



FROM ASSISTANCE TO PARTNERSHIP: MOROCCO AND ITS FOREIGN POLICY IN WEST AFRICA

Mohammed El-Katiri



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Mohammed El-Katiri

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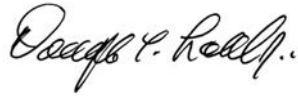
FOREWORD

Morocco is seeking to position itself as a regional security provider in West Africa. Over recent years, Morocco has emerged as a key partner for the development of variety of sectors in different West African countries, but it also aspires to contribute to peace and stability of this African sub-region that continues to face important challenges and significant threats. In particular, a range of initiatives is under way to combat religious extremism, terrorism, and transnational organized crime including illicit drug trafficking, which remains a major threat to peace and security in the region.

At a time of deepening budget constraints, bilateral cooperation with reliable and moderate regional partners offers a potential means of reducing costs while still maintaining regional reach in order to pursue U.S. security objectives. Morocco's new efforts and initiative offer synergies with U.S. priorities for the region. Morocco, with its geographic location, political stability, and close cultural ties with Sub-Saharan Africa, offers itself as a potential partner to the U.S. defense community to maintain U.S. influence in the region and address shared security concerns.

In this monograph, Dr. Mohammed El-Katiri focuses on the geopolitical, security, and economic drivers of the renewed Moroccan interest in Sub-Saharan Africa. He highlights Morocco's contribution to counterextremism in West Africa and the Sahel region through initiatives promoting moderate Islam, and concludes with a number of recommendations on

how Morocco could be supported by the United States in tackling some key common challenges arising from these sub-regions of Africa.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr." in a cursive script.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.
Director
Strategic Studies Institute and
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SUMMARY

Moroccan foreign policy is currently emphasizing its presence and relations in Sub-Saharan Africa, and in particular West Africa. The wide range of cooperative projects undertaken in recent years extends to security relations, with Morocco seeking to position itself as a regional security provider.

Morocco's renewed interest in sub-Saharan Africa is driven to a large extent by the remarkable economic performance of a variety of African economies over the last decade, and the potential for continued growth over coming decades. Several African countries have been seeing much greater – and increasing – economic activity, particularly those rich in natural resources such as, but not limited to, copper, gold, oil, and gas.

But shared security has also emerged as an important aspect of Morocco's relations with a range of Sahel and West African countries. Moroccan decisionmakers see that peace and stability in the Sahel is not only a basic requirement for their own economic development but, thanks to shared security concerns, is also of prime importance to the stability of Morocco. Over the last decade, Morocco has showed intense interest in supporting peace and security in the region, through regional and broader multilateral forums such as the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the European Union.

Morocco is leveraging a range of factors – including historic ties, domestic political stability, unique economic and institutional development experience, its strategically important geographic location, and relations with Western countries – to strengthen its position in West Africa. Morocco also aspires to position itself as a partner of choice for the United States and

other organizations seeking to develop their interests in Sub-Saharan Africa. This therefore provides opportunities for the United States to leverage common interests in security and stability in the region.

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Introduction.

Morocco has been deepening and accelerating its engagement with Western African countries since the ascendance to the throne of the current King, Mohammed VI, in July 1999. This is evidenced by the numerous visits paid by the Moroccan King to a variety of West and Central African countries since 2000, and the number of commercial and cooperation agreements signed over the last decade. Some of the Moroccan monarch's tours lasted for weeks, signaling not only the importance that the Moroccan state gives to sub-Saharan Africa, and in particular, the West Africa region, but also indicating the King's personal fondness for these African countries.

The desire to diversify economic partners remains Morocco's main driver for strengthening and expanding its ties with West African countries. The strong economic growth achieved over the last 2 decades in a number of these states has drawn the attention of Morocco's political and economic elites to the region. Several Western African countries, such as Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea-Conakry, Sierra Leone, and Equatorial Guinea, have rich endowments of mineral resources like ores and petroleum. Their economies have benefited from the surge in international prices for commodities and the emergence of growing middle classes. Moroccan interest in Africa is also driven by the necessity to gather political support among sub-Saharan

African countries for Morocco's claims to the Western Sahara territory.

Morocco leverages its political connections with a variety of Western African rulers to facilitate business opportunities for its private investors and state-owned commercial institutions. Though Morocco has not been a member of the African Union since 1984, its relations with sub-Saharan countries and involvement in the continent's security and development matters have never ceased. Morocco has long-standing and excellent relations with a number of West African countries such as Gabon, Senegal, and Cote d'Ivoire. Successive Moroccan Monarchs have persisted in efforts to maintain and establish new co-operative and productive relationships. Furthermore, unlike European and, in general, Western countries, Morocco benefits along with Western African countries from not carrying any colonial baggage. On the contrary, against the background of Morocco's own struggles for full political sovereignty from the French during the 1950s, Morocco has managed to gain a reputation among Western African political leaders as a trusted ally, proactive in addressing African development and security challenges.

Morocco's current engagement in West Africa is multifaceted; it focuses on security cooperation, economic development, strengthening cultural ties, and capacity building. Moroccan authorities consider a more comprehensive approach will be necessary; one that embraces a sustained, and long-term investment in the region's security and economic and human development.

Seen from Morocco, this comprehensive strategy entails the exchange of experiences and expertise in institutional capacity building in a variety of key

sectors that are of importance to the socio-economic development of West African societies. What characterizes the current strategy is the significant involvement of the Moroccan private sector. This involvement is unlike previous cooperation and engagement efforts that were limited to ministries and publicly owned institutions.

Security assistance forms an essential component of Morocco's pivot to West African countries. Without security and stability in these African countries, Morocco cannot achieve its economic and commercial objectives, since its own security is directly affected. Moroccan officials consider these regions to be Morocco's hinterland, given their geographical proximity and strong commercial and cultural ties, but also because some of the security menaces are cross-border in nature, including the trafficking of drugs, weapons, and people.

