by the late king for decades.⁶²



Mohammed VI's policy in this area was mainly driven by inertia and continuity during his first year in power. The foundations of the official Moroccan stance had not changed for quite some time: These were the search for a just, lasting and comprehensive peace based on respect for international law (resolutions 242 and 338 of the UN Security Council) and the commitments made by both parties; the creation of an independent Palestinian state coexisting with Israel and with its capital in East Jerusalem (considered as occupied territory); and the principle of 'land for peace'.⁶³ In addition, the status of Jerusalem necessarily occupied a central place in the national discourse, due to the Moroccan king's position as president of the al-Quds Committee of the OIC. The defence of Muslim heritage of the city was presented as a cause of the Islamic *umma*, "a matter that occupies an important place in the heart of every Muslim".⁶⁴

The authorities in Tel Aviv somehow feared for the future of bilateral relations following the dismissal of the Moroccan Ministry of Interior Driss Basri, one of their most trusted interlocutors in Rabat since the 1980s. Notwithstanding this, common agricultural and industrial projects, tourism and trade continued their course without mishap. Thus, Moroccan exports to Israel reached \$830 million in 2000.⁶⁵ As far as the peace process was concerned, the US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was received by Mohammed VI in Rabat in September 1999, two days after the president of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat, and personally informed him of the state of the negotiations. This visit was interpreted, again, as a gesture of appreciation for the mediating role played by Morocco in the Middle East conflict. In January 2000, it was the turn of Foreign Minister David Levy of Israel to meet the king.⁶⁶ The Moroccan involvement in this series of contacts continued even after the failure of the Camp David summit between Barak, Arafat and President Bill Clinton in July 2000. Mohammed VI then chaired a meeting of the al-Quds Committee in Agadir in which the Palestinian leader was invited to explain his refusal to sign the deal brokered by the US (28 August). Shortly thereafter the new Israeli Foreign Minister, Shlomo Ben Ami, travelled to the same city with a similar agenda (4 September).

All this happened just before the outbreak of the Second Intifada in the Palestinian territories late September, which definitely buried the ailing peace process. Countries like Qatar, Oman, Tunisia and Morocco closed their liaison offices in Tel Aviv right away in protest against the Israeli army's disproportionate use of violence to quell the uprising.⁶⁷ According to official figures, bilateral trade between Morocco and Israel immediately decreased from this moment.⁶⁸ On the diplomatic front, fulfilling his responsibilities as the president of the al-Quds Committee, Mohammed VI called an urgent meeting in which support was reaffirmed for the Palestinian position on Jerusalem and a call was made to recognise this city as the capital of an independent Palestinian state. Rabat also supported the resolution of the extraordinary summit of the Arab League held in Cairo in late October which recommended breaking all relations with Israel.⁶⁹ Domestically, the widespread condemnation of the Israeli atrocities, whose shocking images were broadcasted by the pan-Arab television channels as well as Moroccan media, resulted in the organisation, almost simultaneously, of two huge demonstrations in Rabat and Casablanca, the first (7 October) having official character and the second (8 October), called by several Islamist forces, being instead banned.⁷⁰

After this first critical moment, however, Mohammed VI made some attempts to recover a mediating role. At the very end of 2000, he received in Rabat to discuss US peace proposals both Arafat (12 December) and Shimon Peres (28 December) – the latter of whom would become the new Israeli foreign minister three months later.⁷¹ Arafat revisited the North African kingdom on the eve of the Arab League summit in Amman (March 2001), when a common Arab position to support the Intifada was being negotiated.⁷² However, in the end, the



Moroccan head of state did not attend that meeting, which he delegated to his foreign minister. This unexcused absence revived doubts about his true commitment to the Palestinian cause and earned him the reproaches of his counterpart King Abdullah of Jordan.⁷³

At this stage, evidently enough, the recurrent division was reappearing between ‘moderate’ Arab states which were reluctant to distance themselves from the US positions and those more willing to strongly censure the Israeli actions. Morocco openly sided with the former camp the following year, when it emerged as one of the most active advocates of the Arab Peace Initiative by Saudi Prince Abdullah. On the eve of the Arab summit in Beirut in March 2002, in which this initiative was finally approved, Mohammed VI called on Arab leaders to help stop violence in the Palestinian territories by supporting the ‘land for peace’ proposal. Furthermore, it also had the precedent of the previous Saudi-originated Fahd Plan (1981), supported as well at the time by Morocco, which allowed the Moroccan press to praise again the “visionary and prophetic” attributes of Hassan II.⁷⁴

