

Moroccan African Religious Diplomacy: Prospects and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Morocco has developed, over the last two decades, an unparalleled policy of exporting its experience of being the hub for moderate Islam, to several African countries, such policy falls within an ambitious geostrategic vision that aims at strengthening the Kingdom's political and economic influence on the African continent. Some aspects of Morocco's new religious policy in Africa are embodied in several initiatives launched so far for the purpose of enhancing the Moroccan-African cooperation in the religious sphere. Therefore, this article is an attempt to shed light on: First, the milestones of this religious diplomacy towards Africa by exploring the tools that help Morocco achieve its geostrategic goals. Second, the challenges as well as threats facing this strategy especially those coming from political and ideological rivals like Algeria and Iran. Third, this article will tackle the political benefits of this strategy on the both medium and long term

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1. Introduction

Religion has long been seen as an obstacle to diplomacy, especially in disputes and conflicts that seem to be related to or motivated by religion. The very nature of religion, its concerns for dogma, truth, and certainty, would seem to be contrary to the nature of diplomacy, with its emphasis on empathy, dialogue, understanding, negotiation, and compromise. However, religion and diplomacy have become more interrelated since the beginning of the 21st century. Globalization has exposed the limits of conventional diplomacy in resolving these new conflicts in a global era, and this has opened new prospects for religious actors involved in diplomacy. "A faith-based diplomacy" has emerged, which promotes dialogue within and between religious traditions, particularly in the Islamic world.

Over the past decade, Morocco has sought to diversify its traditionally Northern-Oriented policy by developing closer economic and political ties with Sub-Saharan African countries. Morocco hoped that this step would raise Morocco's regional profile and boost the Kingdom's exports. Hassan II started opening up to the continent during the last years of his reign in the late 1990s by signing numerous cooperation agreements and deploying the diplomatic staff all over the continent. This represented a radical shift in Morocco's foreign relations with Africa. Observers of the development of Moroccan-African relations in the past decade consider that the religious dimension has become an

indicative and essential dimension in strengthening Moroccan-African relations. Also, the partnership between Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa, as Morocco is slowly positioning itself in the continental approach with a new diplomacy, which based on considering Morocco as a guarantor of moderate Islam. Therefore, the kingdom has proven its effectiveness in combating extremism and terrorism thanks to the important experience Moroccan authorities accumulated in managing religious affairs in order to preserve the spiritual security of its populace.

In this context, the royal diplomacy and its investment in religious and spiritual relations, especially the institution of the “Emirate of the Faithful”, constituted one of the main pillars for drawing the features of Moroccan foreign policy in its African dimension and re-establishing geopolitical balances. To exemplify, the geo-strategic challenges in the Sahel and West Africa region and the development of mechanisms for cultural, religious, economic and security cooperation to confront terrorist threats that affect the stability and security of North and West African countries. In a nutshell, this article aims at answering some important questions such as, to what extent is the initiative towards African countries in the religious field is an indication of the existence of an official religious strategy and policy (religious agenda)? If yes, what are its tools to make it concrete? Lastly, what are the most important benefits to the Moroccan diplomacy in general?

2. Method

This article employed a literature review, as a critical analysis and synthesis of existing research and scholarly articles on Moroccan-African religious diplomacy. The aims of this article is to provide an overview of such, identify gaps, and highlight areas where further research is needed. The author developed a systematic search strategy to identify relevant literature, used academic databases, libraries, and other sources to search for peer-reviewed articles, books, conference papers, and other scholarly publications.

The author evaluated the quality and credibility of each source identified any biases in the literature. The author also highlighted the relationships between different theories or findings. The sources are not limited to offline material but also online materials.

