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# MOROCCO-IRAN RELATIONS DUPLICITY OF FOREIGN POLICY AND FUTURE OF MUTUAL RELATIONS

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**M**orocco-Iran relations have experienced many highs and lows, as well as, tensions over some regional and international issues. They have seen various challenges and . Morocco has major issues with Iran's role in fermenting regional crises in the Arab world. A major disagreement involves Iran's exploitation of sectarian policies to spread Shiism across the Maghreb, particularly in Morocco. Subsequent disputes have risked diplomatic ties between the two countries, leading Morocco to sever ties with Iran and charging it with supporting the Polisario Front.

The relations between the two countries have fluctuated since the 1979 Iranian revolution. King Hassan II spoke out against the clerics when they first took power in Iran. He offered to host the Shah who stayed in Morocco before moving to the Bahamas. Diplomatic relations with Iran were formally severed in 1980 over its recognition of the so-called "Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic" proclaimed by the Polisario Front in 1976.

The sectarian disagreements widened the gap between the two countries. Morocco is predominantly Sunni, while Iran is predominantly Shia; the King of Morocco enjoys religious authority and is called "Amir al-Mu'minin" (Commander of the faithful). In contrast, the Iranian revolution was led by a Shia cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who proclaimed to be the Supreme Leader for all Muslims. <sup>(1)</sup>

However, tensions arose again between the two countries in March 2009. Rabat severed its diplomatic ties with Tehran after heated exchanges between the two countries that started when Iranian officials called Bahrain the 14<sup>th</sup> province of Iran. In response, Morocco stood in solidarity with Bahrain, as well as, accusing the Iranian embassy of carrying out missionary activities to spread Shiism in its territory and of implicitly supporting the Polisario Front. <sup>(2)</sup>

After a six-year period of severed ties, Morocco and Iran agreed to resume diplomatic relations in 2014. Iran appointed an ambassador to Rabat in 2015. Morocco designated the former ambassador to Azerbaijan, Hassan Hammi, as its new ambassador to Tehran. Hammi submitted his credentials to President Hassan Rouhani in October 2016.

Morocco cut its diplomatic ties with Iran once again on May 1, 2018. It shut down the Iranian embassy and asked the ambassador to leave the country. The 2018 diplomatic crisis arose because Iran was charged with supporting the Polisario Front. Morocco's Minister of Foreign Affairs Nasser Bourita said that the Lebanese Hezbollah provided military training and weapons to members of the Polisario Front covertly via the Iranian embassy in Algeria. <sup>(3)</sup>

The sections below review the historical events related to relations between Morocco and Iran<sup>(4)</sup> by analyzing the dimensions that have structured their mutual relationship and forecasting its durability. This will be done by using a comparative approach.

### **First: Comparative approach analyzing the foreign policies of Morocco and Iran**

The decision making process varies from one country to another according to the interactions, challenges and threats. The internal and external challenges play an integral role in determining the goals of foreign policy, which may change according to the feasibility of the proposed goals and the productivity of the tools (i.e. soft and hard power) which are used. <sup>(5)</sup>

#### **1- Moroccan foreign policy in a transforming world**

Morocco has gone through deep transformations over the past ten years. Its foreign policy and strategic alignments have changed. More than thirty Moroccan embassies and consulates have opened across the world; in strategic countries like Chad, as well as, in a few smaller countries like Barbados. The Moroccan representation in regional and international organizations has magnificently increased, especially in the "Advanced Status" partnership with the European Union (EU). Morocco signed agreements with the Sahara countries and South America. It joined the African Union on January 30, 2017.

Morocco's dynamic policy, ensuring its active standing in the international arena, does not have a strategic and theoretical framework to set the principles of its foreign policy. As there is no specific theoretical framework or parliamentary discussion on the

country's foreign policy, the King decides its foreign policy alignments.<sup>(6)</sup>

Despite this shortcoming, Morocco's constitution affirms the protection of human rights, recognized by the international community, and the pursuit of peace and security in its regional and cultural circles. This can be seen from the following:<sup>(7)</sup>

- 1- The Maghreb circle: Morocco boosts its standing by strengthening political, economic, and security collaboration with its neighboring countries.
- 2- Islamic-Arab circle: To embed its standing in the Islamic and Arab world by strong and long-standing relations based on a shared historical and religious identity.
- 3- African circle: To consolidate relations of cooperation and of solidarity with the peoples and the countries of Africa, notably the sub-Saharan countries and the [countries] of the Sahel;<sup>(8)</sup>
- 4- Euro-Mediterranean circle: To boost rapprochement agreements with Euro-Mediterranean countries.
- 5- Global circle: "To enlarge and to diversify its relations of amity and of its rapport with human, economic, scientific, technical and cultural exchange with the countries of the world;"<sup>(9)</sup>
- 6- South Circle: "To reinforce South-South cooperation [cooperation Sud-Sud]"<sup>(10)</sup>

