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# JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL & PROSPECTIVE STUDIES

*Semi-annual, Peer-reviewed Journal*

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## Editorial

# Editorial Introduction (Inaugural Issue)

As we present to you the inaugural issue of the *Journal of International and Prospective Studies* (JIPS), it is with a deep sense of responsibility and anticipation that we open a new chapter in the exploration of regional and global issues. This journal seeks to establish itself as a crucial forum for the exchange of ideas, providing a platform where international relations, regional dynamics, and interdisciplinary approaches converge to offer fresh insights into the most pressing challenges of our time.

The launch of JIPS comes at a pivotal moment in the dynamics of international relations. We are witnessing rapid transformations driven by geopolitical shifts, technological advancements, and environmental crises, all of which are reshaping the contours of global governance, security, and diplomacy. These developments, compounded by the increasingly multipolar world order, demand critical reflection and analysis from scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike. The need for a publication that promotes innovative and rigorous research on these complexities has never been greater.

## Aims and scope: Promoting interdisciplinary dialogue

JIPS is committed to expanding the exploration and understanding of international relations through dialogue across disciplinary boundaries and regions. The journal welcomes contributions from a wide range of fields, including, *inter alia*, international relations, political science, security studies, diplomacy, environmental studies, economics, sociology, history, cultural studies, law, and philosophy. In doing so, JIPS aims to challenge the conventional silos that often limit the scope of international studies, offering instead a comprehensive lens through which to examine global issues and phenomena.

The present inaugural issue exemplifies this editorial mission. The contributions featured here explore diverse topics, bringing together eleven contributions across three sections—*Articles*, *Policy Perspectives*, and *Book Reviews*—each offering distinct yet interconnected insights into contemporary international and regional dynamics.

The *Articles* section opens with Mohamed El Bouchikhi's historical overview of Morocco–Korea diplomatic relations, followed by Omar El Hammoud's discourse analysis of Macron's rhetoric on "Islamic separatism." Samira Benboubker explores Morocco's alignment of gender legislation with international norms, while Imane Ezzehouany analyses Morocco's strategic position within China's Belt and Road Initiative. Azeddine Hannoun closes the section with a conceptual study of foreign policy realism in relation to the Sahara question.

In the *Policy Perspectives* section, Alberto Maresca proposes a "Cuban JCPOA" to counterbalance the US embargo, while Julia Rushchenko addresses resistance to gender reforms through the lens of positive masculinities. María del Pilar Rangel Rojas argues for African-led security solutions in the Sahel, Jaechun Kim discusses crisis management on the Korean Peninsula, and Jamal Ait Laadam assesses the repercussions of US tariffs on Morocco's economic relations with China.

The issue concludes with Moussa Mahamat Djibrine's critical review of *Le Sahel: Tribus, Jihad et Trafics*, shedding light on the complex nexus of tribalism, jihadism, and informal economies in the region.

## Prospective analysis: Anticipating future trends and challenges

In addition to our commitment to examining contemporary issues in international relations, JIPS places a strong emphasis on prospective analysis. This approach enables scholars and practitioners to

anticipate future trends and challenges, providing valuable insights that can inform policy decisions and strategic planning.

Prospective analysis involves not only the exploration of potential scenarios and outcomes but also the critical evaluation of emerging issues that may shape the global landscape. As we move forward, JIPS will prioritise contributions that engage with prospective analysis, urging authors to consider how their research can inform our understanding of potential future developments in international relations. This focus will not only enrich our discourse but also enhance the journal's relevance in a rapidly changing global environment.

### **Closing note**

The qualitative leap of the Moroccan scholarly community depends not only on publishing in high-impact indexed journals, but also on creating Moroccan platforms that adhere to international standards of research and publishing. This inaugural issue reflects this energy and passion driving our community of researchers. It presents new contributions and perspectives that we hope will spark new lines of inquiry and reflection.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to all who made this first issue possible—authors, reviewers, members of the editorial board, and colleagues—for their invaluable contributions.

We warmly invite you to explore this issue and discover the diverse dimensions of research it brings to light. This initiative represents a meaningful step toward building a dynamic and engaged research community.



## Article

# Morocco Korea: Assessing Six Decades of Diplomatic Relations<sup>1</sup>

Mohamed El Bouchikhi   
Hassan I University, Settat, Morocco

**Abstract** – By 2022, Morocco and Korea had inaugurated 60 years of diplomatic relations, established in 1962. These relations can be described as ancestral and were characterized by their constancy and continuity. However, the economic relations are not at the same level of consistency and continuity as the political ones, despite the promising future. The geographical factors, among others, have had always an impact, however, recently, the presence of Korean companies has been increasingly apparent in Morocco revealing the promising opportunities between the two countries. This paper seeks to analyze and assess six decades of bilateral relations between Morocco and Korea, analyze the challenges that hinder improving economic and political relations, and provide opportunities to build strong relations.

**Keywords:** Morocco; Korea; Diplomatic Relations; Economic Opportunities; Challenges.

## Introduction

Both the Kingdom of Morocco and the Republic of Korea (ROK, hereafter Korea) have rich historical and civilizational backgrounds, during which they interacted with their neighbors through wars and trade. After World War II, both Korea and Morocco gained independence from their former colonizers—Japan in 1945 and France in 1956, respectively. In the aftermath of their independence, both countries aligned with the Western capitalist world under American leadership.

Soon after its independence, the divided Korean Peninsula plunged into a devastating civil war that resulted in roughly 4 million casualties and left both the North and South on the brink of collapse, particularly the South. As the North launched its first attack on the South, an international coalition was formed under the UN umbrella, consisting of 16 nations that fought alongside the South. Among the personnel who fought and lost their lives on Korean soil were soldiers from many countries still under European colonization, including Moroccans who fought under the French flag, as Morocco had not yet gained its independence. As the war ended, Korea sought to gain international support for its UN seat and launched an active diplomacy in Africa, which consisted largely of newly independent nations. Morocco was among the first African nations to establish diplomatic relations with Korea in

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July 1962. Consequently, their relationship can be described as ‘ancestral’ compared to Korea’s relations with other Arab and African countries (Saaf, 2022). They established diplomatic ties during the Cold War when both countries were part of the American-led global alliance against Communism. Over the following years, both countries strengthened their political ties, with Morocco supporting Korea’s quest for a UN seat, while Korea backed a UN resolution on the Sahara issue, carefully balancing its relations with both Algeria and Morocco. However, despite the strong political ties, their economic relations have not reached the same level of development.

## Long-standing political relations

Morocco and Korea established formal diplomatic relations in July 1962, making them one of Korea’s longest-standing diplomatic relationships. Morocco was among the first African nations to formalize diplomatic relations with South Korea. Given the global engagement in the anti-Communism war led by the US, Morocco did not join the majority of Arab and African nations in opening a diplomatic mission in Pyongyang. Even during the 1960s and 1970s, when North Korea normalized diplomatic relations with several sub-Saharan African countries (Wertz et al., 2016), North Korea had a greater presence in Africa than the South. For example, in 1974, 11 out of 36 African countries established diplomatic relations with the DPRK, while only 9 recognized the South, and 14 countries had diplomatic relations with both (Park, 1978). While maintaining continuous relations with Seoul, Morocco normalized diplomatic relations with the DPRK in February 1989 (NCNK, 2016). Today, trade between the two nations is nonexistent, and the Moroccan embassy in Beijing manages diplomatic ties with Pyongyang, as there is no Moroccan diplomatic mission in North Korea.

In the aftermath of their independence, both countries focused on state-building and domestic stability. In Seoul, the military regime that resulted from the May 1961 coup d’état sought to gain political legitimacy domestically and secure a UN seat internationally. As a result, General Park aimed to expand Korea’s diplomatic relations by launching an open-door policy towards Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) countries. Meanwhile, Morocco, as a member of the NAM, had no diplomatic relations with the DPRK, which allowed Korea to include Morocco in all its diplomatic campaigns (Saaf, 2022).

Before its independence, Moroccan soldiers fought under the French flag as part of the so-called “*effort de guerre*” in various locations, from Europe to Asia (Maghraoui, 2015), alongside personnel from France’s former colonies, particularly during WWII in Tunisia, Libya, Italy, and even as far as Indochina (Quisefit, 2013). This has always raised the question of Moroccan soldiers’ participation in the Korean War (1950-53), especially given the Arabic names of the fallen soldiers who fought under the French flag. This question was recently answered when the Korean Embassy in Rabat revealed a previously unknown chapter in the shared history between Korea and Morocco. According to the Korean Ambassador to Rabat, 26 Moroccans “fought and sacrificed themselves for the freedom and liberation of the South Korean people” (Chung, 2022).

Recently, two Moroccan soldiers who fought in the Korean War under the French flag were identified. Mohamed Lasri, originally from Taza, fell during the Battle of Hill 1037, which was fought near the small city of Pyongchang. He was among the 30 soldiers who lost their lives in the battle in 1951 (French Ministry of Armed Forces, 2024). Another Moroccan soldier, Julian Djian, a Moroccan Jew from Marrakesh, died during the Battle of Song Kok in 1953, just a few weeks before the signing of the armistice (Korean Embassy in Morocco, 2024).

After the opening of the Moroccan embassy in Seoul in the late 1980s, reciprocal high-level visits increased, reaching 35 visits from Korea to Morocco between 1995 and 2021, and 38 visits from Morocco to Korea between 1991 and 2018. The highest-profile visit from Morocco was that of Prince Moulay Rachid, the King’s brother, in 1991, followed by the visits of Heads of Government Abdelilah Benkirane and Saadeddine El Othmani in 2015 and 2018, respectively. High-level visitors from Korea

included the Prime Minister's visits in 2014 and 2018, respectively (Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

The Korean Deputy Minister for Economic Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs labeled 2018 as the Year of Morocco because it witnessed significant high-level visits from both sides. From the Korean side, a delegation from the National Assembly visited, followed by the Vice Speaker of the National Assembly and Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon. From the Moroccan side, three high-level political figures visited Korea: the Head of the House of Representatives, Habib El Malki; the Head of Government, Saadeddine El Othmani; and the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Mounia Boucetta.

As the Sahara Question has been the cornerstone of Moroccan foreign policy for decades, Korea has consistently supported a peaceful political solution to the conflict over the Sahara under the United Nations, despite its strong relations with Algeria (L'Opinion, 2024). Moreover, Korea welcomed Morocco's return to the African Union in 2017, as well as Morocco's accession to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) following its official request (Saaf, 2022).

Six decades later, their steady and uninterrupted diplomatic relations can be characterized as a strong partnership based on mutual benefits and cooperation. Morocco, as one of Korea's oldest diplomatic partners, has concluded several cooperation agreements with Korea, including the Trade Agreement, the Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement, the Cultural and Scientific Cooperation Agreement, the Convention for the Avoidance of Double Taxation, and the Cooperation Agreement on Tourism, among others.

the long-standing political relations between Korea and Morocco can be divided into two distinct periods. The first period was characterized by Korea's eagerness to gain a UN seat as the representative of Koreans; therefore, its foreign policy was oriented toward this goal. Moreover, their bilateral relations were established and developed during the Cold War, amid the ideological division between the East and West, as both countries ideologically aligned with the same camp. The second period began when Korea became a developed nation, seeking markets, raw materials, and opportunities to export its development model.

## **Unbalanced yet promising economic relations**

Morocco is Korea's 78th largest trade partner in the world and its 3rd largest trade partner in North Africa, behind Egypt and Algeria. Today, economic relations between the two countries are unbalanced in favor of Korea. In 2021, Korean exports to Morocco totaled \$309.62 million, while its imports from Morocco amounted to only \$57.84 million (Trading Economics, 2022). Korea mainly exports automobiles, telecommunication devices, audio-visual equipment, and industrial machinery to Morocco, while Morocco primarily exports mineral commodities such as phosphate, copper, and aluminum (KIEP, 2016). It is worth noting that trade between Morocco and Korea rose from \$140 million in 2000 to \$905 million in 2016, the highest trade level achieved. Despite this positive growth, trade between the two countries still accounted for less than 1.5% of Morocco's total trade and only 0.08% of Korea's total trade (IRES, 2018).

In 2020, Korea's exports to Morocco mainly consisted of coated flat-rolled iron (\$31.1 million, 8.5%), laboratory reagents (\$26.1 million, 7.18%), and cars (\$20.9 million, 5.74%), as shown in Figure 1. Over the past 25 years, Korean exports to Morocco have increased at an annual rate of 7.66%, from \$57.5 million in 1995 to \$364 million in 2020 (OECD World, 2022). Meanwhile, Morocco exported \$149 million worth of goods to Korea. As shown in Figure 2, the main products exported from Morocco to Korea were fish fillets (\$28.4 million, 19%), non-fillet frozen fish (\$15.3 million, 10.2%), and non-knit women's suits (\$15.1 million, 10.1%). Over the past 25 years, Morocco's exports to South Korea have increased at an annualized rate of 9.42%, from \$15.8 million in 1995 to \$149 million in 2020 (OECD World, 2022).

Figure I: Korean Exports to Morocco 2020  
(Total \$364 million)

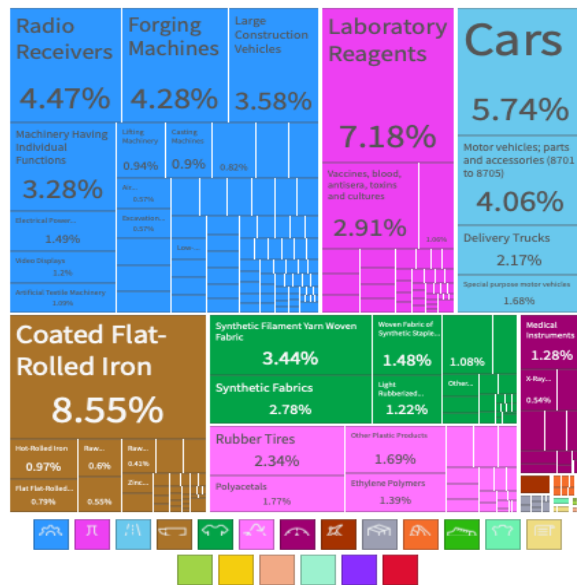
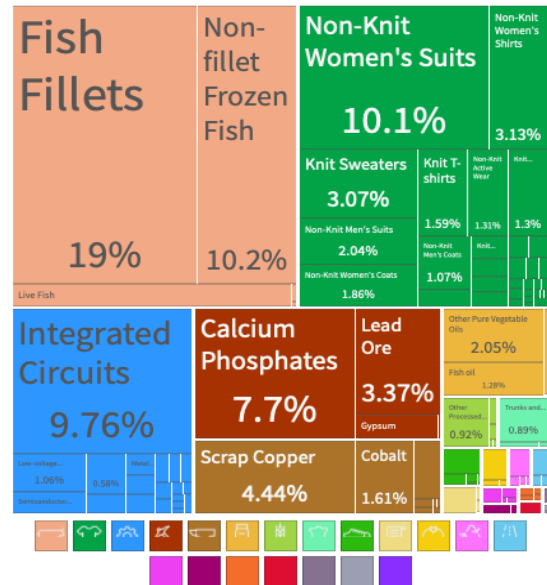


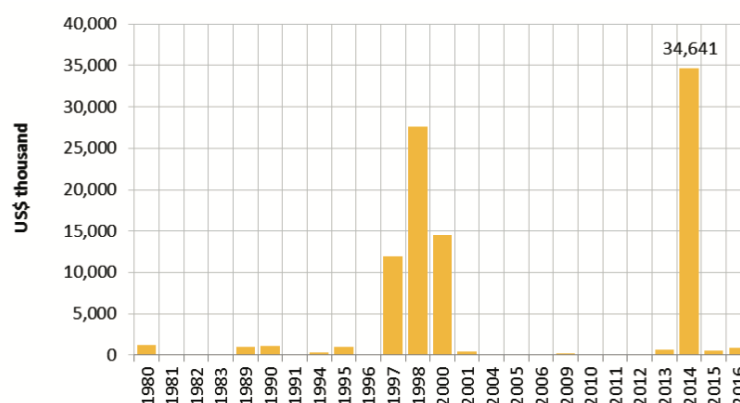
Figure 2: Moroccan Exports to South Korea in 2020 (Total \$149million)



Source: OEC World, 2022.

Contrary to political relations, Korean investments in Morocco have neither been constant nor continuous. As shown in Figure 3, the pattern of Korea's investment in Morocco has been highly uneven, if not sporadic. The late 1990s saw promising Korean investments, marking the beginning of a new era of Korean presence in the Moroccan market, with Daewoo Electronics and Daewoo Automobile entering the market. Unfortunately, the company exited the market due to the Asian Financial Crisis and the disbandment of the group. However, the following decade recorded the lowest levels of investment, starting in 2004, before rising sharply to \$34 million in 2014. The investment then plummeted again to less than \$1 million, reaching \$608,000 in 2015 and \$899,000 in 2016, respectively (KIEP, 2016).

Figure 3: Korea's Investments in Morocco 1980-2016



Source: KIEP, 2016.

The presence of Korean companies in Morocco dates back to the Green March in 1975, when Daewoo equipped and assisted Moroccan marchers in the peaceful decolonization of the Southern

provinces (Chung, 2022). After Daewoo withdrew from the Moroccan market in 1998, the company re-entered 12 years later, signing a \$1.16 billion contract for the Jorf Lasfar coal-fired power plant. In 2013, Daewoo E&C signed a \$1.767 billion contract for the construction of a private development project in Safi, which, to date, remains the largest overseas contract ever signed by Daewoo E&C (Matthew, 2013).

According to the Korean Ambassador to Morocco, Chung Keeyong (2022), Samsung C&T built and handed over the main fertilizer factory in Jorf Lasfer to the Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP). Additionally, other Korean companies have entered the Moroccan market, such as HANDS Corporation, an aluminum wheel manufacturer that opened its first African production site in Tangier in 2020. HANDS Corporation is among the top five global leaders in aluminum alloy wheels, supplying major car manufacturers, including Peugeot-Citroen, Renault, Nissan, and Volkswagen, among others (North Africa Post, 2020).

Despite their long-standing diplomatic relations, trade between Morocco and Korea remains low compared to Sino-Moroccan trade relations. Total trade rose from \$4 billion in 2016 to \$5.3 billion in 2018, but the economic relationship remains unbalanced, with Korean exports surpassing Morocco's imports. However, over the past six decades, the two countries have built mutual trust, which could allow them to engage in various business projects in the foreseeable future.

## **Towards the future: Challenges and opportunities**

Although their bilateral relations are among the oldest in the post-independence era and present promising opportunities, Morocco and Korea face many challenges that could hinder the development of stronger economic and political ties. Various opportunities exist in areas such as the Korean developmental model, triangular north-south-south cooperation, and Morocco's strategic position as a gateway to Africa.

Korea has achieved unprecedented economic development and legendary growth, transforming from one of the poorest countries on the verge of famine in the early 1960s into an economic giant by the 1980s, and later, one of the most advanced countries in the world in the 21st century (Jwa, 2017). Korea has been working to export its model to developing countries. As a result, Morocco has much to learn from the Korean model of industrialization, particularly in industries that Morocco has been prioritizing, such as automotive, shipbuilding, and arms industries, among others, especially after adopting the New Development Model, through which Morocco seeks to achieve its own development.

The geographical position of Morocco, situated between Europe and Africa, presents a great opportunity for both countries. This strategic location makes the kingdom a gateway to both Europe and Africa. It provides Korea with a base for its companies to produce and sell in both continents, as well as other regions, thanks to Morocco's extensive network of free trade agreements. Morocco has signed various free trade agreements, starting with the Free Trade Agreement with the Greater Arab Area (which includes Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and Yemen) in 1997, followed by agreements with the United States in 2005, Turkey in 2003, the Arab Mediterranean Agreement (known as the Agadir Agreement, which includes Tunisia, Jordan, and Egypt) in 2004, the UAE in 2003, and Canada in 2016 (Mouline, 2018).

In addition to its domestic political and social stability following the Arab Spring upheavals, Morocco has positioned itself as a competitive industrial platform over the past two decades. Today, the kingdom has become one of the most attractive investment destinations in Africa (CNN, 2024). Various sectors offer investment opportunities for Korean companies, including automotive and aeronautics, renewable energy, tourism, digital industries, and shipbuilding. Regionally, Moroccan companies have expanded their reach across Africa in vital sectors such as banking, insurance, energy, and telecommunications, among others. In 2021, Moroccan foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa

exceeded \$800 million, making it the second-largest African investor, behind South Africa (Monnier, 2022). Banks, telecommunications, and insurance companies accounted for 88% of the country's FDI in Sub-Saharan Africa (The Economist, 2018). Morocco has acquired expertise in triangular cooperation with both Belgium and Japan, which could provide various opportunities for Korea to export its developmental experience to Sub-Saharan countries in cooperation with Morocco (Hur, 2017), as well as with international organizations such as the FAO (Daher, 2018).

Despite the various opportunities and challenges that might hinder the building of stronger bilateral relations, both Korea and Morocco hold important geo-strategic positions in their respective regions. However, geography plays a crucial role in politics, and the geographical distance between Morocco and Korea, which exceeds 10,000 km, remains an obstacle to developing stronger economic ties, considering that indirect flights take between 15 and 17 hours, along with very long maritime routes. As a result, Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are the closest markets to Korea and Morocco, respectively.

Another major challenge since the establishment of diplomatic relations in the early 1960s has been the absence of any head-of-state summit. Over the past decades, Korean presidents have visited Africa, including neighboring countries of Morocco such as Algeria, Egypt, and other Sub-Saharan African nations; however, Morocco was not included. Similarly, King Mohammed VI visited Korea's neighboring countries—namely Japan in 2005 and China in 2016—but did not visit Korea during these trips.

As mentioned previously, Morocco is Korea's third-largest trade partner in North Africa, following Egypt and Algeria, although both of these countries still host embassies from North Korea (Kharief, 2018). Due to its interest in natural resources and gas from both Egypt and Algeria, as well as from some Sub-Saharan African countries, Korea has prioritized these nations as stronger partners in its foreign policy (Zawya, 2022). For example, in 2021, Korean imports from Algeria totaled \$1.9 billion, with refined petroleum accounting for 53.4% and crude petroleum for 46.1% (OECD World, 2022). Meanwhile, Morocco is focused on building strong, pragmatic relations with China, given its global position as a rising superpower. This interest stems not only from Morocco's aim to benefit from the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) but also from its desire to recalibrate its foreign policy away from the West (Zoubir, 2020).

On August 20th, 2022 speech, the king Mohammed VI sent a clear message to the world: "I therefore expect certain states among Morocco's traditional partners as well as new ones, whose stances concerning the Moroccaness of the Sahara are ambiguous, to clarify their positions and reconsider them in a manner that leaves no room for doubt."

Following the American recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara territory, Morocco launched an assertive foreign policy aimed at gaining the support of its major European partners for its plan to resolve the issue under Moroccan sovereignty. As a result, Spain, Germany, Portugal, and other European countries openly recognized that the Moroccan plan was the most realistic solution to the issue. In contrast, France later fully recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara. These new developments may place some pressure on Moroccan-Korean relations, as Morocco is increasingly viewing its international partnerships through the lens of the Sahara issue. Despite these challenges, Morocco and Korea still have many opportunities to strengthen their political and economic ties and build strategic partnerships.

## Conclusion

Morocco-Korean relations are not only among the oldest diplomatic ties for the ROK, but they have also remained uninterrupted and have steadily improved over the past decades. Recently, it was revealed that Moroccan patriots sacrificed their lives while fighting alongside their Korean comrades in arms. Politically, as allies in the pro-capitalist world under US leadership, both nations have shown reciprocal respect and support. Morocco supported Korea's campaign to gain a UN seat, while Korea

backed a peaceful UN resolution on the Sahara issue (positive neutrality). Economically, their trade exchange has been steadily improving, though it remains unbalanced in favor of Korea. Moreover, the modest presence of Korean companies in the Moroccan market has recently seen a positive change, despite the market being small and more competitive in favor of European companies.

Six decades after the establishment of bilateral relations, Korea has become one of the leading industrial economies, following a spectacular journey from the brink of famine to becoming the twelfth-largest economy in the world by 2022. Meanwhile, over the past two decades, the Kingdom has proven to be a safe haven in a troubled region in the post-Arab Spring era. On the international stage, it signed an FTA with the US in 2004 and was granted advanced status with the EU in 2008, reflecting strong political and economic ties, as well as the Kingdom's growing presence in Sub-Saharan Africa. The achievements of both countries present numerous opportunities. Morocco has much to learn from Korea's industrialization experience at a time when it is launching its own industrialization plan, while offering several cooperation opportunities to Korea, such as serving as a gateway to Africa and providing easier access to EU markets, among others. Over the years, both countries have built mutual trust, which will help them overcome challenges and forge a strategic partnership that will benefit both in the foreseeable future.

## Notes

- I. This paper was presented at the 2022 KAMES Joint Conference themed "Commemorative Academic Conference for the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Ties between Korea and Four Middle Eastern Countries (Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, and Iran", organized by the Korean Association of Middle Eastern Studies, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Korea. The original title was "Sixty Years of the Diplomatic Relations Between Korean and Morocco: Overview & Assessment".

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Mohamed El Bouchikhi is an Assistant Professor of Law, International Relations, Islamic Politics & Culture, Asian Studies, and MENA Politics, with a diversified academic experience in Korea (Sun Moon University), Qatar (Ahmed Bin Mohamed Military College), Oman (Sultan Qaboos University & National Defense College), and Morocco (AUI, Mohammed V University, and Hassan I University).

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## Article

# ‘Islamic Separatism’: A Semantic Macrostructural Analysis of the Discourse of French President Emmanuel Macron

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**Abstract** – In the context of contemporary France, the relationship between the state and the Muslim community has been the subject of intense debates, especially regarding issues related to integration and secularism. Thus, this article explores Macron’s speech titled “Islamic Separatism,” which addresses the current state of Islam and the Muslim community in France. In this speech, Macron outlines the guidelines that must be followed to resolve the crisis that, according to him, Islam is facing, with the goal of creating a new Islam fully compatible with the values of the republic. This speech was broadcast by various media outlets on Friday, October 1, 2020, with an approximate duration of 45 minutes. The study is based on critical discourse analysis, primarily using the sociocognitive method, where we thoroughly analyze the macrostructure of the discourse, which includes the study of themes, ideology, and the social representations of the actors.

**Keywords:** Critical discourse analysis; Islamic separatism; French Republic; ideology; social representation.

## Introduction

On October 2, 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron delivered a speech lasting at least 45 minutes about the fight against what he called “Islamist separatism.” This speech was part of measures aimed at strengthening secularism and combating separatist ideas that, according to him, threaten national unity and republican values.

This speech marked a turning point in the way the French government addresses issues of integration, secularism, and internal security, in response to what Macron refers to as the rise of Islamist separatism, while emphasizing the need to uphold the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity that form the foundation of the Republic. As expected, the French president’s speech provoked diverse reactions. It received support from those who believe France must defend itself against extremist ideologies, and criticism from those who saw it as stigmatizing Islam and Muslims.<sup>1</sup>

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After President Macron's speech, the French Constitutional Council approved, with minor modifications, the "law reinforcing respect for the principles of the Republic" in August 2021. The measures can be summarized as follows:

- Imposing neutrality on organizations collaborating with public services.
- Allowing the government to exercise stricter control over associations, mosques, and Muslim charitable organizations.
- Requiring authorization for homeschooling.
- Limiting freedom of expression online.
- Banning "virginity certificates" and further strengthening the fight against polygamy.

This provision has been described by some as a clear violation of several political, associative, religious, and freedom of expression rights for the Muslim community in France.<sup>2</sup> This article explores, on one hand, Macron's discourse on what he called "Islamic separatism" in France, as well as examines the guidelines proposed by the French President to address this crisis.