This monograph focuses on the geopolitical and economic drivers for the renewed Moroccan interest in West Africa. It also examines how Morocco is conducting its foreign and security policy in a variety of Western African countries. It highlights Morocco's contribution to counterextremism in the West Africa and Sahel regions by training African Mosques' imams and preachers. It concludes with recommendations on how Morocco could be supported by the U.S. defense community in tackling some of the key security challenges that are facing these sub-regions of Africa for the mutual benefit of both countries. Given the common interest between the United States and Morocco in preserving peace and stability in Morocco's surrounding region, Rabat's growing assertiveness in West Africa presents an opportunity, rather than a challenge, for U.S. interests. Morocco's geographic

location, political stability, and deep and long-standing cultural ties with sub-Saharan states provide a potential bridgehead for U.S. efforts to promote its security objectives in Africa. At a time of severe defense budget constraints, bilateral cooperation with reliable and moderate regional partners can provide an effective multiplier and augment the U.S. reach into otherwise challenging regions.

A History of Strong Ties with West Africa.

Morocco's bilateral relations with Western African countries are not of recent origin. These relations date back centuries to the time of different ruling dynasties that governed Morocco, such as the Almoravids and Almohads, as well as the current Alawi dynasty that has ruled since 1666. These previous rulers traded with sub-Saharan African countries and maintained close social and religious links. Relations continued despite challenges posed by a variety of political events, including the French protectorate and later decolonization debates.

After independence from the French and Spanish colonial rule in 1956, Morocco continued its relations with African countries. Moroccan engagement initially was driven by a desire to help colonized countries to achieve their independence through providing support to liberation movements and supporting their cause in international circles. Morocco was a key founding member of the Organization of African Unity (OAU, now called the African Union [AU]), an organization that initially was established to support African territories and peoples to gain their freedom and independence.¹

In the 1970s, cultivating the support of sub-Saharan African countries for Morocco's claims on Western Sahara became an important factor, one that continues to drive Moroccan foreign policy until today. Moroccan diplomacy became very active in attempts to deny the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (RASD) any new recognition, and pursue African countries that had recognized RASD to withdraw their recognition. The effectiveness of Morocco's African foreign policy was evident from the failure of the Nineteenth Annual Summit of the OAU in August 1982 in Tripoli, Libya, to achieve its two-thirds quorum, after a large number of African countries supporting Morocco boycotted the summit in protest at the admission of RASD as a member of the organization.² The later acceptance of RASD as a member of the OAU, in turn, led Morocco to withdraw its membership in this pan-African organization, a situation which persists today.³

The unresolved Western Sahara issue continues to dominate Morocco's foreign policy towards African countries and the AU. In June 2014, the appointment of former Mozambican president Joaquim Chissano by the AU as a special envoy for Western Sahara revived Morocco's tensions with the organization, but also highlighted how pervasive this territorial dispute still is in Morocco's relations with African countries. Morocco objected to this appointment or any specific AU role, stressing that handling of this issue remains the exclusive domain of the United Nations (UN) Security Council and the Secretary-General.⁴

However, the withdrawal of Morocco from the AU in 1984 did not interrupt Morocco's bilateral relations with many African countries and engagement with the continent's development and security issues. Morocco has participated in many conferences and

meetings concerning the African continent at UN, European Union (EU), and African levels. For example, Morocco played an active role in initiating a dialogue between African countries and the EU on migration and development in 2006, known as the Rabat Process. The main objective of this initiative was to bring together countries of origin, transit, and destination in Europe to discuss the migration phenomenon not only from a strictly security angle, but also from a development perspective.⁵ Morocco initiated or joined other pan-African organizations to promote regional cooperation on a variety of issues, such as the Ministerial Conference on Fisheries Cooperation among African States Bordering the Atlantic Ocean that has its secretariat based in the Moroccan capital, Rabat; and the Community of Sahel-Saharan states (CEN-SAD) that Morocco joined in February 2001.⁶

Despite Morocco's limited financial resources and position as a major recipient of international aid for the past 30 years, the country has continued to provide humanitarian and technical assistance to African countries in order to maintain its influence and signal its solidarity and commitment to the African continent's causes. Over recent decades, Morocco has set up military hospitals and sent food and medical aid on a variety of occasions when Western African countries suffered from conflicts or natural disasters. The most recent humanitarian initiative was the setting up of a surgical field military hospital by the Moroccan armed forces in the Malian capital of Bamako, in September 2013,⁷ and in Guinea-Conakry in February 2014.⁸ Morocco has also supported the development of a variety of key sectors in some West African countries by sharing its knowledge and expertise. It granted scholarships to hundreds of students and provided training to cadres from these countries.

On the bilateral level, Morocco has particularly close relations with a number of West African leaders. For instance, Congo is one of its closest allies in Africa. The late King Hassan II of Morocco and the late Gabonese President Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba forged a cordial relationship which translated into closer ties between their two countries. The Gabonese president was one of the key supporters of Morocco's sovereignty claim over Western Sahara. Both leaders jointly staged diplomatic interventions to end crises among African countries. The close relations between the two leaders continue under their successors, King Mohammed VI, and President Ali Bongo Ondimba. Equally, Morocco's relations with Equatorial Guinea have been continuously friendly since the 1970s.

Changing Opportunities in View of West Africa's Economic Growth.

The past decade has witnessed a remarkable socio-economic development trajectory in the economies of Sub-Saharan Africa. These economic achievements and their potential have gradually changed the perception of the region among the Moroccan political and business elite. Despite glaring differences in economic structures, rates of economic growth, and political stability across sub-Saharan countries, the region as a whole has realistic future economic potential. Since 2003, Sub-Saharan Africa has had average annual growth of 5 percent. This is a significant achievement particularly at a time when many developed economies are struggling to grow. According to International Monetary Fund, some Western African countries are expected to grow at 6 percent per annum.⁹ These are Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic

of Congo (DRC), Equatorial Guinea, and Sierra Leone. Africa's economic progress has been driven mainly by the increase of international prices for commodities, the expansion of middle class population, and urbanization. It is also these three trends that will continue to make sub-Saharan Africa one of the fastest growing regional economies over the coming decades.