As a result of the constitution and the aforementioned, Morocco is committed "to protect and to promote the mechanisms [dispositifs] of the rights of man and of international humanitarian law and to contribute to their development within their indivisibility and their universality"; and "to ban and combat all discrimination whenever it encounters it, for reasons of sex, color, belief, culture, social origin, language, disability or whatever one's personal circumstances may be."<sup>(11)</sup>

The Morocco's foreign policy-making imperatives which control its political behavior and diplomatic actions are:<sup>(12)</sup>

- A- Sovereignty: to protect national unity and territorial contiguity of Morocco and to prevent interference in its domestic affairs.
- B- Cooperation and solidarity: to develop partnerships aiming to achieve mutual development, specifically South-South cooperation.
- C- Openness: to diversify diplomatic relations.
- D- International legitimacy: to abide by international law and treaties which Morocco is a part of.

Soft power is a dynamic tool in Morocco's diplomacy, and it includes the following:<sup>(13)</sup>

**A- Economic diplomacy:** Morocco has benefited from foreign investment by holding international economic forums under foreign policy initiatives.

**B- Diplomatic representation in small countries and sub-regional organizations:** the number of diplomatic missions has greatly increased over the last century. In Asia, resident and non-resident diplomatic missions are almost complete, the same goes in smaller countries like the Caribbean islands. According to Morocco, every small country is significant since it is a member in the United Nations and has a vote in the Western Sahara Case. For Morocco diplomatic representation in regional and sub-regional organizations is a key tool in foreign policy. Morocco joined the African Union and applied to join the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).<sup>(14)</sup>

**C- Cultural diplomacy:** Morocco promotes its cultural identity to serve its national interests. The Moroccan government has already began a program to open cultural centers abroad. They were opened in Brussels, Montréal, Tunisia, Tripoli, Amsterdam,

Paris and in many other capitals. The Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation provides academic scholarships for foreign students, targeting mainly students living in the South. In 2012, 8000 students won scholarships from the agency. .<sup>(15)</sup>

**D- Religious diplomacy:** Morocco is keen to export its moderate Islamic identity to Saharan African countries through the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imam Morchidines and Morchidates. A few delegations visited the Institute including an Indian delegation headed by the Vice-President of India Mohammad Hamid Ansari on May 31, 2016 and a French Senate delegation on April 25, 2016. The Institute has trained imams from many countries like Libya, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Senegal. In addition, it has trained 500 imams from Mali one of the most conflict-ridden countries in Africa. .<sup>(16)</sup>

## **2- Iran's foreign policy and imperial dream**

The main goal of Iran's foreign policy is to achieve its imperial dream by leading a global Islamic government project. This project is a recreation of the Qajar dynasty. This dynasty was preceded by a long history led by the *Shahinshahs--monarchical* dynasties. The Achaemenid Empire, known as the first Persian Empire, united and completely conquered the Persian Plateau. The Iranians have an expansionist mindset since ancient times giving rise to the Shaddadid and Kayanian dynasties. There are common characteristics shared by the present Iranian state and the ancient *Shahinshahiyah* dynasties, most prominently the mix of nationalism, sect and religion. Iran and its Jurist Guardianship system (i.e. the supreme leadership) are a living example of mixing ancient Iranian identity and culture with Islam in a Shia melting pot, to keep expanding. .<sup>(17)</sup>

The future of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its imperial dream is linked to the following:<sup>(18)</sup>

- 1- Developing military capabilities: improving land-sea-air military forces capable to resist all expected security threats and challenges.
- 2- Promoting a strategy of regional military presence by military operations abroad, recruiting regional proxies, and developing non-Iranian military units that fit in with Iran's regional strategy.
- 3- Using unique features to in navigate opposing interests, resolve disputes by negotiations, and adjust to world transformations. Permitting political space to the moderate current that has been Iran's trump card to counter international isolation and sanctions.
- 4- Preparing for the nuclear stage in which its nuclear project is the backbone of its imperial dream.
- 5- Developing a new regional and international policy with an Islamic perspective.

