

MOROCCO'S COVID-19 AFRICAN INITIATIVE: A MIRROR OF COMPLEX ASPIRATIONS



HAFSSA FAKHER EL ABIARI





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Acronyms

AU	African Union
AwB	Attijariwafa Bank
BMCE	Banque Marocaine du Commerce Extérieur
BP	Banque Populaire
CBJI	Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation
CCCR	Consultative Commission for Constitutional Reforms
CCHR	Consultative Council on Human Rights
CT	Counterterrorism
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FDIs	Foreign Direct Investments
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDTS	General Directorate of Territorial Surveillance
GNA	Government of National Accord
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IS	Islamic State
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NHDI	National Human Development Initiative
NHRC	National Human Rights Council
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
PJD	Party of Justice and Development
RAMed	Régime d'Assistance Médicale
TSCTP	Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

1. Introduction

In November 2019, China reported the first cases of COVID-19 infection within its territory. Since then, the pandemic, which made its first appearance in Wuhan, was transformed into a global security threat due to the interdependency of interests among nations. Morocco, a Maghreb country, was also affected by its geographic position at the crossroads between Europe and Africa and the Moroccan diaspora movement. In March 2020, the Ministry of Health officially declared the first cases of contamination with COVID-19. In the days that followed, Morocco initiated testing and tracing, suspended international flights and shipping, launched sensitization campaigns, and suspended public gatherings to prevent an exponential spread of the pandemic. Since then, the number of infected patients and deaths has been rising at regular increments, mainly due to the distinct contagiousness of COVID-19. In parallel, the health team has been able to balance the previous variables by continuously recording a significant number of cured patients.

Facing this healthcare crisis, Morocco adopted a multifaceted strategy to curb the consequences of COVID-19, touching upon the health sector, the economy, and the social sphere. Under the aegis of King Mohammed VI, nationwide mobilization of various actors has made Morocco's fight against the pandemic efficient. In April, he urged his African counterparts to adopt a cooperative frame of operation against the pandemic.¹ The monarch exposed his willingness to benefit his African allies with expertise and technology, mainly because the Economic Commission of

the United Nations in Africa warned against the pandemic's repercussions on the food-economy-stability nexus.² So, Rabat enlarged its scope of action by providing medical aid to African countries. In June, the king gave instructions to send medical aid to 15 African countries.³ The support was comprised of preventive equipment, masks, disinfectants, and other pharmaceutical products. The African Union (AU), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), all praised the actions of the latter for alleviating the impact of COVID-19 on the continent.

During global crises, solidarity becomes a must among countries. In the case of Morocco, solidarity towards fellow countries in Africa raises probing questions on the motives that account for the Kingdom's behavior. Indeed, the executive's instructions put the country in a distinguished position compared to its neighbors, namely Algeria and Tunisia.

This report deals with Morocco's African foreign policy in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Specifically, it scrutinizes the nexus between Rabat's COVID-19 medical aid overseas and the achievement of various foreign policy goals. In the first section, the report tackles Morocco's foreign policy goals under King Mohammed VI (r. 1999-present). In the second, it outlines the Kingdom's strategy against COVID-19 while focusing on the different sectors that have been mobilized. In the third, it sheds light on the intertwined variables that motivate Morocco to behave the way it currently does towards Africa.

2. Morocco's Foreign Policy Goals (1999-Present)

2.1. Diversification of Economic Partners

In 1999, the ascent of King Mohammed VI to the throne represented a departure from King Hassan II's foreign policy (r. 1961-1999). The new king, a businessman par excellence, pushed the economic sector to foster exceptional relations with the international community and serve his country's national interests. This choice fits in economic diplomacy, defined as "international financial arrangements and coordination, negotiation of trade and investment, development and international environmental policies."⁴ This definition grasps two aspects of Morocco's economic diplomacy.

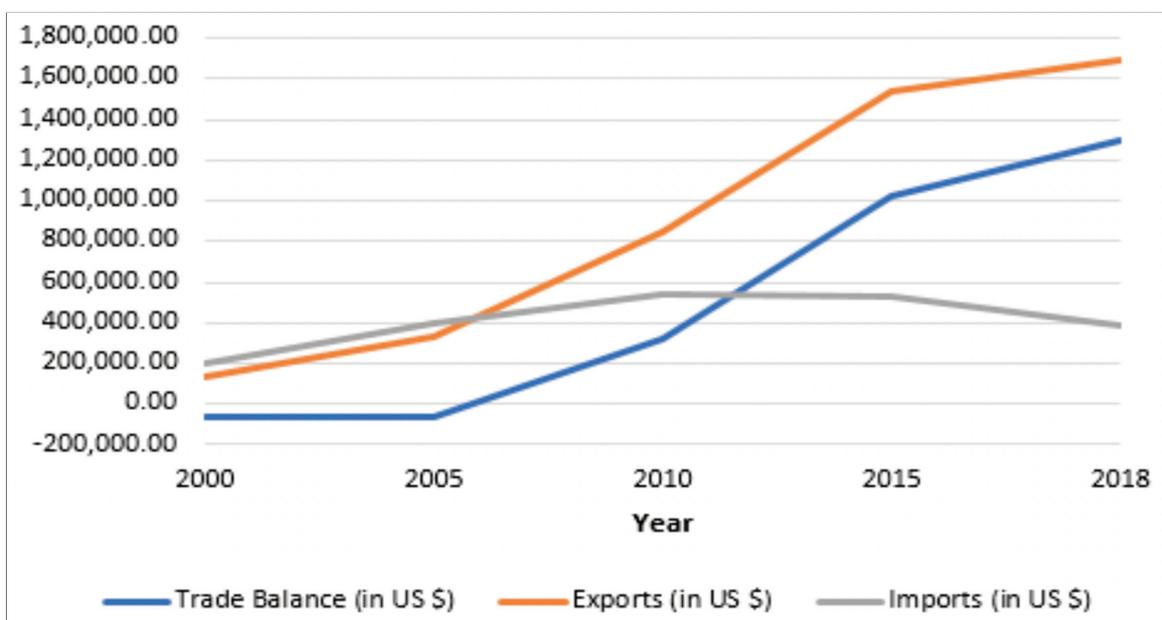
The first aspect is the expansion of economic networks through the improvement of the trade balance, particularly vis-à-vis Sub-Saharan Africa. Since 2000, Morocco's trade with Sub-Saharan countries has been significantly growing. Between 2000 and 2018, the difference between imports

and exports (figure 1) underwent a significant shrinkage as the Kingdom's Sub-Saharan exports started to outpace its imports in 2008.⁵ Since then, the same pattern continued, clearly represented by the trade balance curve (figure 1).

The available data depict a change in Morocco's place as an economic partner because it shifted from the status of 'buyer' to the status of 'seller.' In international trade, exports are beneficial to a country's economy since they entail the entrance of money, thus boosting the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Contrarily, imports exert a reverse effect on the economy since the concerned country, in this case Morocco in the early 2000s, sees its GDP shrink as it acquires goods and services overseas.

Another observation is bound to traded products. The exports of Morocco, a country where the agricultural sector has always been an important driver of economic growth, were predominantly food products, consumer goods, and textiles in the 2000-2010 period.⁶ This pattern

Figure 1: Trade Balance, Exports and Imports of Morocco with Sub-Saharan Countries



changed when the Kingdom expanded the list of exports to chemicals and fuel, among others. In 2016, chemical products started to abundantly include fertilizers because the OCP Group, the Moroccan leader in the transformation of phosphates, launched a venture called OCP Africa to reveal the continent's agricultural potential and mobilize various resources to benefit farmers.⁷ The comparison of Morocco's trade with Europe to its trade with Sub-Saharan Africa reveals an asymmetry. In 2018 alone, the Kingdom exported 4,526,888.21 US\$ and 3,631,785.77 US\$ worth of products, respectively to Spain and France.⁸ However, those numbers do not necessarily question the significance of Sub-Saharan economies to Morocco since the nature of Rabat's involvement has proven to be highly profitable, in reciprocity.