Economic growth, particularly the last 15 years, has benefited from the surge in global oil and commodities prices in major oil-exporting countries such as Nigeria. Several West African countries are resource-abundant, such as Gabon, Republic of Congo, DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone. West Africa's natural resources are not limited to hydrocarbons, but also include other minerals such as iron ore, precious metals, and agricultural commodities. However, sub-Saharan Africa's economic progress has also been derived from other diverse sources such as tourism and manufacturing. Demographic trends and urbanization have also contributed to growth. Africa's population is rising rapidly at a time when population growth is slowing in other global regions. With a population of 924.7 million in 2014, Sub-Saharan Africa is the world's second most populous region after Asia. The population is expected to more than double by 2050 to reach about two billion. This high growth rate is driven largely by high fertility rates, on average 5.2 children per woman (compared to a world average of 2.5). Sub-Saharan Africa is also by far the most rapidly urbanizing continent. In 2014, 37 percent of the population (345.6 million people) lived in urban areas. By 2050, about 1.1 billion will be living in cities. By 2035, about half of the population will be urban.¹⁰

Domestic demand has constituted an important part of this growth story. Africa's middle class—

including North Africa—has expanded greatly over the last 2 decades. According to a report by the African Development Bank, the middle class doubled in size between 1990 and 2010, from 157 million to 326 million.¹¹ This effectively includes individuals earning between US\$2 to US\$20 per day. The middle class is projected to continue to grow and reach 1.1 billion (42 percent of the population) by 2060. The more affluent lifestyle associated with the middle class has contributed to increased domestic consumption in many African countries.

Another driver pushing Moroccan political and economic elites to diversify the country's economic relations by strengthening ties with faster-growing countries is uncertainty over the duration of the economic crisis in Europe, and its potential ramifications for Morocco and other traditional North African trade partners in Europe. The negative impact of the economic crisis in the EU on the Moroccan economy, whose main trading partner is the EU, has already been felt in a drop in foreign investment, the return of Moroccan immigrants, and a fall in some exports.

Morocco's external economic ambitions are also a response to the realization by African leaders of the need for external assistance and foreign investment in order to achieve the economic development required to meet the rising expectations of their people. Western African governments are keen to modernize their economies by strengthening their competitiveness and economic diversity in order to make those economies more resilient to commodities price fluctuations. Moroccan political and business elites see in this expansion of public investment in West Africa, and in the rise of the middle class, a variety of business opportunities, which has encouraged them to set up production

plants and distribution channels for consumer goods as well as engaging in the building of infrastructure projects. This is discernible in investment projects announced by Moroccan public and private entities over the last 5 years. A good example of this trend is the investment of the Moroccan property developer, Ad-doha, in building affordable housing in Mali, Congo-Brazzaville, and Cameroon; as well as cement factories in Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea-Conakry, Gabon, Burkina Faso, and Congo-Brazzaville.¹²

What characterizes the current Moroccan foreign policy towards sub-Saharan Africa, compared to previous engagements, is that it is a coherent and well-orchestrated strategy with a strong backing from the Moroccan palace. The dossier of rapprochement with African countries is handled at Palace level; it is in the hands of the King and his entourage. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries play a minor role in developing this emerging relationship. Their role is limited to executing what is assigned to them and implementing the previously agreed cooperation agreement.

Morocco's current African strategy is proactive. Moroccan institutions have analyzed market potentials and gone on to pursue them. This is different from what characterized Morocco's relations with Africa under the late King Hassan II, which were mainly conducted on an ad hoc basis with the single goal of securing African states' diplomatic support on the Western Sahara issue. However, this does not argue that the current rapprochement does not achieve such diplomatic influence. It certainly does, but also in full alignment with other socio-economic and security objectives.

The formulation of Morocco's grand strategy towards Africa has been based, to a large extent, on the investment experience of the country's financial institutions in French-speaking Africa. Morocco's three leading banks – Attijariwafa Bank, Banque marocaine du commerce extérieur (BMCE), and Banque Centrale Populaire (BCP) – have boosted their retail banking presence in several sub-Saharan African countries since 2005. Moroccan lenders are now occupying leading positions within the African banking landscape in terms of assets and regional network coverage.¹³ Attijariwafa bank has 414 branches in 11 West and Central African countries.¹⁴ BCP, after taking control of the Ivorian Banque Atlantique in 2012 to add to its earlier acquisitions of Banque populaire Morocco-Centrafricaine and Banque populaire Marocco-Guineenne, has a presence in seven countries of the West African Economic and Monetary Union. BMCE Bank with its 72.6 percent stake in Bank of Africa has an extensive geographical coverage. In 2014, BMCE was present in 16 countries with a total of 461 branches.¹⁵ BMCE is the only Moroccan bank that operates not only in French-speaking Africa, but also has a presence and a plan to expand into English-speaking African countries in Central and East Africa.

The remarkable experience of Moroccan banks' expansion in Western and Central African countries has inspired other Moroccan companies to seek opportunities in a variety of sectors. The systematic insights and contacts that such institutions have aggregated from these African countries have contributed to the formulation of the new Moroccan foreign policy towards sub-Saharan Africa. The dominance of economic elements in Morocco's ongoing engagement with sub-Saharan African countries, and the nature

of investment and economic partnership agreements inked so far, are an indication of the contribution of Morocco's early banking investments. Those charged with the formulation of Moroccan policy and strategy towards sub-Saharan Africa have benefited from detailed insights on business opportunities in these African countries.

What is different now? Morocco has aggregated immense expertise in a variety of fields that are needed for the development of African countries. Morocco, during the 15 years rule of King Mohammed VI, has launched major economic, social, and security projects that have given Moroccan private and public institutions significant experience and relevant skill sets. Moroccan companies in variety of sectors—from banking, agriculture, real estate, and pharmaceutical to physical infrastructure development—have accumulated extensive industry knowledge, experience, and financial wealth that allow them to expand internationally.