In conclusion, the analysis conducted in the article on the thematic hierarchy in Macron's speech and the frequency of topics demonstrates a strong interest on Macron's part to reform Islam in France, with the aim of preserving the Republic and its secular values. The structure of Macron's speech suggests a coherent narrative that links the defense of republican values with the issue of radical Islamism, where the focus on Islamic radicalism and ideologies such as Salafism and political Islam reinforces Macron's approach to security and social cohesion.

This analysis is based on the approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), combining the socio-cognitive perspective of Teun A. van Dijk and the sociological perspective of Theo van Leeuwen. Both approaches help to understand how Macron's discourse on "Islamic separatism" constructs social representations, and how it reinforces power dynamics and regulates the inclusion or exclusion of social actors in his discourse.

## Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis is not simply a unified model, but rather a common perspective on linguistics, semiotics, and discourse analysis. What distinguishes CDA from other related fields of discourse analysis is its "critical" characteristic (Van Dijk, 1993). Fairclough and Wodak (1997) suggest that what is crucial for critical discourse analysts is explicit awareness and their role in society. Following a tradition that rejects the possibility of a "value-free" science, they argue that science, and especially academic discourse, is inherently part of and influenced by the social structure, and is produced in the social interaction that generates the text. Therefore, CDA is a form of analytical research of discourse that considers how abuse of power, domination, and inequality are embedded, reproduced, and resisted in texts and discourses within specific social and political contexts (Van Dijk, 2000).

Additionally, it is important to mention that some of the foundational concepts of CDA were already present in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School before World War II (Agger, 1992; Rasmussen, 1996). However, the current focus of CDA on language and discourse began with "critical linguistics," which primarily emerged in the United Kingdom and Australia in the late 1970s (Mey, 1985).

CDA also has certain counterparts in "critical" developments across various fields of knowledge, including sociolinguistics, psychology, and social sciences, some of which trace back to the early 1970s (Ibáñez & Íñiguez, 1997; Singh, 1996; Thomas, 1993; Turkel, 1996; Wodak, 1996).

The macrostructure of a text consists of a set of global propositions, or macropropositions, which are derived from the meanings of individual sentences (propositions) at the local level. This process is carried out through the use of abstract rules known as macro-rules. These allow for linking and establishing coherence between the propositions of the macrostructure and those of the

microstructure. Their function is to help extract the main theme or issue of the text, transforming complex information into simple, easy-to-understand fragments that can be stored and reproduced. By applying the macro-rules to summarize a set of propositions into a single macroproposition, we identify a common element that unifies them (Van Dijk, 1990).

There are three main macro-rules of semantic reduction:

- i. *Suppression*: This rule eliminates all information that is not relevant to the general understanding of the text.
- ii. *Generalization*: This is a process where a propositional sequence is replaced by a generalization.
- iii. *Construction*: This involves replacing a sequence of propositions that describe the conditions or consequences of an action with a macro proposition that focuses on the entire act or event.

Van Dijk (1990, 1997) uses a triangular framework to explain the macrostructure of a text. At the base of this triangulation are the sentences and specific details; at the intermediate level, the propositions or meanings of those sentences. At the top of the triangle are the topics or macropropositions, which are expressed in the title, subtitle, or the first sentence of the discourse. The hierarchical organization of the macrostructure is based on the discursive value that the speaker assigns to their statement. For example, in Macron's speech of October 2, 2020, titled "Fight Against Islamist Separatism," the president's statements stand out, as he emphasizes from the outset that this is a "war."

Based on the theoretical framework described, as an analysis methodology, we have classified the different macropropositions within the themes in which they appear. Furthermore, we have conducted a count of the number of times each theme appears throughout the entire corpus, ranked from highest to lowest frequency. To do this, we have combined critical discourse analysis with quantitative methodology in order to obtain results and make the analysis easier to understand for the readers. First, the object of study will be defined, focusing on Macron's speech of October 1, 2020, considering its socio-historical and political context. Subsequently, the macrostructure of the text will be analyzed, identifying the main themes, the hierarchy of ideas, and the argumentative coherence.

The analysis will proceed with the examination of social and ideological representations, exploring the discursive constructions of the in-group (the Republic) and the out-group (the Muslim community), as well as the strategies of inclusion, exclusion, and legitimization that shape the narratives of the discourse. At the socio-cognitive level, mental models and collective representations promoted, such as the crisis of Islam and the figure of the Muslim, will be examined, evaluating how these representations legitimize specific political measures.

## Findings and discussion

President Macron's speech establishes a connection between "Islamist separatism" and the crisis currently facing France, linking them to the themes of his discourse. This connection creates a sense of responsibility between the status quo of the Republic and Islamic radicalism on one hand, and the Muslim community on the other. The precise and specific selection of these themes provides coherence and argumentative strength to the president's speeches. Upon analyzing these interventions, it is clear that the dominant theme is the reform of Islam in France. Although Macron addresses various issues, they all converge on one central concern: "France's problem is radical Islamism." This thematic centrality underlies almost the entire speech, with a constant focus on religious radicalism, specifically Islamist ideology. Therefore, there is an extensive religious backdrop with references to ideologies such as Salafism, fundamentalism, radicalism, and political Islam, which form the foundation for several thematic elements of the discourse.

Table 1: Themes and their frequency in Macron's speech

	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>T1</b>	Reforming Islam	22.58%
<b>T2</b>	Defense of the Republic	20%
<b>T3</b>	Radical islamis/Terrorism/Jihad	14.84%
<b>T4</b>	Education	12.26%
<b>T5</b>	Associations	9.03%
<b>T6</b>	Praise of the Republic	8.39%
<b>T7</b>	Social Services	7.1%
<b>T8</b>	History	3.23
<b>T9</b>	Others	2.58

Macron's speech on October 2, 2020, titled Fight Against Islamist Separatism, is structured around nine distinct themes, whose hierarchy reveals both the primacy of certain topics and the speaker's intent. The table displaying the frequency of these themes in the speech reinforces this thematic organization, highlighting the centrality of each one in terms of relevance and emphasis.

The main theme is Reforming Islam (T1), which represents 22.58% of the speech, where Macron proposes adjustments to align the religion with republican values. This emphasis on the reform of Islam underscores its relevance in the discourse and suggests a concern for integrating certain religious principles with the republican ideal. Following in importance is the Defense of the Republic (T2), with 20%, which emphasizes the need to protect republican values that, according to Macron, have been distorted or threatened by radical Islamism.

Radical Islamism, jihadist terrorism (T3) ranks third with 14.84%, highlighting the focus on security issues related to Islamic radicalism. Next, the theme of Education (T4) with 12.26% is presented as an essential tool for promoting civic values and countering separatism.

The themes of Associations (T5), with 9.03%, and Praise of the Republic (T6), with 8.39%, although in smaller proportions, remain relevant as they reflect support for social organizations and the promotion of republican values. Social Services (T7), occupying 7.1%, address practical issues such as transportation and housing, while History (T8), with 3.23%, helps strengthen republican identity. Finally, the category of Others (T9), with 2.58%, includes a variety of secondary topics such as immigration, racism, economy, and culture.

Overall, the analysis of the thematic hierarchy in the speech and the frequency of the themes reveals a strong concern for the reform of Islam and the preservation of the Republic. The structure of this discourse suggests a coherent narrative that articulates the defense of republican values with the issue of radical Islamism, where the focus on Islamic radicalism and ideologies such as Salafism and political Islam reinforces Macron's approach to security and social cohesion.

## Reforming Islam

Macron addresses the need to reform Islam so that it is consistent with the republican values and secularism of the French state. His speech highlights the importance of countering radical Islamism and creating new alternatives for the integration of the Muslim community into French society. According to him, this reform is essential to ensure social cohesion and prevent radicalization, as Islam must align with the norms and values of the French Republic.

Macron's focus on the reform of Islam involves a series of actions and policies aimed at promoting a new "French model" of Islam, which emphasizes the separation of religion and state, as well as respect for human rights and gender equality. This may include measures such as controlling foreign financing of mosques, overseeing the training of imams, and promoting a more moderate and tolerant form of Islam. The theme of "Reforming Islam" stands out as the central axis of Macron's speech, as its constant presence makes it the main focus of the message, with other themes developing around

this central idea. The very name of this theme suggests the need for a profound revision of the religion, as it is perceived as being misaligned with republican values. This approach implies that Islam, as it currently exists in France, is incompatible with social cohesion and, therefore, requires reform. The macropropositions that stand out in this theme are presented and analyzed below:

Table 2: The Macropropositions of the Theme “Reforming Islam”

<b>Mp1</b>	Islam is a religion that is currently in crisis worldwide.
<b>Mp2</b>	We need to build together an enlightened Islam.
<b>Mp3</b>	We need to train a generation of imams.
<b>Mp4</b>	We must create an Islam compatible with the Republic.
<b>Mp5</b>	The French Council of Muslim Worship will be responsible for conducting the training and certification of imams.
<b>Mp6</b>	We need to create an institute of Islamic studies.
<b>Mp7</b>	We need to create our own model of Islam.

The macropropositions in Macron’s speech on the reform of Islam in France reflect a structured and strategic approach in which the president articulates his vision for a “French Islam” aligned with republican values. Through a set of macropropositions, the speech suggests that Islam, in its current state, is perceived as incompatible with the republican model and, therefore, requires specific adjustments.

The deontic and emphatic modalities in these messages are crucial for understanding the urgency and importance of the proposed actions. The insistence on collective obligation and the repetition of calls to action not only convey a sense of necessity but also mobilize the community to participate in a joint effort for the reform and supposed modernization of Islam. These rhetorical strategies can be effective in promoting significant change in the perception and practice of Islam within French society.

By using the deontic modality, the speaker imposes normative changes on how the religion should be practiced in the French context, advocating for clear discursive control and delineating the principles expected of a republican Islam.

- “*We must build together an enlightened Islam*” (Mp2): The use of “we must” implies a collective obligation, meaning it suggests that it is necessary to work together to bring about a change in the interpretation of Islam. This expression of necessity emphasizes the urgency of the reform.
- “*We must create our own model of Islam*” (Mp7): This message also expresses an obligation to build a model that reflects the principles of the Republic, highlighting the importance of self-definition and cultural adaptation.

The emphatic modality refers to the use of expressions that reinforce the importance of an idea or a call to action. In the messages, this can be observed through:

- *Repetition of “we must” and “we have to”*: The repetition of these phrases in several messages acts as an emphasis mechanism, highlighting the urgency and necessity of the proposed actions. This repetitive use reinforces the idea that these actions are not only desirable but essential, if not mandatory, for republican Islam.
- *Construction of “we”*: The use of “we” in phrases like “we must build together” reinforces the idea that the responsibility is shared, which not only emphasizes the need for action but also creates a sense of community and belonging in the pursuit of solutions. At the same time, the speaker’s “I” becomes diluted in the message, which helps to diffuse responsibility.

The use of ambiguous and implicative language allows Macron to highlight the need for reform without directly attacking the Muslim community. Instead, the discourse focuses on Islam as an abstract structure, employing terms such as “fundamentalism” or “radicalism” that create a negative representation of the religion in the collective imagination and, thus, provide a justification for

intervention and reconfiguration. On the other hand, the creation of institutions like the French Council of Muslim Worship and the Institute of Islamic Studies acts as an institutional instrumentalization, enabling direct regulation of religious practice, thereby imposing a structure of power and state supervision over Islam in France.

Finally, Macron's speech relies on a strategy of discursive influence, polarizing the values of the republic against the religious values of Islam, thus creating a hierarchy where the republic occupies a position of superiority. This speech, as a whole, presents a pragmatic and normative approach to addressing Islamism in France, in which the discursive hegemony of the state is used to impose a cultural and religious model that replaces the current one and aligns with republican principles.

## Radical Islamism/Terrorism/Jihad

The theme of radical Islamism, terrorism, and jihad occupies a prominent place in Emmanuel Macron's political discourse, especially in the context of national security and immigration management in France. In his speech, Macron addresses these issues with a combination of political, social, and cultural approaches, reflecting the complexity of the phenomenon and the government's responses.

Firstly, Macron presents radical Islamism as a threat to the stability and security of France, emphasizing the need to combat this extremist ideology both nationally and internationally. This narrative is based on the association of radical Islamism with acts of terrorism and violence, justifying the adoption of stricter security policies and immigration control measures.

Furthermore, Macron articulates his discourse on radical Islamism within the context of integration and national identity, emphasizing the importance of promoting republican values and secularism as a counter to radicalization and religious extremism. A series of macropropositions (Mp) revolve around this theme, emphasizing the danger of the radical Islamist project, which, according to the message, seeks to divert and ultimately control the republic.

Table 3: The macropropositions of the theme of radical Islamism

<b>Mp8</b>	There is a conscious political-religious project that diverts the values of the republic, manifesting in the creation of a counter-society.
<b>Mp9</b>	Radical Islamism is a methodical and separatist organization that seeks to contradict the laws of the Republic.
<b>Mp10</b>	The goal of radical Islamism is to take control of the Republic.
<b>Mp11</b>	We must not forget the attacks of January 2015.

The macropropositions presented in Macron's speech on radical Islamism reflect an ideological and persuasive framework, centered around constructing a polarized narrative between the Republic and radical Islamism, which is presented as a threat to republican values and principles. The speech employs a strategy of othering, positioning radical Islamism as an "enemy" of French society and defining a conflict of identities between the "counter-society" of Islam and the French Republic. The selected terminology—such as "political-religious project," "counter-society," and "methodical and separatist organization"—helps create a perception of a meticulous and organized threat, which justifies, from the speaker's perspective, the implementation of control and security policies.

Macron appeals to previous collective experiences, such as the Charlie Hebdo attacks, evoking a mental model of vulnerability and danger in the French collective memory. This reference reactivates a sense of national victimization that supports the dichotomy between "us" (the Republic, republican values) and "them" (radical Islamism, portrayed as the aggressor). The macro proposition about freedom of expression and the right to blasphemy in relation to radical Islamism underscores a cultural and legal incompatibility, reinforcing the legitimacy of the Republic in its fight to preserve its values against a perceived invasive and oppressive threat.

- *Mp8: There is a conscious political-religious project that diverts the values of the republic, manifesting in the creation of a counter-society.*

Here, there is clear evidence of a careful selection of terms and the construction of a persuasive narrative by the speaker, aimed at influencing the audience towards a specific perception of the political-religious project presented. According to the statement, it is a conscious political-religious project that operates with the deliberate intention of merging political and religious elements.

The term “project” stands out as a crucial starting point, evoking meticulous and premeditated planning behind the proposed actions. This lexical choice suggests an intention of legitimacy and seriousness in the proposal, while also implying the existence of active agents behind its formulation. Moreover, by associating it with a political-religious context, it introduces a specific ideological charge that polarizes the perception of the recipients.

This project is characterized by diverting from the fundamental values established in the constitution of the republic, which serves as the normative and ethical framework for society. The mention of this deviation suggests a deliberate break from the principles and norms enshrined in the constitution, implying a reconfiguration of the core values that govern social coexistence. This action can be interpreted as an attempt to promote an alternative agenda that contradicts the established democratic and republican principles. Furthermore, there is reference to the formation of a “counter society,” which represents an alternative social entity or one in opposition to the dominant society. This concept implies the creation of a distinct social structure with its own norms, values, and identities.

The existence and legitimacy of this “counter society” can be justified through narratives that critique or question the legitimacy and effectiveness of the dominant society, positioning it as a more just or legitimate alternative. In this context, it would be explored how identities are constructed and maintained within this “counter society” and how its relationship with the predominant society is established. The mention of religion, specifically radical Islamic extremism, not only identifies the actors involved in the project but also invokes pre-existing mental models in the audience, such as the dichotomy between religion and the republic. This dichotomy creates a conceptual framework that places the proposed project in direct opposition to the values of society, generating an emotional reaction of rejection in the audience. By using the term “conscious,” the speaker is reaffirming that this is a project that has been pre-planned and premeditated. Thus, the subjects of this project are positioned on the opposite side of the speaker and, consequently, of their audience. They automatically become enemies of the republic, as their goal is the establishment of a counter society.

- *Mp9: Radical Islamism is a methodical and separatist organization that seeks to contravene the laws of the Republic.*

Here is another MP that continues the same line as the previous one, though it provides new information regarding this “other” radical Islam. It does so by using very technical terms in order to offer the most complete possible image, and evidently, the most negative one of them. A methodical organization points to the presence of a group of people who are scheming something against someone, a methodical group that has a pre-thought-out plan to carry out.

This statement directly triggers a specific mental model, as it refers to clandestine organizations, mafias, and criminal networks. In other words, the speaker institutionalizes radical Islam and places it within an organization aimed at fracturing society, disturbing the order, and acting against the laws of the republic, which means acting against us. Macron sees radical Islam as an opportunity to argue and ground his message, giving it logic and coherence, and what interests him most is to highlight their evilness, the others, at the expense of our republic and our goodness. Hence, the representation of Islam is as an active aggressor, confronting the passivity of French society, which in this case is the victim.

- *Mp10: The goal of radical Islamism is to take control of the Republic.*

This MP suggests the presence of a plan and a goal, which reaffirms the previous MPs where the speaker indicates that it is a methodical organization. Here, they continue in the same line of describing radical Islam in terms of a criminal organization, thus insisting on the evil of the other who seeks to subjugate us. It can be inferred from the expression “take control of the republic” that this refers to an act of war. Furthermore, this implies dominating those who believe in the republic and its values, that is, the French people in general. In this way, the current message hides a high degree of polarization, where the “other” is an active aggressor and “we,” the republic, represent the passive victim being attacked. All of this contributes to accentuating the negative image of “them” and favoring the image of “us” as victims.

- *Mp11: One must not forget the attacks of January 2015.*

In line with the previous MPs, this one once again activates another mental model and another negative experience stored in the memory of the French. A direct reference to the terrorist attack carried out by radicals, a series of shootings against terraces of 5 bars and restaurants, and in the Bataclan concert hall. From this point, the president’s discourse regarding Islam in France takes on an increasingly aggressive tone and an offensive character, creating tension and confusion in its recipients.

As we continue with the analysis, we observe how Macron insists that it is the government’s responsibility to ensure that the law is enforced and to control all types of violations. In other words, there is an intent to apply the law of the republic rigorously. In this macro-proposition, the theme reaches its peak, as it is presented as a statement, an undeniable truth, as the result of all the other macro-propositions. What Macron intends is to make it clear that these new attacks are nothing more than new episodes that complement the series of wars that began at the end of the 11th century. Specifically, the discourse reminds us of the attacks, so that radical Islamism plays the role of the active agent. Macron discursively brings up past attacks, thus, in some way, reactivating a specific mental model—the presence of Islamic terrorism.

In conclusion, Macron’s discourse uses a dialectical approach that frames radical Islamism as the antagonistic “other” to the values of the Republic. The use of polarized language and historical experiences of terrorism reinforces the narrative of national security and justifies policies of secularism and immigration control. The recurrence of pre-existing mental models of conflict and aggression in the audience fosters the acceptance of preventive and confrontational measures against this threat, thereby consolidating the official discourse on radical Islamism as a methodical entity that undermines republican cohesion and justifies the active defense of the principles of French society.

## Defence of the republic

In his attempt to justify the actions that are intended to be taken, along with the search for consensus and acceptance from the listener, Macron exalts the values of the Republic, while simultaneously condemning the so-called “separatist groups.” A discourse forged based on the logic of fear and the blaming of the other.

Table 4: The macropropositions of the theme of the defense of the Republic.

<b>Mp12</b>	We must attack Islamic separatism.
<b>Mp13</b>	We must fight against those who use religion.
<b>Mp14</b>	There is only one way, to isolate the problem, that of radical Islamism.
<b>Mp15</b>	We must reconquer/recover everything that the Republic has allowed to happen and that has led our youth or our citizens to feel attracted to this radical Islam.
<b>Mp16</b>	We will be united in the face of our enemies.

Macron’s speech constructs a narrative in which the “Defense of the Republic” is reaffirmed as a necessary and urgent endeavor. Through the use of persuasive and imposing discursive strategies, the



speaker presents radical Islamism as an active-aggressor agent and positions the Republic and its society in a passive-victim role. The choice of terms such as “Islamic separatism” and the deontic modality (“we must attack/fight”) evokes a binary representation in which republican values are seen as besieged by a radical and threatening “other.” Furthermore, the use of a “we” strengthens collective identity, involving the audience in a “common battle” and denying any dissent.

This mechanism of identity cohesion seeks, in turn, implicit support for the measures proposed by Macron, by associating any form of opposition with a lack of commitment to the Republic. In the last macropropositions, Macron resorts to terms like “reconquest” and “recover,” which evoke a historical imagery that adds emotional weight, establishing a narrative of urgency. Here, the shift is made from persuasion to imposition, as it indirectly nullifies the recipient’s freedom of interpretation, urging them to adopt the speaker’s stance as the only defense of republican values. The idea of “Defense of the Republic” becomes a totalizing moral endeavor, where both the preservation of national identity and obedience to state authority are merged. Through this, Macron seeks not only consensus but submission to a discursive hierarchy that positions loyalty to the Republic as an absolute duty.

- *Mp12: We must attack Islamic separatism.*

The use of “we must” implies a collective and urgent obligation, positioning the act of attacking as the only way to confront a threat explicitly defined as “Islamic separatism.” This construction reinforces the idea of shared responsibility between the speaker and their audience. The term “attack” introduces a direct and aggressive strategy, legitimizing decisive measures and eliminating any possibility of dialogue. Furthermore, the association of separatism with Islamism suggests an ideological framework that links this religion to threats to national cohesion, reinforcing negative and polarizing representations. Islam is portrayed as a discrete active-aggressor agent, while “we” play the role of a passive agent receiving the aggression.

- *Mp13: We must fight against those who use religion.*

Similar to the previous macroproposition, this one identifies and characterizes the enemy, though not explicitly: those who use religion, a deliberately vague phrase, allowing for a flexible interpretation that implicitly points to radical Islamists without directly naming them. In other words, it is understood that it refers to radical Islamists. There is nothing new in the description of the actors, as both are portrayed (as in other parts of the speech) as active-aggressor agents, while implicitly, the Republic appears as the passive patient receiving this aggression. All of this makes the effective meaning of this statement insist on the fight against radicals, who are described as active agents from whom protection is necessary. Within this dialectic, the president and his audience are presented as defenders of the Republic. The use of “we must” establishes an unavoidable need for struggle, presenting the action as a collective imperative. This discursive strategy reinforces the narrative of threat without specifying the limits of the enemy, thus expanding its symbolic reach. Furthermore, there is intense polarization, positioning the audience as defenders of secularism against those who instrumentalize religion for their own purposes.

- *Mp14: There is only one way, to isolate the problem, that of radical Islamism.*

Here, the speaker takes a step beyond persuasion toward an attempt at imposition, denying the audience the freedom of choice regarding a given fact (Breton, 2000: 11). Any possibility of resistance from the recipients is nullified. In this regard, van Dijk (2006) notes that persuasion occurs whenever one attempts to convince the other without exercising domination over them. Seen from this perspective, Macron transcends the realm of persuasion and moves into the domain of imposition (van Dijk 2006).

- *Mp15: We must reconquer/recover everything that the Republic has allowed to happen and that has led our youth or our citizens to feel attracted to this radical Islam.*

Macron continues with the same idea of blaming the other; however, for the first time, he introduces a somewhat sincere statement acknowledging the Republic's involvement in exacerbating the problem of radicalism. The statement becomes ambiguous when addressing the Republic as if it were a person, a subtle and effective tactic to avoid blaming institutions or directly naming individuals as responsible. The use of the political "we" is repeated, even in the case of "we must," which encompasses his entire audience, including the Muslim community, softening the content of the statement. This is further complemented by the use of the possessive determiner "our youth/citizens." The speaker suggests a certain irresponsible abandonment of the youth (our youth), who places their hopes in "us" to preserve and develop the profession. A relationship of custody is established between the government and the citizens.

- *Mp16: We will be united in the face of our enemies.*

It can be said that they are trying to give a sense of strength and hope in order to ensure that their audience firmly supports their ideas, while also attempting to convince others of the validity of their project. These four macropropositions differ in terms of explicit content, but they share the same structure and focus on the same action, which is none other than defending the Republic. However, it can be observed that the speaker combines a series of actions that vary between attacking, fighting, isolating, and reconquering, thus giving some expressive intensity to his message. That is, Macron attempts to set the guidelines that must be followed to "defend the Republic." Another noteworthy fact is that in the first macroproposition, we see how the speaker directly informs his listener/recipient that the action he intends to take is to attack the Islamic separatist project led by radicals whose goal is "a parallel society." In the second, he names and faces it, specifying it further as "radical separatism." Therefore, in the first and second, the enemy is an active subject, occupying the role of aggressor and radical agent.

In conclusion, all these macropropositions, through the use of combined modalities, end up positioning the speaker as an authority. The expected consequences of these macropropositions are that the recipients will support the ideas presented by the President of the Republic.

Throughout the speech, the idea of Defense is closely linked to the idea of the lost Republic; as can be observed, all the macropropositions analyzed establish and reaffirm this relationship between defense and the Republic. Furthermore, the act of defense is amalgamated in all areas, including social and economic ones, among others. In other words, Macron gives it a totalizing sense. On the other hand, the description of defense as a moral endeavor responds to the desire to convince and persuade the recipients.

Table 5: The representation of social actors in Macron's speech (Outgroup).

<b>Social Actor</b>	<b>Van Leeuwan Categories</b>	<b>Description and Justification</b>	<b>Role</b>
<b>Islam</b>	Objectification / Differentiation / Passive agency	Represented as a cultural and religious phenomenon that needs modernization and alignment with democracy, without full autonomy; it is the object of change from the outside.	Active aggressor agent, passive agent in transformation.
<b>Radical Islam</b>	Externalization / Nominalization / Negative Activation	Described as a threat and something 'external' that must be fought. Its presence is objectified as	Active aggressor agent

something dangerous and deviant in relation to republican values.

<b>Islamic separatism</b>	Externalization / Negative Agency / Differentiation	Seen as a 'counterculture' or isolated and negative element, it is a problem to be controlled by positive social agents, suggesting an exclusionary stance	Active aggressor agent
<b>Counterculture</b>	Externalization / Differentiation / Negative Agency	Associated with elements that challenge and threaten the values of the State, it is an 'enemy' agent that must be fought and represents something 'external' and incompatible with republican society.	Active aggressor agent
<b>Muslim community</b>	Individualization / Identification / Inclusion	Represented as a diverse and active group, it is recognized for playing an important role in the modernization of Islam, showing agency and cooperation; it is also a victim of crisis and prejudice.	Active agent victim
<b>Imams</b>	Nominalization / agency Active / Inclusion	They are crucial social agents, responsible for the formation of new generations and for guiding the Muslim community in the direction of republican values.	Active agent intermediary
<b>Religious institutions</b>	Inclusion / Identification / Agency/Active	Considered as mediators, these institutions have a structured and legitimate role in education and in the representation of Islam in an institutionalized and regulated context.	Active agent representative and mediator
<b>Youth/Citizens</b>	Individualization / Passivation / Victimization	Represented as a vulnerable population susceptible to the attraction of radical Islam, youth are seen as a group in need of protection and guidance from external agents.	Active aggressor agent/ passive victim

The table provides a detailed representation of how social actors are constructed and positioned within the discourse on Islam and its variants, according to the categories of analysis based on social representation theory. Through these discursive categories (such as objectification, passive or active agency, externalization, etc.), it is possible to observe how each actor is positioned in an ideological narrative that reflects the power dynamics and exclusion present in social representations.

In general terms, actors associated with Islam, such as Islam itself and Radical Islamism, are described through categories of externalization and negative agency, positioning them as 'others' or threats that must be fought and transformed. This approach reinforces a stance of exclusion and control over these elements, perceived as alien to the republican or democratic society. Islamic Separatism and Counterculture are positioned along similar lines, presenting them as negative phenomena that challenge the values of the State, and, therefore, they are assigned the role of active aggressor."