The second aspect of Morocco's economic diplomacy is the abundance of investments. Since the ascent of King Mohammed VI to the throne, the number of Moroccan companies ex-

panding their activities to Sub-Saharan Africa has been steadily increasing, especially in the last decade. Soon after Morocco's readmission in the AU, the monarch organized a two-month visit to five Sub-Saharan countries to sign many bilateral agreements. This quest for closer ties paid high dividends by transforming Morocco into a significant investor. Between 2013 and 2018, the Kingdom's Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) destined to Sub-Saharan Africa grew by 90%.⁹

With this status, Rabat flexes its financial muscle by multiplying the number of the Banque Marocaine du Commerce Extérieur (BMCE) affiliates and becoming the BMCE Bank of Africa after acquiring a massive portion of Bank of Africa's capital. Attijariwafa Bank (AwB) and Banque Populaire (BP) are also expanding their networks in African markets, not necessarily the francophone ones. This move, albeit risky because of currency depreciation and political instability, was not a considerable threat enough to discourage



those banks from overseas expansion. The reality is that the presence of banks across the continent eases the development of Moroccan businesses.

In parallel, the sector of telecommunication is also top on Morocco's list of investments. Maroc Telecom is a principal operator in Africa through its affiliates in more than nine countries. The rationale, rooted in Morocco's South-South cooperation policy, is to enhance access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the national and continental ranges.¹⁰

Equally important, fertilizers are also a sector in which the Kingdom is expanding in Sub-Saharan Africa through OCP Group. In 16 countries, the company is exporting its expertise and technology to enhance the yield, supply fertilizers at a reasonable price, and modernize the fertilizer industry in those countries.¹¹ Accordingly, banking, telecommunications, and fertilizers are only examples of the sectors that Morocco is expanding in Sub-Saharan Africa to delineate the centrality of economic diplomacy in Rabat's foreign policy.

2.2. Solving the Western Sahara Conflict

Since the 1970s, the disputed territory of Western Sahara has occupied the foreign policy agenda of Kings Hassan II and Mohammed VI. Although the controversy existed since the 19th century with Spain's presence, Morocco's claims became conspicuous when general political instability reigned in the 1970s. In July 1971 and August 1972, King Hassan II survived two coup d'états, led by the military. In the aftermath of those events, unusual in the history of the Alawite dynasty, the monarch started seizing every opportunity to consolidate his power. While hard means were extensively used, the Western Sahara was an issue that could be transformed into a nationalistic cause around which Moroccans would converge, including the military and the leftist opponents. Michael Willis explains that Morocco's claims on the Western Sahara indeed united factions that had once been fierce opponents of the monarchy.¹² In 1975, 350,000 Moroccans participated in the Green March, a peaceful mass march that helped complete Spain's withdrawal. The transfer of power, long expected in Rabat,

Figure 2: Map of the Western Sahara¹³



was contested in Algiers because it endorsed self-determination. Accordingly, Algeria embarked on the support of the Sahraoui resistance movement in Western Sahara, known as the Polisario Front. Those different events tarnished Rabat-Algiers relations, and the Western Sahara issue evolved into a protracted conflict whose resolution has proven to be complicated, given the goals of the stakeholders involved.

Under King Mohammed VI, the Western Sahara is a particularly sensitive file. He has suggested that the conflict over the Western Sahara can only be settled through an autonomy plan that places the south's provinces under the sovereignty of Morocco. In parallel, several African countries have been opening their consulates in Laâyoune and Dakhla at regular intervals (figure 2). For example, Gambia and Guinea inaugurated their respective consulates on the 8th and the 17th of January. Between December 2019 and February 2020, Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita presided over the opening of seven consulates.¹⁴ As for the leaders of the inaugurating countries, they joined the Moroccan side, issuing statements that oscillate between the advocacy of the autonomy plan and the 'Moroccan status' of the Western Sahara.¹⁵

In Latin America, Morocco is also fostering political and economic relations to set the stage for favorable positions vis-à-vis the Western Sahara to emerge. Aside from diplomatic tours to launch the Latin American-Morocco rapprochement, the Kingdom obtained observer status in the Andean Community in July 2020. In short, those examples are significant since they reveal the centrality of the Saharan conflict for Morocco's diplomacy. The country is gathering as much support as possible, and this is what stakeholders like neighboring Algeria perceive as an attempt to instate Moroccan sovereignty on the contested territory.

Morocco is playing a double game when it comes to foreign relations. Economic gains and the Saharan conflict are two equally important concerns for the Kingdom. It is the logic of killing two birds with one stone.

In short, Morocco's first and second foreign policy goals are connected. However, this connection raises concerns about the priorities of Morocco. Is it economic gains or the Western Sahara that drive Rabat's behavior? Is the diversification of economic partners an end or a means to render Morocco's claim over the Western Sahara legitimate? The reality is that Morocco is playing a double game when it comes to foreign relations. Economic gains and the Saharan conflict are two equally important concerns for the Kingdom. It is the logic of killing two birds with one stone. The next section will show that the idiom extends to three birds.

2.3. Seeking A Leadership Status in Africa

Historically, Morocco entertained relations with African countries. King Mohammed V (r. 1957-1961) had maintained strong bonds with African countries. In 1960, Morocco participated in a UN peacekeeping operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, during which the King endorsed the independence movement, led by Patrice Lumumba. The failure of the operation pushed the monarch to host the Casablanca Conference, an event that hosted many African leaders to suppress racial segregation and interference in all its forms and foster African unity.¹⁶ Hassan II, once king, continued reviving his father's legacy by portraying Morocco as a tree

whose roots extend in Africa and branches extend into Europe.¹⁷ In 1962, he created a Ministry of African affairs and kept friendly relations with numerous leaders, including Mobutu. However, the eruption of the Saharan conflict polarized the African scene: some states joined the Moroccan side, whereas others did not. Facing this conundrum, Hassan II refrained from fostering more significant linkages as he was faced with other realities that imposed a distinct string of policy moves.

In 1999, the transfer of royal power concretely revived the African aspirations of Morocco. King Mohammed VI framed his relations with African leaders around economic value, unlike Hassan II who had settled for personal relationships.¹⁸ The businessman's personality of the monarch automatically placed the economic

sector under his control. Anouar Boukhars explains that the monarchy has multiplied its domination over the economy in what he describes as “a monopoly over the exercise of political and economic power.”¹⁹ This distinct feature of governance has paved the road for Morocco to seek a leadership status in Africa by portraying itself as a provider of regional security.

Whereas hard power consists of using military and economic capabilities to obtain specific outcomes, soft power is the use of attraction and co-optive means to get particular results. To achieve its regional aspirations, Morocco uses a mix of hard and soft power in what Ernest J. Wilson III labels “smart power.”²⁰ In Africa, the country's exercise of smart power is visible through its approach to security threats and neighboring conflicts.

Figure 3: Map of the Maghreb and the Sahel²¹



Over the past years, the Sahel's security climate has deteriorated due to the proliferation of terrorism and illicit trafficking (arms, human, drug). Due to its geographical position, Morocco is concerned about the Sahelian conflict and seeks to alleviate it by adopting a multifaceted strategy that tackles the symptoms (terrorism) and the root causes of instability (exposure to radical thoughts, marginalization, poverty). On June 12, FM Bourita expressed his concerns about the worsening order in the region, emphasizing the need to adopt an inclusive frame of operation to eradicate security threats.²² Indeed, the diplomat is well-placed to issue such a statement because Morocco is well-known for its counterterrorism experience.