A few leading Moroccan conglomerates, such as Addoha, Cooper Pharma Maroc, and the National Office of Electricity, have made accessing sub-Saharan African markets an important part of their internationalization strategies. Several of these companies have inked contracts to build overseas manufacturing units during the last 3 years.

The expansion of the Moroccan state-owned *Office Chérien des Phosphates* (OCP) into Africa exemplifies Morocco's new economic strategy towards Africa. With its rising population and agriculture production potential, sub-Saharan Africa is increasingly becoming an important growth market for the OCP, a world leading phosphate fertilizers producer.

OCP has set up a new production unit in Jarf Lasfar, a Moroccan industrial park and port south of Casablanca that exports its entire production to Sub-Saharan Africa. OCP has even developed specific fertilizing products that are suitable for West Africa soils, such as the Teractive fertilizer that is designed for local crops, including: cotton, cocoa, and corn. Ivory Coast is by far the largest cocoa producer in the world followed by Ghana. Adding Nigeria and Cameroon, the combined share is around 70 percent of global production.¹⁶

In March 2014, OCP and Gabon's state-owned mining company, Société Équatoriale des Mines, signed a partnership agreement to develop a fertilizer manufacturing industry involving both countries and dedicated entirely to meeting demand in Sub-Saharan Africa. The logic behind this joint venture is to exploit synergies between the phosphate and natural gas resources of both countries. The partnership agreement stipulates building an ammonia plant in Gabon that uses natural gas feedstock, and a phosphate fertilizers production unit. Morocco undertakes to build two phosphoric acid facilities and a unit to produce phosphate-based fertilizers in Morocco. OCP's partnership with Gabon is driven both by the desire to tap into new growing markets in Sub-Saharan Africa, and by a need to access natural gas resources that constitute an important input to produce fertilizers. This project symbolizes the kind of partnerships by Moroccan private and public institutions that are willing to pursue the creation of wealth and achieve economic development across the continent.

Gateway to Africa.

The strengthening of the presence of Moroccan companies in sub-Saharan Africa is one pillar of Morocco's new economic strategy. A second pillar focuses on positioning Morocco as both a hub and foothold for international companies with an interest in expanding across the African continent. BMCE bank was the first Moroccan bank to see an opportunity in becoming a hub for Africa by capitalizing on Morocco's linguistic, political, and cultural connections with a number of African countries. In 2007, BMCE set up an investment bank in London (MediCapital Bank, since 2010 re-named BMCE Bank International Plc), with a business mandate to harness international partnership opportunities with interest in sub-Sahara Africa, particularly French-speaking Africa.¹⁷ Leveraging its expertise and experience in working in sub-Saharan Africa, BMCE has hoped to encourage international investment into Africa and Morocco itself. Though BMCE's experience in London was not a great success, the idea of Morocco serving as a gateway for international investors to expand into North and West-African countries was adopted by Moroccan decisionmakers, and the launch of the Casablanca Financial City project in 2010 reflects this adoption.

Casablanca Financial City is meant to become a financial hub for the French-speaking African market. Many of the major multinational manufacturers that have set up production units in Morocco have been attracted by the possibilities of accessing African markets. The most recent example is the decision by the French-based automaker, PSA Peugeot Citroën, to build a manufacturing facility in Morocco, with plans to produce 200,000 cars and 200,000 motorcycles annually. One of the main factors driving this investment,

in addition to the availability of affordable skilled labor, is the potential for accessing sub-Saharan and Middle-Eastern markets¹⁸ by taking advantage of Morocco's network of free trade agreements and excellent political ties across these two regions.

Solidarity and Crisis Management Help.

Morocco's reconnection with West Africa is not limited only to business contracts and official visits; many of Morocco's economic initiatives over the last few years have been launched with an important social dimension in mind. Over the last 3 years in particular, Morocco has adopted several initiatives to show solidarity with Western African countries.

In 2014, Morocco launched its first program to legalize immigrants from a variety of African countries who had lived in Morocco for years, waiting for an opportunity to immigrate to Europe. The change of official attitude in Morocco towards illegal immigrants is not driven by the need for workers, as used to be the case in many European countries up until a few years ago. Morocco is a country with a young population that is larger than the current economy can provide with adequate job opportunities. Nor is Morocco prosperous enough to provide thousands of immigrants with basic socio-economic services such as education and health care.

Morocco's tolerance of African illegal immigration has two other explanations. First, this is an attempt by the Moroccan government to refute media reporting alleging racist and inhumane treatment of illegal African immigrants. Second, this tolerance is an attempt to show Morocco's solidarity with other African peoples: this is a move to win the hearts and minds of Africans

and demonstrate a difference from the approaches adopted by many European countries.

Morocco showed its solidarity again during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, which is considered to be one of the most severe, prolonged, and complicated outbreaks to have affected the region in decades, with 22,859 infection cases and a total of 9,162 deaths, according to statistics published in February 2015.¹⁹ When most international air carriers were suspending their flights to Western African airports over fear of virus contagion, Morocco's air carrier, Royal Air Maroc (RAM), continued flights, including to the areas most affected by the Ebola epidemic; Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea.²⁰ The continuation of RAM flights in and out of Western African airports allowed international medical aid workers to arrive at the affected areas, and Western African citizens to stay connected with the world. Maintaining scheduled flights was also a clear message of solidarity with Western African countries.

This gesture was well-received by the political leadership in Western African capitals. During the High-Level International Conference on Ebola organized in Brussels in March 2015, Alpha Conde, the president of Guinea, praised Morocco's stance for keeping its borders open, allowing the free movement of people.²¹ These initiatives are designed in senior Moroccan political circles to boost the country's status as a reliable ally and partner for African countries. The strategy appears to be bearing fruit. The Moroccan monarch seems to have won the sympathy of West African societies and leaders, as indicated by the number of popular receptions given to the King during his June tour of Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, and Gabon.²²

Security Cooperation.