Without a long-run strategy, Iran's foreign policy would not be able to achieve its one main goal; a global Islamic government. It is worth mentioning that Iran's maneuvers in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon are without a clear strategic perspective which could help in identifying withdrawal scenarios when facing an undefeatable crisis. Nevertheless, Iran still craftily manages and operates its national interest We see history repeating itself; the Persian empire's 'spheres of influence stretched from Central Asia passing through south-west Asia and reaching the Middle East, historically speaking, and this could happen again.<sup>(19)</sup>

As Iran's foreign policy depends on short-term tactics and clear strategies, its regional influence has become more dangerous for two main reasons:<sup>(20)</sup>

- 1- Tactics are short-run policies used for operating long-run strategies. They do not follow a clear vision, well-defined perspective nor a thoughtful plan. Being solely dependent on

tactics leads to dangerous consequences the policy maker would never expect and be able to address.

2- Having no strategy and applying intensive tactics is considered a deficiency in foreign policy as well as a cause contributing to worsening crises. When tactics are applied without a comprehensive perspective in the short run, the policy becomes an immediate reaction to address the new challenges.

The comparative approach by which we explored the Moroccan and Iranian policies shows how divergent their foreign policies are. The Moroccan foreign policy respects international legitimacy whereas Iran's foreign policy is reckless and is sectarian. Furthermore, what Iran considered as its regional strength is in fact its main weakness. The spread of influence by sectarian alignments helps in making allies so easily, as well as, new enemies in the same degree; therefore, influence over a long period becomes difficult.<sup>(21)</sup>

## **Second: Determinants of Iran-Morocco relations**

### **1- Political determinant**

Iran and Morocco have clashed regionally and internationally, especially when Iran improved its influence across the region, jeopardizing regional security by its intervention in internal affairs. The Iranian imperial project in the Maghreb employs soft and hard power. Iranian consulates spend significant amounts of money to spread Shiism across the region, as well as, developing Shiite movements, and exploiting economic crises.<sup>(22)</sup>

Morocco and Iran follow divergent policies when it comes to the crises in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Bahrain. According to Morocco, Iran is the main instigator in these crises, while Iran employs all options to expand its influence in these countries. It exploited the Iraqi crisis in the 1990s and destabilized its security, as well as, instigating sectarian disputes. In Yemen, Iran worsened the Yemeni crisis and hindered negotiations between conflicting parties. Since the break out of the Syrian crisis,<sup>(23)</sup> Iran has embedded its presence in Syria, jeopardizing Arab national security.<sup>(24)</sup> In addition, Iran's interference in Bahrain's domestic affairs, during 2011-2012, amounted to 42 cases, as well as, a host of interferences across the Gulf. The most significant were:<sup>(25)</sup>

- » Iran's position on security incidents in Bahrain (three cases);
- » Iran's official media policy on Bahrain's political affairs (36 cases).
- » Iran's policy towards the Arab Gulf States (32 cases): espionage (three cases); criticism directed towards the Gulf States (five cases); threats (seven cases); remarks on the Hormuz Strait and the three UAE islands (six cases); attacks on some Gulf embassies in Iran and assassination attempts (two cases).

Morocco has criticized Iran's occupation of the three UAE islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs since November 1971, and its expansionist activities across the region, which threatens Arab national security and stability. It has expressed its rejection of Iran's non-compliance to the UN Charter that calls for respecting state sovereignty and noninterference in other states' domestic affairs. Iran's expansionist ambitions extend to the Maghreb, which has resulted in religious stability being destabilized by Shia's being politicized.<sup>(26)</sup>

Despite Iran claims that it does not pose any threat to the national security of Arab countries, its regional behavior shows otherwise. It still aids proxy militias across Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen.<sup>(27)</sup>

Iran has exploited the crises in the Arab world and expanded its spheres of influence

by carrying out terrorist operations that have hindered humanitarian initiatives in a few Arab countries.<sup>(28)</sup> However, Iran's strategy towards the Arab world, and Morocco will be unsuccessful and hindered by the following reasons:<sup>(29)</sup>

A- Its feeling of Military superiority over the Arab world;

B- Its sense of cultural separation from the Arab world because of differences in language and sect.

C- Its feeling of hate towards Arabs which can be seen in literature such as "Shahnama" a long epic poem written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi, the father of Persian nationalism.

Moroccan concerns are not only about the dangers Iran causes to Arab national security but also about its influence in Africa. Iran combines religion, economy, and humanitarian aid to strengthen its relations in Africa. It has financed hospitals, associations, and factories in African countries like Senegal and Uganda. By developing ties with tribes and Sufis, Iran has managed to spread Shiism very quickly and destabilize Sunni Islam.