3. Results and Discussions

Moroccan Religious Policy in Africa, From Cooperation to Partnership. At the outset, it should be understood that the new Africa-oriented religious policy is not a spur-of-the-moment move, but it is an extension of a previous religious policy that was developed in mid-1980 and was known as the alternative or parallel diplomacy. For instance, since the eighties, the Ministry of *Awqaf* and Islamic Affairs established a body of Muslim scholars who are recognized as having specialist knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence and theology, namely an *Ulema* Association between Morocco and Senegal on June 3, 1985. The Association, organized religious and intellectual activities, through sending Moroccan scholars to sub-Saharan countries. Further, it built and restored mosques in some countries, including Senegal, Guinea, Benin, and Mali. It also provided copies of the Holy Qur'an and Islamic books and publications for mosques, Qur'anic schools, and Islamic societies in Africa (Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali). Equally important

Moroccan authorities organized training courses for preachers (Friday sermons) coming from some African countries at Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca. Finally, it also worked on organizing training and training courses for the benefit of the missions of African countries in the field of organizing Hajj, and guiding permanent and continuous invitations to African scholars and jurists to participate in Ramadan *Hassani* lessons and seminars and meetings organized by the Ministry.

Later on, when King Mohammed VI took power in Morocco, he was very careful to maintain relations with the *Tijaniya* order by organizing bilateral meetings with Senegal, sending messages to their forums, and embracing their sheikhs and leaders. The sheikhs and chiefs of the Senegalese *Tijaniya* sufi order consider the king of Morocco to be honorable and commander of the faithful; therefore, they have a lot of respect and appreciation for him. In addition, the ministry of *Awqaf* and Islamic Affairs, in cooperation with the Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation, provide scholarships for students coming from West Africa, in order to continue their training in various Moroccan universities and *Dar Al-Hadith Al-Hassaniya*. Also, the study seats allocated to African students from the sub-Saharan region in Moroccan universities have grown steadily, doubling the number is more than three times, according to the official statements of the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Staff Training, Morocco receives more than 16,000 African students from different countries, regardless of their religious affiliation or scientific disciplines, 90 percent of them are holders of scholarships from Morocco within the framework of cooperation agreements signed between Morocco and some African countries. This was decreed in the Statement by the Minister Delegate to the Minister of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Staff Training, Dr. Jamila Al-Musali. For more details, see: (The website of the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Staff Training: www.enssup.gov.ma). In the same vein, Morocco continued to respond to requests to train a number of African imams, as well as to restore and repair a number of mosques and schools. The Qur'an and the distribution of thousands of copies of the Qur'an to some official bodies in charge of religious affairs through holding a number of Bilateral agreements with Morocco in several stations.

Within the framework of the project to restructure the "religious field" that the kingdom has embarked on since 2004 after the terrorist attacks that hit Casablanca in May 2003, the process of training imams was launched with the aim of spreading values of moderation and tolerance as authentic values of the religious culture in Morocco. This experience was able to draw the attention of many Islamic countries, in Africa in particular. Hence, they started sending Imams to Morocco in order to seek better training. Hence, when they go back to their countries, they spread values of moderation and tolerance among their people especially at a time when Africa is witnessing the growth of extremism. Mali is one of the first countries to seek help from the Moroccan experience in this field of religious training. In this respect, the day after the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. The late president of the country, and after a transitional process that followed the military confrontations between the Malian forces, the French, and the Azawad rebels, the government of Morocco signed agreements with Mali as well as other countries such as Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Gabon [4]. Rabat's approach to spreading

moderation and tolerance attracts the attention of many Islamic countries as the success of Morocco in addressing the manifestations of religious extremism has been proven.

The special interest that the Moroccan King gives to the development of his country's cooperation with African countries in the religious field was also evident during the response to the request to train Ivorian imams, so to support the modernization and reform of Quranic schools in Ivory Coast, especially with regard to curricula and the training of teachers. Morocco had previously accepted the training of 500 imams from Mali and Guinea, signing a memorandum of understanding between the two countries. At the request of the Guinean Minister of Religious Affairs so as to focus on, according to the Ministry of *Awqaf* and Islamic Affairs in Morocco its official website, "Studying the Noble Qur'an and hadith based on the legal sciences, the Arabic language, and the conditions of the Imamate" [9].