Morocco has now, more than ever, vested interests in seeing Sub-Saharan Africa, and West Africa in particular, politically stable, secure, and prosperous. Increased Moroccan economic presence in West African economies will posit an important Moroccan role in the security of the region. In the event of political instability and chaos, it is Morocco which would suffer most directly, being West Africa's main gateway for illegal trafficking into Europe. Having fought a long-standing, and so far relatively successful, battle against both Arab Spring-style popular protest movements on the one hand, and radical Islamist terrorism on the other, Morocco has a strong incentive to prevent the creation of political flash points near its hard to control southern borders, or of safe havens for international terrorist cells, whether religious in nature or not. Furthermore, substantial Moroccan investment projects include manufacturing plants and infrastructure projects that require stability to continue production. Prolonged disruptions of business operations due to any political or social instability would adversely affect these Moroccan investments. Without security and stability in these African countries, Morocco cannot achieve its economic and commercial objectives.

For example, the political and military crisis in Cote d'Ivoire that began in 2002, and particularly the serious post-election crisis that followed the announcement of the results of the second round of the presidential election on November 28, 2010, resulted in large-scale economic disruption that adversely impacted Moroccan investment and diaspora remittances.²³ Attijariwafa Bank, through its subsidiary the

Ivorian Society Bank, incurred a drop in its revenues, as it had to close down its operations for months during the height of the 2011 crisis.²⁴ Banque populaire Morocco-Centrafricaine is another Moroccan-owned financial institution that has been adversely affected by deep political, security, and economic crises in Central African Republic.²⁵ The economic disruptions as a result of this conflict negatively impacted the bank's performance.²⁶ For the Moroccan ruling circle, this is also a matter that affects personal wealth since many of its members hold shares, board memberships, and commercial roles in these companies.

Although the worst political and criminal violence across the region appears to be over, the security situation across West Africa, as is the case in several other sub-Saharan regions, remains particularly volatile. Decades of political turmoil and armed conflicts have left the region's state authorities weak and unable to control nonstate armed groups or the illicit traffic of drugs and people in their respective territories, or to set up an effective regional security force.²⁷ Since 2011, the flood of weapons from the Libyan conflict has also added to insecurity throughout West Africa, as rebels, terrorist groups, and criminal organizations benefit from the movement of arms and fighters. The rapid economic growth experienced in some countries has not benefited all citizens and provinces evenly. This fragile security and political situations has undoubtedly been a serious challenge to West African governments and their international partners.

Morocco's concerns about security challenges in West Africa preceded its renewed economic interest in this African sub-region. Given their international nature, the rise of terrorism, piracy and armed robbery at sea in the Gulf of Guinea, and illicit traffick-

ing of drugs and humans in West African countries have always been perceived as direct threats to Morocco. Given Morocco's geographic location, criminal groups based in West Africa are tempted to use Moroccan territory as a transit point to smuggle migrants, cocaine, or other narcotics to Europe. In fact, Morocco has become a major transit hub for the trafficking of migrants. Also, over the last decade, there have been many stories in the Moroccan press about seizures of cocaine proceeding from West African countries through Moroccan ports and airports.²⁸ In particular, the nexus between organized crime and terrorism remains the most alarming to Moroccan security authorities. There is concern about the use of financial proceeds from drug and human trafficking by terrorist organizations within Morocco or at its borders to carry out systematic attacks within the country.

Against this background, it is not surprising that Morocco has shown interest in playing an important role in helping West Africa and Sahel countries tackle their significant and complex security challenges over the last decade, and particularly after the events of the Arab Spring in 2011. Moroccan diplomacy has been continuously active and supportive of a variety of initiatives and debates in African, European, and UN forums, calling for structural solutions to West Africa and Sahel security problems. For instance, King Mohammed VI, in a speech addressed to the 69th session of the UN General Assembly, called on developed countries to change their attitude towards African development matters and treat African countries with fairness and objectivity. He asserted that "Africa does not need humanitarian aid as much as it needs mutually beneficial partnerships."²⁹

Moroccan officials argue that their engagement in support of peace and stability in West Africa is not a novelty. Morocco's armed forces have participated in numerous peace missions in Africa since independence in 1956, and have provided military assistance to West African nations either under the umbrella of the UN or bilaterally to its allies since the 1960s. For instance, Morocco contributed to the stability of Zaire (now the DRC) in 1977 by sending a large Moroccan military contingent. The mission of Moroccan troops, leading a pan-African force, was to assist President Mobutu Sese Seko to restore control and stability in Shaba, a mineral-rich province, after the withdrawal of a Franco-Belgian force which had repulsed attacks by an Angola-based rebel group.³⁰ Another Western African country that benefited from Moroccan military assistance is Equatorial Guinea. In September 1979, Morocco sent 100 military officers to the then newly appointed President Teodoro Obiang Nguema, after a military coup that deposed Francisco Macias Nguema on August 3, 1979.³¹ Morocco maintained its security assistance to Teodoro Obiang Nguema, who still rules Equatorial Guinea today. Morocco has also contributed to UN peacekeeping forces in several West African countries including the Congo in 1960, the DRC in 1999 and in Côte d'Ivoire in 2004.³² Furthermore, Morocco has offered hundreds of military officers from West African armies opportunities to receive education and training in Moroccan military academies alongside Moroccan officers.

Since 2012, Morocco has assumed a more assertive role in its foreign policy towards the West Africa and Sahel regions. The changes and challenges brought by the Arab spring in North Africa have created a new geopolitical environment for Morocco. The killing of

Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi in 2011 gave Morocco an opportunity to play an active role in one of the already existing pan-African economic and security cooperation organizations and initiatives. During his rule, Qadhafi had had an assertive foreign policy in the Sahel and other parts of Africa, using Libya's financial resources and his unity ideology to gain influence.³³ Morocco's foreign policy attitude at that time was to avoid any competition and potential confrontation with Qadhafi for a leadership role in these African regions, and to opt instead for a more subtle approach working on a bilateral basis with West African countries.