On the other hand, actors such as the Muslim Community and the Imams are described with a more inclusive approach, recognizing their active roles in the modernization of Islam and their participation in the integration of republican values. However, the Muslim Community is also presented as a victim of crises and prejudice, indicating a duality in its representation: on one hand, it is seen as an active agent contributing positively to society, and on the other, as a victim of stigmas and social conflicts.

Youth/Citizens appear with an ambiguous role, as they are seen both as an active aggressor (in relation to their vulnerability to radical Islam) and as a passive victim in need of protection and guidance. This approach reflects a concern for the fragility of this social group in the face of external influences and their inability to make autonomous decisions.

Finally, Religious Institutions and Imams are presented as key mediators in the formation of a moderate version of Islam aligned with republican values, playing an active role in mediation and guidance.

In conclusion, the table reflects how social representations of Islam and its actors are structured through a discourse that alternates between exclusion and inclusion, positioning certain groups as threats that must be controlled, while others are recognized for their more active role in constructing an Islamic identity that aligns with state norms. This analysis helps to understand how narratives about religion and culture can be used to justify policies of integration, exclusion, and social control.

Table 6: The representation of social actors in Macron's discourse (Ingroup).

<b>Social Actor</b>	<b>Van Classification</b>	<b>Description and Justification</b>	<b>Role</b>
<b>Emissary</b>	Identification / Active Agency / Inclusion	Presented as the defender and guardian of the values of the Republic, he is attributed with the responsibility of safeguarding freedom of expression and conscience against external threats.	Active defending agent/Passive victim
<b>Civil Liberties</b>	Inclusion / Identification / Victimization	Represented as fundamental rights under threat, freedoms (expression, conscience, blasphemy) are pillars that legitimize the secular society and must be protected.	Passive Agent/ Passive victim

<b>French</b>	Identification / Active agency / Collectivization	Represented as a unified nation vulnerable to external threats; it focuses on the protection of republican values and the cohesion of its citizens.	Active agent / Passive agent
<b>Secular society</b>	Inclusion / Identification / Agency/ Active	Represented as a collective defender of the Republic, French society positions itself as a protector against threats; it emphasizes unity and leadership in the face of crisis.	Passive Agent/ Passive victim

The table shows how social actors within the ingroup are represented through discursive categories that reinforce the active defense of republican and secular values against external threats. These categories help construct a narrative in which the unity and protection of society are presented as fundamental.

The Emissor describes themselves through the categories of Identification, Active Agency, and Inclusion, positioning themselves as the main defender of republican values. They are attributed the responsibility of safeguarding fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression and conscience, highlighting their active role in preserving the republican and democratic order against external threats.

Civil Liberties are represented through Inclusion, Identification, and Victimization, positioning them as fundamental rights under threat. By being seen as victims of external forces, civil liberties are presented as essential pillars of secular society that must be protected, thus justifying the need for constant effort in their preservation.

France, as a nation, is represented through the categories of Identification, Active Agency, and Collectivization, highlighting its vulnerability to external threats. It is positioned as a unified nation that must protect republican values and ensure the cohesion of its citizens. The narrative presents France as a collective and active actor in defending these principles.

Finally, Secular Society is represented through Inclusion, Identification, and Active Agency, positioning them as a collective defending republican values against external threats. The unity and leadership of society in the face of crisis are emphasized, presenting them as active protectors of the Republic.

In summary, the actors of the Ingroup are represented as active defenders of republican and secular principles, with a focus on protecting fundamental rights against external threats. The discursive categories of active agency, identification, and inclusion highlight their crucial role in the preservation of society, while the victimization of liberties and the collectivization of the nation underscore the need for unity and joint action in response to perceived crises.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Macron's discourse on "separatist Islam" in France presents a complex thematic construction that articulates the relationship between religion and state, national security, cultural identity, and the rights of minorities. In this context, a narrative is established in which radical Islam is represented as a direct threat to the Republic, evoking a crisis of Islam in France that justifies measures of control over religious practice. Through a series of macro propositions, Macron promotes a "French Islam" aligned with republican values, which involves the regulation of religious discourse and the training of imams, seeking to standardize Islamic education in the country.

The representation of actors in this discourse reflects a dynamic of confrontation, where separatist Islam and radicals are considered an active threat, while the Republic is positioned as a passive victim and defender of its values. This dichotomy creates a block of “We” composed of the government, the French Council of Muslim Worship, and Muslims who accept this vision, in contrast to a block of “Them,” which includes radical Islamists, Wahhabis, and Salafists.

The underlying ideologies in the discourse are diverse and reflect a combination of republican secularism, political liberalism, and counterterrorism concerns that include considerations of national identity and controlled multiculturalism. Macron carefully selects his terms, guided by an ideological system aimed at persuasion and influence. The choice of words such as “radical,” “terrorist,” “struggle,” and “reconquest” underscores an ideological-strategic process that pits two models of life against each other: one negative, characterized by hostility and danger, and another presented as suitable and superior.

Ultimately, Macron’s discourse stands as an attempt to reconfigure the relationship between Islam and the state, justifying interventions that promote a new model of Islam compatible with republican principles, while reinforcing the perception of threat and the need for control.

## Notes

1. The al-Azhar institution, the highest religious authority of Sunni Islam, described the French president’s speech as “racist” and denounced the “accusations” against Islam. Additionally, the mufti of the Sultanate of Oman, Sheikh Ahmad Hamad al-Khalili, called President Macron’s remarks an unprecedented attack on Islam, coming from “a country that prides itself on freedom, democracy, and equality.” Emmanuel Macron’s comments resonated particularly in Turkey, where tensions are very high between the French president and his Turkish counterpart, notably due to their differences in the Eastern Mediterranean. “Who are you to talk about structuring Islam?” reacted Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday.
2. Fatima Khemilat, La loi contre le « séparatisme » : mort et résurrection d’une « justice d’exception », *Modern and Contemporary France*, volume 31, 2023, pp 183-198.

## Disclosure statement

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## Article

# The Integrated Gender Approach: The Normative Convergence of Moroccan Domestic Law with International Law

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**Abstract** – Gender-sensitive normative convergence is a process aimed at transposing international treaties into domestic law in the realm of gender equality or integrating a gender-sensitive approach into national legislation. The Moroccan Constitution of 2011, aligned with European constitutions, explicitly enshrines gender equality in its preamble. Prior to this reform, legislative revisions, such as those of the Family Code and the Nationality Code, initiated a dynamic of harmonization. While both reforms contributed to this dynamic, the Family Code remains central as it directly shapes gender relations within Moroccan society and is currently being revised through a nationwide debate and broad public consultation. However, structural and sociocultural barriers hinder the effective implementation of this normative convergence. The emergence of normative spheres of influence, driven by international organizations or foreign agencies, provides fresh momentum to this process. The Council of Europe and the United States have supported key reforms, particularly in combating violence against women and ensuring equitable access to land for women in ethnic communities. The ongoing reform of the Family Code reflects a commitment by Moroccan institutions to harmonize national law with international commitments, while respecting cultural and institutional specificities.

**Keywords:** Normative convergence; Gender equality; International law; Legislative reforms; Integrated gender approach

## Introduction

Morocco has consistently demonstrated a proactive commitment to ratifying international conventions on human rights. From the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 to the ratification of the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights, as well as Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Kingdom has affirmed its dedication to conventional law. However, this commitment has occasionally been accompanied by reservations, as illustrated by the 1993 ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

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(CEDAW). These reservations, notably concerning the transmission of nationality by mothers and the right of women to initiate divorce, were significant points of contention. The withdrawal of Morocco's main reservations to CEDAW in 2011 marked a pivotal moment in the country's commitment to international human rights standards, coinciding with the adoption of the new Constitution. This reform enshrines the primacy of international law over domestic law, notably reflected in Article 55, which stipulates that ratified treaties prevail over national legislation once published. Article 19 goes further by explicitly guaranteeing the equality of men and women, aligning Morocco's domestic framework with its obligations under CEDAW. The Preamble reinforces this by affirming Morocco's adherence to universally recognized human rights. While the 1996 Constitution did guarantee general equality before the law for all citizens, it did not explicitly enshrine gender equality as a fundamental constitutional principle. The 2011 constitutional reform therefore represents a significant normative shift, laying the groundwork for a gradual harmonization of domestic law with international standards, particularly in the field of gender equality. This shift laid the foundations for a gradual normative convergence.

The concept of normative convergence, understood as a mechanism for regulatory harmonization, is central to this process. In this paper, 'normative convergence' refers to the gradual alignment of Morocco's domestic legal and regulatory frameworks with external international standards. It implies the progressive harmonization of principles, norms and institutional practices through mechanisms such as soft law, policy learning and selective adaptation (Mouline, 2013). Applied to gender equality, it aims to standardize legislation by integrating a gender-sensitive approach and addressing persistent disparities in rights between men and women. Gendered normative convergence thus entails the transposition of international legal principles into domestic law through the lens of gender equality, requiring significant revisions to discriminatory laws. However, the effective implementation of this mechanism faces structural and sociocultural challenges, necessitating strong political will and institutional support.

Moreover, the partnership between Morocco and the Council of Europe, alongside the advanced status granted by the European Union since 2008, provides strategic frameworks for cooperation to experiment with this normative convergence. These collaborations go beyond legal harmonization, contributing to the creation of normative influence spheres that promote gender equality across various legislative domains, such as combating violence against women and ensuring equitable access to resources within ethnic communities. In this context, gendered normative convergence between Morocco and its European partners has the potential to serve as a model for advancing global gender equality, transcending north-south divides.

This study, therefore, aims to address, in the first part, the current state of Morocco's international commitments on gender equality and to evaluate the extent to which gendered normative convergence between domestic and international law has been initiated. It will also identify the obstacles and resistance impeding this harmonization process. In the second part, the analysis will explore the potential to broaden gendered normative convergence to a global legislative coherence that extends beyond conventions on human rights. This approach would integrate reforms supported by external normative influence spheres. Initiatives led by international organizations or foreign governmental agencies play a crucial role in implementing targeted reforms, particularly regarding combatting violence against women and ensuring equal access to resources within ethnic communities. The ongoing reform of the Family Code serves as a case study to illustrate the scope and impact of these normative influence spheres.

## **The integration of gender equality into domestic law: A structured transposition of international treaties promoting gender equality**

The 2011 Moroccan Constitution, in an effort to align with European constitutions, explicitly enshrines gender equality in its preamble. Article 19 reinforces this commitment by guaranteeing

equal rights for men and women, in line with the international conventions ratified by Morocco, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This legal development represents a foundational step toward gendered normative convergence between Moroccan domestic law and international law.

However, the specific nature of Moroccan law, which is based on a triple legal foundation – Islamic law, customary law, and modern law – complicates the full adoption of international norms on gender equality. This normative plurality creates tensions between the universal principles enshrined in international conventions and the religious and identity-based considerations that remain deeply embedded in Morocco's legal framework. These factors present significant structural obstacles to achieving a genuine and sustainable normative convergence.

### ***The alignment of the Moroccan Constitution with international commitments on gender equality***

The 2011 Moroccan Constitution marks a significant rapprochement with European constitutions, both in structure and content. This constitutional revision, materialized notably through the inclusion in the Preamble of “human rights as they are universally recognized,” illustrates a substantial legal transformation of Moroccan law (Melloni, 2013). This overhaul reflects an explicit desire to integrate international norms into the domestic legal framework, particularly concerning gender equality.

Article 19 of the Constitution constitutes a central pillar of this transformation. It states that

men and women shall enjoy, on an equal footing, the rights and freedoms of a civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental nature, as set out in this Title and in the other provisions of the Constitution, as well as in the international conventions and treaties duly ratified by Morocco, and this, in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution, the constants of the Kingdom, and its laws. The State shall work towards achieving parity between men and women. To this end, an Authority for Parity and the Fight Against All Forms of Discrimination shall be established.

This article integrates an extensive normative framework inspired not only by civil and political rights but also by economic and social rights as outlined in international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenants (1948), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979). By embedding these principles into its constitutional framework, Morocco reaffirms the explicit prohibition of all forms of discrimination based on gender and establishes gender equality as a legal imperative.

The creation of an Authority for Parity and the Fight Against Discrimination further reinforces this approach, demonstrating a clear commitment to promoting women's rights. This mechanism is designed not only to combat inequalities but also to ensure the progressive integration of women into all spheres of Moroccan society, including those traditionally reserved for men.

The Throne Speech of July 30, 2022, delivered by His Majesty King Mohammed VI, marked an important milestone in this dynamic by asserting that “the principle of parity is an objective that the State must strive to achieve” (Le Matin, 2022). This speech not only reiterated Morocco's commitment to gender equality but also emphasized the necessity of operationalizing constitutional institutions concerned with women's and family rights and updating national legislation to ensure the full enjoyment of women's rights. The King insisted that these reforms do not constitute privileges, but rather legitimate rights enshrined in law.

Morocco's approach aligns with what Amy Mazur and Dorothy McBride Stetson define as “state feminism.” This concept, developed in 1995, refers to “the activities of government and administrative institutions officially responsible for promoting women's rights and, more broadly, gender equality.” This notion finds particular resonance in Morocco, where the state, under the King's leadership, has spearheaded progressive reforms, notably in areas previously restricted to men, such as the religious sphere. The example of the *Mourchidates* (women tasked with disseminating religious teachings)

embodies this desire to promote a modernized and inclusive Islam that integrates gender equality values.

On the jurisprudential level, the Constitutional Court has relied on Article 19 to strengthen the principles of equality and parity. Two landmark decisions (Decision No. 817/11 and Decision No. 820/11) have conferred constitutional value on these principles. Decision No. 817/11 addressed the issue of equal opportunities and the prohibition of discrimination, particularly in the context of electoral laws, confirming that the principle of equality of opportunity has binding constitutional status and must guide legislative and administrative action (Constitutional Court of the Kingdom of Morocco, 2011). Decision No. 820/11 focused on gender parity in political representation, interpreting Articles 19 and 30 of the 2011 Constitution, and held that achieving parity is a constitutional objective that requires proactive measures and specific quotas to ensure balanced participation of men and women in elected bodies (Constitutional Court of the Kingdom of Morocco, 2011).

However, the persistence of legal asymmetries in family law (such as the unequal right to initiate repudiation) illustrates how cultural and religious considerations continue to constrain full gender parity. This shows that Morocco's version of state feminism remains a hybrid model, marked by a continuous negotiation between international gender equality standards and local sociocultural specificities. Consequently, gender parity has become a legally binding objective requiring effective and measurable implementation, but its full realization depends on overcoming structural and cultural obstacles through genuine legislative and institutional reforms.

### ***The Primacy of International Law Over Domestic Law: The Impact of International Conventions Enshrining Gender Equality Before the 2011 Constitutional Revision***

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was signed by the Kingdom of Morocco in 1993 with two major reservations: the transmission of nationality by the mother and the right of women to initiate divorce. These reservations reflected the tensions between Morocco's international commitments and the principles of its domestic legal order, which is deeply influenced by religious and customary considerations. However, significant legislative reforms were initiated prior to the 2011 constitutional revision, laying the groundwork for partial normative convergence.

The 2004 reform of the Family Code introduced substantial changes to key aspects of marriage and its dissolution. Repudiation, initially a unilateral act of divorce initiated by the husband, was maintained but subjected to judicial oversight to ensure the wife's right to a defense. This modification rebalanced rights in the dissolution of marriage while preserving its religious foundations.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, additional types of divorce were introduced, including divorce for discord, which allows women to petition a judge to dissolve the marriage within a six-month period. This procedural innovation rendered Morocco's reservation to CEDAW concerning divorce obsolete as early as 2004, thereby strengthening women's legal autonomy in this area.

In 2007, the Nationality Code underwent a significant overhaul. Article 6 of Law No. 62-06 definitely states that "a child born to a Moroccan father or mother is considered Moroccan" (Official Bulletin of Morocco, 2007). This inclusive amendment abolished a major inequality that previously prevented Moroccan women married to foreigners from transmitting their nationality to their children (Tak-Tak, 2017). This reform, which included retroactive application, aimed to eliminate disparities among Moroccan citizens concerning this issue.<sup>2</sup> It constitutes a clear example of normative convergence between Moroccan law and the principles enshrined in international instruments.

While these reforms were significant, they revealed the limits of effective normative convergence, which remains hindered by the weight of traditions and religious influences. Nonetheless, these legislative changes paved the way for subsequent developments, particularly through the 2011 constitutional revision, which explicitly enshrines the primacy of international conventions over domestic law.

The Preamble of the 2011 Constitution asserts that “international conventions duly ratified by Morocco shall prevail over domestic law,” thereby granting these instruments a superior status to ordinary laws. However, this primacy is not absolute. Pursuant to Article 55, international commitments must undergo a prior constitutional review. If a provision is found to conflict with the Constitution, its ratification requires a prior amendment of the constitutional text. This mechanism ensures a coherent articulation between national and international norms while highlighting the political and legal constraints inherent to their integration. These constraints include not only constitutional review but also the enduring references to Morocco’s religious and national identity, which frame the application of international norms. Morocco has committed “to protecting human rights in both their universality and indivisibility” (Francophone Association of Constitutional Courts, 2014). Despite this normative framework, the convergence between Moroccan law and international law, particularly regarding gender equality, remains incomplete.

Yasmine Berriane identifies four priority areas to address these gaps: combating poverty and the economic marginalization of women, reforming legislation to protect them from all forms of violence, strengthening education and literacy initiatives, and increasing their representation in religious and political spheres. These recommendations emphasize that gender equality cannot be fully achieved without a holistic approach that incorporates economic, social, and institutional reforms (Berriane, 2013).

In conclusion, the legislative reforms undertaken before 2011 laid the foundation for normative convergence, but their impact remains limited in the absence of full adherence to the universal principles enshrined in international law. The 2011 Constitution reinforced this process by affirming the primacy of international conventions, but the operationalization of this legal framework depends on sustained political will and appropriate institutional support.

## **Manifestations of normative convergence with international law on gender equality**

The 2011 constitutional reform paved the way for Morocco’s increased adherence to international instruments enshrining gender equality. In 2015, the Kingdom ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>3</sup> This protocol grants the CEDAW Committee the authority to examine communications or petitions submitted by individuals or groups alleging violations of rights guaranteed by the Convention.

Under this framework, Moroccan women facing discrimination have the possibility to submit complaints to the Committee. However, this right is contingent upon the exhaustion of all available domestic remedies. Anonymous complaints or those concerning events that occurred prior to Morocco’s ratification of the protocol remain inadmissible. Additionally, the protocol allows the Committee to conduct field investigations when credible information is provided, indicating serious or repeated violations of the rights outlined in the Convention. This strengthens the international monitoring mechanism.

Aligned with Morocco’s commitments under CEDAW, significant progress has been made in combating violence against women. The adoption of Law No. 103.13 in 2018, which addresses violence against women, introduced specific provisions into the Penal Code. These measures target offenses related to violations of honor, sexual harassment, and abuse committed through social media platforms. Enacted under Section V of the Penal Code, these provisions underscore Morocco’s commitment to protecting women within a societal context influenced by traditional, Muslim, and conservative norms.

Furthermore, the enactment of Law No. 79-14 in 2017 established the Authority for Parity and the Fight Against All Forms of Discrimination, as envisioned in the 2011 Constitution (Morocco, 2017). This institution is designed to play a pivotal role in protecting women from all forms of discrimination. With its mandate as both an observatory and a consultative body, the Authority examines complaints, provides recommendations, and works to align national legislation with

Morocco's international commitments. In line with its mandate, the Authority is empowered to receive and investigate complaints of discrimination stemming from both state and non-state actors. This institution demonstrates a commitment to operationalizing the constitutional principles of gender equality and ensuring their effective implementation.

These normative advancements reflect a growing intent to transpose international instruments into Morocco's domestic legal order. However, despite these efforts, tensions persist between Morocco's international commitments and certain provisions within its domestic legal framework. This dissonance illustrates the challenges inherent in harmonizing legal systems that operate under differing logics. Concrete examples of these contradictions will be analyzed in greater depth in the following section.

### **Obstacles to the normative convergence of conventional law promoting gender equality with domestic law**

According to Professor Omar Bendourou, "international conventions that contradict Islam, which constitutes one of its essential components, have no place in domestic law" (Bendourou, 2014). This position highlights the tension between the primacy of international law and the specificities of the Moroccan legal order, which is deeply rooted in religious and national identity principles. He further asserts that "the ratification and implementation of international conventions can only be envisaged insofar as they respect national identity, which remains ambiguous" (Bendourou, 2011). This statement underscores the challenges posed by the coexistence of Morocco's international commitments and the elusive concept of national identity.

The primacy of international norms over domestic law is thus limited by two fundamental parameters: national identity and religion. However, according to Professor Bendourou, the concept of national identity itself is difficult to define, complicating its use as a criterion for assessing the compatibility of international conventions. These inherent limitations directly affect the effectiveness of constitutional provisions, with Bendourou asserting that the text is "dominated by provisions that render it incomprehensible" (Bendourou, 2011).

This complexity is particularly apparent in Article 19 of the 2011 Constitution, which enshrines the principle of gender equality. According to Bendourou, the normative impact of this article is constrained by the requirement that equality be exercised in accordance with "the provisions of the Constitution, the constants of the Kingdom, and its laws" (Bendourou, 2011). These constants shape the implementation of international gender norms and call for a careful reconciliation between international commitments and national specificities. Bendourou's analysis sheds light on the inherent challenges of transposing international norms into the Moroccan legal framework. This situation reflects the complex interaction between the desire to integrate international commitments and the constraints imposed by national, religious, and cultural considerations.

Bendourou's analysis is fully endorsed here, as it convincingly captures the structural tension that explains the partial and sometimes fragmented nature of Morocco's normative convergence with international gender equality standards.

### **Moroccan Law: A superposition of legal sources**

Moroccan law is based on three foundational sources (Filali Meknassi, 1994):

- **Islamic Law (*Sharia*):** Inspired by the Maliki school of thought, it governs fundamental areas such as family law (marriage, divorce, inheritance) and land law. These provisions are deeply rooted in religious texts, particularly Quranic verses, and hold a sacred dimension within the Moroccan legal order.
- **Customary Law (*Orf*):** This source is derived from local customs, which vary according to tribes and ethnic communities. It continues to play a role in certain domains, particularly in

the rules governing collective land management. However, it has often been criticized for perpetuating glaring inequalities, especially regarding women's inheritance rights, as illustrated by the *Soulaliyates* movement.

- **Modern Law:** Inherited from the French Protectorate, it encompasses general law, such as the Dahir of Obligations and Contracts, judicial organization, the Penal Code, and the Dahir on the civil status of foreigners. The latter, promulgated in 1913, represents one of the earliest codifications of private international law in Morocco. Although still in force, certain provisions of this law are now outdated, particularly regarding conflict-of-law rules in the context of marriage, such as the rule of the spouses' common nationality.

These pluralistic foundations raise a central question: do they constitute obstacles to normative convergence between Moroccan law and international law, particularly concerning gender equality? The modern legal system derived from the Protectorate does not, in itself, represent a major obstacle to normative convergence. However, the slow pace of reforming some of its provisions hampers its effectiveness, especially in addressing the requirements of gender equality. Customary law, by contrast, reflects deep structural inequalities. The exclusion of women from inheritance rights in certain ethnic communities underscores these disparities.

Islamic law, meanwhile, constitutes the primary source of tension with international law. The Moroccan Constitution of 2011 explicitly stipulates that international law cannot prevail in cases of contradiction with religion. In the 2022 Throne Speech, His Majesty King Mohammed VI, in his capacity as Amir Al-Mouminine (Commander of the Faithful), reiterated this primacy by declaring: "I cannot authorize what God has prohibited, nor forbid what the Almighty has authorized, particularly regarding matters governed by explicit Quranic texts." Thus, any normative convergence between Moroccan law and international standards on gender equality must necessarily be considered through the lens of Sharia. The automatic transposition of international norms, based solely on the principle of the primacy of international law, proves ineffective in this context.

As David Melloni aptly notes, "the preamble also introduced a significant reservation to the effectiveness of this new normative hierarchy." This reservation, grounded in the "constants of the Kingdom," reflects a legal and political approach that seeks to balance the integration of international norms with the preservation of Morocco's religious and cultural specificities (Melloni, 2013).

### ***The exception of unconstitutionality in the 2011 Constitution: a tool to reconcile domestic law with conventional norms on gender equality?***

The case of the exception of unconstitutionality, as provided for under Article 113 of the 2011 Moroccan Constitution, represents a significant step toward convergence with European constitutional practices, particularly the model of the *Question Prioritaire de Constitutionnalité* (QPC) in France. This article grants the Constitutional Court the authority to rule, by way of exception, on the constitutionality of a law when it is alleged to infringe upon rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. Beyond this alignment with major constitutional systems, the exception of unconstitutionality also embodies the recommendations of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (Bendourou, 2012).

However, this provision remains inapplicable in the absence of an organic law defining the conditions and modalities for its implementation. Since 2011, the adoption of this organic law has faced repeated delays, reflecting institutional and political resistance to establishing an effective ex-post control mechanism. Rejected for the first time by the Constitutional Court in 2018, a revised version of the organic law, adopted by Parliament in April 2022, was again rejected by the Court in 2023 (MAP Express, 2022). Had it been promulgated, this organic law would have enabled litigants to raise, during a trial, explicit violations of gender equality principles, particularly in the realm of family law. This ex-post control mechanism could have paved the way for challenging several provisions currently applied by Moroccan courts, which are deemed inconsistent with the country's international commitments.

These shortcomings highlight a structural difficulty in ensuring the optimal use of international conventions, particularly in their constitutional role of anchoring gender equality. In this context, it becomes crucial to explore alternatives to the immediate transposition or direct harmonization of international norms. “Normative spheres of influence,” as indirect mechanisms, emerge as a promising avenue for gradually aligning Moroccan law with international standards while respecting the country’s institutional and cultural specificities.

### **Normative spheres of influence in gender equality: from external support to internal advocacy for normative convergence**

This paper adopts the concept of ‘normative spheres of influence’ as an analytical lens to explain how international standards progressively permeate domestic legal systems. These spheres rest on three interrelated dimensions: first, they operate through soft law mechanisms, such as recommendations, action plans or guidelines, rather than binding rules; second, they foster a gradual and flexible normative alignment that adjusts to local contexts and institutional constraints; and third, they rely on mutual assistance, training and capacity-building provided by international organizations and transnational partnerships. Together, these dimensions demonstrate how Morocco’s legal framework can be influenced through indirect, supportive channels that facilitate the harmonization of national law with international gender equality norms.

This conceptual framework can be illustrated through concrete foreign partnerships that translate these spheres of influence into practice. Foreign partnerships play a crucial role in assisting states in achieving normative transitions in key strategic areas. For example, the Council of Europe, through its Neighborhood Partnership, actively supports Morocco in its normative alignment with international human rights standards. Similarly, the United States, through a governmental agency, has provided support for the reform of the *Soulalyates*’ rights within ethnic communities, particularly in relation to land management. These external collaborations go beyond one-off assistance; they contribute to raising awareness among legal professionals and stakeholders, thereby enabling the progressive integration of international norms into national practices.

This approach, focused on the creation of normative spheres of influence, fosters the emergence of new internal demands for gender equality. The ongoing reform of the Family Code exemplifies the impact of these influences on public debates and legislative initiatives. Indeed, numerous institutions, associations, and academics are advocating for the alignment of the Family Code with international treaties ratified by Morocco. This now constant and recurring demand reflects the progressive appropriation of international norms by internal actors.

These dynamics, combining external support and internal pressures, not only accelerate normative convergence but also ensure a contextually sensitive adaptation that respects Morocco’s cultural and institutional specificities. The challenge lies in Morocco’s ability to transform these spheres of influence into structural levers for effective and sustainable reform of its national legal framework.