On the other hand, instructions were given to the ministry of *Awqaf* and Islamic Affairs to proceed with the repair and restoration of the King Faisal Mosque Mali. Also, Morocco gave the authorities in charge of religious affairs 10,000 copies of the Holy Qur'an to be distributed among various Mosques of Guinea, and 10,000 copies of the Holy Qur'an for the Ivorian authorities in charge of managing religious affairs for distribution in mosques, and 10,000 copies of the Holy Qur'an to the Gabonese authorities in charge of managing religious affairs for distribution in mosques [6].

Regarding North Africa, Libya and Tunisia also joined the list of these countries, which expressed their firm desire to benefit from the Moroccan experience in the field of managing religious affairs. In this context, dozens of Libyan and Tunisian Imams continue to train in Morocco at the hands of experts Moroccans in this field. In addition, 100 imams were received from France to benefit from free and special training in Morocco, which last two full years [4]. This moderate religious policy that made some countries to commend the Moroccan experience, such as the United States of America [2]. As a result of the new transformations that African countries have experienced, Morocco's strategy towards these countries has evolved according to a vision that is channeled through religious policy based on a number of stakes, and taking into account urgent challenges.

Milestones of the New Strategy of Moroccan Religious Policy towards Africa. Morocco has moved from the stage of reforming religious field in order to export the values of moderation, a response based on bilateral agreement to the stage of institutionalizing this work and responding academically through the establishment of the Institute for the Training of Imams, *Morchidines* and *Morchidates* (these are two Arabic words meaning the ones who guide to the right path of Islam), and the transition from academic and scientific training to the stage of organizing and gathering African scholars and imams within this institution.

The Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, *Morchidins* and *Morchidates*. The Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams was created under the Decree No. 103.114 issued on Rajab 20, 1435 (May 20, 2014) and was inaugurated by the Moroccan king on March 27, 2015, investing in his constitutional powers stipulated it in Chapter 41 of the constitution, by emphasizing its mission within the framework of the implementation of the national strategy to preserve religious identity and patriotism, and consolidating the values of Islam imbued with the values of moderation, tolerance and

openness. This is a multidimensional strategy that is based on three pillars: the institutional pillar, effective mentoring, sound Islamic education and modern scientific training constantly renewed.

The institute is keen on allowing various countries to benefit from the Moroccan experience in the field of training Moroccan imams. Hence Imams from Arab, African and European countries will be able to study the Maliki school of thought and the legal and ethical teachings by renouncing all kinds of exaggeration, as well as developing their performance and advancing their level of science and knowledge, and important budget and investments have been allocated to them. Foreign students are accepted depending on their countries and receive their training according to a program that is being prepared in coordination with their countries, and includes basic components, including the basics of Sharia sciences, languages, some necessary human sciences, and the history of the original country of the imam and his current institutions, and the applications in the imam and guidance, provided that the training and its background period are taken into consideration.

The law regulating the training period, in its second article, has set a twelve-month period, divided into two semesters, each lasts six months, provided that the basic training is taught in the form of theoretical lessons and applied training, and aims to empower students' familiarity with religious sciences, linguistics and humanities. Also, the students are trained to acquire preaching skill, the art of public speaking, and communication techniques. Some observers consider that two-year training program is not sufficient while others say that it is a long period and the nature of the training must be reconsidered.

Article 4 of the *Dahir* (the king's decree) detailed the functions of the institute exclusively, and emphasized that, in addition to training foreign imams; there is the possibility of establishing partnerships and cooperating with national institutions and foreign countries of common interest. In this regard, it can be said that the institute that came in response to the requests to train imams and preachers from African countries such as Tunisia, Mali, Guinea Conakry, and Ivory Coast , as well as requests from other European countries. Therefore, the institute is a mechanism for establishing a true partnership with our brotherly African countries.