Iran's foreign policy aims to surpass Morocco's influence in Africa but with an expansionist plan resembling that of old colonial powers. Morocco is not an invading power in Africa; it belongs to Africa stemming from a shared history, culture, and belief, as well as, interest in South-South cooperation which seeks to build a win-win partnership.<sup>(30)</sup>

### 1- Sectarian determinant

The spread of Shiism has provoked tension between the two countries. Moroccan authorities have closed private educational institutions contributing to the spread of Shiism among children. However, the latest diplomatic crisis was not over sectarian concerns; Morocco has had security concerns about Iran supporting the Polisario Front. .<sup>(31)</sup>

During the reign of King Hassan II and King Mohammed VI, Iranian religious scholars were invited to participate in religious lectures during Ramadan in addition to signing cultural-exchange agreements,<sup>(32)</sup> offering Iranian scholarships for Moroccan students, and the participation of Iranian publishing houses at the Casablanca International Book Fair.<sup>(33)</sup> But these arrangements finished because Morocco discovered that Iran had underlying sectarian objectives in extending its sphere of influence into its territory.<sup>(34)</sup>

Also, Algerian activists warned about the spread of Shiism in 2016. This indicates that Morocco is not the only country complaining about Shia missionaries. The Algerian activists called on their government to expel Iran's cultural attaché who was accused of provoking sectarianism in Algeria. Also they refused President Hassan Rouhani's visit to their country, which later was postponed indefinitely. .<sup>(35)</sup>

Despite of all the above that we explored, Iran and Morocco signed cooperation agreements on agriculture, economy, culture, and arts.<sup>(36)</sup> There are three determinants that ensure the continuity of their ties: geography, economy, and knowledge.

### 2- Geographical determinant

The geographical location of a country has a tremendous bearing on its strength, vital interests, and its international role. The military, economic, and political decisions of a state are linked to its geographical location. It could be a gift or a curse. If a state is located between disputed territories, it unwillingly gets involved in endless conflicts and wars. Yet the geographical location could be the lifeblood for some countries.<sup>(37)</sup>

The geographical location improves Morocco-Iran relations for two main reasons: First, having no common borders makes Morocco expect less threats than the Arab Gulf

States from Iran. Second, the geo-strategic location of Morocco makes it Iran's gateway to Africa, especially considering Iran's poor relations with other North African states. This provides Morocco with an advantage to shape its own relations with Iran.

Even though Iran and Morocco are geographically far apart to avoid any potential military collision, the sophisticated arms and ballistic missiles Iran has developed has shortened the distance and increased the military and security threats that Morocco may face. This explains why Morocco began many initiatives to counter Iran's looming threats. King Hassan II at the 1982 Arab League Summit held in Fes said that Morocco was ready to stand with the Arab states to implement the commitments of the Arab Joint Defense Treaty if Iran continued fighting in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The Syrian President Hafez al-Assad rallied behind Iran in this war<sup>(38)</sup> where as some Arab Gulf States backed Iraq.<sup>(39)</sup>

### 3- Economic determinant

Despite the stress-strained relations, Iran and Morocco have concluded several economic agreements during 1995-2007:<sup>(40)</sup>

- » Trade agreement on 30 July 1995;
- » Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Trade Promotion Organization and its Moroccan counterpart on 25 May 1995;
- » Program of action for one-year signed between the Moroccan Center for Export Promotion and its Iranian counterpart on 27 February 1997;
- » Bilateral agreement to encourage and protect investments between both countries signed on 21 January 2001.
- » Cooperation agreements under the Iranian-Moroccan Business Council which opened in 2004 to improve industrial exchange and bilateral investment and trade.<sup>(41)</sup>

Iran-Morocco trade-exchange has increased significantly since 2003. The volume of trade exchange was 0.7 million Moroccan dirhams and jumped to 8 million dirhams in 2006. The trade balance registered a deficit as Iranian oil exports surpassed Moroccan phosphate exports. .<sup>(42)</sup>

After Morocco cut diplomatic ties with Iran over Bahrain's crisis in 2009, the trade exchange volume decreased. Over the course of three years before 2015, the trade exchange volume barely reached 41 million dirhams by a decrease of 99.99%. In 2014, a sharp fall in trade exchange was approximately 15 million dirhams: Moroccan imports did not exceed 6.91 million dirhams whereas the volume of exports exceeded 8.05 million dirhams.<sup>(43)</sup>

The trade volume was approximately 11.25 million dirhams in 2013 and 14.97 million dirhams in 2012. Morocco imported a significant amount of oil from Iran worth approximately 1.08 billion dirhams while Iran imported phosphates.<sup>(44)</sup> This highlights the meagre trading volumes fluctuating over time because of unstable bilateral relations.