The problem was that, at this very moment, the bloodiest Israeli military offensive in the West Bank, known as Operation Defensive Shield, started in retaliation for a series of Palestinian suicide attacks. In early April, the streets of Rabat hosted one of the largest demonstrations of solidarity with the Palestinian people ever recorded in the entire Arab world, supported by all the country’s political and social forces. The demonstration was more than one million strong.⁷⁵ The protest was timely scheduled for the day before the visit of the US Secretary of State Colin Powell to Rabat, which was the first stage of a controversial Middle East tour.⁷⁶

Later on, as of the spring of 2003, Mohammed VI gave explicit support to the new Roadmap by the Quartet (made up of the US, the EU, Russia and the UN), which was considered to be compatible with the previous Arab Peace Initiative. However, the king declined the invitation to participate in the Sharm al-Sheikh summit (June 2003) in which its implementation mechanisms were to be discussed.⁷⁷ On the other hand, in December, Mohammed VI did receive in Marrakesh the former Israeli and Palestinian ministers Yossi Beilin and Yasser Abd Rabbo, who were promoting the non-official and civil society-based Geneva Initiative throughout the Arab capitals.⁷⁸ In late 2004, a new mass rally of solidarity with the victims of the conflicts in Palestine and Iraq took place in Rabat, this time with the absence of the parties of the government coalition, and while the city was hosting the Forum for the Future, promoted by the US in the framework of the BMENA initiative.⁷⁹

The relations between Morocco and the Palestinian Authority entered a new phase of difficulties as a result of the electoral victory of Hamas in January 2006 and subsequent intra-Palestinian clashes. The only official statement of Rabat on this thorny internal conflict – which would eventually lead to the de facto political division between the West Bank and Gaza – was a later call by Mohammed VI, acting as president of the al-Quds Committee, to “put an end to violence and clashes and favour the path of dialogue and national reconciliation”. This was actually a sign of support for the initiative of Saudi King Abdullah to organise talks between Fatah and Hamas representatives in the city of Mecca.⁸⁰ For the moment, in April 2006, the king received a visit by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to discuss the latest developments in the occupied territories⁸¹ and another meeting was announced in Morocco between a Palestinian and an Israeli delegation, mediated by the royal advisor Azoulay (but ultimately cancelled).⁸²

Tensions with Israel rose again in July 2006, after this country attacked from air and invaded by land southern Lebanon. The official position expressed by the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign



Affairs was “[condemning the] use of force against civilians by Israel and its consequences in terms of loss of life and destruction of infrastructure and civil facilities”.⁸³ The main cities of the kingdom immediately became the scene of a new cycle of protests against the war. This time again, the main demonstration organised with ‘national’ character, which took place in Rabat on 6 August, was not supported by the political parties being part of the government.⁸⁴

In 2008, after some months of apparent momentum in negotiations,⁸⁵ the next Middle East crisis the Moroccan diplomacy had to face was the Israeli offensive against the Gaza Strip (Operation Cast Lead) that took place between December 2008 and January 2009. Besides some initial diplomatic mobilisation, Morocco maintained during this episode a stance of balance and ambiguity, hiding to a great extent behind recurring calls for concerted Arab action. The aim was to prevent the risks – both external and internal – of openly endorsing one of the two sides emerged in the new polarisation of the region.⁸⁶ Deep differences had surfaced between the countries that supported the authorities of Hamas one way or another, headed by Syria and Qatar, and those which, like Egypt, hoped for the defeat of the Palestinian Islamist organisation even more than Israel, for fear of internal destabilisation.

Meanwhile, throughout all these crises following the Second Intifada, bilateral relations between Morocco and Israel continued to be marked by ambiguity. Beyond the dramatic closure of the liaison office, the presence of shared security interests and common ties with the US ensured the continuity of economic flows and political contacts between Tel Aviv with this and other Maghreb states. Yet all this happened behind the scenes, always avoiding publicising or granting official character to the relations. As explained by Bruce Maddy-Weitzman: “Morocco has been comfortable enough with maintaining the status quo, i.e. a partially open door to Israel in the realms of tourism, diplomacy, and presumably security cooperation”.⁸⁷ The Moroccan independent press was also well aware of this reality.⁸⁸ In practice, the double game of Morocco consisted in alternating periodic statements condemning Israel’s acts of aggression, military escalations or violations of international law – calls on the international community to intervene to stop abuses,⁸⁹ defence of the legal status or the Muslim historical heritage of the city of Jerusalem by the king as president of the al-Quds Committee⁹⁰ – with tentative moves towards a progressive normalisation of bilateral relations.