The Mohammed VI Foundation of African Ulemas. The Kingdom of Morocco was not satisfied with establishing an institute for the training of imams and scholars. Rather, it sought to organize them within the Mohammed VI Foundation of African *Ulemas*, established by *Dahir* No. 75.15.1 issued on 7 Ramadan 1436 (June 24, 2015). Its preamble emphasizes the importance of religious and historical ties and culture that unites Morocco with Africa as an integral part of it, and based on the will of the Kingdom of Morocco and its quest to unify the efforts of for Moroccan scholars and the scholars of the rest of the African countries, serve the true Islamic faith, whether by introducing and spreading its tolerant values, or Encouraging research and studies in the field of Islamic thought and culture by adopting a set of mechanisms such as establishing centers and religious institutions, or to engage in preserving the unity of the Islamic religion and repelling extremist and ideological ideas, also, the center widens opportunities for the exchange of views among the scholars of the continent by linking up and establishing cooperative relations with civic associations, or developing trainees' scientific and cognitive perceptions, and so on. Hence, the foundation is a mechanism that ensures the protection of

the Islamic faith and spiritual unity of the African peoples from all conflicts, misleading ideas that harm the sanctity of Islam.

On the legal level, the Mohammed VI Foundation of African *Ulamas*, which was announced by a press release in Casablanca on 26 of Ramadan 1436 corresponding to 13 July 2015, is an institution under the aegis of the King of Morocco that seeks no profits at all. It enjoys financial independence and it made for public benefit. This institution has the right to establish branches in African countries, by virtue of an honorary decree, with full respect for the laws and regulations in place in these countries, in accordance with Article 2 of the same *Dahir*. It should be understood from This realization is that the branch of the institution in a country cannot be a substitute for any official or civil national or local authority, but rather respects Sovereignty of each of those countries. Chapter Three of the *Dahir* regulates the issue of granting or withdrawing membership from the institution, whose membership is required to be granted to personalities known for their scientific achievements and their knowledge in the field of Islamic sciences, holding Moroccan nationality, or the nationality of an African country which assumes a commitment to striving to achieve the goals of the institution, as well as respecting its principles that the institution seeks to consolidate. The *Dahir* also provides for the administrative organization of the work of the institution, which consists of several organs, the most important of which are the Supreme Council, the Bureau Executive Director, Managing Director, in addition to permanent committees that work on implementing the Foundation's goals. With regard to its financial organization, the institution's budget (according to Article 26) includes incomes based mainly on the state's contribution.

In order to facilitate the work and functioning of the institution, the Ministry of *Awqaf* and Islamic Affairs places at its disposal the necessary material and human means in order to start carrying out its tasks under the direct supervision of the government. We note, in this regard, that the African *Ulamas'* Foundation came as a result of coordination and consultation with a group of scholars. In this regard, a preparatory meeting was held in Rabat on the 1st of June 2015, and was attended by scholars from nineteen African countries [6] . The meeting discussed the goal behind setting up the institution, its objectives and its organizational structure, in a manner consistent with the proposals of scholars. The *Dahir* ensured the participation of women in the meetings so as to encourage women by giving them the status they deserve.

In sum, the strategy adopted by the Kingdom of Morocco is considered a cornerstone in its religious diplomacy, which is based on the fact that any diplomatic strategy or policy aims to achieve certain interests, the question remains about the political and economic benefits of this strategy adopted by the Moroccan. In the next section, we will try to illustrate the nature of the challenges that prevent this diplomacy from achieving its ultimate goals?

Religious diplomacy in Africa between facing dangers and Reaping Benefits. The Moroccan religious diplomacy towards Africa faces a number of difficulties that prevent the achievement of its strategic objectives. Indeed, past and present challenges boil down to the following areas: First, confronting extremist movements and terrorism, which witnessed an escalation in Africa, especially after the Arab Spring. Second, opposing the spread of Shiism in Africa, which is supported ideologically and materially by external

forces, without neglecting the fierce and historical competition over Sufi *Zawiyas*, especially the Tijaniya sufi order from Algeria. *Zawiya* is an institution associated with Sufis in the Islamic World..