Since the 2000s, the country has witnessed many terrorist attacks like the 2003 bombings in Casablanca and the 2011 bombings in Marrakech. Exposed to the risk of spillover, it adopted a comprehensive counterterrorism framework, which consisted of three pillars: cooperate with global and regional partners to bolster counterterrorism proficiency, improve the domestic scene by empowering women and expanding legal rights, and curb the spread of radical ideologies.²³

In the years following the 9/11 attacks, Morocco developed a strong partnership with the United States in counterterrorism, allowing the General Directorate of Territorial Surveillance (GDTS) and its Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (BCIJ) to benefit from training and expertise in intelligence and management.²⁴ Through the BCIJ, Morocco has been able to bolster the national security governance and institutionalize its counterterrorism (CT) efforts. Regionally, Morocco is a traditional partner in the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a US strategy intended to develop resilient institutions able to respond to crises and security threats. It is also part of the Global

Counterterrorism Forum and the Framework for Cooperation on Training for civil Security Services, respectively aiming at obstructing terrorist recruitment and attacks, and enhancing regional cooperation in CT efforts.

Despite the promise of CT, it remains incomplete when the root causes of terrorism are not addressed. Accordingly, Morocco developed a Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program to curb radicalization and terrorist recruitment. The Murshidat program, launched under the aegis of Mohammed VI, aimed at combating violent extremism while empowering women. Women joined the religious circle as counselors, charged with spreading a moderate version of Islam while using dialogue to transmit the dangers of terrorism.²⁵

In 2005, the King launched a religious television channel to disseminate moderate Islam and waterproof the citizens against radical versions that are broadcast in some non-Moroccan channels. Ten years later, the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs founded the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, an institute specialized in training Moroccan and international Imams from Africa, Asia, and Europe. Vis-à-vis the Sahel, this initiative allows Morocco to play a central role in CVE beyond its borders. In 2018, the academy celebrated a cohort of Malian Imams, trained in the context of a Moroccan-Malian agreement signed in 2013.²⁶

Whereas Morocco's CT and CVE efforts mirror its ability to use Wilson III's "smart power" and portray it as a dominant player in the region, its gentle approach to neighboring conflicts portrays it as a peace-seeker country and safeguards its reputation.

Since 2011, instability in Libya has been a significant concern for Morocco. Located in

proximity to a country where politics polarize, terrorist cells burgeon, and foreign interference abounds, Morocco has condemned foreign intervention. In Rabat, officials have repeatedly called for the cessation of foreign intervention and the adherence to the Skhirat agreement for three reasons.

First, the Libyan people are becoming increasingly vulnerable. In 2019 alone, 405,499 people faced humanitarian concerns (internally-displaced people, refugees, asylum-seekers, returned internally-displaced people).²⁷ Since April 2019, the security landscape in Libya has dramatically worsened as the Haftar-affiliated forces launched an offensive to seize Tripoli. The event triggered a polarized flow of foreign support destined to restore the balance of power between the rival governments and achieve interests ranging from gas and oil exploitation to the en-

hancement of geopolitical leverage. Accordingly, the eruption of hostilities halted the efficiency of the UN Refugee Agency's missions, thereby increasing the number of people of concern by 50% between 2018 and 2019.²⁸ Even worse has been the outbreak of COVID-19, which aggravated the human condition. In July, a medical team in the city of Sabha asserted that the pandemic's evolution is alarming and that the health infrastructure cannot absorb increasing numbers of infected patients.²⁹

Second, Algeria is the sole buffer country between Morocco and Libya. The present havoc puts the stability of Morocco and its neighbors in jeopardy because the region fits in what Buzan and Weaver refer to as 'regional security complex.' The butterfly effect of the 2011 uprisings proved that many security concerns are common to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries.



Since then, threats like the regional expansion of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) have been central to those countries' security agendas. Rabat, in the words of Boukhars, "is not immune from terrorist contamination."³⁰ In a virtual meeting of the UN Security Council, FM Bourita expressed his national security concerns because the climate in Libya is a powerful shaper of the regional order.³¹

Third, foreign intervention transformed Libya into a proxy battlefield where warring actors clash, thus inhibiting political unity prospects. On the ground, Turkey has succeeded in offsetting the balance of power in favor of the GNA. In response to this configuration, the forces loyal to Haftar expressed their discontent. In Paris, President Macron declared that Ankara is driving Libya into disarray. In Egypt, President al-Sisi warned against a potential intervention if the Tripoli government and its backers launch an assault on Sirte, considered a gateway to oil fields and a delimitation between western and eastern Libya. On July 5, unidentified airstrikes hit al-Watiya airbase, where Turkey had planned to build a military base. Hence, Libya evolved into a proxy battlefield where conflict resolution and political unity are anything but certain. The situation has reached a stage when hazards outpace certainty, and this reality pushes the Moroccan diplomacy to condemn foreign intervention and reiterate the centrality of the Skhirat agreement.

When predictability, reliability, and coexistence are fundamental, the dilemma of distrust that dominates international relations blurs, thereby enhancing the country's status.

Through its CT/CVE strategies and approach to the conflict in Libya, Morocco seeks to portray itself as a provider of regional security. This aspiration fits in leadership rather than hegemony. Whereas the first is lasting, the second is ephemeral and risky for a country's reputation. Moroccan diplomacy strives to sustain a good image of the Kingdom overseas. Moreover, reputation can be either an asset or a liability, depending on the direction it takes. When predictability, reliability, and coexistence are fundamental, the dilemma of distrust that dominates international relations blurs, thereby enhancing the country's status. The next section of this report exposes Morocco's COVID-19 strategy to show that the foreign and the domestic spheres overlap.

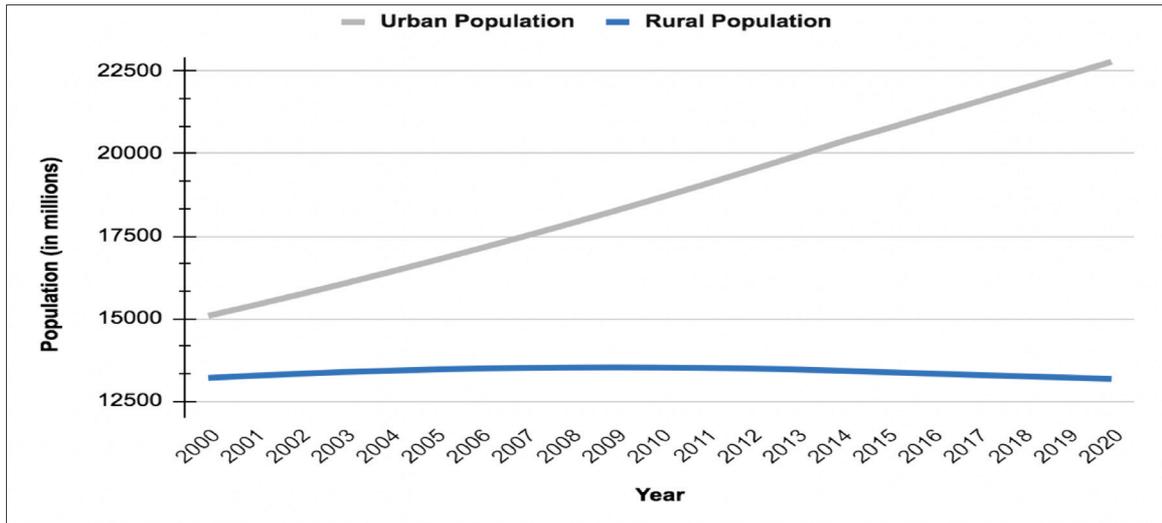
3. Morocco's Strategy Against COVID-19

In March 2020, Morocco started to declare the first cases of COVID-19 infection. In the subsequent days, the authorities closed maritime and aerial borders, launched sensitization campaigns, and imposed a nationwide lockdown. Moreover, they developed a multifaceted strategy that mainly touches upon the healthcare and the socio-economic sectors.

3.1. The Healthcare Sector

In Morocco, the outbreak of COVID-19 necessitated the rapid implementation of a robust strategy for two reasons. First, the health sector has limited human resources to absorb horrific scenarios like those in neighboring European countries. Society is undergoing a demographic transition that requires the devotion of greater human resources and funds for the health sector. In the 2000-2010 and 2010-2020 periods, the urban population grew respectively by 2.2% and 2.0%.

