



Faith Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution; A Case Study of Morocco and West African Countries

Ahmed HAMZAOU^{*}

Faculty of Letters Fes Sais, University of Sidi Mohamed Ibn Abdullah, Fes, Morocco

^{*}Corresponding author: ahamzaoui3@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Religions have often been a divisive factor of leading to conflicts in many parts of the world. In recent times, suffices to mention Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Yet, Religion can also play a constructive role in consolidating peace and resolving conflicts. This article examines expectations of faith dialogue and how conflict can change to peace process building because of this soft power tool; the focus here is on the western block of Moroccan Sahara vs. the separatist group called Polisario driven by the support of the Algerian Republic. Three approaches are used in faith dialogue mainly theological, political and peace building. All will be discussed in this article. The Moroccan case in managing domestic religious issues in some African countries can have tremendous results in achieving foreign policy goals. Unlike other cases of foreign religious sphere, the Moroccan case has attracted attention of both academia and researchers since it advanced Morocco's economic and geopolitical stability and addressed the issue of the western block of the Moroccan Sahara in order to find a resolution for this protracted conflict in the area.. The last segment of the paper will focus on shared practices of religious dialogue as a tool of peace making through examining the role of some religious institutions and brotherhood communities. The article concludes that faith dialogue can contribute to peace building and harmony.

Keywords: Religious dialogue, Conflict resolution, Geopolitical stability, Faith-diplomacy, Peace-process.

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Introduction

Conventional diplomacy holds that religion is irrelevant to diplomacy in the modern secular nationalist age or it is the source of future conflict "Sam Huntington's Clash of Civilizations." ¹This section argues that religions have remarkably grown more important since the creation of the Israeli state in 1947. Religion is deemed to act positively in diplomacy and conflict resolution. While religious values served as a stabilizer in communities, diplomacy provides effective tools to litigate conflicts related to the religious field. In the post-cold war period, religion has become more relevant to International Relations (and hence diplomacy). "This has occurred with the increase in religious (ethnic) normal conflict on the entire continent, including the collapse of governing structures."²

Aside from bilateral relations, cross cultural communication among the MENA and South Eastern regions occurs through three multilateral organizations: first, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), (a generally

¹ Sam Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* Simon & Schuster 1998

² Robert Kaplan scholar's chaos arguments

ineffective union of 54 Islamic countries), second the Arab League (which for the first time made itself visible internationally with its involvement in the internal conflicts in Libya and Syria) and third the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which is dominated by Saudi Arabia and as a result it is a purely Sunni organization.

The virtues and practices of particular religious traditions embodied in faith communities are increasingly becoming a central part of diplomacy and peace building. Researchers have recently focused on the possibility of integrating faith into official diplomacy. Recent studies have revealed that applying faith into peace-making process and conflict resolution activities can result in geopolitical resolutions and contribute to abating religiously driven violence and misunderstanding. An emerging practice of soft power represented by diplomacy could promote faith dialogue whose interests have gained strong ground since the advent of 9/11. Yet, the act of bridging the gap between faith dialogue and diplomacy remains deficient and neglected with the exception of Indonesia and the USA which are stated to be pioneers in the effective use of faith dialogue to achieve policy goals.

Results and discussion

[II] Overview of the Religious Situation in Morocco

Morocco has always been a model to follow in terms of cultural coexistence and interaction between Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Since the foundation of Al-Qaraouiyine University in Fes in 859 A.D., Morocco has had an important impact in shaping religious discourse and education throughout the Islamic world. The Moroccan constitution states that the nation is a sovereign Muslim state attached to its national unity and to its territorial integrity and HM the King is the Commander of the Faithful. It is also considered to be a model in democratic governance structure and liberal economy. The 2011 constitution states that Morocco's unity is forged by the convergence of its Arabic, Islamic, Amazigh, and Saharan Hassania, component which are nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Hebraic and Mediterranean influences. Several statements in the preamble to the new constitution focus on Morocco's deep rootedness toward Africa.

The Moroccan Muslim identity asserts itself as both national and transnational sphere. The significant positioning of Morocco revolves around a "middle path" (Al Wassatyah) conception of a moderate religious framework as a guiding principle for the Moroccan population mainly since the terrorist attacks on May 16th, 2003 in Casablanca. This Moroccan religious identity has become more and more elaborated and publicly recognized. By looking at the way this so-called Islamic 'middle path' is revealed in official discourses, it is possible to understand its characteristics, tones, occurrences, reoccurrences, semantic fields and grasp the various notions of Islam that materialize. Many countries have adopted Moroccan expertise in religious education and governance mainly in Africa and Europe as a means to counter Fundamentalism and radical Salafism

Moroccan Islam is based on three pillars "the Maliki School of law (Maddhab), Ash'ari theology (kalâm) and Sunni Sufism (tassawûf). This recipe, a theological (and cultural) 'tajine' slowly simmering in the Habous' kitchen (the Moroccan Ministry of Religious Affairs) is drawn from Morocco's long history." The Majority of the Moroccan population adheres to the Maliki jurisprudence. However, this trend in moderate Islam Wassatyah" didn't submerge all of a sudden; it is the outcome of a long-lasting legacy all the way up to Al Qaraouiyine University and other remarkable religious institutions in the country. It has become a national and cultural doctrine only after being the "subject of a particular and constant institutional and discursive investment. Bourdieu revealed that "every ideology invested with a historical efficiency is the result of the work of all those that it represents, inspires, legitimizes and mobilizes, and the various moments of the circulation-reinvention process are equally fresh starts" (1971, p. 324).