Moroccan Religious Policy in the Face of Christian Missionary Movements in Africa. Sufi orders played a historical role in confronting the Christian missionary movements that flooded the African continent. The missionary movements adopted a strategy that focuses on working through charitable organizations all over Africa. Despite Africa's Islamic charitable presence, especially from the Gulf countries, such as: The Islamic Forum, the Muslim World League, and the Committee of African Muslims, yet most of these associations have been closed due to some obstacles, namely the suspicion of spreading terrorism.

The missionary movements, mainly from Europe, rely in their strategy on scholarships, opening educational institutions while ensuring the education of languages. "The goal is to give a clear presentation of the Gospel", Tyler, a member of an Ohio Baptist church who set up Project North Africa in Morocco, told Reuters. Such movements take advantage of the weakness of Islamic education in Islamic schools, as well as the lack of basic training of African preachers and imams; also, their weak financial capabilities. Therefore, it can be said that Morocco is exerting huge efforts in order to curb such movements both domestically and elsewhere in Africa.

The security concern and the fight against terrorism. The African continent has witnessed a dangerous growth of terrorist religious organizations, such as the presence of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in the region. and its branches such as the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa and *Boko Haram*, or groups close to it such as *Ansar al-Din* in southern Libya. These organizations have become a real threat. In sub-Saharan Africa, the jihadist movements have been mushrooming especially after the Arab Spring. These terrorist organizations have exploited the weakness and poverty of African countries and their political instability resulting from decades of civil wars and conflicts.

Morocco, as a leader of terrorism fighting, has been involved in the war on terrorism and the struggle to achieve development, peace and security since the nineties. This is done by supporting militarily brotherly nations as well as fully engaging in the international projects on the war against terrorism on the African continent, under the aegis of the UN. To exemplify, Morocco has at least 1500 soldiers serving in countries such as DR Congo, Central African Republic and elsewhere. Further, Morocco joined forces since the inception of the American initiative for the Sahel and Sahara in 2002 with the aim of combating terrorism, which includes the chiefs of staff in: Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal, Nigeria, Mali, Niger and Chad, the initiative aims at supporting cooperation between these countries in the field of combating terrorism [8].

This security concern and maintaining security and stability has become a constitutional principle and one of the cornerstones of the Moroccan foreign policy. This is through the Moroccan Constitution of 2011 in its preamble within the constants and values on which the Kingdom of Morocco is based. Indeed, the Moroccan 2011 constitution as well as a number of royal letters including the letter he addressed to The Franco-African Summit on Peace and Security affirmed that Morocco "takes it upon himself to protect Sunni Islam, which calls for moderation, tolerance and openness, which the peoples of the

region have embraced throughout their history, relying on spiritual ties, the long-established relationship that links Morocco with countries of the Sahel region and the institution of the Emirate of the Faithful, in addition to Morocco's successful experience in the field of reforming the religious field". His Majesty King Mohammed VI sent a lofty message to the participants in the work of the Franco-African summit on peace and security that opened on Friday 06 December 2013 in Paris.

The Moroccan-Algerian Competition in the Field of Zawaya orders, especially the Tijaniya Order. Through their use of religion, *Sufi* orders were able to communicate and maintain the social and human fabric as well as political relations between Morocco and Africa. In this respect, Morocco has always emphasized that religious and spiritual bond among a number of African countries. As this religious method of Zawaya was accepted by Africans, it helped Morocco penetrate to Southern and Western part of Africa through zawaya orders and their mystical teachings.

Among the most important Sufi orders that trace their origins back to North Africa are the *Muridiyya*, *Qadiriyyah*, and the *Tijaniyyah* order. The latter, in particular, which played a historical role in facing a set of religious and security challenges that the African continent has experienced for a long time. Its sheikhs, especially from Senegal, recognize the historical ties that bind them to Morocco, which can be said to be the subject of competition and even an on-going conflict between Morocco and Algeria, after the latter claimed that it had some legitimacy in *Tijaniya* order [6].