Figure 4: Evolution of Urban and Rural Populations (2000-2020)³²



However, the health sector's evolution does not match the demographic expansion, which causes a gap between the demand and the offer for healthcare. In 2019, the mean number of inhabitants per medical doctor in the public sector was 3,103, and the mean number of inhabitants per medical bed was 1,398. Figures 5 and 6 provide a detailed statistical record for each region, displaying the severely-needy areas in red and

orange colors. Additionally, the private sector started to take over the public sector as a large segment of Moroccans strives to afford healthcare in private clinics. There, medical attendance and service quality issues are not as recurrent as in public healthcare facilities.³³

Second, the Moroccan healthcare sector suffers from the unequal distribution of services, and

Figure 5: Satellite Map of the Ratio of Inhabitants/Medical Doctor³⁴

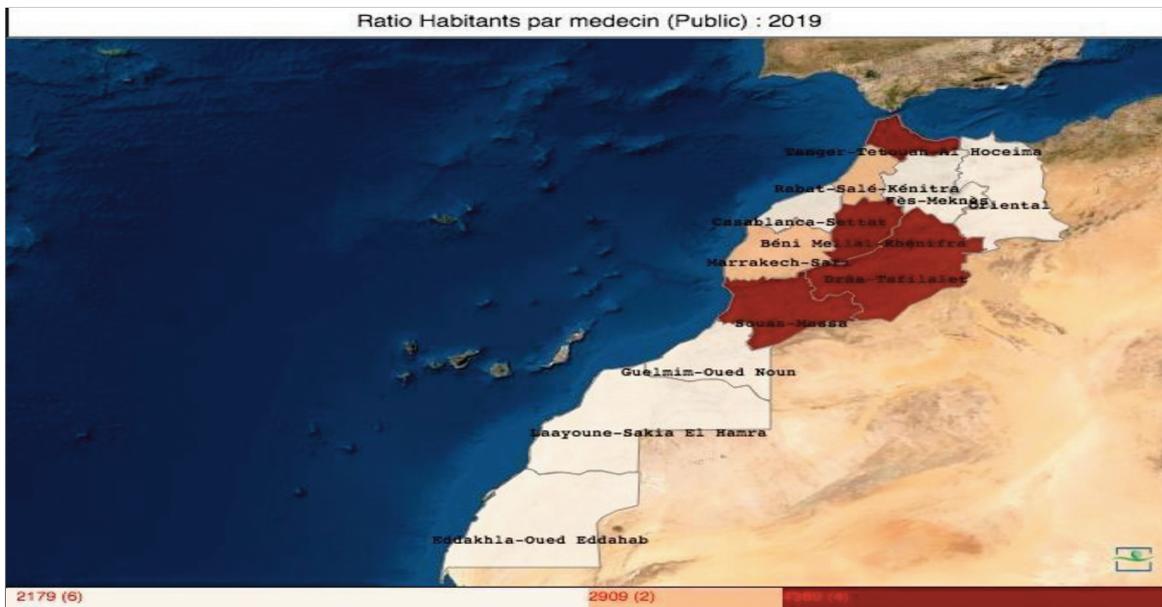
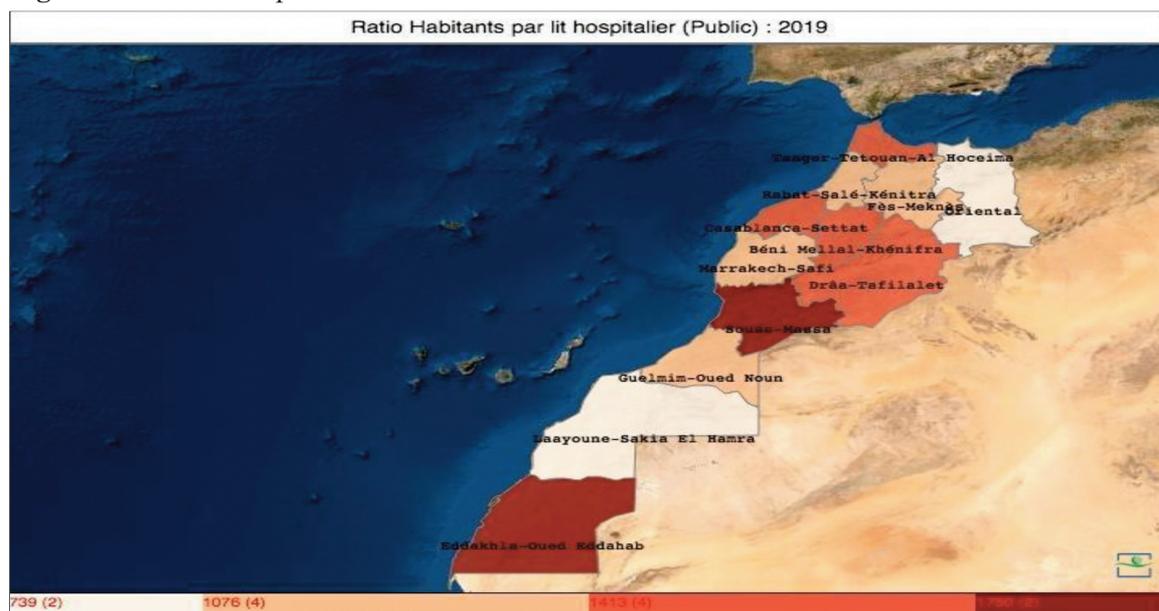


Figure 6: Satellite Map of the Ratio of Inhabitants/Medical Beds³⁵

that at two levels: regional and rural/urban. The Kingdom's regions are not equally developed in what concerns education, employment (seekers and hired), income, and contribution to the GDP. Whereas the regions of Casablanca-Settat and Rabat-Salé-Kénitra contribute the most, other regions like Drâa-Tafilalet, Béni Mellal-Khénifra, Souss-Massa, and Fès-Meknès remain behind.

Admittedly, the health sector is no exception since the latter regions are categorized in the alert zones. The same disparities exist between rural and urban areas, although other variables such as financial poverty, remoteness, and shortage of healthcare facilities, come into play. Sixty-one percent of the medical and the paramedical team is distributed across urban areas, against 39% in rural areas.

Morocco opted for a strategy to fight COVID-19 and neutralize the effects of an imperfect health sector. The threefold strategy aimed at containing the propagation of COVID-19, enhancing the capacity of healthcare infrastructures, and issuing hygiene recommendations. First, the

primary initiative consisted of creating the so-called 'Postes de Commandement de Coronavirus' to monitor infection cases and their location. Aware of the healthcare deficit, King Mohammed VI created a special fund to level up the medical apparatus, acquire medical equipment and medicine, and strengthen the socio-economic structure in the face of the pandemic.³⁶

Second, the Moroccan authorities expanded the capacity of healthcare infrastructures by opening new hospitals and transforming some facilities into hospitals. In demographically large cities like Casablanca, the initial number of medical beds was insufficient to meet the rapidly increasing numbers of infection. The office area of the exposition fair became a field hospital, ready to welcome around 700 medical beds. Similarly, a nearby hospital underwent a capacity boost by disposing of a test facility designed to carry out up to 600 daily tests, and some departments shifted towards hosting infected patients.

Complementarily, Morocco imported medical equipment and medicine (especially Chloroquine)

and created medical stocks to avoid shortages and maintain control over the pandemic's evolution. In the industrial sector, some companies shifted their activities towards producing respirators, masks, disinfectant gel, and other medical equipment. For example, Lamatem, a Moroccan textile company, started devoting its business for the production of medical clothing (head and shoe covers, medical gowns).³⁷ Furthermore, Morocco increased the daily number of screening tests to meet the evolution of the pandemic. Starting in June, the health team was able to conduct 20,000 daily screenings, a change made possible thanks to two variations: the expansion of the number of coronavirus-specialized laboratories and the conclusion of a deal with the South Korean OSANG Healthcare to acquire screening kits.³⁸

Third, awareness against the severity of COVID-19 took various dimensions. Television channels started to broadcast awareness programs, taking into consideration that a large segment of Moroccans gets news from those channels. Salaheddine El-Ghomari, a journalist at 2M, launched a program called 'Les questions sur Corona'

(Questions on Coronavirus), to encourage people to follow hygiene measures and stick to social distancing and confinement. The program, broadcast in Darija (Moroccan dialect) and accompanied by street sensitization moves, was a significant success for the Moroccan media.