### 4- Knowledge and technology determinant

Morocco and Iran believe that they can have tremendous opportunities by cooperating in the fields of knowledge and technology. They seek to specifically explore the following areas:

- 1- Improve development cooperation by collaborating in education, exchanging expertise and human resources to alleviate poverty, increasing economic opportunities, and developing plans to mitigate climate and environmental risks ;
- 2- Advance cooperation in all fields: education, culture, sports, tourism, and social affairs, in addition to activating academic exchange between think tanks.



### **Third: Future of Morocco-Iran relations**

The future of Morocco-Iran relations is to evolve around mutual respect, i.e. respect of state sovereignty without interference. Both countries follow pragmatic perspectives to optimize their national interests. Morocco and Iran, have shown willingness in the past to coordinate on issues of common interest whether in the economy, security or social fields if their security is not jeopardized by the other.

But problems persist. Despite a Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Foreign Ministries of Iran and Morocco on improving mutual respect, particularly sovereignty and territorial integrity without any interference, Iran has instigated crises directly and indirectly with Morocco, leading to diplomatic ties being severed.<sup>(45)</sup>

The strained relations between Morocco and Iran because of political disagreements have thwarted any real rapprochement on the cultural and historical level. In fact, this rapprochement could flourish in better times, Iran's relations with Morocco far exceed its relations with the rest of the Maghreb.<sup>(46)</sup>

Most of the Maghreb countries along with the Arab countries have been suffering from Iran's foreign policy. Iran has interfered in many of the Arab crises and worked to export its 1979 revolution, along with its sectarian beliefs. The former late Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani stressed that the 'export of the revolution' cannot be achieved but by force. During the reign of President Hassan Rouhani, Iran's interference in regional countries, particularly in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, has become explicit.<sup>(47)</sup> Apparently, the current Moroccan-Iranian crisis has arisen from Iran's incursions in the Arab world.

Morocco is keen to keep strong ties with Islamic countries, including Iran.<sup>(48)</sup> After the latest constitutional reforms in 2011, Morocco's foreign policy has become more open to working with all international and regional powers, as well as, with traditional partners like Russia, China, and India.

Iran, always, aspires to play an integral role in the Middle East. Its regional behavior, which is non-acceptable to regional and international actors, has resulted in many difficulties for Iran. By collaborating with Morocco in countering common challenges – related to security, economy, and social affairs- Iran can gain regional belonging, instead of targeting the vital interests of the Arab world, which is a red line for Morocco. Cooperation would improve the Moroccan-Iranian relationship and serve their mutual interests.

By exploring the determinants of the Morocco-Iran relationship, allows us to stimulate two main scenarios:<sup>(49)</sup>

#### **First scenario: A clean break**

Iran does not have many options available to warm its tense relations with Morocco; especially as it kept silent when Rabat accused it of supporting the Polisario Front. Later, Iran broke its silence and claimed that some countries instigated the diplomatic crisis. By reviewing Morocco's case for sovereignty over Western Sahara reveals that it makes independent decisions. It withdrew from the African Union following the organization's acceptance of the "Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic" as a member state. This acceptance definitely impacted the Western Sahara's Case. Morocco has real concerns about Iran's disrespect to state sovereignty and its interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

#### **Second scenario: Settlement of the crisis**

Morocco-Iran relations have gone through many difficult periods but returned to

normality. The stoppage of crises between the countries is dependent on Iran's reaction, with it undertaking practical steps to respect the unity and the sovereignty of Morocco. In the future, any Iranian interventions in Morocco will not be successful, because of the following reasons:

- 1- Natural Morocco-Gulf relations and the rising role of Saudi Arabia in the region;
- 2- Morocco-Iran interests clash in different political arenas.

### **Conclusion**

If Iran changes its regional behavior towards the Arab world, including Morocco, cooperation and partnership will serve the interests of the whole region. Amidst the current crises, one country cannot face the current regional and international challenges alone. Issues of common interests require cooperation, and coordination, and to disregard all political conflicts. Iran ought to reconsider the policy of exporting its revolution, which has weakened its relations with the Arab world, only then would it be able to collaborate with the Arabs- on common regional challenges and to deter the great powers from interfering in the region by exploiting the Iran-Arab dispute.

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