‘Normalisation’ acts implied prioritising bilateral relations and shared interests between Morocco and Israel over the traditional focus on the Middle East conflict, an approach that was seen by some as a hallmark of Mohammed VI’s foreign policy. The subtle evolution of the overall strategy towards the Middle East coincided, according to some sources, with the progressive transfer of responsibility for the relations with Israel from the king to the foreign ministry. This seemed an attempt to downgrade their category, visibility and internal sensitivity, providing them with a more technical and depoliticised appearance while advancing in their institutionalisation. According to an analysis by *Al Usbue*, the new pragmatic course hinted in this issue included “moving it out of the palace, liberating it from the complex of Jerusalem and the emirate of the faithful, and achieving some kind of ‘advanced relationships’ between the Moroccan foreign ministry and Israel, regardless of the principled positions of the people and the king”.⁹¹

The first and most controversial movement known in this regard in the context of the Second Intifada was the visit to the kingdom by the Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, received by both King Mohammed VI and his counterpart in September 2003. Minister Benaissa had to justify these contacts claiming that “among the addressed issues [was] a possible meeting between Palestinians and Israelis in Morocco”,⁹² yet the alibi of peace negotiations was not



credible for most of the Moroccan independent press.⁹³ The conciliatory gestures towards Israel reappeared two years later, after the visit to this country of a Moroccan delegation headed by figures like Azoulay, Serge Berdugo and Robert Asaraf in November 2005.⁹⁴ In early 2006, the Moroccan Foreign Ministry claimed in a statement to “closely follow” the evolution of the health of former prime minister Ariel Sharon after he suffered a cerebral haemorrhage,⁹⁵ and the king received in Fes the new Labour Party leader Amir Peretz, born in Morocco, before the March legislative elections.⁹⁶

In 2007 rumours were intensified as to an imminent normalisation of bilateral relations. Morocco was once again assigned the role of pioneer, charged with paving the way for other ‘moderate’ Arab states.⁹⁷ First, the Israeli press speculated on the possible designation of Berdugo, then roving ambassador of the kingdom, as its unofficial representative in Tel Aviv.⁹⁸ Second, in early July, there was a meeting in Paris between two delegations led by the foreign ministers of Morocco and Israel, Benaissa and Tzipi Livni.⁹⁹ As speaking publicly about any contact with Tel Aviv continued to be taboo or ‘politically incorrect’, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs justified the appointment claiming that the talks had been “completely focused” on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Arab Peace Initiative.¹⁰⁰

Moreover, in 2008 the idea of honouring King Mohammed V (1909-1961) as ‘Righteous Among the Nations’ regained strength in Israel,¹⁰¹ following the publication of new historical research highlighting the help the future king gave to the Moroccan Jews during World War II, when he was still a sultan under French protectorate.¹⁰² Another alternative channel for the normalisation with Israel that gained prominence at this stage were some of the activities of the new Institut Amadeus which may be regarded as parallel diplomacy.¹⁰³ In particular, this think tank chaired by Brahim Fassi Fihri, the son of the new minister of foreign affairs, invited Shlomo Ben Ami to the first meeting of the Forum MEDays, held in Tangiers in November 2008. The following year, it was the former Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni (2006-2009) who appeared among the participants of the event, arousing controversy,¹⁰⁴ which was repeated again in the 2010 gathering.¹⁰⁵

Meanwhile, although the Moroccan authorities insisted on denying any economic relationship with the state of Israel since the closure of the liaison office, trade between the two countries not only did not stop, but increased. According to some data from the Israel Export and International Cooperation Institute reproduced by part of the Moroccan press, 46 Israeli companies were engaged in exporting their goods or services to Morocco in the first quarter of 2006.¹⁰⁶ In the first four months of 2009, the companies involved were already a hundred.¹⁰⁷ According to Tel Aviv’s official statistics, the total value of bilateral trade had temporarily diminished only between 2002 and 2003, but grew steadily and visibly from 2004.¹⁰⁸