Another significant change in North Africa's geopolitical environment is the perception in Rabat and in Western capitals of Algeria's shift away from playing an active role in the Sahel. The rapid deterioration of security environment along almost all Algerian borders in addition to the country's acute internal social problems have forced the Algerian leadership to take a defensive position, and show little interest in playing a major role in the security of the region. Algeria's refusal to participate in any Western-led military intervention in northern Mali, and its preference for a diplomatic solution has been widely interpreted as a withdrawal from the Sahel.³⁴ It is beyond the scope of this monograph to discuss in details the motives of Algerian stances on the Libya and Mali security situations, but this is interpreted as a tactical retreat, allowing Algerian military strategists to adapt to the new complex geopolitical scene next to their borders. Algerian political and military elites have resisted being drawn into any exhausting war in the region with little prospect of resolution but have, similarly to Morocco, been affected negatively by the trafficking of

weapons, people, and radical ideas pushing through its southern and eastern frontiers.

In this context, the Moroccan authorities saw an opportunity to expand Morocco's influence and assume a hegemonic role in the region. Morocco organized a series of conferences and meetings to discuss ways and means to fight transnational organized crime and terrorism, including illicit drug trafficking, which remains a major threat to peace and security in the Sahel and West Africa regions. In November 2013, Morocco held the Second Regional Ministerial Conference on border security between Sahel and Maghreb States that brought senior officials from the region together with representatives from the United States, France, and EU. Morocco offered to host the headquarters of a regional border security management training center that was agreed at the conference.³⁵

The establishment of this center was a response to an acute security problem that affects many countries in the region. Many governments are unable or unwilling to exercise full control of their own borders, or coordinate with their neighboring countries on joint surveillance operations, a weakness that is exploited by terrorists and traffickers. Terrorists in particular find it straightforward to carry out attack operations and then flee to another country, seeking sanctuary. Once established, the center will provide training to officers with responsibility for border security management in the states of the region, as well as allow for sharing of expertise and best practices—in terms of institutions, policies, laws and procedures—from other leading international partners.

Since early-2012, Morocco has been leading efforts to revive and restructure the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), an intergovernmental

organization with 28 members that was closely associated with the late Libyan ruler, Qadhafi.³⁶ Morocco advocates the need for strengthening CEN-SAD in order to tackle the region's precarious security situation. Since a January 2012 meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Morocco has hosted several meetings to discuss the issue of reorganizing the organization to tackle security challenges through a comprehensive approach placed at the center of each meeting agenda. The drive to reshape the organization and allow it to build a collective security mechanism is a response to the failures and inability of Sahel and West African countries to coordinate responses to recent crises in Mali, Guinea-Bissau, and Central African Republic; as well as their inability to enhance border controls and fight terrorism.

Morocco appears to allocate great importance to these meetings and efforts, as is evident from the involvement and support of the highest decisionmaking figures within Morocco. For instance, during the October 2013 CEN-SAD meeting in Rabat, Moroccan Foreign Minister Salaheddine Mezouar highlighted the importance of amending the policies of the Sahelo-Saharan Investment and Commerce Bank, a subsidiary organ of CEN-SAD, to allow it to play a bigger role in the socio-economic development of its member countries.³⁷

Morocco's hegemonic ambitions in the Maghreb and Sahel regions also remain a driving force behind its active role in strengthening and playing a leading role in CEN-SAD. A strong organization with efficient political and economic organs, and clear security objectives will undermine Algeria's main security initiative in the Sahel, *Comité d'état-major opérationnel conjoint* (CEMOC). CEMOC was launched by Algeria in April

2010 with the aim of coordinating counterterrorism efforts and conducting joint patrols and cross-border operations between Algerian, Nigerien, Mauritanian, and Malian forces.³⁸

Counterterrorism through the Training of Religious Preachers.

Perhaps the most visible indication of Morocco's distinctive influence in West Africa and Sahel regions is its contribution to counterterrorism, primarily through counterextremism, by training religious personnel in the Moroccan experience of reforming religious affairs. In recent years, there has been growing interest in receiving Moroccan assistance in this field from West Africa and Sahel countries. During King Mohammed VI's visit to Mali in September 2013, the Moroccan Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs agreed to provide training to 500 Malian imams. The purpose of this 2-year training is to ensure that religious leaders preach moderate messages to the public, and that they are prepared to engage in theological debates to challenge extremist views.³⁹

Other countries, such as Guinea-Conakry, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Tunisia, and Libya have approached Morocco for the same training for their Imams and preachers in order to benefit from Moroccan experience in tackling extremism through dialogue and communication. To respond to the surge in demand for training of religious personnel, Morocco established the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidines, and Morchidates (female Islamic preachers) in March 2015, with capacity to train up to 1,000 candidates.⁴⁰ A few months later, in July 2015, the Moroccan King inaugurated another pan-African

religious institution, the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Ulama (Muslim religious scholars).⁴¹ According to Royal Decree (Dahir) No.1.15.75, from its headquarters in Rabat, the foundation aims to coordinate African Muslim scholars' efforts to generate and disseminate ideas of tolerance on the basis of Islamic values, revitalize the common Islamic cultural heritage, undertake scientific research in Islamic studies, and organize events.⁴² Though the foundation's competencies do not include issuance of fatwas, this initiative is likely to further strengthen Moroccan influence across Muslim communities in Africa.

Morocco's successful reform of religious affairs initiated after the 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks has positioned the country as a leading example in the Muslim world by subtly but determinedly counteracting religious radicalism and terrorism. The reshaping of religious institutions and affairs has constituted an important part of the Moroccan government strategy to combat terrorism.⁴³ It is arguably not only one of the most comprehensive reform packages of religion and religious institutions in Morocco, but also in the Muslim world.

