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Guinea-Bissau in Morocco's Foreign Policy

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On 28 May 2015, Morocco's King Mohamed VI landed in Guinea-Bissau for a two-day visit aimed at deepening bilateral ties.¹ The official visit was part of a four-nation tour of sub-Saharan Africa, which included three of Morocco's main regional partners: Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon. At first glance, it is hard to understand the reason for Guinea-Bissau's inclusion in such a high-profile trip. That, however, becomes clearer when considering the geopolitical context in which Morocco is inserted, as well as the foreign policy guidelines Rabat has been pursuing for more than a decade.

In general terms, the tour is representative of Morocco's intention to avert its relative isolation in Africa — it is the only African country that is not a member of the African Union (AU) — focus on South-South cooperation and turn the African continent into a "strategic priority".² In fact, since 2000 the monarch has visited several sub-Saharan countries, concluded bilateral agreements, and has been a staunch supporter of African causes and interests, either by actively contributing to peacekeeping operations or in supporting sub-Saharan countries in international *fora*.

One can rightly conclude that economic interests were a major driver in Morocco's shift towards its southern neighbours. In a context of low European demand for Moroccan exports, Rabat recognizes the need to develop ties with the

rapidly growing sub-Saharan countries, namely in West Africa, so as to boost the national economy. In 2014, West Africa was the second fastest growing sub-region in the continent (5.9%), with estimates pointing to 6.2% in 2015.³ Given the sub-region's geographic proximity with Morocco and the potential associated with fantastic economic growth rates, it is not surprising that Rabat looks favourably at West African countries.

With respect to Guinea-Bissau, one can easily understand why Morocco views the tiny West African nation as attractive: the return to constitutional order and institutional stabilisation will lead, at least in theory, to the revival of Guinea-Bissau's economy, i.e. to the emergence of a consumer market and, more importantly, to opportunities in the construction sector — infrastructures are notably scarce in the country, a result of decades of political instability, as well as poor and weak governance.

In deepening its relationship with Guinea-Bissau, Rabat has greater scope to expand influence across a region where most countries have been cementing close ties with the Kingdom — namely Senegal, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Mauritania — in this way forming a strategic bloc which will surely favour Moroccan political and security interests. That said, the motives for Morocco's shift towards the south go clearly beyond economic interests.

1 16 bilateral agreements were signed in several areas. "África: Guiné-Bissau e Marrocos assinam 16 acordos de cooperação" (*Agência Angola Press*, 29 May 2015).

2 "Africa, Strategic Priority for Morocco's Foreign Policy: Minister" (*Morocco World News*, 25 May 2015).

3 "World Economic Situation and Prospects: Mid-2015 Update" (ONU, 19 January 2015), p. 112.



More than economic gains

The rapprochement and strengthening of ties with sub-Saharan countries boosts Rabat's politico-diplomatic position, thus guaranteeing broader support for sensitive diplomatic issues — such as the Western Sahara case — and also greater projection and influence in international *fora*. In fact, when making the joint declaration marking the end of Mohamed VI's visit, Guinea-Bissau's President, José Mário Vaz, reiterated his country's support for Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed territory. In addition, the Bissauan President declared his country's support for Morocco's bid to join the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP) as an observer: if successful, Rabat will be present in another major diplomatic front.⁴

The Moroccan monarch has been making strategic use of its "religious diplomacy",⁵ so as to strike a closer relationship with sub-Saharan countries. The King is viewed as a moderate with regards to Islam, which serves the purpose of fomenting ties and boosting Rabat's influence. For this purpose, he takes advantage of the close links between Islam in sub-Saharan Africa and Morocco's centennial Sufi traditions, as well as from the fact that, due to historic reasons, many Muslims in the sub-region recognize the legitimacy of the monarch's religious leadership. It should be noted that West Africa is the only sub-region in sub-Saharan Africa with a Muslim majority (52.2% in 2010), with estimates pointing to a 60% increase in the next 20 years.⁶