The ‘Two-level Game’ of the Iraq War

In addition to the Arab-Israeli question, the other Middle Eastern issue which grabbed the interest of the international community and also Morocco during these years was the 2003 Iraq war. During the countdown to the US-led invasion of this country, since the autumn of 2002, Rabat expressed its reluctance to endorse Washington’s plans in line with most of the Arab states. Unlike what happened in 1990-91, when the differences between the leaders of the region were obvious, at this time there was a fairly wide declarative consensus about the lack of relationship between the regime of Saddam Hussein and the 9/11 attacks, the need to peacefully settle the dispute over Iraq’s alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction through diplomatic channels and the rejection of another war in the region, both for



humanitarian reasons and because of the risks of instability it would entail. Mohammed VI insisted on these points in several speeches and interviews.¹⁰⁹

Yet such official statements could barely hide the profound discomfort of this and other Arab regimes from which the Bush Administration was seeking political support – or even logistical facilities – for a unilateral intervention deprived of UN endorsement. However, the appeal to international law and the search for a peaceful solution by the king of Morocco and his counterparts in the region was just part of a conventional and ultimately harmless discourse, playing to the gallery, which contrasted with their real difficulties in trying to distance themselves from the superpower and adopt autonomous positions. The problem was how to respond simultaneously to the demands of the alliance with the US and national public opinions which were unanimously opposed to the forthcoming war; in other words, how to demonstrate loyalty to Washington while minimising its domestic impact and political cost. This was a textbook case of the difficulties of harmonising foreign policy and domestic politics, or ‘two-level games’ theorised by Robert D. Putnam.¹¹⁰ Philippe Droz-Vincent has also analysed this as a complex and unstable triangular relationship between regimes, national societies and the United States.¹¹¹

In the case of Morocco, on the eve of the conflict in early 2003, the independent press warned that the regime was “more divided than ever between its de facto alignment with the U.S. and the attention to the ‘street’, inevitably furious”.¹¹² The official motto at the time was advocating a “negotiated, peaceful solution” to the Iraqi problem, arguing that “the war would have dire consequences for the entire world”.¹¹³

The popular anti-war protests in Morocco began to be set in motion a bit later than those in other countries, however. After some small sit-ins, the first major rally took place in Rabat on 23 February. The call was endorsed by political organisations of all stripes and the ‘national march’ was attended by leaders of most parties, among about 100,000 demonstrators.¹¹⁴ The demonstrations were resumed with even greater intensity at the beginning of the invasion of Iraq on 20 March.¹¹⁵ The biggest ‘national march’, with some 150,000 demonstrators, occupied the streets of the political capital on 30 March. Sticking to the practice of alternating gatherings in the two main cities, the following big demonstration was scheduled for 6 April in Casablanca.¹¹⁶ All in all, these protests stood out as the most visible of all in the Maghreb and broke the general trend towards demobilisation observed for years in Morocco. Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi has analysed this as a “paradoxical phenomenon of intense politicisation” in a context of widespread de-politicisation, in which the reference issue was transnational but inevitably filtered by domestic variables.¹¹⁷

The turning point in the protest cycle was 20 March, not only for the beginning of the Iraq war itself but also, and even more, for the Moroccan king’s speech about it. As Hassan II did in 1991, Mohammed VI addressed the Moroccan people in these turbulent circumstances with the express aim of “calming the spirits”. His measured crisis speech contained many emphatic expressions of solidarity and fraternity with the “brotherly Iraqi people”, but significantly avoided any reference to the specific origin of its “disgrace”. At the same time, the king urged the population to avoid any outburst of the protests, to preserve public order and to distance themselves from those who attempted to exploit the situation to destabilise the country, not without recalling incidentally which were the “great causes” or priorities in which the Moroccan nation should focus its efforts.¹¹⁸ This significant speech was interpreted as seeking deterrence against any spontaneous demonstration, as well as ensuring that the inevitable anti-war protests



were channelled by recognised political and union organisations, as happened in fact in the case of the great authorised march on 30 March.¹¹⁹

The Economic Dimension: Agadir Process and Gulf Investment

Another dimension that began to gain weight from the 2000s in Morocco's relations with the Middle East countries was economic cooperation. This course of action was in line with the pragmatic and 'economicist' approach advocated by key decision-makers such as Minister Fassi Fihri, with the aim of "[rationalising] relations with the Arab world and [extracting] them from their affective context",¹²⁰ rather than continuing to "feed them with politics alone".¹²¹ Joint socio-economic development and the promotion of economic cooperation were indeed Rabat's priorities for the future of the Arab League stated in 2004,¹²² in what looked like a declaration of 'minimalist' Arabism that alienated Morocco from the core of this organisation.