Some of the principal aspects of this reform include:

- Training and educating religious personnel, including not only those who lead worship (known as Imams), but also male and female preachers (known as Murchidin and Murchidat).
- The launch of television and radio stations whose sole purpose is to counterbalance the influence of hardline preachers, and the influence of religious satellite channels from the Middle East and Iran that spread radical Islam

or Shi'ism. The ultimate aim is to achieve a high level of religious homogeneity among Moroccan Muslims and avoid the emergence of any sectarian divide in the country.

- The stipulation that only qualified scholars approved by the Moroccan Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs are allowed to issue fatwas (religious legal opinion), thus preventing the involvement of unauthorized scholars and radical preachers. The only institutions authorized to issue fatwas are the High Council of Ulama (religious scholars) and Regional Ulama Councils.⁴⁴

A further important factor that has led to official requests for Morocco's assistance in religious affairs from Western African governments is backing from important religious groups in societies that have maintained strong religious ties with Morocco. Moroccan *Sufi* orders have many followers in a range of African countries, and maintain strong ties with West African *Sufi* orders that date back centuries.

In being perceived to be moderate and flexible in terms of the diversity and nature of sources available to the Ulama to practice *Ijtihad* – reinterpreting the principles of Islam to provide legal answers to contemporary issues facing Muslims and Muslim societies – the *Maliki madhab* (Islamic legal school) that is officially adopted by Morocco aims to provide answers to contemporary issues that have not been dealt with in the fundamental texts (the *Qura'an* and *Sunnah* – Prophet Muhammad's known sayings and deeds). The *Maliki madhab* is praised for consulting more sources than the other remaining three Sunni Schools. More importantly, it accommodates local traditions and reconciles them with the teachings of fundamental texts.

Cooperation with Regional and International Partners.

Despite willingness to contribute to the promotion of peace and security in the region, Moroccan officials in Rabat are aware of their own limitations. There is a recognition that the security needs of West Africa are multiple and complex, and beyond the technical, human, and financial capabilities of Morocco acting alone. The proliferation of militant groups in the region, many of which have ties to al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) or other international terrorist organizations, remains a main challenge facing the region. It is one which requires well-trained and equipped armed forces, not only in one country but across the Sahel and West Africa region, given the transborder nature of the threats. For example, Boko Haram is a major threat for all of western Africa with proven links to AQIM and other terrorist organizations.⁴⁵ The existing military capabilities, with minimal communication networks and limited manpower resources, are not suited for effective surveillance and control over vast terrains on the edge of the Sahara desert. Furthermore, many West African militaries are not structured and trained to face the challenges with which their countries have been presented in recent years.

Morocco recognizes that it is effectively impossible for individual countries to tackle today's international security challenges on their own, and therefore acknowledges the necessity of working with regional and international partners to be able to deal systematically with cross-border security challenges. Cooperation will allow also pooling of knowledge, expertise and resources to tackle some of these security menaces that are destabilizing West Africa.

The reform of armed forces in West African countries will entail a considerable training effort in order to enable these militaries to play a more effective role in meeting current and future security challenges facing their own societies and states. As a result, security sector reform is becoming a priority policy area in order to maintain stability and achieve economic growth across the West Africa region. West Africa's armed forces and security agencies have been debilitated or deprived of opportunities to professionalize, including by decades of instability as a result of frequent regime changes and coups, which have precipitated frequent rearranging of security policies and institutions.

Morocco could play an important role with other international partners in delivering military assistance to West African countries. Morocco can leverage its linguistic access, and its understanding of military cultures, its political ties, and growing economic presence to become a hub for international donors and nongovernmental organizations that are interested in professionalizing armed forces and providing security sector reform assistance to West African countries. Strengthening the security sector requires understanding how local institutions function and building relationships with key local stakeholders, including civil society actors. With these factors in mind, Morocco is well-positioned with partnership and support from leading international associates to provide tailored training and capacity building assistance that meet the specific needs of each individual armed force across the region.

Conclusion.

Deepening the engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly with West African countries, is what distinguishes Morocco's foreign policy under the rule of the current King, Mohammed VI. West African economies and markets are increasingly gaining importance in Morocco's ambition to diversify its export markets and seek new sources of growth for its companies. Over the last decade, sub-Saharan Africa, including West Africa, has emerged as one of the world's fastest growing regional economies. This growth momentum looks set to be maintained in the coming years.

Morocco is keen to leverage its linguistic, political, and cultural ties with West African societies and leaders in order to seek new economic development opportunities. This can be seen from the number of bilateral agreements signed during numerous visits by the Moroccan monarch to African countries, and initiatives launched in Morocco over the last few years.

Though one could argue that there is nothing new in signing training, commercial, and sectorial cooperation agreements between Morocco and sub-Saharan African countries (as there have been many such agreements signed since the 1970s and 1980s), what distinguishes Morocco's current engagement in Western Africa is the substantial involvement of private investors in a variety of sectors and countries across the continent. The experience and expertise gained by Morocco public and private sector investors over the last 15 years in a variety of fields have positioned the country as a model of socio-economic development and a desired partner for many sub-Saharan countries.

Morocco has a vital interest in preventing the deterioration of West Africa's security. It is well understood in Moroccan political circles that harnessing economic growth opportunities in Western Africa cannot be achieved without peace and security. Despite some progress in political and economic stability over recent years, the security situation remains particularly volatile, given the weak state of security institutions and the existence of large number of armed groups that are competing with some West African states for control of resources.

An important Moroccan contribution to the security of West Africa and the Sahel is in the realm of fighting religious extremism, through the sharing of the country's expertise and experience gained from the implementation of multifaceted reform of religious affairs, particularly the training and education of clerics. Morocco perceives the training of imams as an approach to preventing and countering radicalization. Fostering moderate imams will contribute to the resilience of individuals and communities against the appeal of violent extremism.