For example, immediately after Morocco organized the Tijani Forum in Fez, and the World Forum Sidi Chiker was organized in 2009, Algeria, in response to this, organized another international forum for Tijanis in early November 2009, where it called for it. Delegations from the Tijanis visited the village of "Ain Madi" in the city of Laghouat, as it is the birthplace of the founder of the order, Ahmed Al-Tijani. At the time, the Algerian Ministry of Religious Affairs issued a statement saying, "The presence of a delegation of this kind and this size." By visiting Algeria, he confirms once again that the order was and still is of Algerian origin, and that no religious, cultural or scientific activity can be done to change this historical fact" [7].

This was followed by a number of moves, this means that religious competition is just part of political competition between arch-rivals Morocco and Algeria. Indeed, oil and gas wealth have enabled Algeria to play an important role in Africa, and to establish a highly active diplomatic network within Africa with the aim of gaining new supporters for Polisario Front. This was done by pushing many African countries to recognize the "Sahrawi Republic" by promoting the right of the "Sahrawi people" to self-determination.

The Growing Spread of Shiism in Africa And The Dangers Of Sectarianism. The growing presence of Iran in Africa has alarmed many countries of the dangers of the Shiite penetration within African societies. Iran and the Shiite forces associated with it were able to establish relations with some local Islamic institutions and charitable organizations. Two factors helped Shiism growth in Africa. First, the fame enjoyed by some of Arab Shiites parties, especially Hezbollah in Lebanon, during the past two decades because of their positions in resisting Israel's occupation. Second, Iran's policy of divide and rule especially when it comes to the traditional hostility between Sufi orders and some local

schools of jurisprudence on the one hand, and Salafi movements and Wahhabi origins on the other hand [10].

The Iranian regime has concentrated its diplomatic presence in at least more than 30 African countries - not to mention that forty countries of the continent participated in the Africa-Iran Summit in Tehran in April 2010. We mention, in particular, Nigeria and Guinea¹⁷ Conakry where a large number of its population adopt the Shi'ite sect. The spread of Shiism boils down to several methods including the provision of academic grants for African students to study religious sciences in Iranian universities. Also, providing charitable work and humanitarian aid to African countries. To exemplify, there are many organs affiliated with Lebanese Hezbollah in the African continent who work for the benefit of Tehran. Shiites have many centers in Guinea, including the Association of Ahl al-Bayt, which has the Thaqalain School, the Zahra Center, and the Muhammad Ramadan School in the capital, Conakry. The Hamad Allah Center includes a religious seminary, the Imam Fijekdu School, the Fatima Al-Zahraa School in Beta, and the Ahl al-Bayt School in Calbi. The number of students 600 students who study in these schools and centers, in addition to dozens of students who study outside Guinea, especially in Iran and Lebanon.

Economic activity constitutes the most important entry point from which Iran penetrated Africa. Indeed, under the banner of human and economic development, Iran sought to disseminate its ideology within African countries. This activity was represented in many fields of cooperation; In this regard, some data indicate that the Lebanese Shiite community owns about 60% of the vital economic sectors in Ivory Coast and 80% of companies that collect and export coffee and cocoa overseas. Further, some studies estimate that Lebanese community's presence is about 80% in the diamond trade in the country Sierra Leone.

On the other hand, Iran was able to strengthen its religious relations with many African religious bodies, employing traditional hostility Among the Sufi groups in some African countries, and between some schools of jurisprudence with Wahhabi authority. It is noticed recently that Saudi Arabia also moved towards the African continent, represented in receiving some of the presidents of this continent who have connections and relations with Iran, such as the presidents of Sudan, Senegal, and Mauritania, in Riyadh, are extremely warm. This can be interpreted as a move by Saudi Arabia to curb the Iranian expansion in Africa as well as Riyadh's quest to restore its strategic footprints that it used to occupy in the past years, due to Saudi preoccupation with regional issues at the expense of its interests in Africa.