From a trade perspective, the wish to "found the Arab union on pragmatic basis"¹²³ crystallised in the 2000s in several agreements forming part of the complex jigsaw of subregional economic integration in the Southern Mediterranean - bilateral and multilateral inter-Arab agreements, bilateral agreements between different countries and EU (Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon) or the US (Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain).¹²⁴ The most relevant deal for Rabat was that resulting from the so-called Agadir Process, launched in 2001 by Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan with the purpose of advancing the liberalisation of their trade and establishing a free trade zone with a market of about 130 million people.

An immediate antecedent of the Agadir Process was the Great Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA), a liberalisation programme conceived in 1997 in the framework of the Arab League in order to gradually eliminate tariffs on all goods (not services or investments) of the 17 signatory countries,¹²⁵ but whose implementation was blocked from the mid-2000s due to the lack of harmonisation of the rules of origin.¹²⁶ At the bilateral level, since 1999 Morocco had free trade conventions with Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan, and the latter two countries had another one between them. In any case, the fact is that this initiative was born and gained momentum in direct response to the requirements of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). The EMP's approach in the commercial sphere implied that bilateral (vertical) association agreements between the EU and Mediterranean partner countries were complemented by horizontal free-trade zones to be established between the latter, trying to overcome their "chronic deficit of regional integration".¹²⁷

Morocco stood out from the outset for its commitment and leadership in this project, for which it was repeatedly praised by Brussels. Such initiator role was useful to reaffirm its proximity to the EU and its position as 'model student' in the framework of the EMP, distinguishing itself from other Mediterranean partner countries. This was even more important at a time when Rabat was negotiating its own free trade agreement with the United States, seen with suspicion from Brussels.¹²⁸ Negotiations between Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan, always benefitting from the EU's political, technical and financial support (4 million euros from the MEDA programme, for example), started with the so-called Agadir Declaration (May 2001) and concluded with the signing of an agreement in the same Moroccan city three years later (February 2004). The delay was due to both the special sensitivity of some of the concerned products, especially the agricultural ones, and the great technical complexity of the negotiations. The ratification process was equally slow. The last country to complete it was indeed Morocco (July 2006) and its entry into force was delayed until March 2007 due to difficulties in harmonising the interpretation of the clauses of the agreement.¹²⁹



The novelty of the Agadir Agreement in comparison with previous regional commercial integration initiatives had laid in the use of a negative list approach similar to that of the bilateral agreements with the EU, as well as the adoption of the Euro-Mediterranean acquis in this area.¹³⁰ Moreover, unlike Morocco's agreements with the EU and Turkey, it did not include any exception for agricultural products.¹³¹ However, there were also non-negligible doubts about the added value of this framework, given especially the lack of territorial contiguity between the participating countries.¹³² Its implementation was to face persistent obstacles, not only technical and bureaucratic but also purely political. The Moroccan employers' organisation (CGEM), which did not play any role in the negotiations of this free trade agreement – unlike in the cases of those with the US and Turkey – would later denounce the agreement for having too many loose ends.¹³³ The lack of participation of political or economic actors outside the core of power reduced these negotiations to a “simple decision-making process”, according to the classification by Rachid El Houdaïgui.¹³⁴

The situation had certain parallels with that of the bilateral free trade agreement with UAE, an Arab country not included in the EMP. The latter was signed in 2001 and came into force in 2003, but soon faced significant blockages in its implementation. The Moroccan entrepreneurs, who had not been involved either in these negotiations, even complained that agricultural and food imports from the UAE could have devastating effects on the national economy.¹³⁵