#### ***The impact of international organizations on normative convergence***

##### *a) The role of the Council of Europe in combating violence against women*

Morocco, although not a member of the Council of Europe, is considered a privileged partner due to its commitment to human rights, the rule of law, and democracy. Since 2012, Neighborhood Partnerships between the Council of Europe and Morocco have established roadmaps in various fields related to human rights.

This collaboration is based on reinforced cooperation and support for normative activities. The Council of Europe provides expertise through the drafting of new legislative texts, the revision of existing legislation, and the establishment of institutions promoting human rights and good governance, grounded in European and international standards (Council of Europe, 2022). This



partnership has focused particularly on combating violence against women, culminating in the drafting of Law No. 103-13. Moreover, the Council of Europe has supported the implementation of this legislation by training legal professionals, raising public awareness, and strengthening the National Commission for the Care of Women Victims of Violence, established in 2019.

The partnership aims to consolidate achievements and ensure the effective implementation of Law 103-13 on combating violence against women by legal and judicial professionals. It is part of a broader strategy to create a normative sphere of influence, which includes strengthening the capacities of legal professionals to apply legislation in line with international and European standards. Furthermore, Morocco's inclusion in the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ) as an observer aims to enhance the functioning and performance of Moroccan judicial services.

The European HELP program has also played a key role in providing human rights training to Moroccan legal professionals, particularly in the areas of combating violence against women.<sup>4</sup> These training sessions, conducted in Arabic, aim to dispel any perception of foreign interference or imposition of Western norms, thereby fostering greater acceptance.

The creation of a European normative sphere of influence in the field of human rights is beginning to take shape. The law on combating violence against women demonstrates a clear intention to align Moroccan law with conventional standards. Combating discrimination against women has become one of the new areas of cooperation prioritized by the Council of Europe.

This influence in Morocco's normative development has yielded significant results through a gradual approach that facilitates adherence to international instruments while taking into account the specificities of Moroccan society. Training legal actors will have an even greater impact by encouraging judges to apply Moroccan law through the lens of international conventions. Moroccan jurisprudence, as a source of law, will progressively reflect these influences in the field of human rights.

The European normative sphere of influence marks a new era of normative convergence between Moroccan law and international law. Modifying national law through influence is less abrupt than normative convergence imposed by the hierarchy of norms through the primacy of international law. Preparing professionals for these new norms involves training in Arabic to dispel any perception of foreign interference or the imposition of Western values. Normative cooperation, supported by reform assistance programs, is expected to produce far more sustainable results. The Council of Europe is not alone in seeking to expand its normative sphere of influence in the field of gender equality. The United States has also intervened in a domain that concentrates structural inequalities: land law.

#### *b) The American sphere of influence in advancing gender equality in land governance*

Since 2004, the United States has operated a development assistance agency called the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which establishes partnerships with countries to reduce poverty by engaging local populations. The Millennium Challenge Account-Morocco (MCA-Morocco), a public institution, was established in September 2016 (Official Bulletin of the Kingdom of Morocco, 2016). A cooperation agreement was signed in 2019 to implement a land governance project in Morocco.

As part of this project, a center will be established to integrate a gender-sensitive approach into the *Melkisation* process of *Soulaliyate* lands for the benefit of rightful claimants.<sup>5</sup> This center will also be responsible for creating a database on women's land rights to promote their access to land as beneficiaries. Under demographic and land pressure, collective lands have undergone profound transformations, adversely affecting the social situation of rightful claimants and the country's natural resources. These changes have been accompanied by social, economic, and legal shifts, rendering customary rules and the discretionary power of *Jmaa* (community) representatives obsolete, particularly in governing the status of women from ethnic communities (*Soulaliyates*).

The *Soulaliyates* are women who have fought for their right to equitable distribution and access to collective lands, challenging discriminatory practices rooted in local customs known as *Orfs*. Historically excluded from the processes of allocation, succession, and exploitation of collective lands

in favor of men as “heads of households,” they have become a symbol of the struggle for gender equality in land governance.

The MCC program supported these women in exercising and defending their land rights while assisting the government in implementing reforms to secure these rights. This influence was pivotal in the emergence of new land rights for women, materialized through Law No. 62.17 on the administrative guardianship of *Soulaliyate* communities and the management of their assets. Article 6 of this law states:

Members of ethnic communities, both men and women, shall enjoy the assets of the community to which they belong, in accordance with the distribution carried out by the delegates’ assembly referred to in Article 9 of this law. This enjoyment entitles them only to the personal and direct exploitation of these assets.<sup>6</sup>

Before this reform, *Soulaliyate* women were supported by associations and the MCC in their legal proceedings before Moroccan courts. Moroccan jurisprudence played a crucial role in establishing the principle of gender equality in access to land. On July 23, 2009, the Ministry of the Interior issued Circular No. 2620, addressed to the Wali of the El Gharb-Charda-Béni Hssen region and the Governor of the Kenitra province, ensuring that women received the same compensation as men during land transactions (Ministry of the Interior, 2009). The impact was significant, allowing nearly 800 women to be registered as rightful claimants eligible for compensation.

The actions of the *Soulaliyates* from the Gharb region led to the extension of this measure to all Moroccan provinces through a circular issued on October 25, 2010. This extension aligned with the Moroccan Constitution and conformed to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1948. Furthermore, a 2012 circular expanded women’s rights by enabling them to benefit from the distribution of agricultural land parcels and to inherit from deceased beneficiaries (Berriane & Rignall, 2017).

The creation of normative spheres of influence goes beyond the strict framework of regulatory transition assistance provided by international organizations or states. Civil society actors also advocate for this normative convergence with international treaties on gender equality.

## **The reform of the family code: An adoption of normative convergence with international treaties by Moroccan society**

### ***The reform of the family code: A call to the Nation for gender equality***

His Majesty King Mohammed VI has, on three occasions, called for the reform of the current Family Code:

- In the Throne Speech of July 30, 2022, the King emphasized: “The Family Code represented a genuine leap forward; however, it is no longer sufficient as it stands. Experience has revealed certain obstacles that prevent the completion of the initiated reform and the achievement of the desired objectives” (Le Matin, 2022).
- A Royal Letter, issued on September 26, 2023, provided High Royal Instructions to establish the institutional and collective framework for the drafting process of the reform project (Le Matin, 2023).
- Finally, during the opening of the parliamentary session on October 13, 2023, the King reiterated this call for reform.

An Instance tasked with revising the Family Code has been mandated to conduct extensive consultations with civil society actors, academic researchers, legal professionals, and associations. These consultations consistently highlight the incompatibilities between the Family Code and the

international conventions ratified by the Kingdom of Morocco, underscoring the need for comprehensive reform.

The Economic, Social, and Environmental Council (ESEC) was consulted by the House of Representatives on November 13, 2023, to provide an opinion on the issue of child marriage and its socio-economic impact on girls. According to the ESEC, any reform must be grounded in “the full harmonization of the legal framework with the Constitution and the international conventions ratified by the Kingdom” (Economic, Social, and Environmental Council, 2023).

### ***Child marriage: A challenge for normative convergence***

Although the 2004 family code prohibits child marriage, exceptional provisions allow for circumvention of this ban. Article 20 of the *Mudawana* grants family judges the discretion to authorize “the marriage of a boy or a girl before reaching the age of matrimonial capacity through a reasoned decision specifying the interest and the grounds justifying the marriage.” However, data collected by the Public Prosecutor’s Office reveals that these exemptions are widely granted by judges, often without conducting thorough social investigations and based solely on a simple medical certificate. These exemptions concern 96% of underage girls, revealing a widespread practice that contravenes gender equality principles and children’s rights.

Furthermore, the persistence of customary marriages conducted without judicial procedures exacerbates these significant violations of children’s rights. In response, the ESEC has called for the inclusion of a provision in the Family Code enshrining “the best interests of the child,” aligned with the principles of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (Economic, Social, and Environmental Council, 2023). This provision should include a clear definition and explicit mechanisms for its implementation to ensure effective application.

### **The standardization of expectations for gender equality: A shared critique of family law provisions contrary to international treaties**

The recommendations of the National Human Rights Council (CNDH), the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council (CESE), as well as numerous human rights associations and political parties, converge on a common objective: achieving equality between men and women across the family sphere. These shared aspirations transcend institutions, partisan divides, and the entities they represent.

These national organizations, now actors within spheres of normative influence, are actively working to promote adherence to international commitments within domestic law. The reform of the Family Code exemplifies this lasting influence, bringing together civil society, political, and institutional actors around the shared demand for gender equality.

The consultations conducted by the Instance in charge of revising the Family Code reveal recurring expectations grounded in gender equality. Among the main demands are:

- The abolition of polygamy, even though the conditions for its practice have been tightened since the adoption of the Family Code in 2004;
- The removal of the prohibition on marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man or between a Muslim man and a woman who does not belong to the People of the Book (Christians or Jews);
- The establishment of equality in guardianship between spouses. Currently, only the father holds guardianship in cases of divorce, while the mother is limited to custodial rights;
- The mitigation of inheritance inequalities through the abolition of the *Taasib* rule (agnatic inheritance) and prioritization of wills. However, the half-share rule for women remains difficult to contest due to its religious foundation.<sup>7</sup>

Can it be said that this growing influence of international law on gender equality might encounter resistance from religion? Professor Nadia Bernoussi emphasizes that the constants of the Nation rest

on “moderate Islam” and “democratic choice.” Moroccan society aspires to reconcile these two references (Medias24, 2024). Ijtihad, as a method of interpreting sacred texts in light of contemporary societal developments, could play a central role. The Higher Council of *Ulemas*, a member of the Instance for the revision, is associated with this approach.<sup>8</sup> The call for Ijtihad does not aim to question the word of God in the Holy Quran but rather to consider an interpretation of the texts that is compatible with the rights enshrined in the Constitution and international treaties, particularly in matters of gender equality.

Nouzha Chekrouni and Abdessalam Saad Jaldi (2024) affirm that:

The new Code must restore the principle of justice advocated by the sacred text and the foundations of the Muslim religion by eliminating inequalities between men and women. The jurisprudential rule stipulates that where there is interest, there is the law of God. This rule, discussed by Imam Al-Shatibi in his book *Al-Muwafaqat*, can inspire our policymakers to enact a new Code in harmony with the requirements of equality and democracy advocated by the Constitution and Morocco’s international commitments. The issue of women should no longer be tied to religion and the sacred. No injustice based on gender can be justified by Islam or the Sacred Text, whose ultimate goal is justice and equality among believers, both men and women.

## Conclusion

The reform of the Family Code represents an unprecedented testing ground for normative convergence with international treaties on gender equality. The publication of the upcoming draft law will reveal the impact of these spheres of influence on the emergence of legislation that eliminates gender inequality.

The reform of the Family Code represents a profoundly Moroccan initiative, the result of a dialogue between modernity and tradition, driven by and for Moroccans. The emergence of normative spheres of influence, whether external or internal, has contributed to uniting demands around gender equality, reflecting a growing consensus among various actors, whether from civil society or institutional frameworks. However, these dynamic faces resistance, particularly from certain conservative groups who view this reform as a threat to the religious and cultural foundations of society (Khetrou, 2024).<sup>9</sup>

This positive influence, aimed at ensuring gender equality, is reversed by some as an attempt to import Western family law principles. Misinformation is particularly prevalent, to the extent that on the issue of inheritance equality, Moroccans hesitate to advocate for a fairer distribution of inheritance for fear of committing a religious offense (Benboubker, 2023).

Despite these tensions, reform advocates rely on strong arguments, emphasizing that the proposed amendments align with Islamic principles, the Constitution, and Morocco’s international commitments. This normative convergence, far from representing a clash between tradition and modernity, offers an opportunity to reinterpret norms in harmony with contemporary social developments.

Ultimately, the realization of this reform provides a unique opportunity for Morocco to position itself as a key player in promoting human rights on the international stage, while ensuring a national appropriation of universal principles. It is hoped that resistance will diminish in favor of a constructive consensus, allowing the Family Code to serve as a symbolic example of reconciling local specificities with international standards.

## Notes

1. In cases of repudiation, the husband must deposit a substantial sum with the court registry. This financial condition aimed to make its application more difficult to execute.

2. The new provisions concerning the acquisition of Moroccan nationality, under this article, by birth to a Moroccan mother, shall apply to all individuals born prior to the publication date of this law.
3. Morocco acceded to the CEDAW in June 1993. The Optional Protocol was unanimously adopted on July 7, 2015, by the House of Representatives. This ratification, enacted through legislation, was published in the Official Bulletin on August 17, 2015.
4. The European Human Rights Training Program for Legal Professionals, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/help/home?desktop=true>
5. *Melkisation* is the process of transforming collective lands into private ownership, enabling the individualization of plots.
6. Morocco. (2023). Law No. 62.17 on the administrative guardianship of *Soulaliyate* communities and the management of their assets.
7. Opinion of the CESE, op. cit., "Women cannot be legal guardians of their children. In practice, the mother has sole custody of the children by default, except in specific cases, while the father is considered the sole legal guardian of the children. This situation contradicts the principles of shared responsibilities between spouses in family matters, particularly regarding children. It also undermines the rights and obligations of divorced parents towards their children when conflicts between separated spouses persist. Moreover, the right to remarry is penalized for women by the loss of child custody, except in exceptional circumstances."
8. *Ijtihad* literally means "effort" or "exertion" in Arabic. It refers to the process of legal decision-making through independent interpretation of the sources of Islamic law.
9. The President of the CNDH responded to the criticisms of former Prime Minister Benkirane, stating that "the proposed amendment was based on Islamic principles, the Constitution of the Kingdom, and the international treaties ratified by Morocco, thereby ensuring its compatibility with the existing legal framework."

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## Article

# Morocco's Assets: A Strategic Hub for China's Belt and Road Initiative

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**Abstract** – Morocco is important in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its political stability and strategic position as a gateway into Africa and Europe are the main motivating factors for the People's Republic of China (PRC). Meanwhile, Morocco capitalizes on China's advanced technological and industrial expertise to bolster its economic development. As China seeks to expand its global influence and Morocco aims to position itself as a regional hub, their bilateral relationship continues to evolve, marked by significant trade agreements, infrastructure projects, and diplomatic initiatives. This article examines political, economic, and cultural relations between Morocco and China, analyzing key developments and strategic interests, particularly within the framework of the BRI.

**Keywords:** Morocco; China; Bilateral cooperation; Strategic partnership; Belt and Road Initiative

## Introduction

Over the last two decades, China has reinvigorated its longstanding ties to African countries, placing the continent at the center of its ambitions to become a global leader. China, the first emerging power in the world without a colonial past in Africa, tried to gradually extend its African policy in several areas through political and ideological considerations in the period between 1950-1970, which was concretized first through the Bandung Conference, before moving on to a stage of seeking confirmation of power through Zhou Enlai's trip to the African continent. Once past this period, it has given itself the means to achieve the major objectives of its return to Africa by setting up its economic and commercial diplomacy focused on natural resources and raw materials by implementing a "going out" policy, positioning itself to achieve the primary objectives of its return to the African continent and secure strategic interests essential for sustaining its economic growth. A policy of development aid, economic cooperation relations, institutional and political instruments have accompanied the Chinese economic mechanism. The launch of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 is the core of this mechanism (Onnis, 2022).

China established official relations with most African countries at the end of the 1970s, but it was not until the 1990s, with increased openness and a strong growth in Chinese exports, that the country

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deepened diplomatic relations with the Maghreb and North Africa due to their strategic position in the region, as they make up the main part of Africa and the Arab World. Geographically, all the Maghreb states are maritime economies strategically located at the intersection of three key regions: The Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean. However, as the United States slowly disengages from the African continent and Europe faces internal challenges, a new actor is quietly wielding greater influence across the region. Beijing's growing footprint in these countries is not limited to trade or infrastructure development but also ports, shipping, financial cooperation, tourism, and manufacturing. This conjuncture receives confirmation through the signing of a strategic partnership between China and Morocco during the official visit of the King Mohammed VI to Pekin on May 2016.

Although direct interactions between China and Morocco were limited in ancient times, a notable early interaction between the two countries was the journey of the medieval Moroccan scholar and explorer Ibn Battuta to China in the 14th century (Madhoun, 2020). The seeds of friendship planted by Ibn Battuta have given Moroccans an infinite imagination of the distant country of the East, and they were very curious and eager to discover the Chinese history of five thousand years of civilization and its brilliant culture (Bouchiba.,2018). The modern era of Chinese Moroccan interaction began in the mid-20th century when Morocco established diplomatic relations with China in 1958 (Jackson, 2024). It was quickly followed by the inauguration of diplomatic representation in Beijing in 1960, which made it the second African and Arab country to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The close partnership between the two countries has strengthened political, economic, and cultural ties, especially within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Launched in 2013 by the Chinese president Xi Jinping, the New Silk Road aims to enhance China's commercial connectivity with the rest of the world, establish its influence and secure its supplies. Currently, there are 151 countries affiliated with the BRI across all continents: Western Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa and some of Latin America. The BRI is targeted specifically developing states in need of infrastructure improvement and economic development (Cohen, C., 2025). For this reason, the BRI has been particularly popular in African countries. As of March 2025, 53 African countries have joined the initiative. Morocco was the first North African country to sign the MoU to promote China's BRI, supporting the cooperation initiative proposed by China within the framework of the FOCAC to advance PRC-Morocco and Sino-Africa cooperation (Xinhua., 2018).

Given its political stability and strategic location, the Moroccan Kingdom appears to support the PRC's engagement with the Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean region and make it an important participant in China's BRI. However, the method of implementing the BRI in Morocco differs from China's traditional approach in Africa and, particularly in the Maghreb and North Africa. The action plan integrates existing infrastructure rather than launching new projects, as well as maintaining a cautious stance toward Chinese concessional loans and the associated aid model (Neary., 2022). The last notable instance of such financing dates back to 2014 with the construction of the Jerada coal-fired power plant by Shandong Electric Power Construction Corporation III (SEPCO III). From the first glance, this position may give the impression that Morocco has a limited access to the initiative opportunities. In fact, it highly strengthens the kingdom's commitment to transparent governance and respect for international standards.

Through BRI, both countries intend to promote cooperation in trade, investment, infrastructure, agriculture, energy, finance, education, technology, security, research and development, health, and industry. In this regard, the BRI will be instrumental in expansion and investment in Morocco's emphasis on e-commerce, high-tech automotive, aeronautics, and textiles. Inevitably, each partner addresses the BRI framework through its perspective status. Therefore, in realizing the shared vision, the two countries have very different attitudes (Chaziza., 2022). The key questions raised include: What a role does Morocco have in China's Belt and Road Initiative? Furthermore, what does the Moroccan Kingdom want out of this relationship with China and what is China seeking in its partnership with Morocco? This article aims to analyze the political and security, economic, and

cultural dimensions as the main axes of the Morocco-China Strategic Partnership in the era of the BRI.

## **Political and security cooperation**

Over the past 67 years, Morocco – China political ties have deepened steadily and smoothly, marked by high-level visits and bilateral cooperation covering various fields. Both countries share close and mutual alignment in their views on many international and regional issues (Chaziza, 2022). Like Beijing, Rabat coordinates critical global challenges at multilateral levels, including human rights, climate change, and Middle East affairs (Al-Razawi, 2023, p. 4).

This partnership is further bolstered by their shared commitment to principles such as respect for national sovereignty and opposition to separatist movements, territorial integrity, multilateralism, and non-interference in the Internal Affairs of other countries. By these principles, Moroccan diplomacy supports the One-China policy, meaning that Rabat recognizes Taiwan only as an integral part of China's territory. In contrast, China's position on the Sahara question is generally considered positive, given its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto power. China maintains a neutral stance on the conflict by refraining from officially recognizing the "Polisario Front" as the latter has never been among the invitees to the FOCAC.

Additionally, China abstained from voting on the issue in the Security Council or not participating in relevant United Nations Committee meetings (Gouyez Ben Allal, 2025). This neutral position can be explained by China's long-standing and close relationship with Algeria, which places Beijing in a diplomatic quandary. Recognizing the Moroccan proposals alienate Algeria, a key regional ally to China, but recognizing the Sahwari Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) could break Sino-Moroccan relations (Jackson, S., 2024). To navigate this delicate balance, China encourages political negotiations between the parties involved, emphasizing international legitimacy as the primary means of resolving the conflict and positioning itself as an intermediary to maintaining its relationship with Algeria and Morocco.

From Morocco's perspective, China's neutrality on the Sahara dispute issue works in its favor as it ensures that China will neither challenge Morocco's territorial claims nor support the independence of the SADR. This neutrality allows Morocco to maintain its cooperation with China and approach the issue confidently in international forums. This confidence grew more assertive with the position of two other permanent members of the UN Security Council, the United States in 2020, followed by France in 2024, which have effectively recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara. Morocco carefully avoids antagonizing its traditional partners and continues cooperating with its new ones. In this context, while Morocco maintains strong ties with the USA and France, it also seeks to balance its relationship with China. In addition to the political aspects discussed above, the security aspect is crucial to the partnership.

China's military power is constantly increasing. In addition to quickly implementing this policy on the African continent, China is trying to race towards modernizing this system by employing the latest advanced technologies and allocating significant financial budgets for its development, even though Africa is not a critical part of China's security policy. For China, Africa is a security issue only in terms of its effort to secure the energy, mineral, and timber resources used to fuel its economy, as Angola, Sudan, Libya, Nigeria, Algeria (especially for oil), Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea, Gabon, Cameroon, the DRC (for oil, timber, base metals, iron ore, manganese), Namibia (for copper) (Rotberg., 2008) or Djibouti, while the China's military base, located near the strategic Bab El-Mandeb Strait, plays a crucial role in securing maritime routes for oil and gas as a logistical hub under the BRI.

For this, military relations remain generally weak between China and Morocco, compared to the latter's ties with France and the United States of America. Thus, it was logical for Morocco to think with the framework of diversifying its partnership about opening more to strengthening military cooperation with China and benefiting from the capabilities and expertise it provides in this field. The

Moroccan Armed Forces recently purchased advanced anti-tank weapons, TB-001K Combat Drone, training cycles and exchanged high-level visits (Gouyez Ben Allal, 2025). These arms contracts with China are part of a Strategic Partnership between the two nations, alongside Morocco's ongoing collaboration with other key allies such as the USA and France as well as relations with Gulf countries which play a role in shaping regional influence.

## Economic cooperation

A decade ago, Morocco was barely a consideration in China's African strategy (Abdel Ghafar, 2022). Similarly, China was not central to Morocco's national economic development strategy or its calculations to attract foreign investors. Unsurprisingly, Chinese investment and business activity in the Kingdom were negligible, especially compared to the significant level of Chinese engagement in other African economies. Today, economic relations between the two countries have become pivotal. The economic factor is one of the key drivers for China's orientation towards Morocco, strengthening their ties and ensuring their continuity.

During King Mohammed VI's visit to China in 2016, the two heads of state signed the Strategic Partnership, representing the cooperation's legal framework. It aligns with the evolution of their economic relations, moving beyond simple bilateral trade cooperation, as defined by the 1995 trade agreement. It came into force in 1999, addressing the large trade imbalance in favor of China and exploring promising areas for economic cooperation between the two parties. To strengthen the Strategic Partnership framework, Morocco signed the Memorandum of Understanding for the BRI on November 17th, 2017. On January 5th, 2022, Morocco signed the implementation as the first North African country to adhere to the initiative. These two events marked a new era of bilateral cooperation between the two countries. However, what strategic factors drive this economic rapprochement between Morocco and China, and what role does Morocco play in China's BRI?

First, this rapprochement derives its importance from the international context and the economic situation that requires greater openness to the world and the South-South partnership as well as the. Inevitably, each partner addresses the BRI framework through its perspective status in accordance with the "win-win" ideology of the initiative. For China, this partnership represents a geo-economic strategy rather than a geopolitical one, positioning Morocco as a key partner. In contrast, Morocco needs Chinese expertise in infrastructure development, manufacturing, and the information sector to enhance its economic standing and industrial position in Africa and the world (Laadam., 2024) while benefiting from the Chinese economic model. It can also reward a huge domestic market of more than a billion consumers who could, in the future, constitute an opportunity for Moroccan products and companies.

After the BRI, Morocco and China have enjoyed relatively smooth trade and economic cooperation, opening new opportunities for imports and exports. The volume of bilateral trade between the two countries has steadily increased, as was one of the goals of the Chinese initiative from the beginning. According to the China Customs Database, bilateral trade between Beijing and Rabat continued to grow in 2024, with imports and exports totaling \$ 8.82 billion compared to \$ 3.63 billion in 2016, as highlighted in the data below:

Table 1: Trade volume development between Morocco and China (2016-2024) in USD

<b>Year</b>	<b>Trade value</b>	<b>Exports</b>	<b>Imports</b>
<b>2016</b>	3,632	553,456	3,079
<b>2017</b>	3,826	650,597	3,176
<b>2018</b>	4,387	706,900	3,680
<b>2019</b>	4,667	633,346	4,034
<b>2020</b>	4,769	595,611	4,173
<b>2021</b>	6,416	826,419	5,590
<b>2022</b>	6,598	909,015	5,689

<b>2023</b>	7,464	981,422	6,483
<b>2024</b>	8,820	1,298,495	7,521
<b>Total</b>	54,003	7,676,787	46,326

Source: China Customs database compiled by Nasser Bouchiba, created with [https://www.datawrapper.de/\\_/Wd53S/](https://www.datawrapper.de/_/Wd53S/)

Although Spain is still the leading source of Moroccan imports, China and France compete for second place. The trendline is decidedly in China's favor: Morocco imported approximately USD 9 billion in Chinese products in 2024 (Bouchiba., 2025). Moroccan exports to China, on the other hand, are a low percentage of Moroccan foreign trade, between 1 and 1.3 billion of its exports, and consisted of \$600 million in electronic products, and base metals and their products ranked second with \$330 million and minerals ore, totaling \$250 Million, placing third (Bouchiba., 2025). On the investment side, Chinese investments in Morocco add up to around \$56 million (Al-Monitor, 2024). However, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's "China Going Global Investment Index 2023," Morocco was Africa's third most attractive country for Chinese investment after Egypt and South Africa (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023).

In terms of infrastructure, China has played an important role in extending Morocco's bullet-train service. According to Sabbena Sddiqui (2024), the Chinese infrastructure firm Railway Shanhaiguan Bridge and leading German railway technology company Vossloh Gogifer won contracts worth \$56.2 million from October 2024 to supply critical components for Morocco's high-speed rail (LGV) expansion. After the efficient operation of Africa's fastest train Al-Boraq with the Tangier-Casablanca line launched in November 2018, Morocco has taken a new step in the modernization of its transportation infrastructure by launching the LGV line between Kénitra and Marrakech awarded to the Chinese Gezhouba Group. The high-speed rails scheduled for commercial operation in November 2029, aim to enhance intercity mobility as a part of the preparation for the 2030 World Cup, co-hosted by Morocco, Spain, and Portugal (TelQuel, 2024) by facilitating the movement of goods, making Morocco the main logistics hub of trade between Africa and Europe (Al-Monitor., 2024). For Chinese companies, the implementation of such high-speed rail projects implicitly contributes to the realization of an important aspects of the BRI in terms of infrastructure, aiming to enhance connectivity through infrastructure development.

Morocco's free trade agreement (FTA) with the US, The EU, France, Italy, Turkey and its alignment with European standards, coupled with its participation in the African Continental Free Trade Area, member for the African Union as well as Arab League with a strong tie to the Gulf countries make it an attractive destination for Chinese companies seeking to expand their presence to a vast market. The Moroccan motor vehicle sector has, in particular, taken advantage of the opportunities provided and now has the largest and most advanced plants in North Africa (Jackson, 2024, p. 205). In 2023, nearly 10 billion euros have been announced by Chinese investors in their intention to invest in the manufacture of electric batteries and their items in Morocco (Le monde Afrique, 2024). BTR New Material, CNGR Advanced Material, Gotion, Hailiang, Shinzoom, and Tinci share the same focus. They are specialized in producing batteries or components for electric vehicles.