Where they established global and professional institutions, such as a university and hospital in Ghana, and Fodya schools for youngsters (in relation to Sheikh Othman Fodi), which are similar to In Khalawi, he gave in it their beliefs, and they included some subjects such as jurisprudence and the Qur'an, and Husseinias in Nigeria and Tanzania, and Al Ghadeer Center in Ivory Coast. What some journalist writers Participation in countries' events and occasions, exploiting the media to exonerate themselves, championing their causes, and adopting to write about their cases. For more details see "Challenges Facing Africa".

After reviewing the foundations of the Moroccan religious diplomacy strategy in Africa, as well as the means and mechanisms it adopts to achieve its goals, we address, in

the following section, the aspect related to the extent of interaction with Moroccan religious policy, by discussing the political gains of these relations, especially when it comes to the Moroccan Sahara issue, as well as security and economic gains that fall within the framework of bilateral cooperation, South-South.

Political Benefits of Religious Diplomacy at the Level of Support for the National Cause. The Sahara issue has always been the cornerstone of the Moroccan diplomacy. Hence, garnering support to the cause is of paramount importance. In this respect, investing in religious relations is an important basis for achieving this goal. Historically, Sufi orders, which find their roots in Africa, have always been loyal to Morocco. In other words, these sufi orders have constituted a strong lobby in favor of Morocco's major political issues, especially in the Moroccan Sahara. During the seventies and eighties of the last century, Algeria benefited from its oil and gas to buy support for Polisario (they are a guerilla group who are backed by Algeria and claim independence of the Sahara from Morocco) within the African Union. However, Sufi groups exerted pressure on their governments to review their position and support Morocco. One of the results of this vital role played by Sufi orders was that a group of African countries withdrew their recognition of the fictitious republic; in exchange Morocco supported these countries in different domains such as security, military and economy. Therefore, The Kingdom's historical decision to return to the African Union in 2017 is only an important step towards strengthening and consolidating Moroccan-African ties in several fields.

Economic Benefits of Religious Diplomacy. Morocco's relationship with African countries has made great strides and has become stronger than before, within the framework of bilateral cooperation, also called South-South cooperation, whose formula is based on the search for new economic opportunities by focusing on overall development approach [1]. This is done with an intention to benefit both parties within the framework of equity in gain and loss".

In this respect, since King Mohammed VI announced at the Cairo Summit in 2000 the cancellation of Morocco's debts to the least developed African countries. Also, Morocco removed trade barriers on all products coming from these countries. Hence, Morocco began to reap the fruits of its South-South policy.

This step was followed by many royal visits in Africa, especially to the Eastern hemisphere of the continent where Morocco had had less economic ties. In this respect, the king, who was accompanied by several ministers, in addition to a number of businessmen, both from the public or private sectors, succeeded in his endeavor to make the visits a success. In this respect, royal visits to Tanzania, Zambia, Gabon, Ethiopia and others have been crowned by striking many deals with these nations in different areas. These visits have added a new dimension to the strategic vision of Morocco in Africa, and have provided promising opportunities for partnership, and expanded the scope of Moroccan businesspeople in various sectors.

However, this development of the Moroccan-African bilateral relations is still in dire need for further development. Thus, there is a need for reconsidering Morocco's approach that is limited to Francophone countries. Concerning the structure of commercial exchange, it remains traditional and does not live up to the required level especially when compared with a number of non-African countries. Hence, an overhaul of the whole

strategy is needed in the near future so as to reap the fruits and to be able to compete with other nascent powers such as Turkey, UAE, and others.

4. Conclusion

This article concludes that religious diplomacy has recently become a cornerstone for countries to garner more support for its political and economic ambitions. Indeed, the fundamental role that religion plays today in shaping religious diplomacy cannot be ignored. The Moroccan religious policy has been praised by many countries and international organizations because it prioritizes coordination, integration in facing myriad challenges, especially security ones.

Despite all the gains Morocco has obtained, religious diplomacy is still not yet developed and supported, especially in light of its weakness and absence from the international arena in the last decades. Hence, forces must be joined in order to make from religious diplomacy the spearhead that guides Morocco's ambitions of being a real powerhouse on the African continent.

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