Trade aside, and as a great novelty of Mohammed VI's era, Morocco deployed successful efforts to attract FDI from the Gulf Arab states. This was the aim of the contacts maintained with the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) back in the early 2000s, offering the reduction of obstacles and taxes as an incentive.¹³⁶ But it was not until the aftermath of 9/11 that the Maghreb in general began to receive greater attention from Gulf investors, not least because some of their capital had become suspicious in Europe and the US and needed to look for alternative destinations. The appeal of countries like Morocco and Tunisia was explained by the good understanding between their leaders and those of Gulf monarchies, the political will demonstrated at the highest level – in the former case, with personal involvement and multiple visits to the region by King Mohammed VI – their apparent political stability, the consolidation and opening-up of their market economies, the reforms undertaken in different sectors (privatisation, measures to improve the investment climate, major public works, policy of tourism development) and their existing trade agreements with the EU and the U.S.¹³⁷

The historic rise of oil prices witnessed in 2005 and 2006 marked a turning point that was even more decisive. In the latter exceptional year, the Gulf countries overtook their European counterparts for the first time ever as the leading investors in the Middle East and North Africa.¹³⁸ In Morocco, UAE investments were adding up to \$12 billion, which was also to provoke some emulation effect from Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. The distribution by origin of Gulf FDI was changing and becoming more balanced due to the emergence of companies of these four countries and the parallel decline of the traditional Saudi hegemony – especially during the phase of cooling of political relations between Rabat and Riyadh, from 2002 to 2007.¹³⁹ By sector, the bulk of the capital was concentrated on tourism, real estate and the most ambitious infrastructure projects launched by the Moroccan monarchy in this period.¹⁴⁰

The trouble for Morocco was that the quality and sustainability of these investments, seeking immediate and high profits with low risks, were far from satisfactory. Another fundamental obstacle was that most of the companies involved were controlled by the respective royal families, so the decision-making was particularly opaque and subject to political contingencies.¹⁴¹



Apart from this, Morocco's relations with the Gulf countries continued to be conditioned by marked energy and financial dependence. The North African kingdom imported from them all of its oil, worth more than \$2,500 million annually. The political counterpoint was some generous demonstrations of "solidarity". For example, in May 2008, Rabat received two donations from Saudi Arabia (\$500 million) and the UAE (\$300 million) as a "contribution to the alleviation of the impact of the exceptional rise in energy bills in the Kingdom" (the value of its oil imports in the first quarter of 2008 had increased by almost 69% compared to the same period of the previous year).¹⁴²

A final derivation of these economic dependence relations was the increasing migration of Moroccans to the Gulf Arab monarchies, favoured by the oil boom and rapid economic development of states like UAE, Bahrain and Qatar since the 2000s, in addition to the parallel tightening of the EU's immigration policies. Although not comparable to the European countries, which concentrated 85% of the more than 3.3 million Moroccans living abroad, the Arab world was in 2008 the second pole of attraction for the Moroccan immigrants (283,000 people, 9%), led by the UAE, Libya, Algeria and Saudi Arabia.¹⁴³

Conclusions

Since the accession of King Mohammed VI to the throne, relations with the Middle East as such have not represented a genuine priority in Morocco's foreign policy, but remain vitally connected to pivotal issues such as the kingdom's steadfast alliance with the US and the international management of the Western Sahara conflict. Their significance is also enhanced by the persistence of identity-based 'norms' that have a non-negligible domestic political impact in times of crisis or conflict. Due to such contradictory interests and constraints, the legacy of King Hassan II's reign was one of unwavering alignment with the so-called 'moderate' Arab countries, combined with an emphasis on pan-Islamic identity, openness to dialogue with Israel and mediation in the Middle East conflict. Though continuity was pursued globally, in the first decade of the 21st century these Moroccan classic foreign policy orientations needed to be adjusted to the constraints of a particularly turbulent regional scene, which was marked by the new US policies responding to the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada (2000).

The reduction of the margin of manoeuvre of the Rabat authorities, which were caught in the middle of Washington's demands and the divergent preferences of a large part of the domestic public opinion and political actors, arguably represents one of the main reasons for Morocco's apparent loss of specific weight or 'withdrawal' from the wider Arab scene and the mediation in the Middle East conflict, in comparison with the times of Hassan II. In parallel, an emerging pragmatic or 'economicist' discourse claimed that, for the sake of general interest, Morocco should better focus on relations with countries with which it had stable economic ties and set aside outdated normative/identity concerns originating in Arabism and Islam. However, the 'Islamic dimension' of the Moroccan foreign policy continued to be rhetorically emphasised as a result of King Mohammed VI's dignity of 'amir al-muminin' (commander of the faithful) and the increased value placed on the 'diplomacy of interreligious dialogue' in the post-9/11 context.