Most of these investment companies are centered in the industrial Zones of Tangier Tech City, also referred to as Mohammed VI Tangier Tech City. This intelligent industrial city constitutes China's most prominent industrial and technological hub in Africa, with around 200 Chinese companies operating in high-value-added sectors such as aeronautics, automobiles, and ICT innovations. Recognizing the importance of its geostrategic location, located across the Strait of Gibraltar, Chinese companies have expressed growing interest in the area for export to African and European markets through Morocco, especially after western accusations of dumping against China and the subsequent increase in taxes on its imports of electric vehicles and batteries. CNGR, a notable exception, has chosen to build a battery component production and recycling complex, in partnership with the Al Mada Royal Investment Fund, in Jorf Lasfar. This latter is home to the largest petrochemical port in

Africa and the site of OCP, one of the world's largest phosphate producers, a key component of electric batteries manufacturing.

However, growing tensions between China and the United States as well as China and Europe have recently undermined Morocco's status as tariff free zone. The 10% tariff imposed on Moroccan imports by the Trump administration as well as the significant countervailing duties imposed on Moroccan export of aluminum wheels (TelQuel, 2025) would make this status increasingly precarious and call into question the stability and reliability of free trade agreements that Morocco has long leveraged in its foreign economic policy, placing Morocco at the intersection of strategic competition between its main major partners (Cohen, P., 2025).

For the renewable energy sector, the North African country has decided to switch to renewable energy sources to secure its production needs and support the Paris Agreement for a clean environment. Besides their collaboration on the Noor solar Complex, the world's largest concentrated solar power station under construction, Morocco and China took a significant step by opening a joint green energy Lab in El Jadida (China Daily, 2025). This ambitious project launched in February 2025 aims to promote the research and innovation sector in the field of renewable energy. A crucial sector for Morocco and China's energy future and for the fight against global climate change.

There is also a mutual interest in the financial sector. During King Mohammed VI's official visit to Beijing in 2016, Attijariwafa Bank, Morocco's leading Bank, signed six agreements with the China Africa Development Fund (CADF). These agreements aimed to support and promote Chinese investment and trade across the African continent by complementing existing credit offerings and opening new opportunities for Moroccan Chinese investments in Africa (TelQuel., 2016). To further strengthen economic relations between Morocco, Africa, and China, the Bank of Africa has also actively participated in the China-Morocco Economic Forum, during which several Memorandums of Understanding were signed with Chinese industrial and financial operators (Bank of Africa, 2016). Banque Centrale Populaire (BCP) was not to be outdone. In partnership with the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), the leading Chinese and global bank, BCP agreed to expand their cooperation to finance Chinese investment projects both in Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa. Notably, this agreement enabled the first payment transactions denominated in the Chinese currency, Renminbi (RMB), for companies conducting business with China (TelQuel, 2016).

During the second Chinese Arab health forum in Beijing in 2019, Morocco and China expressed their willingness to establish a center for traditional Chinese medicine in Casablanca, part of the projects planned under the BRI for African countries. The center will specialize in traditional medicine, digital health, mobile health, and telemedicine to provide Chinese medicine treatments, train Moroccan and African doctors, and promote scientific research (Med Africa Times, 2019). Morocco and China strengthened their relationship in health by sending a Chinese medical mission, which was made up of 8 teams and 79 specialist doctors operating in different provinces in the kingdom. An editorial in China's Xinhua news agency noted, "China and Morocco have strengthened relations through joint efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic" (Xinhua Net, 2020). Sino-Moroccan cooperation in the field of health has also been manifested by the holding of a series of virtual seminars and meetings between medical experts from the two countries to exchange information and experiences on the fight against the epidemic, methods of diagnosis and treatment, as well as the management of hospitals and the protection of medical personnel. The strengthening of the bilateral partnership was also reflected in signing two cooperation agreements on August 20, 2019, in the clinical trials of the anti-COVID-19 vaccine.

## Cultural cooperation

Morocco is often regarded as a country of dialogue and openness, mainly due to its historical role as a bridge between different cultures, religions, and regions. Conversely, Cultural connectivity has always been a focal point of President Xi Jinping's BRI and establishment of Chinese cultural education

facilities to normalize Chinese presence abroad. Beijing's strategic partnership with Morocco, enabling the two countries' people to bond along the Silk Road, is vital to integrating the Kingdom within the BRI framework. One of the critical elements of people-to-people exchanges has been expanding Chinese Culture and academic institutions in the Kingdom (Chaziza, 2022, p. 60). With 48 Confucius Institutes installed in Africa, there are 7 Confucius Institutes and 4 Confucius Classrooms in the Maghreb region. Morocco has hosted three of these institutes, in Rabat since 2009, in Casablanca since 2013, and in Tangier in 2017, while the cities of Agadir and Kénitra have two sub-centers (Xinhua, 2019). In January 2018, the PRC and Morocco agreed to establish an academic institute in the Kingdom devoted explicitly to studying Beijing's BRI. China's Ningxia University and Morocco's Hassan, I University will build the joint institute. It will serve China–Morocco trade and cooperation and enhance higher education between the two sides (The North Africa Post, 2018). The Confucius Institute has become an essential platform for learning the Chinese language and discovering the Chinese culture in Morocco. De facto, China offers scholarships yearly to benefit Moroccan students to pursue higher education in Chinese institutes and universities (Chaziza, 2022, p. 61). This cooperation emphasizes the role of culture in strengthening the economic and political bonds between the two nations.

Nevertheless, the tourism sector is the most explosive growth in people-to-people exchanges. The significant drop in French and German tourists, historically bringing the market to Morocco, is pushing the latter to turn to newly rich countries such as Russia and China (Jeune Afrique, 2016). Morocco saw a record 180,000 Chinese tourist arrivals in 2019 after hosting 170,000 in 2018, especially after a visa requirement was lifted in June 2016. The closure of borders during the COVID-19 pandemic led to a drastic drop, reducing the number of Chinese visitors in 2022. However, data from 2023 shows a promising recovery, with 59,719 Chinese tourists recorded, indicating a positive momentum towards sector revival (China Daily, 2024). By the beginning of 2025, China Eastern Airlines, through its subsidiary Shanghai Airlines, inaugurated a new air route between Shanghai and Casablanca on January 19, 2025. Simultaneously, Royal Air Maroc (RAM) restored the direct link between Casablanca and the Beijing route (Morocco World News, 2025). Launching this direct connection should strengthen Morocco's attractiveness as a tourist destination while opening new opportunities for trade and economic cooperation with China.

## **Evaluation of the partnership**

Sino-Moroccan Cooperation is producing concrete and admirable results that follow effectively China's BRI policy. Moroccan and Chinese leaders have advanced the cooperation process between the two countries with great wisdom. The bilateral relations established in respect, equality, consultation, mutual benefit, and diplomatic solidarity have been considered a model in international relations. Contact is always regular between the two heads of state, and visits by several high-level officials marked the last three years, whether in Morocco or China. These contacts have contributed to strengthening mutual diplomatic, political, economic and cultural relations. Due to its strategic geographical positioning, a crossroads between Europe, Africa, and the Arab world, Morocco has become an ideal place for building logistics and production platforms for Chinese companies wishing to open to international markets and reduce their transportation costs. Morocco strengthens this position by signing more than 56 free trade agreements with several countries and regions in the world (Rboub., 2022).

Morocco's attachment to the Chinese project is a good opportunity for the Kingdom. China's collaboration with Morocco on strategic sectors such as the automobile industry and renewable energies, will undoubtedly allow for strengthening and attracting foreign investment from China and Europe and boost its exports to Africa. Under the BRI, Sino-Moroccan relations should take advantage of the strategic position, attachment to Africa, and advanced European association to attract some of these relocated industries. The tree blocs will benefit from their complementarity in

terms of innovation for Europe, Know-how and skilled labor for Morocco, and outlets and access to raw materials for Africa. The recently operated Casablanca – Beijing direct flight will resume service and strengthen existing contacts.

Furthermore, a real economic development strategy is necessary to prevent Morocco from becoming a simple logistic and commercial platform. It is also important to be vigilant about creating local jobs by relying on a genuine vocational training strategy that meets the needs of Chinese companies. Finally, establishing free trade agreements between Morocco and China and Morocco and Africa would be highly desirable to sustain this ambitious project. However, with continued and likely growing Chinese investment, addressing the obstacles and challenges confronting the Morocco-China partnership will become necessary.

Even if trade between Rabat and Beijing approached \$9 billion in 2024, economic relations remain unbalanced. China exports 13 times more goods to Morocco than it imports. This is due to China's strong economic growth and status as the world's second economic power and first exporter. As a growing country, Morocco can only offer a limited range of products, resulting in modest engagement from China compared to its engagement in the rest of the African continent. China has become Africa's largest economic partner, FDI's most significant contributor, an infrastructure donor, and one of the largest aid donors in Africa. With the inauguration of the BRI, China has expanded its international reach to work with other governments in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East to create new transnational economic corridors. Compared to Algeria, an amount close to \$10 billion in a transaction carried out in 2023 with this neighboring country and the Chinese investments with Morocco remain low: less than \$3 billion between 2005 and 2020, compared to nearly \$24 billion for the same period in Algeria according to the data collected by Yahya Zoubir, affiliated with the Middle East Council on Global Affairs research center in Doha which can pose certain competitiveness between the two countries to attract Chinese investments (Le monde Afrique, 2024).

Environmental risk constitutes another challenge to environmental degradation and its effects on biodiversity, and gas emissions (Zreik., 2024). Theoretically, the BRI has always been associated with supporting green and sustainable infrastructure projects to address this concern, but there is still a long way to go in addressing environmental concerns related to it given the poor reputation of Chinese companies among global environmentalists. Morocco's membership in this project will constitute a contradiction with its environmental policy, based on which it has launched several projects, such as the Green Morocco plan and energy efficiency in the buildings of the Kingdom. To this end, Morocco must also consider the potential environmental impacts of infrastructure development under the BRI on its ecosystems and natural resources.

From their side, Chinese companies face many obstacles in both subjective and objective aspects when investing in Morocco as the academic Dong Liu pointed out (Zoubir., 2020):

While 100 Chinese companies are anticipated to move to Tangier Tech City, only a few Chinese enterprises are active in Morocco. Protectionism has discouraged Chinese companies from investing in the country. Morocco has imposed strict restrictions on the domestic sale of free-trade-zone products and high tariffs on intermediate products needed for industrial production. With these measures in place, Chinese enterprises struggle to reduce the cost of exports to Morocco through the traditional model of setting up assembly plants in a host country.

Language and cultural differences also hinder investments according to Anouar Boukharies (2022):

As the Chinese ambassador to Morocco, Li Li, put it, both Chinese and Moroccan actors must leave their comfort zones to take advantage of the various business opportunities. Chinese companies must adapt to work in an investment environment that differs from those in the African countries where they are active. In most economic sectors, French and European legal, fiscal, and normative standards prevail. As for Moroccan companies,

Li Li, said, they are certainly used to working with their traditional partners, but they do not know or are not very motivated to explore the Chinese market. African countries, such as Ethiopia, that have made a concerted effort to learn the Chinese business landscape and language have had better success in attracting Chinese investments.

## Conclusion

The China–Morocco partnership perfectly embodies China’s ambitious BRI, and relations have gradually strengthened at all levels within the initiative framework over the years. This partnership is beneficial not only to Morocco’s economy and infrastructure but also to China’s commercial and political interests. The choice of Morocco’ as a key partner for China is not random. Thanks to its attractiveness, geographical location, economic strategy, and political stability, Morocco has become an ideal member of the BRI. That is why, political analysts have praised the pragmatism of this relationship since the ultimate goal of the BRI is to expand China’s international image as a responsible power and Morocco is a means by which China will reach this goal.

The respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the two countries has always been a fundamental principle of political exchange within the Morocco-China partnership. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1958, Morocco has always provided support on issues involving China’s core interests and major concerns and always maintained its position on the “One China” principle. Regarding the Sahara issue, China has always insisted on finding a solution within the framework of the United Nations by supporting its resolutions and emphasizing dialogue and peaceful negotiations between the parties involved. During the unexpected landing in Casablanca by the end of November 2024, Chinese President Xi-Jinping and Crown Prince Moulay Hassan confirmed mutual support in safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and stability. In this context, could we witness a clear-cut position of the Chinese government on the Sahara issue following the USA and France’s position?

Since the launch of the BRI, Morocco was one of the first countries to join this innovative project in 2017. The BRI is mutually beneficial for both states not only Morocco’s economy as the BRI develops Morocco’s industry and enhances its economy. However, the geographic position of the Moroccan Kingdom, well situated as an intersection of Europe, Africa, and the Arab world, represents a geostrategic location for China’s project to build connections to the rest of the world. Today, the Sino-Moroccan exchange has been substantially improved, and China has become Morocco’s third largest trading partner worldwide which explains the growing interest of Chinese companies in the Moroccan Market particularly with investment in infrastructure, automotive, technology, and renewable energy sectors. The objective of these companies is to access the US and European markets with which Morocco has free trade agreements. Projects such as Tangier Tech City emphasize what was previously mentioned. However, the trade deficit remains a significant challenge for both Morocco and China, making it essential to ensure a more balanced and sustainable economic partnership.

Beyond the economic exchanges, Human and cultural interactions helped Morocco and China to strengthen mutual understanding and promoted the development of bilateral relations. The three Confucius Institutes in Morocco and the Chinese Cultural Center highlight the mutual fascination for the intangible treasures of each country. De facto, the number of scholarships for Moroccan students from the Chinese government and universities is also increasing to better serve the future cooperation between the two countries in various fields. The two countries also called for more tourist exchanges. The visa exemption for Chinese citizens, as announced in June 2016, reflects Morocco’s willingness to attract a large number of tourists and promote Morocco–China cultural exchanges. Despite Morocco’s visa exemption for Chinese citizens, China has not reciprocated the policy for Moroccan citizens, who still face visa barriers hindering business mobility, educational exchange, and investment flows.



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## Notes on contributor

Imane Ezzehouany's research interests focus on the implication of China's Belt and Road Initiative in North Africa. Selected among the first 1,000 graduates from Italian universities in 2023, Ezzehouany holds a Master's degree in Diplomatic Studies from the Mohammed V University of Rabat, and a second Master's degree in International Relations from the University of Cagliari, where she was subsequently involved in various academic projects as a researcher.

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## Article

# The Sahara Question and Foreign Policy Realism: An Analysis of Paradigmatic and Conceptual Evolution

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**Abstract** – The Moroccan Sahara question, central to the paradigm of territorial integrity, is a longstanding and influential factor in the evolution of modern Morocco's foreign policy. As a foundational pillar of the nation-state's completion, the Sahara issue has played a decisive role in shaping the Kingdom's diplomatic direction. This issue holds a dual significance: domestically, it reinforces political legitimacy and national identity, while internationally, it serves as a core aspect of Morocco's foreign policy framework. This duality has been a defining characteristic of Morocco's approach to the Sahara. Morocco's foreign policy realism is anchored in several parameters, primarily the prioritisation of territorial integrity as essential to state survival, aligning with core realist tenets such as national interest, security, and sovereignty. In this context, the Sahara question acts as a vital expression of national interest, thus underpinning the predominance of realism in Morocco's diplomatic conduct. However, this realist focus on the Sahara also raises potential tensions with other policy vectors, such as economic and social development or the Kingdom's strategic influence. Recognising these potential conflicts, the Moroccan state has sought a balanced approach, maintaining the Sahara as a foreign policy priority while abandoning isolationist stances. This paper hypothesises an evolution towards a functionalist realism in Moroccan diplomacy. By integrating elements of neorealism, Morocco's foreign policy seeks to balance various objectives, positioning the diplomatic pursuit of territorial integrity alongside broader development and strategic aspirations.

**Keywords:** Moroccan Sahara; Moroccan foreign policy; territorial sovereignty; political realism; Moroccan diplomacy; nationalism; neorealism

## Introduction

The Moroccan Sahara question—and more broadly, the paradigm of territorial integrity—constitutes a persistent leitmotif in the historical development of modern Morocco. As such, this issue, a fundamental pillar in the struggle for the completion of the modern Moroccan nation-state, has played a decisive role in shaping the foreign policy of contemporary Morocco. Its trajectory is intimately tied to the broader evolution of the modern nation-state apparatus.

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The Sahara question carries a dual dimension: on the one hand, it serves as an instrument of domestic politics, particularly in relation to the mechanisms of political legitimisation and the assertion of national sentiment; on the other, it functions as a metronome of Morocco's foreign policy (Hannoun, 2006). This "ambivalence" is one of the defining features of the way this dossier has been managed over time.

The realist orientation of Morocco's foreign policy is a structuring element shaped by a variety of parameters and factors. However, this realist tendency—as described by the general theory of international relations—encounters certain tensions, particularly in relation to the prioritisation of the objective of completing national territorial integrity.

Realist doctrine is grounded in the concepts of national interest, state security, and sovereignty. In the Moroccan context, the completion of territorial integrity is perceived as a condition for the very survival of the state. Consequently, the Sahara issue, as a central component of the national interest, helps explain the predominance of realism in the conduct of Moroccan foreign policy.

It may be hypothesised that the centrality of the Sahara question within the foreign policy framework potentially comes at the expense of other strategic dimensions, such as economic and social development or the broader international influence of the Kingdom. The Moroccan state has recognised the risk of such a contradiction. In response, it has sought to establish a balanced foreign policy that maintains the Sahara issue as a strategic prism, while simultaneously abandoning the policy of the "empty chair."

In this regard, one may identify an evolution—indeed, a functional recalibration—of Moroccan realism. Realism has positioned Moroccan diplomacy in the near-exclusive service of territorial integrity. However, the emergence of a form of neorealism within Moroccan foreign policy reveals an attempt to strike a balance between multiple priorities. This raises the following question: How has Morocco managed to rationalise its policy priorities in a way that transforms decision-making optimisation into a lever for both conceptualisation and action?

## **The Sahara question as a vector of realism**

The classical definition of foreign policy highlights the following elements:

- It is defined as the instrument by which a state attempts to act upon its international political environment (Institut Royal des Etudes stratégiques, 2019).
- The policy followed by a state in matters of international relations stems from the sovereign power of its highest authority (Eid, 2019).
- Foreign policy, as an object of study, is never monolithic. It consists of a set of attitudes, decisions, orientations, and actions. The multiplicity of direct and underlying forces acting upon foreign policy makes it a complex scientific object (Duroselle, 1992).

Realism, as the dominant theory in the study of international relations, posits that states are the main actors on the international stage, primarily guided by the pursuit of power and the preservation of their security. This approach highlights the way foreign policy decisions are shaped by considerations of power and strategic concerns, rather than by moral ideals or international norms. From this perspective, foreign policy becomes a scientific object that can be analysed through the prism of national interests and power relations.

Realism entails prioritising the primary needs of states—namely, survival and security. It is for this reason that realism has established itself as the dominant framework in the study of foreign policies. Realism is not an immoral orientation; it is simply a redeployment of moral priorities from a particular perspective in which otherness holds less weight. The priority does not have a collective scope such as building a peaceful world, but rather an egoistic scope—namely, the preservation of the state's interests (Kouadio & Moumine, 2011). Those who adopt and practise the principle of realism are convinced that the nature of the world is inherently conflictual. The principle of sovereignty, a pillar of the international state system, ensures that the world will always exhibit certain characteristics of

disorder. Since states are potentially powerful actors, they are compelled to display a certain form of self-interest in order to preserve themselves.

In fact, it is the prevalence of the principle of state sovereignty that structures the international community and international law. Sovereignty implies the absence of a superior authority; it naturally leads to another fundamental principle, that of the equality of states. This absence of a superior authority has always placed the concept of domination and power at the centre of international relations.

In Morocco, the question of the Sahara today constitutes the primary focus of the struggle for territorial integrity, which itself has been a constant priority of the Moroccan state since independence. Moroccan nationalism was built upon the struggle for territorial unity. One of the Kingdom's historical specificities lies in the fact that its millennia-old independence spared it from civilisational erosion. It was thus able to develop a singular identity bloc. This asset was directly and dangerously threatened; Morocco was divided into three zones. Thanks to its historical capital, the colonial episode remained relatively brief and did not manage to break the momentum of civilisational uniqueness.

All these elements have resulted in the following facts:

- The precolonial political power was able to maintain itself while strengthening its social and economic foundations.
- The country's full independence was not achieved in a single historical moment. Morocco experienced staggered moments of independence (1956, 1958, 1969, 1975, 1979...).
- This specificity had the effect of making territorial integrity the main political issue of independent Morocco. The political forces in place thus invested in this survival field of the nation to strengthen their positions.

From the earliest years of independence, the issue of the "Spanish Sahara" became a major concern both internally and diplomatically and geopolitically.

Internally, the question of Saguia El Hamra and Rio de Oro became an opportunity for the political power to reinforce its legitimacy and draw on historical capital in the construction of modern Morocco. This includes the invocation of restoring Morocco within its authentic historical borders. It also includes the emphasis on the allegiance bond between the Sultan and the Umma, known as *Beia* (البيعة) in Muslim public law. In the Moroccan conception, more emphasis is placed on the Rousseauian (Jean-Jacques Rousseau) character of this bond, referencing the concept of the social contract. In Morocco, *Beia* is a social and political contract through which each party (Sultan, Umma) commits to fulfilling its obligations: the Umma must obey the Sultan and contribute to his efforts to defend the territory and religion, while the Sultan, for his part, commits to doing everything in his power to defend the territory of *Dar al-Islam* (Mouaquit, 2013).

The recovery of the territory, inscribed on the UN decolonisation agenda, became one of the means of legitimation that lay exclusively in the hands of the Monarchy, beyond any competition. The national movement—particularly the Istiqlal party, a true support force of political power—risked turning into a potential competitor to that power. Thus, Allal El Fassi did not hesitate to brandish this card. Greater Morocco was a tool used to put pressure so that Morocco could put an end to the historical fragmentation from which it had suffered.<sup>1</sup>

All these elements generated a contradiction between Moroccan claims based on historical rights and the key principles of international decolonisation law, whose historical construction took place within the Western framework. Classical international law is the result of the evolution of international power relations in the 19th and 20th centuries in Europe and America. In fact, international law is the child of precolonial and imperialist gestations.

One of the most significant points of contradiction lay in the notion of historical rights. The history of political power in Morocco is based on personal ties, crystallised by the bond of allegiance. In contrast, the basis of international law is linked to the effectiveness of territorial ties. This contradiction was illustrated in the 1975 Advisory Opinion delivered by the International Court of

Justice in The Hague.<sup>2</sup> Through the Green March, Morocco sought to assert its own conception of territorial rights based on a selective reading of that advisory opinion.

In his book *The Social and Cultural Origins of Moroccan Nationalism*, historian Abdallah Laroui clearly linked the birth of Moroccan nationalism to the struggles of the Sharifian Empire against European and colonial penetration attempts (Laroui, 1977). The centrality of the Sahara issue in Moroccan foreign policy is an extension of the role that the struggle for territorial integrity has historically played in Morocco's international relations. In a speech on 20 August 2022, on the occasion of the anniversary of the King and the People's Revolution, King Mohammed VI declared:

I would like to send a clear message to everyone: the Sahara issue is the prism through which Morocco considers its international environment. It is also, clearly and simply, the yardstick by which it measures the sincerity of friendships and partnerships it forges.<sup>3</sup>

This prism did not originate in this 2022 royal speech. It has been consistently expressed and implemented. One of its most significant historical manifestations was Morocco's withdrawal from the Organisation of African Unity, of which it was a founding member.<sup>4</sup> At times in history, Morocco even distanced itself from its most loyal allies and supporters. This was the case with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which provoked the discontent of the late King Hassan II when the Polisario leader addressed the Palestinian National Council in 1987.<sup>5</sup> More recently, on 19 December 2007, Morocco recalled its ambassador to Dakar for consultations following remarks deemed unfriendly by the head of the Senegalese Socialist Party in Tifariti. These are strong examples of the Moroccan diplomacy's intransigent stance on this issue. Friendly countries like Spain and the United States have also faced Moroccan displeasure.<sup>6</sup>

National interest is a central concept in foreign policy, referring to the fundamental goals a country seeks to achieve to ensure its security, prosperity, and influence. It may include aspects such as national security, economic performance, political influence, and culture. The formulation of national interest presents itself as a dynamic and complex process, as this category reflects social realities that encompass the totality of the needs and aspirations common to all members of a socio-cultural entity. It is imperative to note that satisfying and supporting these needs and aspirations is a necessary condition for the existence and identity of a society as a historical subject (Juc & Dodu Savca, 2014).

National interest can remain a subjective notion insofar as the definition of priorities depends on subjective analysis and interpretation. Within this framework arises the question of determining the legitimate political authority to set the order of priorities in foreign policy and thereby define national interest.

It is within this framework that the decision-making process constitutes the main dimension of the study of foreign policy (El Houdaigui, 2003). In Morocco, the constitutional system results in a centralisation of decision-making at the level of the Monarchy. Indeed, foreign policy decisions are linked to the strategic and historical foundations of the State. Foreign policy is a function of the deep forces that define its broad orientations (Renouvin & Duroselle, 2007).

Nevertheless, the supreme decision in foreign policy—whose primary dimension consists in defining the national interest—is not a purely arbitrary and absolutist process. The definition of national interest is the result of various historical and political factors that have themselves contributed to the construction of the modern nation-state. In France, for example, maintaining France's civilisational influence remains one of the key elements constituting the French state and a metronome of its foreign policy.

The decision-making process, along with the historical memory and the deep forces that shape a state, defines the hierarchy of foreign policy priorities and determines what constitutes the national interest. In Morocco, the national interest has historically been closely tied to the issue of territorial integrity. This connection has gradually crystallised into a foundational principle of foreign policy, particularly through the primacy of the Sahara question in both diplomatic and strategic considerations.

This national interest, interpreted through the realist lens, highlights the continuity of the Moroccan state's policies despite changes in the international context. The state's strategic posture reflects the permanence of certain fundamentals that derive from Morocco's long-standing historical narrative, and which continue to influence its political behaviour and diplomatic choices.

In essence, Moroccan foreign policy towards the Sahara question exemplifies how realism operates in practice. It is driven not only by the pursuit of power or the maximisation of strategic advantage, but also by the historical construction of identity, sovereignty, and legitimacy. The Sahara issue, far from being a mere geopolitical dispute, embodies a national consensus and a symbolic struggle for survival and recognition in the international system.

The consistency with which Morocco defends its territorial integrity, even at the cost of diplomatic fallout or temporary isolation, is emblematic of the realist logic that places national interests above all else. This unwavering stance stems from a deep conviction that survival, security, and sovereignty are non-negotiable priorities, which must be preserved even in the face of international legal norms or external pressures (Balta, 1990; Stora, 2002).

Ultimately, the case of Morocco's foreign policy regarding the Sahara demonstrates how realism remains a relevant and explanatory framework in understanding the behaviour of states, especially in postcolonial contexts where sovereignty, identity, and historical legitimacy remain vital stakes of international politics.

## **Neorealism and foreign policy: In search of goal complementarity**

We established in the first part that the realism of Moroccan foreign policy is perfectly illustrated by the prioritisation of the cause of the Moroccan Sahara, seen as the principal embodiment of the paradigm of completing territorial integrity. The time-consuming and quasi-permanent nature of this issue makes it vulnerable to the changing dynamics of the international environment. Indeed, although it remains a top priority in foreign policy, the Sahara question is subject to the test of time. Moroccan foreign policy itself is constantly evolving in response to shifts in geostrategic stakes. Adaptation is an act of survival, and this maxim holds true for states within the realm of international relations (Brailard & Jalili, 2025).