In parallel to this, radio channels and social media platforms also served the same purpose while committing to fight fake news on the pandemic. MFM Radio launched 'Stay Home,' a campaign aimed at erasing confusion vis-à-vis coronavirus and issuing healthcare recommendations. Moroccan public figures like footballers and singers used social media to speak directly to their fellow citizens.

Finally, in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior and other parties, the Ministry of Health launched 'Wiqaytna' (our protection), a mobile application to track coronavirus. Precisely, the application consists of a tracking system that notifies a person who had walked nearby someone who was diagnosed COVID-19 positive without issuing any details that might reveal the infected person's identity.³⁹



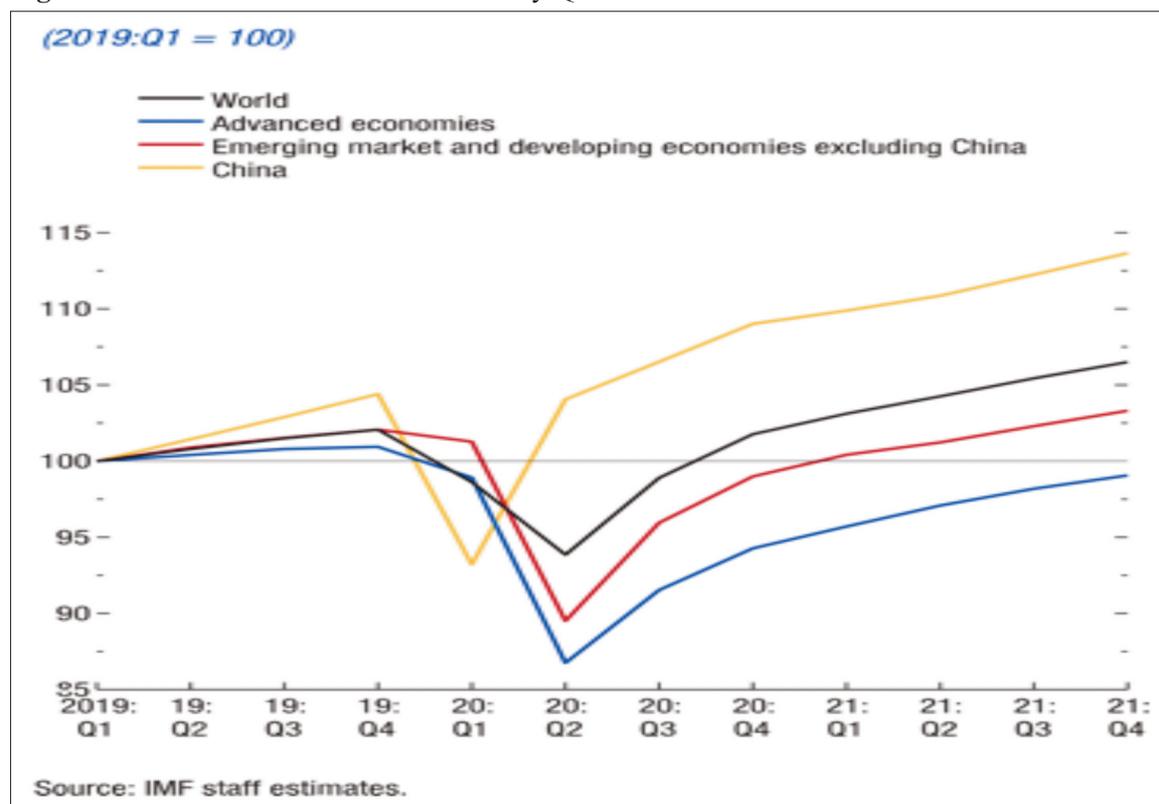
3.2. The Socio-Economic Sector

The spread of COVID-19 is economically challenging for the global economy. Preventive measures hit various sectors, shrank production and consumption, and eliminated some sources of income. To different extents, the economic crisis increased the vulnerability of individuals and governments. In June, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) issued an economic outlook based on key assumptions according to which the 2020 global growth is projected at -4.9%, a 7.8% decrease compared to 2019. Figure 7 shows how advanced and emerging economies are impacted differently. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) warned against a potential increase of poverty and disparities as the consequences of COVID-19 extend beyond health.⁴⁰

The encounter with this reality does not exclude Morocco. Despite the economic successes it achieved in the domestic and the regional spheres, its economic structures remain vulnerable to external shocks. The outbreak of COVID-19 coincided with three realities, each of them jeopardizes the Moroccan economy.

First, drought has become a recurrent problem for farmers and decision-makers. In 2019 and 2020, the disadvantageous climate conditions impacted the agricultural yield of cereals and the dam reservoirs. Second, the balance of trade underwent a remarkable decrease. Between January and April 2020, Morocco's imports and exports shrank by 12% and 19.7%. Europe, a significant trade partner of Morocco, limited its demand for Moroccan products because the pandemic hit many of its countries badly. Third, the

Figure 7: GDP Outlook of 2020 and 2021 by Quarters⁴¹



tourism sector froze for health reasons. Typically, internal and external tourism is a crucial contributor to the GDP because it generates revenues, jobs in the formal and the informal sectors, and contributes to development. However, social distancing and the closure of borders culminated in a cessation of the benefits of tourism and aerial transport, an associated activity.

In this context, Morocco's economic strategy against COVID-19 took two directions. The first, budgetary in nature, aimed at strengthening the immunity of the economy by injecting funds. It has already been mentioned that King Mohammed created a special fund to benefit the medical sector. Simultaneously, the fund was also destined to serve a second purpose, to enhance the resistance of vulnerable sectors, safeguard employment to the maximum, and mitigate the socio-economic fallout of COVID-19. The economic scene witnessed a massive flow of donations from public and private companies, public institutions, citizens, and local authorities. For example, OCP Group and Al Mada respectively donated MAD 3 billion and MAD 2 billion.

The second direction consisted of creating a mechanism to maintain an equilibrium between the demand and the supply. The consequences of COVID-19 have unequally hit the Moroccan society. Affiliated with the formal sector or with the informal sectors, more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of employees and workers temporarily lost their jobs.⁴² For households where sources of income are limited in proportion to the number of people being taken care of, income losses are a real burden. This condition is neither favorable to the people nor for the government. Income losses or shrinkage are positively correlated with demand and consumption. This change exerts pressure on the government because companies adjust their supply to meet the decreasing demand.

Consequently, the government's response aimed at preventing the demand-supply gap as it would cost the Moroccan economy a lot. The first axis of this response consisted of financially assisting employees and workers who have temporarily lost employment with compensation (50% of their salary after tax deductions).⁴³ The second axis concerned people who work in the informal sector, who have become unprecedentedly vulnerable, mainly because the authorities do not have a precise tracking of their numbers. Some of them changed their activity, whatever it is, to selling essential commodities such as vegetables and fruit. Eventually, the demand for those commodities will not fluctuate the way it does for luxury or entertainment commodities during a healthcare crisis. To alleviate the burden, the beneficiaries of RAMed have been granted a sum of money depending on the size of the household (800 MAD for two people, 1,000 for 3-4 people, and 1,200 for more).⁴⁴ The third axis consisted of postponing the payment of bank loans. Individuals and companies facing financial difficulties have been welcomed to pay till the end of June 2020.⁴⁵

In short, facts indicate that Morocco's national strategy against COVID-19 has been hitherto effective. It has shown the Kingdom's agility in managing a one of a kind healthcare crisis while ensuring a serene nationwide climate. In the next section, it will be shown that Rabat can stretch its muscles a bit more to achieve its foreign policy goals while helping African partners fight COVID-19 successfully.