This approach also aims at countering and limiting the propagation of the Wahhabi ideology, which has inspired the extremist groups behind instability in the region. This matter is also relevant in respect to Guinea-Bissau, a country where around

45% of the population is Muslim and is likely to comprise 48.8% in 2050.⁷ When applying the "religious diplomacy" in its relation with Guinea-Bissau, Rabat is advancing an efficient strategy not only to contain religious extremism in the tiny West

Africa nation — which otherwise may spill-over across the region — but also to insert Bissau within its sphere of influence. It is therefore not surprising that Mohamed VI ended up leading prayers in the Attadamum Mosque, in Bissau, during his visit.⁸

Furthermore, also noteworthy is the link between drug-trafficking and the expansion of jihadi groups in the Sahel. Despite the decrease in drug-trafficking in Guinea-Bissau — largely due to the return to constitutional order and US operations in the region — the phenomenon is still very much present. This represents a threat to Rabat's interests, since drugs finance and promote jihadi and criminal organizations in the Sahel — Morocco is one of the transit points between Africa and Europe for narcotics originating from Guinea-Bissau.⁹

One of the major issues approached by both sides during Mohamed VI's visit to Bissau was precisely to strengthen security cooperation, in particular the fight against terrorism and organized crime. Morocco is one of the main regional counter-terrorism players in the Sahel and understands that the fight against religious extremism can only succeed through greater bilateral and regional cooperation. Having said this, deeper ties

between both countries, namely in terms of the promotion of socioeconomic development and rule of law in Guinea-Bissau, is a necessary approach so as to contain potential areas of tension and instability, while fostering greater and more efficient cooperation.

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4 "Joint Declaration issued at the end of Official Visit of Morocco King to Guinea Bissau" (*Maghreb Daily News*, 31 May 2015).

5 Ghita Tadlaoui, "Morocco's Religious Diplomacy in Africa" (*FRIDE*, 27 February 2015).

6 "The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Sub-Saharan Africa" (*Pew Research Center*, 27 January 2011).

7 In contrast, the Christian population is expected to decrease from 19.7% in 2010 to 16% in 2050. "Global Religious Futures" (*Pew Research Center*).

8 "Rei de Marrocos dirige oração na Mesquita de Attadamum em Bissau" (*Portuguese News Network*, 29 May 2015).

9 Guinea-Bissau has been dubbed as the first narco-state in Africa. "Africa's Cocaine Hub: Guinea-Bissau a 'Drug Trafficker's Dream'" (*Spiegel International*, 8 March 2013).



Conclusion

Morocco has been diversifying its external relation, shifting its focus to South-South Cooperation, in particular with West Africa. Considering the region's highly attractive economic and politico-diplomatic potential, this is a logic approach for any nation intending to increase its influence. Aware of the limitations associated with not being part of the AU, Rabat has taken advantage of traditional religious links with Muslim populations in the sub-Saharan region, especially with West Africa, and also from its increasingly important role in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel.

Rabat's strategic handling of those religious links has promoted Morocco has a reliable and committed partner in the region's security and stability context, while allowing it to project its influence. Guinea-Bissau fits well in that strategy, mirroring the importance with which Morocco regards the country within West Africa. In addition, the inclusive nature of Morocco's foreign policy towards the sub-region creates a breeding ground for greater regional cooperation.

The Kingdom's contribution to the fight against criminal activities, to the promotion of the rule of law, to the consolidation of the constitutional order, and to socioeconomic development in Guinea-Bissau is crucial to Morocco's own stability. Not to opt for a multidimensional strategy of this kind represents a risk which Rabat, as a rising regional power, certainly does not want to take.

Morocco's internal stability, economic growth and international affirmation are deeply intertwined with the fortunes of the region comprising West Africa and the Sahel. That being said, even though Guinea-Bissau is relatively less important than other regional countries, it should nevertheless be regarded as an integral part of the complex setting in which Morocco is inserted.

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