But there is appetite in Rabat to play a greater role in facilitating comprehensive solutions to West Africa security problems in cooperation with African and Sahel countries as well as with other international allies. To increase its influence, Morocco plays an increasingly active role in regional institutions, including CEN-SAD, particularly contributing to ongoing efforts to revitalize the role of this pan-African organization's mission, and orient its mission towards cooperation on tackling regional security problems.

Morocco's renewed interest in contributing to the security of the West Africa region, primarily through capability-building, is opening new opportunities for cooperation beyond the region to include other inter-

national partners with similar policy objectives. It also suggests new opportunities for the United States and Morocco to further strengthen their bilateral strategic dialogue by collaborating on regional matters.

Implications and Recommendations.

Morocco's new policy of engagement is an important factor in the evolving security and counterterrorism dynamic in the region. The emergence of a relatively powerful new player in security provision in Africa is a matter of immediate relevance to the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), to the U.S. Army more broadly, and to the U.S. Department of State (DoS). Following and understanding the developing regional power balance in West Africa, and the redrawing of new alliances within the region, are vital not only to fostering regional security, but also to an understanding of developments in the continent overall.

Morocco's clear incentive to enhance its own national security by acting as a regional security provider offers substantial opportunities for cooperation. Several of the problems facing Morocco lie at the root of security challenges confronting close U.S. allies in Europe: resolution of those problems calls for stronger cooperation at the state level, both in the sub-region and internationally. Regional and international threats emanating from West Africa and Sahel cannot be tackled effectively without pursuing innovative partnerships and better exploitation of synergies offered by different countries. Thus, with appropriate support, Morocco's niche capabilities can be exploited to deliver professionalization programs for West African militaries, as well as other security sector reform

initiatives aimed at reducing the incidence of uncontrolled migration, terrorism, trafficking in narcotics and humans, and other cross-border challenges.

This potential for collaboration has already been partially recognized, by initiatives which can now be built on. In 2004, Morocco was designated a “major non-NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] U.S. ally” by President George W. Bush, as a response to the country’s support and cooperation in the war on terror.⁴⁶ In practical terms, this status has allowed the Moroccan security community to benefit from U.S. military assistance and intelligence cooperation. Morocco hosts a yearly joint military exercise, Africa Lion, the largest U.S. exercise on the African continent, intended to enhance interoperability and mutual understanding. In addition, several hundred Moroccan officers have benefited from International Military Education and Training, a program funded by the DoS to enable foreign officers to attend military education at U.S. establishments.⁴⁷

Further vectors for cooperation are provided by Morocco’s relatively close relationship with NATO, as a founding member of Mediterranean Dialogue in 1994. Morocco’s NATO partnership framework was renewed in 2013, with a focus on counterterrorism and interoperability.⁴⁸ This is augmented by Moroccan participation in NATO operations, and ongoing exercises and cooperation between NATO and Moroccan naval forces including U.S. Navy vessels.⁴⁹

With its unique mix of geographical location, cultural, religious and linguistic ties, Morocco could become the international partner of choice for the U.S. defense and development communities to facilitate and jointly provide security assistance programs.

Morocco can capitalize on the same assets that have been used for its investment strategies towards Africa in order to tailor and deliver effective security assistance and security sector reforms. Moroccan military personnel and institutions are familiar with West African military officers and cultures. Morocco has sent several military contingents and provided military education and training to hundreds of West African officers. Morocco's political stability and the professionalism of its military institutions are advantageous, both for cooperation with U.S. counterparts and for effective delivery of security assistance to recipient countries.

Morocco's long-term and continuing political stability is a further significant factor that should encourage the United States to strengthen its security cooperation and collaboration with Rabat. In a region that has experienced sustained political turmoil, Morocco today remains one of the few continuously stable countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Instead, the country's leadership has been adept in negotiating and resolving political and economic challenges. If this trend continues, it removes a number of the risks and challenges inherent in closer security relationships with Middle Eastern and North African states.

Morocco's ongoing Western Sahara territorial dispute in particular does not pose a challenge to the stability of the country, or to its external relationships. Morocco continues to favor a political settlement of the dispute, and eschews use of military force. As a result, the existence of the dispute has not prevented Morocco from developing close security cooperation with a variety of European countries, including Spain, the former colonial power in Western Sahara.

The Morocco-based training center for border security in Sahel and West Africa should be supported and enhanced. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) should not limit its support to establishing the training center for border security officers from West Africa and Sahel agreed in Rabat in November 2013, but it also should encourage the extension of these activities. The Center could provide a wide range of other training courses that can contribute to building the military and security capabilities of West African armed forces. Several counterterrorism training programs offered by AFRICOM through the Trans Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership could be delivered through this center, and thus benefit from funding assistance offered by the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund. This regional training center could serve as a specialized think tank to support needs assessments undertaken by member countries, as well as providing strategic advice and guidance.

Morocco's extension of its counter-radicalism strategy to sub-Saharan Africa should be supported and encouraged. The U.S. defense community and DoS should support at arm's length Morocco's efforts to counter violent extremism through the training of religious personnel and institutionalising of religious affairs in West Africa and Sahel countries. The Moroccan experience of religious affairs reform, with proven success in counter-radicalization, should be studied closely. Lessons learned could be of help in providing similar solutions in other areas where the United States is involved in stabilization and counterterrorism operations, as well as for counter-radicalization efforts domestically and within the United States and its allies. In particular, there are substantial

synergies between Morocco's counterextremism experience and expertise, and U.S. Government strategic communications initiatives across broad parts of the Muslim world; these synergies should be leveraged and exploited.

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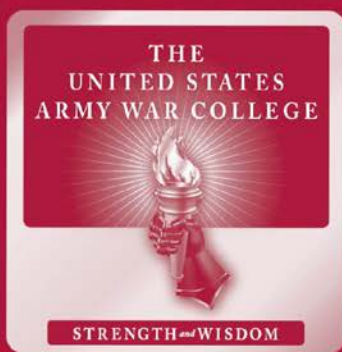
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