4. Humanitarian Engagement Overseas, Foreign Policy, Regime Security

King Mohammed VI's call for a Pan-African mobilization to combat COVID-19 was expected since it falls under the umbrella of projecting

Morocco in the continent. Rabat profusely sent medical aid packages to several African countries like Tanzania and Zambia, enlarging its humanitarian engagement to Anglophone countries. After reaching self-sufficiency in medical masks in May, with the corresponding industry producing 14 million units per day, Morocco targeted a new horizon: export masks. Whereas European countries are the primary recipients, African countries are also on the list (for example, Algeria, Mauritania, Senegal). Moreover, the medical aid included hydroalcoholic gel, Chloroquine, Azithromycin, medical gowns and caps, and protective visors. In this context, Royal Air Maroc mobilized its fleet to transfer the medical items.

The AU, the OIC, and several African countries welcomed the dual engagement of Morocco to curb the spread of COVID-19 inside and beyond its borders. Whereas this move invited the media to shed light on Morocco's solidarity vis-à-vis the continent, it questions the motives behind its behavior. Arguably, altruism is not the sole variable that explains Morocco's behavior. A myriad of domestic and foreign concerns, all intertwined, incite the Kingdom to be an example of humanitarian engagement at the continental scale. This section aims to reveal how Rabat uses humanitarian moves to achieve its national interests and strengthen the legitimacy of the monarchy.

4.1. The Monarchy, Firm But Not Immune

a. Political and Religious Legitimacy

Arab monarchies are known for their resilience and adaptability to the prevailing context. Morocco, an individual constitutional monarchy, is no exception. Political and religious authorities fuse, making King Mohammed VI the monarch and the 'Commander of the Faithful.' In article

41 of the constitution, he "exercises by Dahirs the religious prerogatives inherent in the institution of the Emirate of the Faithful."⁴⁶

The merger of political and religious authorities is the foundation of modern Morocco, and it is useful in two aspects. The first, symbolic, is that religious legitimacy outweighs political legitimacy in building the monarchical power. Islam, the official religion, is a means to promote unity and cohesion among a large segment of Moroccans. According to this logic, Islam manifests in two ways: social (sense of belonging to a group) and divine (belief in the divine authority and the five pillars). The second aspect, practical, is the fact that the king is the guardian of spiritual security. Morocco follows the Maliki school of jurisprudence. Religious authorities, under the aegis of the Commander of the Faithful, strive to maintain homogeneity and make the country evolve away from religious polarization and the associated risks.

b. Executive's Monopoly on Power

Power is concentrated in the executive circle. Under the reign of Hassan II, the executive structure placed him at the top of the hierarchy. The failed coup attempts in 1971 and 1972 pushed the late king to solidify his grip on power. Hence, the citizens embarked on the so-called 'Years of Lead' which referred to continuous repression, abductions, and torture to death in secret places like the Tazmamart prison. The purpose was to eliminate anyone who might oppose the rule of Hassan II and threaten the survival of the monarchy and the Alawite dynasty in the future. In parallel, the monarch's approach to the Western Sahara conflict bolstered the throne as many citizens rallied around the territorial integrity of Morocco, including the regime's opponents. However, the regime's resilience did not enhance the legitimacy of Hassan

II because despotism can buy pseudo-legitimacy and support. In 1999, Morocco shifted from authoritarianism to a liberalized authoritarianism.

Initially, the new king increased the hopes of many Moroccans who had believed that the country would witness tangible changes. In 2004 he created the Equity and Reconciliation Commission to recognize the Makhzen-perpetrated atrocities between 1956 and 1999 and to repair the damage caused to the families of the victims.⁴⁷ Moreover, he pushed for the Personal Status Code's reform to achieve gender equality and justice. In 2005, he launched the National Human Development Initiative (NHDI) to enhance living conditions. The monarch portrayed himself as a keen advocate of human rights and social equity, and a figure who would liberalize the country at all levels.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of reforms were social and economic, but not institutional and constitutional. The monarch started to exert monopolistic control over the totality of spheres, and he implicitly proved that the governance structure that had prevailed between 1961 and 1999 was kept intact. So, the façade was liberal, and the 'inner' was purely authoritarian, making the regime fit in the category of liberalized autocracies.

In Mohammed VI's Morocco, the political scene is pluralistic in the sense that various parties are allowed. However, no party holds enough power to be able to make real changes. In this context, the regime plays a central role in fostering constant fragmentation within each party to limit the growth of its weight and prevent its evolution into a threat.⁴⁸ Additionally, the king's figure is always displayed on television, online platforms, streets, and official places (diplomatic offices, academic institutions, conference rooms). His patronage is always an-

nounced when holding national events, either political or non-political. His name is attributed to various facilities, monuments, transportation infrastructures. So, the monarchical figure's continuous display serves symbolic and literal purposes to remind Moroccans of its grandeur and assert the extent of its powers.

c. The Makhzen: A Powerful Entity

The term 'Makhzen' in Arabic refers to a storage place, from the verb '*khazana*' (to store, preserve). In Morocco, it is associated with power, repression, deep state, governance, the palace, and the king. The concept of Makhzen is elusive, and it is difficult to delineate what counts as Makhzen and what does not. In modern Morocco, every aspect of politics seems to fit without allowing a complete conceptualization of the term. In their everyday language, people tend to use the term as a synonym of fear and supreme authority, without a comprehensive portrait of the entity.

The definition of Makhzen is blurry because it has been used in different centuries to describe distinct realities. Between the 12th and the 19th centuries, Makhzen suggested the bureaucracy, the government, and the army. Precisely, it suggested a centralized system designed to ensure domestic and foreign matters while fostering unity. The sultan occupies the top of the hierarchy, and the bureaucracy, the army, and the religious institutions occupied the middle—religious institutions aimed at promoting the sultan's power.

In post-independence Morocco, the Makhzen refers to a traditional system of control that functions synergistically with the modern state, which comprises bureaucratic and administrative structures. Simply, contemporary Makhzen is an authority that uses various hard and soft means to consolidate the monarchical rule.

The Makhzen maintains the legitimacy of the monarchy at the formal and symbolic levels. The persistence of corruption, injustice and nepotism, the restriction of the freedom of expression, and the lack of judicial autonomy are issues that inhibit the smooth development of any country.⁴⁹ In the case of Morocco, the Makhzen stands behind the persistence of those issues. By fostering division and disorder in the social sphere, it obstructs the emergence of new actors with enough power to challenge the status quo. It is no surprise why institutional and constitutional structures are so rigid: major changes are likely to destabilize the political order thanks to which the Alawite dynasty survived for so long.

The fact that Morocco is a liberalized autocracy makes its foreign policy agenda confusing. It is not obvious to determine the intentions behind economic projection, the defense of the Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara, and the quest for leadership in Africa. The monarchy's sacrality, together with the king's grip on power and the presence of a unique entity like the Makhzen, draw the picture of a 100% stable state. The prevalence of authoritarian features can ensure a regime's firmness, but it does not make it immune from domestic threats.

4.2. Arab Uprisings: A Neutralized Threat

On January 2011, the tragic death of Mohamed Bouazizi triggered a massive wave of protests in Tunisia to condemn social injustice and inequity, and to call for regime change. The demonstrations, known as the Jasmine Revolution, resulted in the overthrow of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled since 1987. In a butterfly effect, protests spilled to neighboring countries. In Libya, the armed rebels overthrew leader Muammar Gaddafi (r. 1969-2011). In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak resigned (r. 1981-2011). In Yemen, President Ali Abdullah

Saleh stepped down from power (r. 1978-2011).