Since the late 1990s, Moroccan foreign policy has consistently sought to answer the following question: what place should Morocco occupy in a changing world? Foreign policy lies at the intersection of global imperatives and domestic political demands. Until the 1990s, it was clear that Morocco needed to concentrate on completing its territorial integrity: before reflecting on Morocco's place in the world, one had to first conceive what kind of Morocco should be promoted.

The Morocco that emerged from independence in 1956 did not reflect its authentic and historical borders. Morocco had to be strong in its identity. The Sahara conflict is an anachronistic one for several reasons:

- It continues to be presented at the United Nations within the framework of decolonisation. The territory itself is still classified as a "non-self-governing territory" eligible for the application of the right to self-determination, a pillar of decolonisation law. It remains on the agenda of the Fourth Committee of the UN General Assembly, which deals with decolonisation issues—one of the most glaring examples of the outdated and rigid nature of the current conflict-resolution framework.
- The Sahara conflict was born from and influenced by the Cold War context. It has outlived that era and become a relic of a bygone time. Algeria has made it a leitmotif for projecting its international influence and asserting its role as a regional power that seeks to perpetuate its anti-colonial struggle.

This anachronistic nature of the Sahara conflict clearly demonstrates the Moroccan nation's deep attachment to this sacred cause and the unanimity it generates. Nevertheless, it could become a source of pressure on the state. Indeed, the renewal of international challenges is an inevitability tied



to global transformations. Morocco's international ambitions require the pursuit of parallel geo-economic objectives. The challenge of development is becoming increasingly urgent; Morocco possesses geographical, historical, and political potential that constitutes a decisive asset. The Moroccan state should not remain confined by the ossification of its foreign policy. While the territorial issue remains constant, the means to address it must be continually renewed.

From the early 2000s to the early 2020s, major events disrupted the international order established after the Cold War. Morocco, due to the specificities of its political system—centred around the strategic role of the Monarchy—initiated a redeployment of its diplomacy in line with the transformation of the “strategic intent of the state” (El Houdaigui, 2022). The completion of the modern Moroccan state-building project had to take multiple yet complementary forms. The completion of territorial integrity needed to go hand in hand with development and economic outreach in service of the Nation.

At the beginning of the 2000s, Morocco faced major deficiencies, particularly on economic and social fronts. In the late 1990s, Hassan II warned in a speech that Morocco risked a heart attack. This alarm bell reflected a real awareness of the challenges at hand and signalled the beginning of a shift in the state's strategic intent.

This shift coincided with the royal succession. King Mohammed VI was confronted with the following strategic dilemma: How to uphold the dogma of completing territorial integrity as the leitmotif of foreign policy while adapting that policy to the evolving international landscape? Improving the living conditions of Moroccans could only happen through a significant improvement in the national economy's performance, which in turn required effective exploitation of Morocco's potential and full integration into the dynamics of globalisation.

The response to this dilemma could not simply lie in seeking a balance. Balance, by definition, implies a break from wholeness; it is based on a process of relativisation. By pursuing balance in this context, the cause of the Moroccan Sahara would inevitably lose its status as the absolute priority of foreign policy. Instead, the goal was to create a kind of synergy, whereby the two major dimensions of foreign policy could become complementary. Morocco has retained the main realist features of its foreign policy, namely adaptation to the constraints of the international context. However, this realism has taken on new characteristics and expressions.

During the phase that followed the 11 September 2001 attacks, a period marked by the hardening of American foreign policy and its effort to keep the world within its sphere of influence, Moroccan diplomacy found itself with limited room for manoeuvre (Saddiki, 2024). The consolidation of a unipolar international order pushed Moroccan diplomacy to develop a strategy that would harness the economy to strengthen Morocco's position on the Sahara issue. Thus, Morocco had to navigate international pressures resulting from the United States' direct involvement in the UN peace process. James Baker, a prominent figure in American diplomacy and the Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary-General, exerted pressure—backed by the American state—to impose a final solution, though without success.

The Moroccan State has undertaken actions aimed at capitalising on its existing potential by leveraging the country's geopolitical status. The conclusion of free trade agreements with the United States and the European Union, as well as the construction of the Tanger Med port, were among the key means deployed to achieve this goal. Strengthening Morocco's status as a geoeconomic partner of the West was intended to prevent any international attempt to impose a solution to the Sahara issue that Morocco would reject. The Kingdom utilised its diplomatic assets to reinforce its integration into global value chains. Major national corporations, referred to as “national champions,” were directed to make substantial investments in strategic sectors, particularly in Africa.

The gradual decline of American supremacy, especially during President Barack Obama's tenure, provided Morocco with additional room for manoeuvre, enabling it to undertake a more dynamic redeployment of its foreign policy.

This redeployment was reflected in the expansion of Moroccan diplomacy, which appeared, at first glance, to become more pragmatic. The new orientations and instruments were thus designed to simultaneously pursue two main objectives: (i) To reinforce the geopolitical status of the Kingdom in order to provide it with the necessary leverage to strengthen its position on the Sahara issue. Since the matter is addressed at the UN level, Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara territory needed as much international support as possible. By creating economic interdependencies, Morocco sought to shield itself from external pressure and to transition from a defensive to a more offensive posture. (ii) To equip itself with the tools for economic take-off through greater integration into the global economy. We can therefore draw a connection between each of the instruments and orientations of this new phase and the parallel objectives mentioned above:

- The diversification of Morocco's international partners. In response to shifts in the international system, Morocco opted to strengthen economic partnerships with emerging powers such as China,<sup>7</sup> Turkey,<sup>8</sup> India,<sup>9</sup> Russia,<sup>10</sup> and Brazil. The economic aim of this reorientation is clear: opening to new markets and opportunities for investment and trade. At the same time, it sought to establish channels of interdependence with these emerging powers, which are expected to play a decisive role in the near future. The rapprochement with Russia and China—both permanent members of the UN Security Council—was intended to prevent the Sahara issue from becoming a point of fracture between the West and its geopolitical rivals. Western support for Morocco should not provoke hardened positions among powers whose foreign policies are increasingly shaped by opposition to the Western-led world order.
- The strengthening of Morocco's presence in Africa is one of the most prominent features of the new foreign policy. Morocco has become one of the leading African investors on the continent. Moroccan companies have penetrated various markets thanks to a well-crafted state-led strategy. In addition to integrating the national economy more deeply into global value chains, this redeployment allows for the multiplication of stakes and communication channels with African countries. Several African states have opened consular representations in cities within the Southern Provinces, the most recent being Chad. Moreover, enhancing Morocco's economic presence in Africa will, in due course, facilitate more effective management of Morocco's membership in the African Union alongside the entity created by the separatist Polisario movement.
- Transforming Morocco into an economic and financial hub has the direct objective of helping the Kingdom secure decisive advantages in the race for economic and strategic emergence. Morocco's economic and financial centrality will translate into geopolitical centrality. Strengthening its geopolitical status both globally and regionally hinges on this transformation, which is meant to attract various interests to Moroccan territory. The hosting of the 2030 World Cup also fits within this strategic framework.
- The redefinition of Morocco's geo-economic environment. Indeed, the state of lethargy of the regional space to which it belongs, namely the Arab Maghreb Union, pushes Morocco to try to redefine its geopolitical environment.

Several initiatives fall within this framework:

- The Atlantic Initiative launched by King Mohammed VI. This initiative is the culmination of a process that began more than ten years ago; the "strategic intent of the State"<sup>11</sup> has thus been oriented towards defining a geopolitical and geostrategic meaning of the Atlantic Africa. This initiative, which has matured to arrive in 2024 at the Royal Initiative aiming to enable Sahel countries to gain access to the ocean, also seeks to create strategic convergences with Sahel states. These states have thus begun to adopt more favourable attitudes towards Morocco: in August, the Republic of Chad decided to open a consulate in the Southern Provinces.

- Morocco had submitted a request to become a member of ECOWAS. Regardless of the fate of this request and the reservations it raised, it constitutes another illustration of Morocco's desire to redefine its geopolitical environment.

Related to the previous point, Morocco's reintegration into the pan-African community framework, namely the African Union, is a symbolic initiative of the new orientation of Moroccan diplomacy. This action represents a clear break with the policy of the empty chair, which made the issue of the Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara an almost exclusive objective of foreign policy. The reintegration into the African Union carries several meanings:

- Strengthening Morocco's diplomatic position requires an offensive approach aimed at opening previously closed doors. The goal was not only to neutralise the impact of this issue on Morocco's influence but to make it the main leverage.
- A pragmatic and realistic attitude aimed at confronting various constraints by giving oneself the means to change certain negative trends.
- It also involves a desacralisation of the cause through a de-dogmatisation of foreign policy. Pragmatism is also expressed through a certain flexibility. Morocco accepts sitting alongside the separatist entity that claims sovereignty over the territory.

The neorealism of the new Moroccan foreign policy is perceptible through a dual observable trend. A new offensive diplomatic dynamic. This dynamic consists in mastering the evolution of the process in order to influence the outcome of the conflict. This dynamic began with the clearing of the Guerguerat zone.<sup>12</sup> This action made it possible to impose a power balance on the ground in favour of Morocco. On the diplomatic level, this dynamic allowed the alignment of a considerable number of states with Morocco's position. Thus, the United States in 2020 recognised Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara. This historic decision triggered a wave of similar decisions, notably resulting in the opening of consular representations in the Southern Provinces. These acts express states' recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over this territory. Some states have not gone so far as to declare direct recognition, but they have shown clear support for Morocco. This is the case of Spain, which has detached itself from its historically neutral and balancing attitude on this issue.

This neorealism is also expressed through an interpenetration between political-diplomatic objectives and economic and geo-economic objectives. Indeed, in a very pragmatic approach, Morocco has sought to make the Sahara issue a strategic and geo-economic lever. The economic dimension has been highlighted for several years as a gateway to managing this conflict.

In fact, King Mohammed VI previously launched a national reflection dynamic around a development model for the Southern Provinces. The Economic, Social and Environmental Council had prepared a report containing an economic model published in October 2013. A new vision thus emerged, making the Southern Provinces a strategic accelerator of the Kingdom's development and influence. Several major projects and structuring initiatives can be cited in this context, such as the Grand Dakhla Atlantic Port, the Tiznit-Dakhla expressway, the gas pipeline project from Nigeria; the Atlantic Initiative launched by the Sovereign is a typical example of this new proactive approach. The objectives of completing territorial integrity and Morocco's economic influence somewhat merge.

## Conclusion

One could conclude that realism is a constant feature of Moroccan foreign policy. It certainly evolves and adapts, taking various forms according to changes in the international context. Through this article, we have attempted to analyse the evolution of Moroccan foreign policy by examining its structuring elements within the major strategic orientations. The specificity of Moroccan foreign policy is linked to the decision-making process, the nature of the politico-constitutional system, and Morocco's vast innate strategic potential. These three elements have enabled the development of a

strategic, depoliticised, and long-term foreign policy. It is true that realism constitutes a dominant trait of the foreign policies of many states today; nevertheless, in Morocco, foreign policy genuinely reflects the country's history and geography.

The following conclusions fall within this framework:

1. Morocco is a monarchy whose protectorate period was but a brief interlude. Historical continuity was able to break the colonial rupture. The completion of territorial integrity is a means to perpetuate this continuity.
2. Morocco possesses major geostrategic assets that must be leveraged to achieve strategic gains.
3. These two elements give rise to particular constraints, notably related to Morocco's immediate environment. The decision-makers have demonstrated realism, synonymous with skillfulness, aimed at achieving successes despite difficulties.

## Notes

1. The 'Greater Morocco' thesis, formulated by El Fassi in 1956, advocated for the integration of territories considered historically Moroccan, notably:
  - Mauritania: El Fassi regarded this territory as a natural extension of Morocco.
  - Former Spanish Sahara: He viewed this region as an integral part of Morocco.
  - Portions of the Sahara that colonial France considered part of Algeria, including the present-day Algerian cities of Tindouf and Béchar.
  - Areas in northern Mali and Senegal, with claims based on historical and cultural ties.
2. As a reminder, the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) acknowledged the existence of legal ties.
3. Royal Speech of 20 August 2022.
4. In a message delivered by Royal Advisor Reda Guedira on 12 November 1984 at the Twentieth Summit of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in Addis Ababa, the late King Hassan II declared: "Here we are, and I regret to say it, at the moment of separation. Until wiser days come, we bid you farewell and wish you good luck with your new partner."
5. *Meeting of the Palestinian National Council in Algiers: Tension between the PLO and Morocco after the intervention of a Polisario delegate*. Le Monde, 23 April 1987.
6. Due to the Obama Administration's stance in favour of extending MINURSO's mandate to include human rights monitoring, Morocco decided to suspend joint military exercises.
7. King Mohammed VI's visit to China in May 2016 led to the establishment of a strategic partnership framework. <https://maroc-diplomatique.net/visite-de-sm-le-roi-en-chine-une-nouvelle-dynamique-aux-relations-de-cooperation-entre/>
8. Following the signing of a free trade agreement between the two countries in 2004, the value of bilateral trade reached over 6 billion USD by 2023.
9. The Royal visit in October 2015 also helped revitalise the strategic partnership between the two countries, particularly in the phosphate sector.
10. The Royal visit to Russia in March 2016 contributed to strengthening economic exchanges. Today, despite various developments, Russia does not adopt a particularly hostile stance towards Morocco on the Sahara issue.
11. According to Rachid El Houdaigui.
12. In a Royal Speech in August 2022, the King stated that around thirty states had opened consular representations in the cities of the Southern Provinces. That number has since been surpassed.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## Policy Perspective

# A “Cuban JCPOA” to Ease the US Embargo

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**Abstract** – To reform the US embargo on Cuba, it would be possible to follow insights from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a 2015 agreement between the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, UK, US, Germany) and Iran. The restrictions imposed by the 1996 Helms-Burton Act are hampering the Cuban economy, without benefits for Washington. US Congress approved Helms-Burton to severe Cuba’s commercial capacities after the Cold War, hence attempting to finally overthrow Fidel Castro. This scenario did not occur, and at the same time, besides President Obama’s attempts, the US still perceives Cuba as a matter of domestic policy, without a new strategy. This policy perspective outlines that Cuba is transitioning to a market economy, out of necessity. Therefore, one of Helms-Burton’s requirements to ease the US embargo is already taking place. Relieving Havana from sanctions might not only better Cubans’ lives, but also improve US foreign policy for Latin America.

**Keywords:** Cuba; US; Sanctions; Embargo; JCPOA

## Introduction

It might be argued that sanctions are the quintessential feature of US foreign policy. In this sense, the example of Cuba immediately comes to mind when studying sanctioning policies. The purpose of this article is not to evaluate the results of US sanctions on Cuba since President Kennedy’s Proclamation 3447 in 1962. Instead, the aim is to illustrate that the continuation and reinforcement of Washington’s sanctions toward Havana, spiked with the Helms-Burton Act of 1996, are harming the US image in Latin America. The Helms-Burton Act, a bill passed by the US Congress, codified the *bloqueo* to impact the Cuban economy after the collapse of its biggest financier, the Soviet Union. In general, “the objective of the Helms-Burton law is basically political: to discourage foreign investment in Cuba through the threat of lawsuits and the imposition of travel restrictions” (Roy, 1997, p. 78). Moreover, regardless of whether Helms-Burton drove the desired changes in the island, the detriment of the Cuban system in the last three decades is driving Cuba toward a market economy.

Considering the P5+1 success around the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), it is possible to identify two main aspects extendable to Cuba. Before that, we can define the JCPOA as an ambitious multilateral agreement that served to negotiate the following exchange between the US and Iran: Reduction of nuclear capacity for sanctions relief. Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew

from the JCPOA in 2018, restoring all the previous sanctions on Tehran (Galbraith, 2019). Firstly, as was the case for Iran, the longstanding hostility between the US and Cuba hampers unilateral or bilateral initiatives: A multilateral effort is needed. In the UN Security Council, Cuba's financiers, like China, will likely not hesitate to collaborate in reforming sanctions on Havana. The inability of Cuba to repay Chinese loans or to motivate Beijing's investments is affecting the exchanges between the Asian giant and the Caribbean nation (Financial Times, 2024). Secondly, if the JCPOA persuaded Iran to de-escalate its nuclear production, with all its political and economic consequences, it would be obviously straightforward to implement a similar agreement for Cuba.

### **Cuba as a matter of foreign not domestic policy**

Contrarily to Iran, Cuba does not possess any belligerent capacity to threaten global or regional security. From US policymakers' perspective, it is essential to detect what must happen in Cuba to revise the sanctioning regime, with potential advantages for Washington, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and the European Union (EU). Reiterating the multilateral way for US sanctions' reform toward Cuba, both the UNSC and the EU are interested *fora* when it comes to the Cuban blockade. As indicated, the presence of China in the UNSC, being a significant economic partner for Cuba, together with Russia, might drive ideas fashioned upon the P5+1. Nonetheless, joint action with the EU can reapproach Transatlantic views on Cuba, remembering the outspoken European denunciation of the Cuban Democracy Act (Wilner, 1993). Before and after Helms-Burton, the Europeans have consistently stood against the US embargo, reaffirming their position in last year's UN General Assembly (European External Action Service, 2023).

Besides the actors with whom the US should interact about Cuba, there is a need for a vital shift in how policymakers think regarding Cuban affairs. In simple terms, the US should refrain from perceiving Cuba as a matter of domestic politics. Cuban-Americans hold a significant weight inside US politics, represented by high-ranking personalities such as Trump's new Secretary of State, the Republican Marco Rubio. Cuban-American voters confirmed Republican tendencies in the last elections, therefore influencing a confrontational foreign policy toward Cuba, which already took place during the first Trump presidency. It is safe to claim that Helms-Burton legally codified and politically invigorated the US embargo on Cuba. At the same time, the rationale for moving President Clinton to consent to Helms-Burton was related to internal politics instead of the faithful wish for changing conditions in Cuba throughout the Special Period:

The timing of the crisis added to the political pressure on Clinton. Coming just two weeks before the Florida presidential primary, it gave Republican candidates a golden opportunity to solicit Cuban-American votes by castigating Clinton for 'coddling' Castro. Reversing his stance on Helms-Burton enabled Clinton to mute the Republican attacks, and perhaps win enough Cuban-American votes in November to swing a tight race in Florida or New Jersey. (LeoGrande, 1997, p. 213).

Can US national interest diverge from voting matters? It is worth noting that the clear electoral flavor of Helms-Burton not only undermined any human rights justification of that bill but also found opposition among young Cuban Americans in Florida (López-Levy & Abrahams, 2010), who did not benefit from the "private cause of action" of Title III (U.S. Department of State, 2000).

A new strategy for US-Cuba relations can, paradoxically, come from the provisions of the very Helms-Burton Act. The 1996 law sets conditions to remove the embargo that, either upon necessity or *force majeure*, have already been met by Cuba. For example, Section 205 implies several requirements that, quite unrealistically, would constitute a democratic, liberal, and pluralist transition on the socialist island. However, we find an interesting proposition regarding a possible transition government in Cuba, which should not include the presence of Fidel and Raúl Castro. Passed away in 2016, Fidel Castro is logically out of the equation, while the beginning of Miguel Díaz-Canel's



presidency is being considered, by Cubans, the end of Raúl's dynastic continuation of Castroism (Sánchez, 2018). Furthermore, in 2021, Raúl Castro officially stepped down from the chieftaincy of the Communist Party of Cuba, ending the 1965-inaugurated presence of Castro's surname in the governing political organization (Xinhua, 2021). Assuming that Díaz-Canel's government is transitioning or willing to promote a pluralistic democratic system is naïve. A reform of US sanctions on Cuba based on this premise will not lead to any dialogue. In its vast assertions, Helms-Burton also includes economic priorities. Those are the more realistic bases for a relaxation of Washington's embargo on Cuba. Section 206 wants an eventual democratic government in Cuba that "is substantially moving toward a market-oriented economic system based on the right to own and enjoy property". Although the US cannot expect Cuba to convoke liberal elections without any incentive from its end, the push for a market-oriented economy is, in reality, already taking place. This argument will now be examined using a possible analogy with the JCPOA. Iran's convenience in signing the agreement was related to economic benefits, which were probably higher than the cost of pursuing its nuclear program (Dadpay & Tabrizy, 2021). For Cuba, liberalizing its economy, which is happening, might be highly advantageous in exchange for a relaxation of some sanctions.

Given the complexity of Helms-Burton, removing Cuba from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list can be a more realistic starting point. US Presidents have the required powers to designate or remove a country as Sponsors of Terrorism. In fact, two Republican Presidents (Reagan in 1982 and Trump in 2021) unilaterally decided to add Cuba to the mentioned list. Instead, the Obama Administration delisted Havana in 2015 (Congressional Research Service, 2021). There is no *a priori* full guarantee about Cuba's compliance or consensus. At the time of the JCPOA, influential Iranian hardliners, such as the recent presidential candidate Saeed Jalili, opposed the agreement due to mistrust toward US promises (Tehran Times, 2024). The difference is that Cuba and the US have diplomatic relations, and the revolutionary generation, correspondent the Iranian hardliners, lost significant appeal in Cuban politics. Moreover, Latin American countries recurrently confirm their opposition to the US through declarations or by voting at the UN General Assembly (Lamrani, 2021). This is the reason why easing sanctions will reapproach the Western Hemisphere and inaugurate a healthy US foreign policy for Latin America. In general, Latin American countries do not forcefully endorse the Cuban model; they instead refuse that Cuban ordinary people must pay a significant human cost due to the undeniable impact of the US embargo.

## Considering Cuba a transitioning market economy

On October 18, 2024, Cuba's nationwide and state-owned electric system collapsed due to faults in the power plant of Matanzas (New York Times, 2024). There is room to offer two debatable explanations for this event. First, Cuba's nationalized energy system is highly inefficient and faces severe infrastructural decline due to misuse and obsolescence. Second, the US embargo critically hampers Cuba's capacity to import energy and technical material from foreign vendors. Whichever of the above might sound preferable, the reality is that the longstanding power grids will force Cuba to open to free market its electric system. This is not a utopian consideration. Since 2021, Cuba has vastly liberalized its economy in favor of small and medium enterprises, known on the island as MIPYMES. This trend led numerous scholars to argue whether Cuba is already a market economy or is under transition.

Using empirical and quantitative evaluations through questionnaires posed to public and private sector workers in Cuba, Romanò and Barrera (2021) found that Cuban liberalization, ongoing since the Special Period, created an entrepreneurial class that, undoubtedly connected with the Communist Party, achieved an ostensible amount of wealth due to its private activities. Despite the intertwinements between the State and the new private sector, it is inferable that Cuban entrepreneurs may want to rapidly transition the system into a market economy. Other studies concluded that the increased Cuba's dependence on tourism fosters private initiatives from residents

in key areas like Varadero (Gimmon & Felzensztein, 2023). Within Cuban academia, public-private partnerships are increasingly accepted as positive tools to tackle infrastructural challenges, including for the very energetic sector (Triana Cordoví, 2021). Despite numerous analyses on how Cuba is transitioning to a market economy, following at least in principle Helms-Burton's requests, US foreign policy remains constrained. The conceptual exercise that US policymakers need to open doors to Cuba is laborious. Friedman (2012) mentioned the pretext of regional anti-Americanism to continue a confrontational US foreign policy in Latin America, initiated in 1954 in Guatemala and prolonged to current-day Cuba. It is almost impossible for a US president to revert or amend Helms-Burton. However, this does not mean that US foreign policy for Cuba and Latin America must follow the Cold War-inspired one of the last decades. The efforts of the Biden Administration and OFAC have been helpful in re-authorizing U-Turn transactions from persons under US jurisdiction toward Cuban *cuentapropistas*, mainly private-sector entrepreneurs (Holland & Knight, 2024). It would not be inappropriate to argue that there is a feeling in the White House that the Cuban private sector is gaining unprecedented momentum. Simultaneously, due to geographic, historical, and cultural reasons, Cuban entrepreneurs look at Miami and US creditors, if allowed, to operate their commercial activities.

The problem is still the assumption that any foreign policy for Cuba should fall into the domestic category or debate. In this sense, specific sectors of the US Congress are already countering the easing of restrictions for Cuban entrepreneurs for their own electoral goals. María Elvira Salazar, a Republican representative from Florida, and Bill Huizenga, a Republican representative from Michigan, alerted Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Treasury Yellen about the supposed perils of relaxing sanctions, declaring that: "Any efforts to diminish or circumvent the current embargo on Cuba are in contravention of U.S. law and play into the hands of our foreign adversaries, Russia and China, who are closely aligned with Cuba" (2024, p. 2). These visions are not only based on no evidence, but miss that diminishing the US embargo can benefit Washington and hamper Russian and Chinese projects. Napier (2010) warned that the embargo is eroding the US image in Latin America and also freezing trading opportunities between the US and Cuba, being absolutely interdependent realities. If Iran, without diplomatic relations with the US since 1980 and on the verge of militaristic menaces to Washington and its allies, can secure a sanctions relief mechanism (JCPOA), it is unthinkable that a similar plan cannot be extended to Cuba, which today represents no threat to US national security. The JCPOA engaged with European actors and the International Atomic Energy Agency to force Iran's reduction of nuclear development in exchange for lesser sanctions (Congressional Research Service, 2022). This formula worked for all parties, with Iran prone to international observation and limiting its nuclear plans, and US-EU relations improved in light of a relaxation of secondary sanctions (Heo, 2023). The proposal is for an agreement between the US, the EU, and Cuba to remove Havana from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list in exchange for consistent liberalizations in the Cuban economy, as set by Helms-Burton. In virtue of its broad investments and presence in Cuba, the EU could play the role of the IAEA in Iran, verifying and assisting the Cuban transition toward a market economy. Reminding of the continuous European opposition to the US embargo, a Cuban JCPOA might strengthen Transatlantic relations in a critical international atmosphere.

Latin America will undoubtedly welcome, follow, and participate in this eventual project. Exiting Cuba from the State Sponsors of Terrorism embraces Latin American demands and also signals that there are changes in US hemispheric foreign policy. On October 22, 2024, the movement People's Forum advertised a letter in the New York Times, exhorting Biden to remove Cuba from the list in its last 90 days of ruling (Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). US foreign policy could see a drastic change in less than three months, and probably make or break the future of the Western Hemisphere. A Cuban JCPOA would revive the humanity of US sanctions and help Washington portray a benevolent image to its European allies and Southern neighbors.

## Conclusion

To achieve a Cuban JCPOA, US policymakers should start considering Cuba as a matter of foreign, not domestic policy. From Helms-Burton to Trump’s inclusion of Cuba in the State Sponsors of Terrorism, it has become clear that sanctions on Cuba are thought for electoral outcomes. In Latin America, the US needs to redefine its agenda, and reforming the Cuban embargo might be an outstanding first step. Multilaterally, the US can work with the UNSC, the EU, and Latin American partners to set conditions for a dialogue with Cuba. Several of Helms-Burton’s provisions are impossible to currently achieve and unrealistic to demand. However, if trade really drivers change, then the US should realize that Cuba is already transitioning toward a market economy.

In 1996, the assumption was that a liberalized Cuban economy would contribute to political reforms. Today, Cuba’s conditions are dramatically worse than even during the Special Period. By removing Cuba from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list, and via a JCPOA-inspired agreement with international verification on the Cuban transition to a market economy, the US may finally use a multilateral effort to review its sanctioning power in Latin America. The recent crises facing Cuba, from electric power scarcity to economic issues, are partial guarantees for compliance. A Cuban JCPOA could function without significant obstacles, given Cuba’s need for smoother foreign direct investments. Political willingness can turn the economic weapon into a new paradigm for inter-American benefits.