In its relations with the Mashreq, in the 2000s Morocco continued to prioritise the bilateral dimension, with Jordan and Saudi Arabia standing out among all the Arab partners for reasons of history and political affinity. Relations with Amman were reinforced especially in the economic realm, due to the two countries' similar trade agreements with the EU and the US,



and participation in the Agadir Process. In contrast, in the case of Saudi Arabia, the historical US-mediated bilateral alliance did not prevent some frictions and moments of distrust that were attributed to a communication deficit following the death of Hassan II. Beyond the Arab countries, increased economic cooperation was the keynote in Morocco's relations with Turkey, as seen in the signing of a bilateral free trade agreement in April 2004, while political tensions grew notably in the case of Iran after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election as president. Rabat's alignment with the positions of the US and Arab countries which viewed Tehran with renewed suspicion, chief among them Saudi Arabia, appears to be the main driver for the Moroccan-Iranian diplomatic crisis that erupted in February-March 2009, irrespective of the Moroccan official accusations of interference and Shiite proselytisation.

At the multilateral level, in the debate over the reform of the Arab League that emerged in 2003-2004 period, Morocco sided with the group of 'moderate' countries that were most reluctant to accept a radical renovation of this organisation - namely one that would lay the foundations for a genuine integration organisation and represent a viable alternative to Washington's BMENA. Rabat's Arabism was a 'minimalist', pragmatic and 'economicist' one, which viewed state sovereignty as untouchable and put forward instead economic development and cooperation as the greatest common Arab objectives. The latter approach resulted in the signing of free trade agreements such as the Agadir Agreement with Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan (2004), or the bilateral one with UAE (2001). At the same time, the Moroccan authorities deployed considerable efforts to attract investments from the Gulf Arab states, which flowed abundantly especially after the historic rise of oil prices in 2005-2006.

In the Israel-Palestine conflict, the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada (2000) blew the chances of maintaining a somehow acceptable conciliatory position that the peace process had opened in the preceding decade. Amid exacerbated tensions and mass demonstrations in solidarity with the Palestinian cause in Moroccan cities, the regime sided once more with 'moderate' Arab states which were careful not to distance themselves too much from US positions. In 2002, Morocco emerged as one of the most active advocates of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah's Arab Peace Initiative, which was adopted by the Arab summit of Beirut. A similar behaviour was pursued one year later with regard to the Roadmap proposed by the Quartet (the US, the EU, Russia and the UN), which was considered to be compatible with the aforementioned proposal of 'land for peace'. Meanwhile, relations with Israel were to evolve amid taboos and ambiguities. The closure of the Moroccan liaison office in Tel Aviv did not prevent the continuation of economic flows and political contacts behind the scenes. At this stage, Rabat's double game would consist of alternating periodic statements condemning acts of aggression, military escalations or violations of international law committed by Israel with tentative moves towards a progressive 'normalisation' of bilateral relations that were very controversial domestically.

Ambivalence was also the keynote in Rabat's position during the Iraq war (2003). On the eve of the invasion, Mohammed VI himself expressed his reluctance to Washington's plans, invoking international law and the search for a peaceful solution. Yet, his was ultimately a conventional and harmless discourse, like that of the leaders of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, which could barely hide the difficulties to dissociate Morocco's foreign policy from the US expectations and maintain a really independent stance. This led the Moroccan civil society and political actors to organise at the beginning of the war some of the largest mobilisations in the entire region, forcing the king to address the people in order to 'calm the spirits'.



In brief, this paper has empirically shown the overall continuity in the basic external orientations of Morocco's Middle Eastern policy under Mohammed VI and how stability and firmness (or inertia) at the level of agency prevailed over the significant structural disruptions at the regional and global levels that occurred at the turn of the century, which also generated greater domestic tensions. The same predictability applies to the fluid post-2011 context, in which the authorities in Rabat have made some reflective readjustments to secure external financial support and FDI (from GCC countries) and continuing political validation from their core allies, namely the European Union and the United States.

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Contact information:
Lorraine Holmes
lorraine.holmes@durham.ac.uk
The Al-Qasimi Building
Elvet Hill Road
Durham
DH1 3TU