The post-2011 political landscape varied from one country to another. Some consider Tunisia "an Arab anomaly" because it successfully underwent the democratic transition.⁵⁰ To the east, neighboring Libya, Yemen, and Syria are the theaters of proxy wars that evolve in different trajectories depending on the goals of the stakeholders involved. Social media and some television stations played a pivotal role in transforming the protests into a regional phenomenon. Facebook was notably used among protesters to spread information and to coordinate actions. Al Jazeera, one of the most-watched channels in the MENA region, seemed to sympathize with the protesters and the Islamist political movements by broadcasting news accordingly.⁵¹

In Morocco, protests erupted in association with the so-called February 20 Movement. Thousands of Moroccans across the kingdom protested to ask for the fulfillment of social and economic needs and the implementation of constitutional reforms. Specifically, the protesters requested better living standards, the recognition of minority and Amazigh language rights, the amendment of the constitution and the parliament, the promotion of accountability and an autonomous judiciary, and the liberation of political prisoners.⁵² The movement neither sought a revolution nor sought the overthrow of the monarchy. Peaceful demonstrations and the absence of violence allowed the movement to delineate its goals, and to distinguish itself from other movements that use violence and vandalism as an approach to achieve their demands.

In response to the protests, the Makhzen did not resort to brutality as the only measure to dissolve the movement. Instead, it used a mix of sticks and carrots to sustain the monarchical institution and fulfill some of the demands that

Moroccans yearned for. The police carried out occasional crackdowns to prevent further escalations. The most notorious crackdown occurred in Casablanca on March 13, when the police contained the flow of protests by using physical violence.

In parallel, the Makhzen enacted constitutional and institutional changes. Notably, King Mohammed VI adopted a set of maneuvers to alleviate anger. First, he created the Economic and Social Council as a basis to initiate economic change. He converted the Consultative Council on Human Rights (CCHR) into the National Human Rights Council (NHRC) to effectively monitor human rights and recognize the various violations that had taken place.

Second, the king verbally admitted the centrality of democratic reforms for Morocco and issued a plan according to which the constitution was to be revisited according to the citizens' demands and submitted for a referendum. Importantly, the king assigned the drafting task to the Consultative Commission for Constitutional Reforms (CCCR), composed by experts (economists, sociologists, jurists) he had appointed, and required to coordinate with various actors in the political landscape.⁵³

This move reveals the ambivalence of the royal circle towards the February 20 movement and the Arab Spring. Parallel to this, the king displayed clear signs of goodwill by his implicit consideration of the people's demands as legitimate. However, the CCCR proves that the goodwill sign was an attempt to tranquilize the Moroccans and overcome the protests wave with the least damage possible. Eventually, it was the king who appointed the Commission's 17 members, and it was the king's advisor, Mohamed Moâtassim, who stood behind the sketching of the new constitution.⁵⁴ In response, the February

20 movement expressed its mixed feelings towards the royal approach to change because the organization of the Commission mirrors a power imbalance that is tipped in favor of the monarchy. Parenthetically, the king himself announced that he would approve the new constitution.⁵⁵ That approval exerted pressure on a large segment of Moroccans since voting with a 'no' was implicitly out of the question.

The new constitution included institutional, parliamentary, cultural, social amendments. The monarchy became parliamentary, on top of being constitutional, democratic, and social. The parliament started to monitor the government, assess public policies and exert power over various areas.⁵⁶ The prime minister, who had been designated by the king before 2011, became appointed from the party that wins the elections. The clause that used to acknowledge the king's sacred status was removed and the religious role of the king was delineated to include the safeguard of Islam and the command of the Superior Council of Ulema.⁵⁷ As for justice, the new constitution emphasized the independence of the judiciary from any interference, and judges are required to report any attempt that might jeopardize the independence of their jurisdiction.⁵⁸ At the cultural level, the new constitution recognizes the centrality of "Arab-Islamist, Berber and Saharan-Hassanic components" and "African, Andalusian, Hebraic and Mediterranean influences" in forging the Moroccan identity.⁵⁹ Besides, Arabic and Tamazight became two official languages of the state. At the social level, the 1996 constitution referred to gender equality solely in political rights. With the new constitution, men and women are deemed equal in all aspects.⁶⁰

Third, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) won the legislative elections in November 2011, and its general secretary at the

time, Abdelilah Benkirane, became head of the government. It was the first time in the history of modern Morocco that an Islamist party that stands independently from the royal palace achieves a staggering victory. The Islamist phenomenon was not particular to Morocco. The MENA region witnessed an upsurge of moderate Islamist movements and parties. In Egypt, Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated candidate, won the presidential elections in June 2012. In Tunisia, Ennahda party won the elections of October 2011 and formed a coalition government Ettakatol and the Congress for the Republic.

In the middle of uncertainty surrounding the post-2011 regional order, the agenda of Islamist parties was appealing for the masses. In Morocco, the people invested their trust in the PJD to eradicate corruption, social injustice, and carry out deep reforms. As time wore on, the hopes of many Moroccans faded as the prices of commodities regularly rose, and the same concerns that fueled anger persisted. In 2016, the PJD again won the elections, but a significant gridlock halted its ability to form a government. The king issued a deadline beyond which he would nominate another official to replace Benkirane, who was well-known for his charismatic and bold personality. Indeed, the king appointed less charismatic Saadeddine Othmani as prime minister. The event coincided with a period when a large segment of people lost their faith in the PJD. Yet, the party is not to blame because the Makhzen intentionally discredited the credibility of the PJD as part of the logic of allowing the opposition to emerge, but tacitly limiting its leverage, to sustain the monopoly of the royal circle on power.⁶¹

So, the Makhzen knew how to handle popular discontent without disrupting the institutional order that has reigned since the independence of Morocco. The constitutional revisiting astutely

took into consideration all the shortcomings that might evolve into significant threats. For example, the recognition of Tamazight and the components of the Moroccan culture deters the eruption of separatist claims and upholds national unity. Similarly, the promotion of an Islamist party like the PJD was also meant to immerse the Moroccan people in an illusion of institutional flexibility. This strategy is called “authoritarian upgrading:” when a regime adopts democratic measures while retaining its authoritarian core intact.⁶²

In 2016, the Rif region in northern Morocco witnessed protests (Rif Hirak) raising their concern over precarity and the absence of social goods like decent healthcare, education, and employment.⁶³ Since the reign of Hassan II, the region has been marginalized due to its strong identity, its organization of two revolts in 1958 and 1984, and its relative independence from the rest of Morocco during the French protectorate (1912-1956) under the so-called “Republic of the Rif” (1921-1926).

In October 2016, the tragic death of fisherman Mohcine Fikri inside the waste grinder of a trash truck when the authorities confiscated his merchandise revived the memories of repression in the minds of Rifi people.⁶⁴ Massive crowds protested in the streets of Hoceima, Berkane, Nador, and other zones because the death of Fikri was the straw that broke the camel's back. A prominent figure of the Rif Hirak, Nasser Zefzafi, condemned injustice. A tipping point in his quest for justice was when he accused an Imam of reflecting the position of the Makhzen, away from objectivity. The incident pushed the authorities to arrest him, which cost him a 20-year prison sentence. The imprisonment of Zefzafi was a Makhzenian threat, aimed at nurturing fear among protesters to avoid dealing with a conundrum similar to the Arab Spring.

The crackdown over social movements is only one manifestation of Morocco's authoritarian core. The arrest of journalists is also a reality that bothers officials. In 2017, journalist Hamid el-Mahdaoui was sentenced to three years in prison for his involvement in the Rif Hirak. Recently, journalist Omar Radi has received a lot of accusations that range from receiving funds from abroad to raping a fellow citizen. Unlike Mahdaoui, Radi is known for his open critiques of the regime, and he has already been condemned for that in March 2020.⁶⁵

Parallel to these events, the king grants pardon to some prisoners during religious celebrations and royal celebrations. On July 30, the Throne Day, 1,446 people who have been detained for

various reasons and different durations benefited from the royal amnesty.⁶⁶ On July 31, the day of Eid al-Adha in 2020, 752 found freedom.⁶⁷ In August 2019, journalist Hajar Raissouni was arrested for having sexual relations out of wedlock and for aborting illegally. The event triggered a wave of discontent among activists and questioned the existence of individual rights and freedom in Morocco. Moroccan outlaws, a movement that promotes personal freedoms, published a manifesto to mobilize resources to defend the case of Raissouni. Hence, the case became popular, and many activists called the authorities to free Raissouni and her fiancé. In October 2019, the king issued amnesty, a decision that was motivated by compassion towards the journalist.