## Notes

1. To achieve a Cuban JCPOA, US policymakers should start considering Cuba as a matter of foreign, not domestic policy.
2. From Helms-Burton to Trump’s inclusion of Cuba in the State Sponsors of Terrorism, it has become clear that sanctions on Cuba are thought for electoral outcomes.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## Policy Perspective

# Redefining Masculinities: Navigating Pushback to Gender Mainstreaming in the MENA Region through Positive Masculinities

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**Abstract** – This policy brief examines the potential of redefining masculinities to counter resistance to gender mainstreaming in the MENA region. Despite robust global support for frameworks such as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agendas, deeply held cultural conservatism continues to drive resistance across the region. The paper advocates for promoting positive masculinities as a strategic tool for behavioral change. Through approaches that connect with local traditions and values, it proposes actionable solutions to engage key stakeholders in reshaping social norms. Recommendations include integrating positive masculinities into education, community advocacy, storytelling, and capacity building programs for policymakers to transform gender dynamics and foster more equitable societies.

**Keywords:** MENA region; gender mainstreaming; positive masculinities; Women, Peace and Security; gender equality; social norms; behavioral interventions.

## Introduction

Despite a growing body of research on gender and security, the role of men and masculinities remains largely overlooked in policy frameworks and programming on the ground. Of the nine UN Security Council Resolutions on WPS, only three (2106, 2242, and 2467) explicitly reference men, primarily viewing them as victims of violence or allies in its prevention (Wright, 2019). Experts conclude that, while men and boys play a crucial role in advancing gender justice, WPS frameworks fail to capture a nuanced perspective of masculinities and to engage them in a meaningful way (Duriesmith, 2019; Myrntinen, Khattab, & Naujoks, 2017). Additionally, there is a significant gap in both policy and academic scholarship when it comes to the resistance these initiatives encounter, and the tools needed to effectively counter such opposition.

The paper aims at filling this gap by exploring strategies to counter resistance to gender-related initiatives in the MENA region and engage stakeholders in advancing gender equality within the

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region's WPS and Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agendas. Given increasing pushback against women's rights, culturally sensitive interventions are needed to shift conservative norms. The author discusses how encouraging positive masculinities and promoting qualities such as empathy, respect, and fairness can help overcome resistance and support lasting change toward gender equality.

This paper reviews relevant theoretical and policy frameworks, examines behavioral interventions for shifting social norms in the region and offers an analysis of the pushback faced by women's rights movements in the MENA region, including its root causes. Subsequently, the paper proposes actionable solutions on using the debates on positive masculinities as an efficient strategy to counteract the resistance from conservative groups. The author contributes to global efforts to advance women's empowerment by emphasizing the strategic promotion of positive masculinities as an essential tool for gender programming.

## Theoretical and policy framework

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, integrating policy analysis, case studies, and literature reviews on gender norms, masculinities, and behavioral interventions in the MENA region. By examining policy documents, academic studies, and reports, it assesses the role of positive masculinities in addressing resistance to gender mainstreaming. The research explores historical and contemporary perspectives on gender norms and draws insights from initiatives promoting positive masculinities.

The MENA region was selected for analysis because of its active efforts in gender mainstreaming, including National Action Plans and commitments to Women, Peace and Security (WPS). Although there has been real progress in addressing the gender gap, resistance from conservative social groups continues to be a major challenge. For example, in post-Assad Syria, gender has become one of the most contentious issues. While activists express concern about the role of women in the public sphere (Sallal, 2025), efforts to promote women's rights are often perceived by conservative groups as externally imposed, fueling concerns about "politicization of the agenda" (Rozana, 2024).

In this context, international actors operating in similar environments must demonstrate diplomacy and cultural sensitivity. Considering that gender inequality has long been associated with the persistence of discriminatory social norms shaping power dynamics between men and women, reshaping them to influence behavioral patterns serves as a critical starting point in the process of promoting women's rights. This paper aims to explore the potential of positive masculinities as a strategic avenue for advancing women's empowerment while mitigating resistance to gender mainstreaming.

Research highlights the role of behavioral interventions in shaping social norms, including gender equality. For instance, economic studies show how social norms influence female labor participation (Codazzi, Pero, & Sant'Anna, 2018; Chen & Ge, 2018; Bussolo et al., 2023). In Saudi Arabia, Bursztyn, Gonzalez, and Yanagizawa-Drott (2020) found that most men privately support women working but underestimate similar support among peers. Correcting these misperceptions through experiments increased support for female employment, highlighting the importance of perceived social acceptability in shaping household decisions.

The argument that perceived social acceptability of certain norms correlates with individual acceptability within households is an important takeaway for future gender programming in the region. These findings highlight the effectiveness of behavioral interventions, particularly low-cost strategies such as information provision, in changing people's ideas and attitudes. As resistance to gender mainstreaming grows, awareness-raising initiatives about the harms and the "real cost" of toxic masculinity (Heilman et. al., 2019) could support global efforts to advance women's empowerment.

## **Women's rights movements in the MENA region and resistance to gender mainstreaming**

The history of women's movements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region reflects a complex interplay of nation-building and women's grassroots activism. For example, in the early 20th century, women's rights became deeply intertwined with nationalist movements, as women played important roles in anti-colonial movements and the formation of political groups, often situating their demands for equality within the broader struggle for national sovereignty and reforms (Husseini, 2021; Magdy, 2017; Evrard, 2014). For instance, in Egypt, figures like Huda Sha'arawi and the Egyptian Feminist Union advocated for education and political participation for women while also supporting the country's independence from British rule. In Algeria, women actively contributed to the independence movement against French colonialism, participating as combatants, organizers, and community leaders (Harize, 2020).

Post-independence, several MENA countries implemented reforms aimed at enhancing women's rights, reflecting both the influence of women's activism and state-led efforts. In Tunisia, reforms under the 1956 Code of Personal Status outlawed polygamy, established judicial divorce, and set minimum marriage age (Khedher, 2017; Whidden, 2019). These policies underscored the state's commitment to redefining traditional gender roles within legal framework. Similarly, in Egypt, women movements' efforts culminated in Egyptian women gaining the right to vote and run for office in 1956 and continued during the presidency of Anwar Sadat when women acquired more economic rights (Magdy, 2017).

Together, these examples show how women's rights in the region have been shaped not just by governments, but by the determination and activism of women themselves who worked from the ground up to push for change, even in challenging sociopolitical circumstances. Ratification of international conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), underscores many MENA countries' commitment to women's empowerment. The international commitments to advance women's empowerment in the region signal a willingness to align with global norms. However, the reality on the ground is often more ambiguous. Reservations on marriage, inheritance, and nationality provisions reflect the enduring influence of cultural, religious, and societal factors that often impede full gender equality (Hussaini, 2021).

Despite the introduction of national strategies aimed at advancing gender equality, these efforts often face significant challenges in practice, primarily because their implementation is perceived by certain actors as threats to existing power structures. Backlash to gender mainstreaming refers to the resistance that emerges in response to policies and initiatives aimed at advancing gender equality and challenging established norms. According to researchers that explore challenges to women's rights activism in the MENA region, it manifests in various forms, from rhetorical opposition in public discourse to institutional barriers (Hussaini, 2021; Al-Ali, 2019). The resistance is not only deeply rooted in traditional values and power structures but is also driven by concerns about identity threats.

Many view feminist movements and gender equality interventions in the MENA region as foreign impositions, particularly those funded by international donors, which are often framed as part of a Western agenda. This perception is compounded by the association of gender equality efforts with LGBTQ+ rights, a connection that many conservative groups interpret as a threat to family values and moral norms. As a result, research confirms that the backlash against women's rights movements has intensified, creating a shrinking space for women's rights activism and making it increasingly difficult for local organizations to advocate for change or gain the support needed to challenge entrenched power structures (Kvinna till Kvinna, 2021).

Furthermore, gender mainstreaming is often viewed with suspicion due to deeply ingrained social norms surrounding masculinities and femininities, which are closely tied to cultural concepts of honour and family reputation. In many societies within the region, the honour of both men and



women is often framed within the context of maintaining traditional gender roles and societal expectations (Halabi, Founouni, Arawi, 2019). Masculinity across the Arab world is frequently associated with control, rigidity, aggression (Alsawalqa, Nasr Alrawashdeh, and Hasan, 2021) and commemoration of kinship and warfare (Aldoughli, 2024), while femininity is often linked to modesty, subordination, and adherence to prescribed social norms. Any challenge to these established roles can be perceived as a threat to societal integrity.

To summarise, resistance to gender equality initiatives in the MENA region arises from a combination of cultural, political, and societal factors:

1. *Social norms and traditions.* Traditional gender norms, prevalent in many communities across the MENA region and beyond, view men as protectors and breadwinners and women as caregivers. Any attempt to change or reverse these roles is perceived as a threat to local values and traditions.
2. *Religious interpretations.* Religious teachings are often used to justify male superiority and oppose gender equality, framing gender mainstreaming efforts as contradictory to religion.
3. *Conflation of gender mainstreaming with promoting LGBTQ+.* The association of gender equality with LGBTQ+ advocacy often exacerbates resistance.
4. *Perceptions of western influence.* Internationally funded gender mainstreaming programs are often viewed with suspicion, as if they were trying to spread foreign ideas inconsistent with local context.

## Using positive masculinities to trigger change: Case studies

Social scientists and humanitarian practitioners underline the importance of using positive masculinities as a key strategy for advancing gender equality and preventing gender-based violence (United Nations Population Fund, 2022). This approach fosters emotional intelligence, empathy, and equitable relationships, offering an alternative to traditional norms that reinforce dominance and emotional suppression (Perez-Martinez et al., 2023). In contrast, harmful forms of masculinity often make violence seem acceptable and help sustain patriarchal systems that block progress on women's rights. By challenging harmful gender norms and stereotypes, promoting positive masculinities empowers women and benefits men by improving their emotional well-being (Heilman et al., 2019). While ongoing monitoring and evaluation are essential, similar initiatives across the MENA region and beyond have already taken shape.

In the West Bank, the HAYA Joint Program's "Men's Alliance" engages 60 men and young men in Bethlehem and Hebron to advocate for gender equality and combat violence against women (UNFPA, 2022). In Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Palestine "Dare to Care" program promotes shared caregiving and household responsibilities of men and boys as a strategic entry point (UN Women). In line with this approach, an advocacy and behavioral change campaign "Because I am a man" was launched across the region. It encourages men to take an active role in caregiving, childcare, domestic work, and preventing violence against women and girls (UN Women).

Similar initiatives extend to Central Asia, where UNFPA's Kazakhstan Communications Plan guides civil society and policymakers in engaging men against gender-based violence and promoting women's rights (UNFPA, 2023). In Turkmenistan, UNFPA's #MenEngage platform provides resources, policy updates, and discussions to encourage male involvement in gender equality efforts (UNFPA). In the framework of this campaign, UNFPA provides information on reproductive health, active fatherhood, and positive gender practices at work and society. In Uzbekistan, UNFPA launched a capacity building program aimed at preparing trainers to involve men in efforts to prevent GBV (UNFPA, 2024).

## Policy recommendations

To effectively address resistance and mitigate backlash against gender mainstreaming initiatives in the MENA region, this paper advocates for the integration of the concept of positive masculinities into gender programming through the implementation of the following strategies:

1. *Incorporate positive masculinities in educational curricula.* Gender programming should engage men and boys as advocates for women's rights, starting with educational curricula in schools, universities, and potentially the military. For example, schools can promote gender norms and values associated with positive masculinities, while military training in countries with conscription such as Morocco or Qatar could include modules on developing emotional intelligence, cooperation, and respectful relationships. Training teachers or military psychologists to facilitate inclusive discussions on the role of positive masculinities for communities and families is also crucial.
2. *Partner with local role models for men.* Engaging influential figures, such as religious leaders, celebrities, social media influencers, and youth leaders, is crucial to promoting gender equality. These role models can play a key role in framing positive masculinities within culturally and religiously resonant narratives, helping to challenge gender stereotypes and mitigate backlash. Additionally, creating culturally sensitive content that aligns with local values and highlights the power of positive masculinities can strengthen the efforts of gender programming.
3. *Counter pushback through media.* Storytelling can play an effective role in countering misinformation about gender equality and reshaping public perceptions by highlighting relatable narratives. Collaborating with media outlets to create content that underscores the benefits of positive masculinities such as fostering stronger family bonds and building safer communities can also influence public opinion. The goal is to convey that positive masculinities are not a threat.
4. *Strengthen intersectional approaches.* Recognizing that class, religion, geography, and gender frequently overlap is essential to effectively address resistance to gender equality. Conducting intersectional analysis to uncover the unique barriers faced by diverse communities, including minorities, allows for the development of more nuanced and impactful interventions. Gender programming must be tailored to address the specific needs of rural populations, low-income groups, and other marginalized communities.
5. *Enhance data collection and research.* Enhancing data collection on resistance dynamics is crucial for informing effective policymaking and advocacy efforts. Systematic research can uncover emerging trends, identify key actors, and assess the impact of existing interventions across the MENA region. Collaboration with academic institutions to examine gender norms and the drivers of resistance, as well as conducting in-depth studies on the primary stakeholders behind the pushback and their strategies, should be prioritized to ensure targeted and evidence-based approaches.
6. *Build capacity among policymakers.* Equipping activists and policymakers with the skills to navigate resistance and promote gender equality is crucial. Workshops on negotiation and conflict resolution for activists, as well as providing policymakers with evidence-based research and appropriate training by scholars and practitioners to support gender-sensitive policies, will help advance gender programming in the region.

## Conclusion

The promotion of positive masculinities by international development actors and policymakers can lead to long-term behavioral changes among men, with the goal of advancing gender equity and reducing gender-based violence. When men are encouraged to demonstrate qualities such as empathy, respect, and emotional intelligence, harmful

social norms can be challenged at the societal level. This approach presents an alternative to traditional masculinities rooted in aggression and control, helping to ensure that violence is reduced and gender justice thrives.

Changing social norms is a non-linear gradual process – it often starts when enough people begin to act differently and those around them take notice. When men see others embracing more respectful, empathetic ways of being, and realise they too can benefit from these changes, it creates momentum. Sharing the idea of positive masculinities and its relatable examples can be an affordable and powerful way to encourage broader shifts in behavior. However, implementing gender-sensitive initiatives often triggers resistance from conservative groups. Although significant progress has been achieved in several sectors such as access to education, deep-seated cultural conservatism makes gender programming complex.

Overcoming this resistance requires practical solutions rooted in local realities. This might include working with respected religious leaders, using storytelling to highlight new version of masculinities, and updating school textbooks and other teaching materials to reflect values such as compassion and fairness. Media campaigns and using role models could be helpful too, provided they speak the language that resonates with their target audiences. Finally, incorporating intersectional approach ensures that gender-sensitive initiatives consider the needs of diverse communities.

Efforts to address the resistance to gender equality in the MENA region must start with contextualising the root causes of the backlash and understanding the key actors involved. To make real progress, it is important to map and engage with the main resistance actors in ways that feel respectful and relevant to them. This means considering local needs and concerns and then tailoring the message. For international actors, bringing cultural awareness and a spirit of collaboration to this work can help create space for honest dialogue where both men and women take part in shaping more cohesive and equitable societies.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

Julia Rushchenko holds a PhD in Criminology and is a Research Fellow at King's College London. She has extensive experience working in international development with United Nations agencies, including UNFPA, UNDP, IOM, and UNODC, across the Middle East and Asia.

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*Policy Perspective*

# Only an African Solution Can Ensure Security in the Sahel

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**Abstract** – The Sahel region faces a deepening security crisis, driven by the convergence of terrorism, organised crime, and political instability. Despite extensive external military interventions, these efforts have largely failed to address the underlying causes of insecurity, resulting in rising disillusionment among local populations. This policy perspective argues that only African-led solutions, grounded in local realities, can effectively tackle the region's complex challenges. The involvement of African institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), alongside locally driven initiatives, is crucial. Western interventions have been criticised for their military-focused approach, neglecting socio-political dimensions and local needs, while non-Western powers like China and Russia are increasingly shaping the region's geopolitical landscape. To achieve sustainable peace, security strategies must prioritise community-based governance, engage civil society—especially women—and ensure that solutions align with the unique political, cultural, and economic contexts of the Sahel. Ultimately, this commentary calls for a shift towards African ownership of the security agenda, supported by international partners in a non-intrusive manner, to foster stability and long-term peace in the Sahel.

**Keywords:** Sahel; Security Crisis; African Union

## Introduction

The Sahel region is currently experiencing an unprecedented security crisis, driven by a complex intersection of terrorism, organised crime, and political instability. Over the past decade, the region has been caught in a vicious cycle of violence, where external military interventions have repeatedly failed to address the root causes of insecurity. This has resulted in widespread disillusionment among local populations, further exacerbating the instability. As external actors struggle to contain the rising threats, a critical reassessment of the security approach in the Sahel is needed. This policy perspective argues that only African-led, locally contextualised solutions can effectively tackle the region's challenges. The involvement of African institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic

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Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is crucial, alongside grassroots initiatives that address the socio-political dimensions of the crisis. It is time for African actors to assume ownership of the security agenda, with international support that respects local priorities, in order to invigorate sustainable peace and stability in the Sahel.

## **The Sahel crisis: An escalating security threat**

The security landscape of the Sahel has dramatically deteriorated in recent years, particularly in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. The region is plagued by a convergence of factors: extremist terrorism, violent separatist movements, human trafficking, drug smuggling, and weak governance. Various jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), continue to expand their reach, destabilising vast areas of the Sahel and threatening neighbouring regions.

Despite numerous interventions, security remains elusive. French-led Operation Barkhane and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) have struggled to contain violence. In 2021, reports estimated that jihadist activity in Mali alone increased by over 30%, while human rights violations related to military interventions surged by 44% across the Sahel (Human Rights Watch, 2019). This failure has been compounded by political instability, as seen in Mali's repeated coups, which undermine regional governance and further weaken the capacity to manage security challenges (Vélez, 2023).

## **The limits of external interventions**

A key factor in the Sahel's continued instability is the limited effectiveness of external interventions. Western-led military initiatives, such as Operation Barkhane, initially succeeded in containing the spread of jihadist movements but have failed to secure lasting peace. While these operations have been valuable in disrupting the activities of extremist groups, they have been widely criticised for not addressing the underlying issues of poverty, political marginalisation, and weak state institutions.

One of the core criticisms of external interventions is their failure to align with the local context. Western actors often approach the Sahel as a purely military challenge, neglecting the social, political, and economic dimensions of the conflict. Additionally, local populations have become increasingly resistant to foreign involvement, perceiving it as intrusive and disconnected from their needs. This sentiment has fuelled anti-Western rhetoric and contributed to growing support for alternative actors, such as Russia and China, who have been expanding their influence in countries like Mali and Burkina Faso (Kotajoki, 2024).

## **China and Russia's growing influence**

The presence of China and Russia in the Sahel has shifted the geopolitical dynamics of the region. Both countries have capitalised on the growing disillusionment with Western interventions, presenting themselves as more neutral partners with fewer political conditions attached to their aid and military support. In Mali, the 2021 military coup government quickly sought to strengthen ties with Russia, even as Western countries condemned the coup and threatened sanctions. Russia has supplied military equipment and mercenaries, increasing its influence in the region. Similarly, China's economic investments, including infrastructure projects, have further entrenched its role as a key player in the Sahel.

This increasing involvement of non-Western powers introduces a new layer of complexity to the Sahel's security landscape. While Russia and China offer alternatives to Western intervention, their growing influence raises concerns about their long-term intentions. Moreover, the introduction of new actors does not necessarily translate into more sustainable solutions. Both Russia and China have

limited experience in addressing the region's multifaceted challenges, and their interventions may prioritise strategic interests over genuine peacebuilding.

## **The need for African-led solutions**

Given the limitations of external actors, the future of security in the Sahel must be rooted in African-led solutions. The African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) must play a central role in coordinating security efforts, drawing on their knowledge of local dynamics and regional relationships. Regional initiatives, such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, represent a step in the right direction but need more robust support and coordination from African leaders.

The most promising approach to addressing the Sahel's security challenges is to move beyond national and regional frameworks and focus on hyper-local solutions. African security strategies must be tailored to the unique political, social, and cultural contexts of each country and locality within the Sahel. For example, in areas where government institutions are weak or absent, local governance structures, such as village councils or religious authorities, must be empowered to play a central role in maintaining peace and security. Successful models of community policing and grassroots dialogue with religious leaders have already shown promising results in fostering stability at the local level.

However, local solutions cannot succeed in isolation. They must be coordinated with national governments and regional bodies to ensure that they are scalable and sustainable. African states must also strengthen their institutions, particularly in terms of governance and rule of law, to ensure that security gains at the local level are not undermined by corruption or political instability at the national level.

## **The role of civil society and societal engagement**

One of the key aspects of an African-led approach to Sahel security is societal engagement. Too often, security strategies have been top-down, excluding the voices of local communities. To be effective, security interventions must be participatory and inclusive, drawing on the knowledge and expertise of civil society organisations, youth groups, and women's associations.

Women, in particular, have a critical role to play in peacebuilding efforts. Research has shown that peace agreements that include women are more likely to last, as women tend to focus on long-term community development and reconciliation (UNOWAS, 2024; Mari Tripp et al., 2025). In the Sahel, women's organisations have been at the forefront of initiatives aimed at addressing the root causes of violence, such as poverty, education, and healthcare. Empowering women and ensuring their inclusion in security planning and decision-making processes will be essential for creating lasting peace in the region.

## **Conclusion: A call for African ownership**

The security crisis in the Sahel is one of the most pressing challenges facing the African continent today. While external interventions have played a role in containing some of the violence, they have not addressed the root causes of instability and have often exacerbated tensions. Only through coordinated, African-led initiatives that are grounded in local realities can the Sahel overcome its security challenges. African leaders, supported by international partners in a non-intrusive manner, must prioritise local solutions, societal engagement, and regional cooperation. These strategies, rooted in the lived experiences and aspirations of Sahelian communities, hold the key to ensuring sustainable peace and stability in the region.

In conclusion, the Sahel requires a security approach that is led by Africans for Africans. The future of the region depends on the ability of African states and regional bodies to take ownership of the security agenda and work with local communities to build solutions that are both context-specific and



inclusive. With the right support, these initiatives have the potential to create lasting peace and stability in one of the most volatile regions of the world.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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*Policy Perspective*

# Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula and Regional Security

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**Abstract** – The Korean Peninsula has emerged as a focal point in the broader geopolitical competition between the U.S. and China, often characterized as the “New Cold War”. This policy perspective paper examines the impact of increasing bloc formation on regional security, particularly the role of North Korea as a key player in the revisionist bloc with China and Russia. North Korea’s strategic value has significantly increased in this new global order, positioning it as a critical actor in the confrontation between the revisionist and liberal blocs. The paper also explores the implications of North Korea’s alignment with Russia and China on its nuclear ambitions and provocations. Additionally, the paper analyses the security responses by South Korea, Japan, and the U.S., culminating in the formation of the trilateral security consultative body (JAKORUS). While the institutionalization of this alliance is key to maintaining regional stability, its sustainability hinges on public support and continued diplomatic cohesion amidst shifting domestic political landscapes. This paper contributes to the discourse on crisis management and security strategies in the Indo-Pacific region under the evolving New Cold War dynamics.

**Keywords:** Korean Peninsula; New Cold War; regional security; bloc formation; trilateral security; revisionist bloc

## Introduction

The current international order is facing significant changes. The global trend in the early post-Cold War era was liberalization. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a belief that if countries with different identities were ‘engaged’ to induce economic liberalization, it could eventually lead to political liberalization. The United States pursued such an engagement policy towards China. It supported China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and granted China Most Favored Nation (MFN) status, deepening trade relations between the two countries. In the 2000s, while the United States was fighting the war on terror and exhausting its national power in Afghanistan and Iraq, China grew dramatically, transforming into a great power that not only dominated the region but also challenged the hegemonic status of the United States. Contrary to the U.S. intention to make

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China a responsible member of the international community, China has become a revisionist state that threatens the existing order, intending to revise rather than conform to the U.S.-centered international order. With the U.S. declaring a full-fledged 'strategic competition' against China, the international order has regressed into an era of great power competition.

The competition between the U.S. and China is often referred to as a new Cold War, drawing an analogy to the Cold War between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union. Of course, the strategic competition between the U.S. and China and the resulting changes in the international order have many differences from the strategic competition and Cold War order between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union. Even two snowflakes, when viewed under a magnifying glass, can be seen to have very different forms. However, snowflakes of different forms share an important qualitative commonality: they are formed when water evaporated from the earth rises in low pressure and collides with high pressure, and such snowflakes have distinctly different qualities from raindrops. The metaphor of the new Cold War should also be understood in terms of the qualitative similarities with the old Cold War. The old Cold War and the new Cold War share qualitative similarities as typical strategic competitions of great powers on a global scale. In 2021, Mearsheimer wrote that "today, China and the United States are locked in what can only be called a new cold war

## **New Cold War and blocization of order**

What are the qualitative commonalities between the Old Cold War and the New Cold War? The strategic competition of great powers inevitably involves 'geopolitical' competition for the preservation and expansion of their 'sphere of influence'. Just like during the Cold War, the U.S. and China are engaged in a geopolitical competition to preserve their own sphere of influence and erode that of the other. If during the Cold War, the U.S. and the Soviet Union mainly competed geopolitically over Europe, now the U.S. and China are engaged in a geopolitical competition over the core region of the Indo-Pacific. The competition for the expansion of spheres of influence to the 'Global South' is also fierce. The main regions for the preservation and expansion of spheres of influence have changed, but the nature of the competition can be said to be quite similar.

Competition among great powers often involves the formation of blocs. This was the case during the Cold War, and the competition among great powers before World War I and World War II also proceeded with the formation of blocs. Just like during the Cold War, the new Cold War also involves the formation of blocs, and competition is intensifying between blocs. The current international order tends to be divided into a bloc of liberal states represented by the U.S. and a bloc of revisionist states represented by China and Russia. Of course, it is also true that there are quite a few countries, such as India, Turkey, and Brazil, that do not lean towards one bloc and are walking a tightrope between the two blocs. The Global South is also staying in the middle ground, striving to maximize its national interests. Considering these aspects, the new Cold War can be said to be weaker in terms of blocization and more multipolar compared to the Cold War. However, considering that a considerable number of countries adopted a policy of non-alignment while advocating a neutralist line during the Cold War, the formation of blocs in the Cold War and the new Cold War can be said to be a matter of degree.

This formation of camps tends to be more clearly manifested in the case of great power competition that involves ideological competition. Like the Cold War, the new Cold War also has an ideological flavor. Of course, China is not immersed in a dogmatic ideology that communism must be propagated worldwide, as the Soviet Union did in the early days of the Cold War. However, China has the perception that its unique political and economic model can be an alternative to the American-style liberal democratic political model and market capitalist economic model. Before the opening ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, Xi Jinping held a summit with Vladimir Putin, who was visiting China, and the two leaders revealed this perception in a joint statement issued after the meeting.

The biggest difference between the new Cold War and the Cold War is that the new Cold War has a much higher degree of economic interdependence between camps compared to the Cold War. During the Cold War, there was no significant economic relationship between the liberal camp and the communist camp. In contrast, the economies of the U.S. and China are intertwined like threads through various supply chains. High economic interdependence makes the geo-economic competition of the new Cold War very complex. Nevertheless, the trend of camp formation in the new Cold War is expected to strengthen, and competition between camps is also expected to intensify.

### **Regional Security: Challenge of Revisionist Bloc**

Blocization is the most conspicuous in Asian security order. China and Russia are flaunting their 'limitless friendship', and the relationship between Russia and North Korea morphed into a de facto military alliance. North Korea now has become an indispensable member of the revisionist bloc.

North Korea welcomes the arrival of New Cold war era. North Korea was 'mentally collapsed (멘붕)' when the U.S.-Soviet Cold War ended somewhat abruptly. When Russia and China successively established diplomatic relations with South Korea, North Korea felt a strong sense of betrayal. When communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe were falling one after another, Kim Il-sung was restless, and he began to embark on nuclear weapons development in earnest. However, the international order of detente brought harsh trials to North Korea. While countries that rode the wave of globalization achieved unprecedented development, North Korea, which chose isolation, became one of the most backward countries in the world. Now the arrival of the new Cold War era is acting as a major strategic opportunity for North Korea.

In the international order of blocization, North Korea's value has risen sharply. This also means that the strategic value of North Korea has increased for China and Russia. Unlike most countries in the world that want to avoid the new Cold War, North Korea is rather welcoming the arrival of the new Cold War. North Korea knows this and is performing the role of a vanguard of revisionist states. North Korea is one of the few countries that support Russia in the Ukraine war. At a state banquet with Putin during his visit to Russia in 2023, Kim Jong-un branded the U.S., Japan, and South Korea as "evil groups" and ignited his will to "punish them and win in the fight for justice."

Now China and Russia act as guardians of North Korea. In the early 2000s, blocization was not prominent, China and Russia had shown efforts for North Korea's denuclearization, but now they are not even pretending. Rather, they are covering up North Korea's nuclear missile provocations. After completing his fifth inauguration, Putin visited China and held a summit with President Xi Jinping. In a joint statement after the summit, both leaders warned against "military intimidation" of North Korea. China and Russia will continue to indulge North Korea, which is standing at the forefront of the new Cold War competition and playing the role of a vanguard.

Russia is leading the way in neutralizing the UN sanctions resolution against North Korea, which it passed with its approval as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Although it is true that China wants to keep a certain distance from North Korea and Russia, which are going too far, the possibility of China leaving the 'North Korea-China-Russia' bloc is very slim.

### **Regional security: Response of ROK, Japan, and the US**

According to Walt (1981), the most important reason for states to form alliances or security consultative bodies is the sharing of a "common threat perception" between those states. The reason why the three countries of South Korea, Japan, and the United States held the Camp David Summit and launched a trilateral security consultative body is because they perceive the challenge of the revisionist bloc as a common threat, and they have come to share the perception that they can respond to such threats through close trilateral security cooperation. All three countries have a clear

identity as liberal states and perceive the strengthening of solidarity and attempts to change the status quo by the revisionist bloc as a serious threat to their core national interests.

In fact, the need to strengthen the trilateral security policy alliance of South Korea, Japan, and the United States has been raised for quite a long time. Nevertheless, there were many difficulties in actually building a trilateral security consultative body. The most important reason was the difficulty of the relationship between South Korea and Japan. The South Korea-Japan relationship was at its lowest due to the cancellation of the comfort women agreement and the issue of forced labor compensation.

The relationship between South Korea and Japan is a highly volatile political issue in both countries. Especially in South Korea, it can be said that domestic politics account for more than half of the impact on the relationship with Japan. Nonetheless, President Yoon Seok-yeol made considerable concessions to Japan, omitting domestic political ground work, and held a South Korea-Japan summit for the first time in four years as a South Korean president. This bold decision allowed him to secure some momentum for the restoration of South Korea-Japan relations. It appears that the people who were skeptical about President Yoon's rapid efforts to improve South Korea-Japan relations later endorsed the president's decision, because many people in South Korea have come to share the perception that despite the numerous problems between South Korea and Japan, such as history and territorial issues, they need to hurry to restore South Korea-Japan relations and strengthen South Korea-US-Japan cooperation to respond to the challenge of the revisionist bloc. As North Korea's nuclear missile threat goes beyond the line and becomes fierce, and China and Russia are circling around North Korea, public agreed that South Korea needs to improve its relationship with Japan.

### **Concluding remarks: Future of JAKORUS**

The South Korea-Japan-US security consultative body, which was born through the Camp David Summit, was a strategic decision by three countries to preserve and strengthen the region's liberal international order. South Korea and Japan have laid the groundwork for cooperation on many issues in the Indo-Pacific in the future, and South Korea has also created an opportunity to strengthen global hub state diplomacy. Both countries secured a mechanism to respond more efficiently to North Korea's nuclear missile provocations, and established an important cooperation mechanism to defend against the expansion of the sphere of influence to the Korean Peninsula by the North Korea-China-Russia revisionist bloc.

The key to the future of trilateral security consultative body is to secure sustainability. Three countries have made great efforts to institutionalize the consultative body to secure the sustainability of trilateral security cooperation. If trilateral cooperation is institutionalized, the trilateral consultative body will be relatively free from domestic political changes. However, even if a diplomatic agreement is institutionalized, a situation where it is invalidated can occur when a politician with a very different perspective on the direction of foreign and security policy becomes the top leader. The Moon Jae-in government of South Korea canceled the comfort women agreement, and the former Trump administration of the United States unilaterally canceled many diplomatic agreements and agreements such as the Paris Climate Agreement. This suggests that institutionalization is a necessary condition for securing sustainability, but not a sufficient condition.

In order to secure sustainability, it is important to secure sufficient public support in addition to institutionalization. It is difficult for even the top leader to arbitrarily overturn a diplomatic agreement that receives considerable public support. In order to derive more active public support for the trilateral consultative body, it is necessary to emphasize more that the trilateral alliance of liberal states is directly linked to the core national interests of South Korea and Japan. It is necessary to actively persuade the people that protecting the existing liberal international order is directly linked to the 'national interest' of South Korea and Japan, despite the numerous problems between South Korea and Japan.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

Jaechun Kim is a political scientist trained at Yale University (MA in International Relations; M.Phil. in Political Science; Ph.D. in Political Science). Before joining Sogang GSIS, he worked for Yale University as lecturer for the Department of Political Science and Yale Center for the International and Area Studies (YCIAS). Earlier in his career, he had worked for the National Assembly of Korea as legislative assistant and the Bankers Trust Company as credit analyst. Since early 2003, he has been advising ISR (International Strategic Reconciliation) Korea as board member and executive director. His research interests include International Relations Theory, U.S. Foreign Policy Making, International Security and Peace, and Intelligence Policy. His recent publications deal with intelligence policy of the U.S. during the Cold War era to secretly undermine democratically elected governments and the Democratic Peace scholarship. At Sogang, he offers courses on International Relations, International Security and Peace, International Political Economy, Research Methods, and American Politics and Society.

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*Policy Perspective*

# Evaluating Trump's Tariffs: Impact on Sino-Moroccan Relations and Morocco's Economy

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**Abstract** – This paper delves into the impacts of President Donald Trump's reemergence in politics, focusing on his protectionist trade policies and their effects on a global scale. Trump's tariffs have sparked considerable debate in the international economic community, affecting trade relations and economic stability in numerous countries. The analysis pays particular attention to Morocco, a country situated at the intersection of Africa and Europe, which is currently navigating the challenges of a shifting global trade landscape. The study explores how the current political situation and the economic policies influenced by U.S. directives challenge Morocco's long-established role in international trade agreements. It also looks into both the immediate and long-term impacts of these tariff policies on Morocco's economic stability and growth. As Morocco aims to strengthen its influence in Africa, its relationship with China becomes increasingly important. This analysis highlights the direct effects of U.S. trade policies on Morocco and illustrates the wider implications for global trade dynamics. By examining these interrelated factors, we can gain a clearer understanding of the future of Morocco's economic outlook in an ever-evolving international context. The findings emphasize the necessity for countries like Morocco to strategically adapt to changing trade conditions.

**Keywords:** Morocco; Sino-Morocco Relations; Trade; Trump's Tariffs

## Introduction

American President Donald Trump's resurgence in the political arena and the revival of a bold, protectionist trade agenda have stirred considerable debate within the global economy, prompting discussions in political and economic circles worldwide. As countries reevaluate their positions in this transformed trade environment, the effects of Trump's policies extend far beyond U.S. borders, significantly influencing global markets and partnerships in often underestimated ways. While much attention has rightly been directed toward the U.S.-China relationship—an essential component of this dynamic—the implications of these tariff policies are resonating in lesser-noticed regions, such as Morocco. Strategically located at the crossroads of Africa and Europe, Morocco navigates the complexities of shifting global trade forces. Although the country has long been a participant in various

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international trade agreements, the current political landscape and trade directives pose challenges to its economic stability and growth. This paper investigates the repercussions of Trump's tariff policies on the Moroccan economy (Bown, 2019). It analyzes the immediate consequences and their far-reaching implications for the nation's evolving relationship with China as it seeks to broaden its influence in Africa, including Morocco. Understanding the interplay of these factors will be crucial for comprehending Morocco's future trade dynamics and economic prospects in a rapidly evolving world.

## **A re-examination of Trump's tariff policy**

Trump's 'America First' philosophy has led to significant changes in the U.S. trade landscape, including implementing extensive tariffs on Chinese goods and exports from various trade partners, such as Morocco. In 2025, the U.S. government made a surprising decision to impose a 10% tariff on Moroccan products, which caught many off guard, especially considering the active Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the two nations (Wall Street Journal, 2025). This unexpected move sent shockwaves through Moroccan trade circles, creating confusion and concern among exporters and businesses alike, particularly since Morocco has long been recognized as a friendly and stable ally of the United States in the region. The ramifications of this decision have raised questions about the future of U.S.-Moroccan trade relations and their impact on Morocco's economy, which heavily relies on its trade partnerships. As discussions unfolded among policymakers and business leaders, the uncertainty surrounding trade practices intensified, illustrating the potential volatility caused by shifting U.S. trade policies under the current administration (Cheng et al., 2023).

## **Exploring the economic effects on Morocco**

Morocco's textile and agricultural export sectors, which are essential to its economy, are currently facing considerable challenges, primarily due to their reliance on competitive pricing strategies in a progressively volatile global market. Exporters in these industries have documented contract disruptions, a predicament compounded by escalating production costs and supply chain complications. Such pressures have significantly strained numerous small enterprises within these sectors, often less equipped to adjust to swiftly evolving economic conditions and market demands (World Bank, 2023).

Concurrently, the phosphate fertilizer sector, a fundamental component of Morocco's agricultural productivity, is predominantly controlled by the state-owned OCP Group and has come under significant scrutiny. Recent U.S. Department of Commerce actions have garnered particular attention, as it retroactively increased tariffs on Moroccan fertilizers from 14.21% to 16.81% (Bouoiyour, 2003). This tariff increase marks a pivotal moment for the industry, affecting profitability and raising concerns about Morocco's ability to compete internationally.

OCP has responded to this increase by formally contesting the decision, describing it as 'economically unjustified and methodologically flawed.' This assertion sparks significant discussions about the implications of such trade policies on developing economies and their impact on domestic industries that heavily depend on exports. The increased tariffs may undermine OCP's competitiveness and threaten Morocco's broader economic stability, a nation striving to establish itself as a key player in the global fertilizer industry, according to the International Fertilizer Association (MADICORP, 2019) and agricultural product markets.

## **Pivot toward China**

In recent years, the global landscape of politics and economics has undergone a notable shift. While the United States has increasingly become more unpredictable, marked by fluctuating policies and uncertain international commitments, China has steadily grown in prominence on the world stage. This evolution is a coincidence and a deliberate strategic maneuver reflecting China's broader global

trade aspirations. Particularly in the case of Morocco, China's interest is deeply rooted, as the country serves as a vital gateway to the vast European and African markets (Belcaid & El Ghini, 2019).

China's investments in Morocco span key sectors, ranging from the ambitious Tangier Tech City project to the burgeoning field of electric battery manufacturing (Moroccan Investment & Export Development Agency (AMDIE, 2022). These initiatives are not isolated but integral to a comprehensive Chinese strategy to localize production near essential trading corridors. By establishing a foothold in Morocco, China is enhancing its economic influence and positioning itself to capitalize on the regional opportunities that arise from Morocco's strategic geographic location (MIEDA, 2022).

For Morocco, the influx of Chinese capital offers a compelling alternative to the volatility of American investments, which can often be unpredictable and subject to rapid policy changes. While engaging with Chinese investments does invite certain risks, such as dependency on a single superpower and potential socio-economic implications, it also presents an extraordinary opportunity for economic development and diversification. Embracing this dynamic relationship could catalyze Morocco's economic transformation, allowing it to thrive in an increasingly complex global landscape. Thus, while caution is warranted, the potential benefits of forging a robust partnership with China should not be overlooked. Such a relationship could position Morocco as a key player on both the African and European fronts, ushering in a new era of growth and stability for the nation.

## **Geopolitical balancing act**

The evolving relationship between China and Morocco has garnered significant attention in Washington, particularly among U.S. policymakers and analysts. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has notably highlighted the urgency for the United States to 're-engage Morocco strategically' due to the increasing influx of Chinese investment in North Africa, indicating a shift in the region's geopolitical landscape (Zhang, 2022).

Navigating this complex international terrain poses a considerable challenge for Morocco. On one hand, the country heavily relies on American diplomatic and military support, which has been critical for its stability and security. This partnership with the U.S. has historically provided Morocco with political backing and access to military resources that enhance its defense capabilities.

On the other hand, China is emerging as a vital partner in Morocco's efforts to develop its green economy. Chinese investments are crucial for funding various infrastructure projects and technological advancements that are key to fostering sustainable development in Morocco. This dual reliance presents a precarious balancing act for Moroccan leaders, who strive to secure the benefits of both partnerships without alienating either party. The underlying challenge lies in maintaining solid and fruitful relationships with these two global powers while avoiding the risk of being caught between conflicting demands or expectations from each. Ultimately, Morocco's ability to navigate this intricate dance of diplomacy will be pivotal in shaping its future economic landscape and its role in North African international relations.

## **Strategic opportunities**

Morocco stands to gain significantly during this turbulent period characterized by global economic shifts and upheavals. As international corporations actively seek to recalibrate their supply chains to minimize potential tariffs and trade barriers, Morocco emerges as an attractive destination. The country benefits from unrestricted trade access to vital markets such as the United States and the European Union. With its modernized infrastructure and geographic proximity to Europe, Morocco is a crucial strategic hub for businesses looking to innovate their operational logistics.

The increasing interest from multinational firms in sectors such as textiles and automotive parts highlights Morocco's attractiveness. These industries recognize the benefits of cost efficiency, skilled

labor, and advantageous trade agreements. The global shift towards sustainable practices has also intensified attention on regions that can effectively meet these demands. In this context, Morocco's continuous progress in renewable energy, especially in solar and wind, positions it as a frontrunner in the energy transition. The country's dedication to promoting innovation in electric vehicle batteries further enhances its appeal, as these technologies are becoming crucial in the global shift towards electrification (Reuters, 2023).

As the world economy continues to expand and evolve, Morocco's competitive advantages present substantial opportunities for growth and partnership. The combination of a strategic location, favorable trade conditions, and a forward-thinking approach to renewable energy creates an environment ripe for investment and development. Consequently, Morocco's potential to capitalize on these dynamics is considerable, potentially establishing it as a pivotal player on the global economic stage in the years to come (Reuters, 2023).

## **Risk and long-term considerations**

Nonetheless, the forthcoming journey involves certain risks that must not be disregarded. A substantial dependence on Chinese capital has the potential to engender significant economic imbalances within the Moroccan economy, which could yield far-reaching ramifications for various sectors. Specific Chinese initiatives, which have already been initiated, have faced considerable criticism for their limited contribution to local employment opportunities and a notable deficiency in transparency regarding their operations. These criticisms highlight stakeholders' ongoing concerns about the benefits these investments provide to the Moroccan workforce and economy. Moreover, the tariffs imposed by Trump serve as a continual reminder for Moroccan policymakers of the precarious nature of excessive reliance on any single market (Belcaid & El Ghini, 2019), particularly in the context of global trade tensions. Such economic vulnerabilities could render Morocco susceptible to unforeseen challenges and impede its growth trajectory. Consequently, the sustainability of long-term resilience relies on thorough institutional reform, the proactive development of skills among the workforce, and the execution of a strategic and diversified foreign policy that aims to engage with multiple global partners. By adopting a multifaceted approach, Morocco can mitigate the risks associated with a heavy reliance on a single country, thereby fostering a more balanced and resilient economic landscape in the years to come.

## **Conclusion**

The trade conflict initiated by President Trump has expanded beyond its initial bilateral scope, which was primarily confined to the Washington political landscape and the vibrant markets of Beijing. It has broadened its impact, affecting nations and economies as distant as Casablanca and Tangier. This ongoing economic contention is not merely a backdrop to geopolitical tensions; it catalyzes significant transformations in global trade dynamics that resonate across various continents. Although introducing new tariffs has undeniably had an adverse effect on Morocco's economy, posing challenges for local businesses and consumers alike, it has concurrently created an opportunity for the nation to embark on a transformative journey. Morocco finds itself in a unique and potentially advantageous position, allowing it to redefine its image and role on the international stage. By capitalizing on this moment, Morocco can establish itself as a dynamic, globally integrated trade and investment hub, attracting foreign investors and supporting local enterprises. The road ahead for Morocco is fraught with challenges, and its ability to truly meet this moment will largely hinge on its strategic foreign policy decisions and the extent to which it can vigorously pursue the ambitious objective of cultivating a modern, self-sufficient economy capable of thriving amid external pressures and competition from other nations.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## Book Review

# Le Sahel : Tribus, Jihad et Trafics, Beatriz Mesa

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**Beatriz Mesa**, *Le Sahel : Tribus, Jihad et Trafics* [The Sahel: Tribes, Jihad, and Trafficking]<sup>1</sup>

Casablanca: La Croisée des Chemins, 2024, 258 pp.

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Neither a religious conflict nor a secessionist struggle. In Mali, ideology serves as a unifying force but is not the root cause of the armed groups' uprising, which is primarily driven by profit.<sup>2</sup>

(Mesa, 2024, p. 243)

Beatriz Mesa is a leading expert on security issues in the Sahel, with a particular focus on the Liptako-Gourma region, encompassing Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. She is a Professor at the College of Social Sciences at the International University of Rabat, a former Associate Professor at Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis, Senegal, and a member of both LASPAD Senegal and the Center for Global Studies (CGS). Additionally, she has an extensive career in journalism, with over two decades of experience reporting from conflict zones.

Mesa's scholarly contributions include *Les groupes armés du Sahel, conflits et économie criminelle au Nord du Mali* (The Armed Groups of the Sahel: Conflicts and Criminal Economy in Northern Mali) by Los Libros de Catarata in 2022 and *L'échec de l'Occident en Afrique* (The Failure of the West in Africa) by Almuzara in 2024.

This review examines her latest work, *Le Sahel : Tribus, Jihad et Trafics* (2024), published by La Croisée des Chemins, which represents the culmination of twenty years of research. Drawing on extensive empirical data, the author argues that a comprehensive understanding of security challenges and armed violence in the Sahel necessitates an in-depth engagement with local societies. Mesa consistently critiques the disconnect between external actors and local realities, advocating for a more context-sensitive approach—what she terms “a connection with the local.” She contends that foreign security interventions fail to investigate the social foundations and root causes of conflicts, instead adopting a narrow counterterrorism paradigm that frames “jihadism” as the universal enemy since the September 11, 2001 attacks. This discourse has been further reinforced by high-profile incidents such as the 2003 abduction of 32 European tourists in southern Algeria/northern Mali by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC).

Adopting a critical perspective, Mesa offers a reinterpretation of armed violence in the Sahel, particularly in Mali, foregrounding the role of tribal rivalries and the criminal economy. To explore these dynamics, this study will examine the secessionist aspirations of northern Mali, the phenomenon

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of jihadist violence, the legacy of Algeria's civil war, and the impact of illicit economic activities on territorial control.

## Rebellion, Jihad, and the dynamics of armed conflict

Since gaining independence in 1960, Mali has experienced multiple episodes of political instability, particularly through successive Tuareg rebellions originating in the northern region (1963, 1990, 2006, and 2012). At the outset, Beatriz Mesa highlights the sociocultural composition of northern Mali (Azawad), which is home to both “white” communities (Arabs and Tuaregs) and “black” communities (Peuls and Songhai). The term *Tuareg* derives from the Arabic *targui*, which, due to its religious connotation, translates as “the forsaken of God.” Some scholars argue that the term has a geographical rather than religious origin, stemming from *targa*, meaning “valley”—an Amazigh term appropriated by Arabs to describe the Fezzan region in southern Libya, an area rich in water sources. The Moors, comprising Arab and Arabized populations, traversed the region either as nomads or settled communities along the Niger Valley. Historically, these groups engaged in camel and livestock herding, necessitating constant movement in search of sustainable grazing land. Meanwhile, the Peuls and Songhai, originating from what was known as *useful Mali* (formerly French Sudan), gradually migrated and settled in the Azawad region along the Niger Valley. These populations historically moved freely across the region without the administrative and territorial boundaries later imposed by colonial rule.

Mesa underscores the significance of classifying armed groups into *legitimate armed groups* (LAGs) and *non-legitimate armed groups* (NLGs). However, she stresses that each faction ultimately serves the interests of its respective tribal leadership. For instance, *Mouvement Arabe de l’Azawad* (MAA, Sector 1), composed of the Lamhar Arabs of Gao and led by Secretary General Ahmed Ould Sidi Mohamed (an Arab from Tilemsi), is known for its involvement in various illicit activities in northern Mali. Among the NLGs, a key example is *Front de Libération du Macina* (FLM), led by Amadou Kouffa. Witnessing the legitimacy acquired through violent struggle by Tuareg armed groups, Kouffa adopted jihadist rhetoric as a mobilizing strategy to instigate a revolution within the Peul community. By doing so, he successfully recruited disenfranchised Peul youth, disillusioned by the privileges enjoyed by their elites and the neglect of central governance structures.

According to Mesa, the 2012 Tuareg rebellion was unprecedented in that it marked the first genuine attempt by the irredentist Tuareg population to achieve full independence. She argues that international mediation, conducted from a top-down perspective, further facilitated the emergence of a *de facto* state in northern Mali by legitimizing armed actors involved in the insurrection. However, this legitimacy remains contentious, given the interconnections between separatist rebel groups, such as *Mouvement National de Libération de l’Azawad* (MNLA), and jihadist factions.

These jihadist groups include the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC), which later rebranded as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007 following its allegiance to Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network. The GSPC emerged from Algeria's *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS), whose members, having been driven out by the Algerian military during the black decade (1991–2002), sought refuge in southern Algeria and northern Mali. Over time, the FIS evolved into the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA), then the GSPC, and ultimately AQIM. Additionally, the collapse of Libya in 2011 played a significant role in exacerbating the Malian rebellion, as Tuaregs who had migrated to Libya during the droughts of the 1970s—many of whom had joined Gaddafi's military forces—returned to Mali armed with heavy weaponry, reigniting hostilities against the Malian state.

Mesa further examines the power struggles among tribal elites following the self-declaration of the so-called Republic of Azawad. Notably, when Iyad Ag Ghali—belonging to the Ifoghas Tuareg tribe—sought to lead the new insurrection, as he had done in the 1990s, he was rejected by the new generation of MNLA leaders. These younger, more educated elites sought to differentiate themselves

from their predecessors. In response, Ag Ghali embraced Islamist rhetoric and founded *Ansar Dine*, advocating for the establishment of a Tuareg Islamic State governed by *shari'a* (Islamic law).

France's military intervention, first through *Operation Serval* and later through *Barkhane*, was initially requested by Mali's government to restore its sovereignty. However, Mesa critiques the intervention, arguing that France allied itself with the separatists in its efforts to oust jihadist forces. This approach, she contends, ignored the intricate familial and tribal ties among these groups, whose conflicts are less ideological than they are driven by economic interests. Once its immediate objectives were met, France subsequently blocked the Malian army from reclaiming control over northern territories for years—a key factor in the 2020 coup d'état.

Mesa (2024) asserts that “the equation of tribe, power, and economic and territorial control is fundamental to understanding the dynamics of violence in northern Mali” (p. 66).<sup>3</sup> In other words, isolating jihadism as the sole threat to peace and security in the region is an oversimplification. Without accounting for the role of tribal power struggles and territorial control—driven in large part by criminal economies—any sustainable peace process remains unattainable. Furthermore, she argues that jihadism, much like other ideological frameworks, is instrumentalized by tribal factions as a means of legitimizing their broader strategic objectives.

## Organised crime

This work examines the infiltration of organised crime in West Africa and its expansion into the Sahel, with a particular focus on northern Mali. It analyses how criminal networks have absorbed both ideologically driven non-state armed actors and state actors. Furthermore, Beatriz Mesa explores the impact of the criminal economy in a country like Mali, which faces profound political, economic, and social challenges.

The author argues that the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall led to market liberalisation, repositioning Africa as a focal point of global interest. However, for drug traffickers—primarily involved in cocaine smuggling and operating from Cuba, Colombia, and Peru—the intensification of enforcement by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) disrupted traditional supply routes from South America to the United States and Canada.

Mesa (2024) underscores that “organised crime in northern Mali did not emerge from within” (p. 116).<sup>4</sup> In other words, long-standing tribal communities, traditionally engaged in transhumance, seized the lucrative opportunities presented by Latin American cartels to facilitate drug trafficking from South America to Europe via the Sahara Desert. The author further reveals that Algerian jihadists did not unilaterally decide to establish themselves in the Malian desert; rather, they required the approval of tribal leaders who exercised authority over the region. These included the Berabiche Arabs of Timbuktu in the west and the Tuareg communities of Kidal in the east. For instance, Iyad Ag Ghali was in contact with Abderrazak El Parà, one of the earliest Algerian jihadists to arrive in northern Mali. El Parà sought to transform the Taoudenni region, northeast of Timbuktu, into a trafficking hub, allowing him to integrate into the lucrative global network of organised crime. Ultimately, he opted for the mountainous region of Tigarga, in Kidal, in north-eastern Mali, as “Taoudenni was deemed too flat and exposed to sustain illicit trafficking operations by jihadist katibas” (Mesa, 2024, p. 87).<sup>5</sup> The intensification of the criminal economy in Mali has also exacerbated intercommunal conflicts, particularly among the Tuareg, Arab, and Songhai communities. Beyond drug trafficking (cocaine, hashish), the illicit economy extends to arms smuggling, human trafficking, and fuel contraband. Additionally, the discovery of new mineral deposits, particularly small-scale gold mining, has attracted significant attention.

## Concluding remarks

Mesa rejects the notion that jihadist ideology is the sole driver of the atrocities committed by non-state armed groups in the Sahel, particularly in Mali. Instead, these movements are shaped primarily by the interests of their respective tribal factions, each striving to control as much territory as possible to secure economic benefits—an economy that encompasses not only traditional transhumance but also the trade in illicit goods.

A decade has passed since the Malian crisis, yet jihadism has not been contained; rather, it has advanced towards the Gulf of Guinea states. While the book focuses primarily on the Malian experience, with references to Burkina Faso and Niger, it is imperative, in our view, not to overlook other Sahelian countries, particularly those surrounding Lake Chad, where Boko Haram has wreaked havoc—an example in which the ideological dimension cannot be disregarded.

The author critically assesses the failures of international interventions, notably those led by France (Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane) and the United Nations through the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Her perception survey, conducted among more than 500 citizens, revealed that the UN mission was widely regarded as “weak, ineffective, and unsatisfactory.” Ultimately, the new Malian authorities have demanded the immediate withdrawal of Barkhane and MINUSMA, paving the way for the entry of a new actor: the Russian paramilitary organisation Wagner.

## Notes

1. All translations from French to English are the author's.
2. « *Ni conflit religieux, ni conflit sécessionniste. Au Mali, l'idéologie fédère mais n'est pas la cause du soulèvement de groupes armés mus par l'appât du gain.* »
3. « *L'équation tribu, pouvoir et contrôle économique et territorial est fondamentale pour comprendre la dynamique de la violence dans le nord du Mali.* »
4. « *Le crime organisé dans le Nord du Mali n'est pas né de l'intérieur.* »
5. « *Taoudenni était trop plat et visible pour le trafic illicite pour que l'une des katibas jihadistes en profite encore aujourd'hui.* »



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