The Makhzen and the royal circle tend to issue mixed signals which keep the nature of the regime blurry. As soon as a concern acquires considerable attention, the authorities take hasty measures to prevent escalation. The truth is that the balance between democracy and autocracy conceals the regime's stance towards sensitive matters.

4.3. A Return to Foreign Policy and Regime Security

Morocco's humanitarian projection in Africa during the COVID-19 crisis is a means towards an end. The Kingdom is striving to acquire a leadership status in the continent. The eruption of COVID-19 has been opportune to show that 'leader countries' help fellow countries to overcome the crisis together. The provision of medical aid counts as a plus for Rabat's foreign policy towards Africa. As a result, the benefits of foreign policy trickle-down to the regime and the monarchy.

International and domestic constraints drive Morocco's foreign policy. Over the past decades, the world has become unprecedentedly interdependent. The power of a country is no longer assessed in relation to the power of its peers. The concept of power expanded beyond economic and military capabilities, to include aspects such as influence and status. Threats have become predominantly regional or global (COVID-19, climate change, terrorism, illegal migration). In short, the zero-sum logic is no longer viable. Instead, the win-win logic dominates the mindsets of decision-makers, and interdependence has become a norm in international relations.

In Mohammed VI's Morocco, the foreign policy sphere underwent massive changes to conform to the new norm. Vice versa, the domestic sphere also shapes countries' external behavior. The typical way makes public opinion

vis-à-vis policy 'x' a crucial indicator of whether the policy will be implemented or not. In the case of Morocco, domestic constraint takes another dimension. The Arab Spring, the protests that shook the country distinctly, the widespread dissatisfaction with the government's performance, and the growing number of activists suggest a change in the composition of the society. People are increasingly aware of the boundary that distinguishes rights from duties. This awareness is particularly alarming for the Makhzen because it pushes people to question the nature of their social contract with the ruling elite.

Consequently, the diversification of foreign partners is an effective way to back the country and the monarchy up for two reasons. First, the nature of Morocco's engagement in Africa is pacific. Mohammed VI favors economic partnerships, and the ministry of foreign affairs condemns interventionism and foreign meddling in the domestic affairs of others. By doing so, the king and the diplomacy safeguard the kingdom from hegemonic allegations, and they portray it as a trustworthy and credible partner.

Second, the person of the king is highly present in Morocco-African relations. He is the one who leads Morocco's solidarity moves in the continent. Concerning COVID-19, he was the one who launched the initiative to send medical aid to 15 African countries. Whereas most leaders mobilized their countries' resources to fight the pandemic inside the frontiers, Mohammed VI and very few others opted for the win-win logic. In International Relations, reputation is a double-edged sword because it can level up or tarnish the country's status. The Moroccan king is fostering a favorable reputation for the country and his person. Gathering remote support is beneficial for the survival of the monarchy and the continuity of the Moroccan state.

Conclusion

Since the ascent of King Mohammed VI to the throne, Moroccan-African ties have become unprecedentedly robust. The monarch, business-oriented, sought to revive his country's historical engagement with Africa by giving it an economic touch. Today, Rabat is seeking three main foreign policy goals towards Africa. First, it seeks to diversify economic partners by expanding economic networks and fostering greater investments. Between 2000 and 2018, Morocco's economic status towards Sub-Saharan Africa progressively shifted from 'buyer' to 'seller.' Besides this, many Moroccan companies are expanding their activities to enhance economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa. Second, Morocco is amassing external support on the 'Moroccan status' of the Western Sahara. The Kingdom initiated a rapprochement with Sub-Saharan and Latin American countries and celebrated the opening of many consulates in the cities of Laâyoune and Dakhla. Third, Morocco is seeking a leadership status by portraying itself as a provider of regional security in Africa. It has used a mix of hard and soft powers to tackle regional problems like terrorism and has refrained from meddling in the internal affairs of other states. By doing so, it is eliminating the distrust that marks international

relations, and that often blurs the difference between leadership and hegemonic aspirations.

In April 2020, Mohammed VI launched an initiative to help 15 of his African counterparts combat COVID-19. Seemingly, the gesture reveals solidarity and altruism, but the monarchy's monopoly on power, the centrality of the Makhzen, and the resonance of the Arab Spring and the Rif Hirak highlight the nexus between foreign policy and state security. In Morocco, the increasing awareness of citizens of their rights and duties alarms the Makhzen. In 2011, the MENA region witnessed the collapse of regimes and the unleashing of wars. In response, the Makhzen took some measures to deter protests while maintaining the institutional status quo. This tactic allows Morocco to balance democratic and autocratic features, without jeopardizing its foreign interests. Still, the truth is that regimes also have a life expectancy beyond which they cannot overcome domestic discontent peacefully. A liberalized autocracy like Morocco maintains a democratic façade to diversify regional partners. This strategy boosts the reputation of the country and the king. Once again, altruism is not the sole motive behind the king's COVID-19 initiative.

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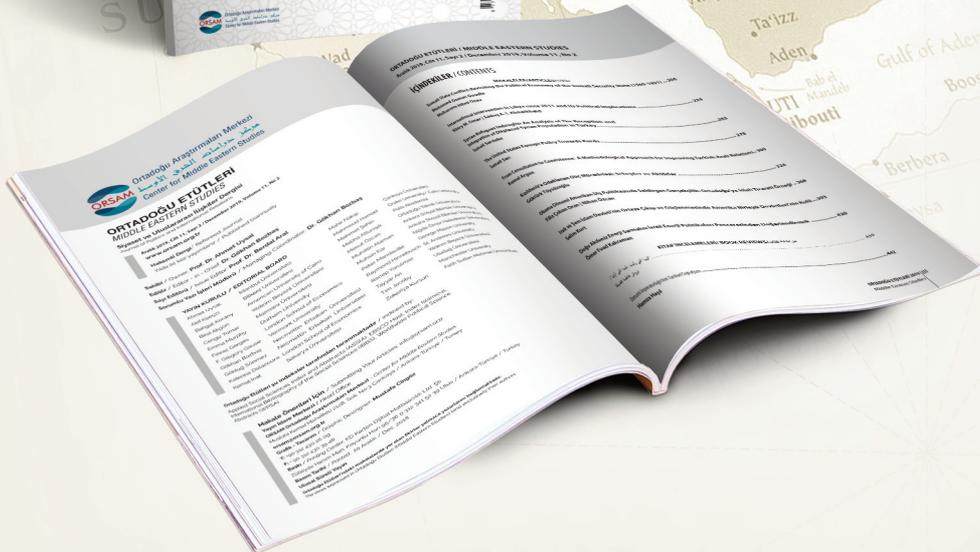
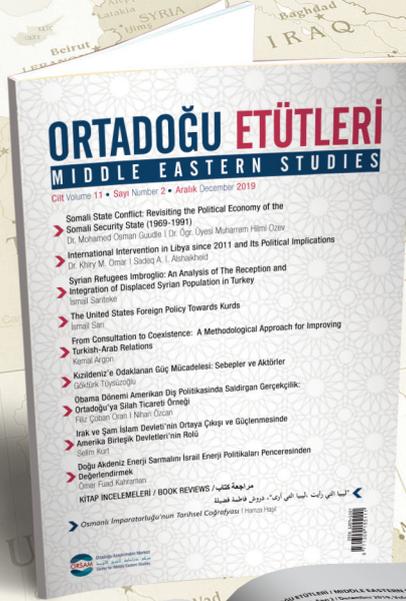
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