Malikism, which is one of the four major "Sharia" schools within Sunni Islam, was acknowledged by the Almoravid dynasty since 1040. At the time, many other "sects" were persecuted, and their leaders killed. Anyone who did not follow the Maliki Madhab was deemed a "kafir"). This school of thought presents a critical approach of Hadith as it spots doubts and allegations and questions the validity of those hadith spread and derived from Iraq –the most important part is the "moral coherence". «This school of thought is characterized by "its attachment to the customs of Medina [...], the interest of the Muslim community, the preferential argument, as well as its concern for moral coherence"

A mere glance at the emergence of Maliki Madhab shows that it gradually moved from al Medina regions to settle permanently in the Maghreb (Morocco, Africa, Tunisia and Libya) and in some west African countries and Andalusia found itself "wriggling into an anthropological space where numerous Imazighen customs already prevailed (in family matters and property law in particular), and having to deal with the dense networks of turûq (Sufi brotherhoods) which developed almost concomitantly when Islam arrived in Morocco" . To establish a modern society in constant interaction with cultures and civilizations, the Maliki "middle path" doctrine makes use of "Ijtihad" (interpretive physical and mental efforts exerted in a particular activity aiming at not only ensuring the Moroccan religious identity, but also extending a delicate diplomatic equation both at the national and

continental level. This choice in the "Madhab" aims at limiting the spread of the influence of the Hanbali Wahhabis rite represented by Saudi Arabia, a rich and potential partner Morocco avoids to offend.

Most recently a moderate and flexible model of Islam that goes hand in hand with the Moroccan context and idiosyncrasies had been more implemented immediately after the Casablanca attacks and which, of course, demonstrates the openness and uniqueness of the state's religious rites and authenticity of its civilization. Officials insist that Morocco's Islamic model helps to explain why radical ideologies have largely failed to strike again in the kingdom since 2003, and why other nations are now looking to Rabat. In a speech from the throne, 30th July 2003, the king Mohammed VI confirmed that "We will not tolerate this, especially given that these doctrines are incompatible with our specific Moroccan identity. To those who would like to try to advocate for these foreign rites for our people [import ritual rites that are foreign to their traditions] We will oppose them with whatever force is necessary to ensure that Morocco's uniqueness of rite is preserved, hereby reaffirming our desire to defend our choice of the Maliki rite [...]."

[III]. Spirituality, a Peace Building Tool in Conflict Situations

This current article came as an outcome of the UN General assembly which adopted a Moroccan –proposed resolution on the promotion of religious and intercultural dialogue and the fight against hate speech. This resolution proposes to undertake initiatives aimed at promoting dialogue, tolerance, understanding and cooperation between regions and cultures in a global context. The Moroccan diplomat Omar Hilal stated: "Today's world is going through a turbulent period, characterized by the exacerbation and multiplication of hate speech, which is contrary to the values of peace, tolerance and coexistence." The adoption of this resolution by all various groups from different cultural and religious sensitivities and its co-sponsorship by ninety countries reflect the role played by Morocco as a promoter of dialogue and moderation. This also illustrates the kingdom 's status as a huge builder of tolerance and coexistence between nations and groups."

Religious dialogue has often been established on open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures and religious establishments that would lead to a deeper understanding of the others' world perceptions and strengthen geopolitical stability. Whether the objective should be confined only to achieving a deeper understanding", or whether the aim should be broader to include conflict prevention and de-escalation, combating prejudices and stereotypes in public and political discourse and facilitating coalition-building across diverse cultural and religious communities can of course be further debated. Morocco considers this type of religious leadership and cooperation as part of its soft power practice in order to raise awareness about its first national priority. "The use of religion plays an important role in the kingdom's overall soft power equation," said Anouar Boukhars, a Maghreb expert and Carnegie Endowment fellow.

[IV]. Religious Dialogue's Role in Geopolitical Stability

Bilateral religious diplomacy has been making use of specific training institutes, mainly the Mohammed VI Institute for Training Imams. The Moroccan religious identity has become widely spread and publicly recognized in official discourses and used as an alternative support for conventional and official diplomacy. In response to the request of countries and officials from Africa, Europe and Asia, His Majesty ordered the institute to provide free accommodation, supervision and training to almost 1.300 foreign students so far since the foundation of the Institute in 2015 for the training of "Morchidines" and "Morchidates" (Imams and preachers).

The foreign student imams descend from such countries as Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Gabon, Chad where Al Qaeda and Islamic State are active, France, as well as students from Niger and Thailand will join the institute soon. "The number of the Institute's graduates from these countries has so far reached 712 imams and preachers," the minister said, adding that 35 Imams from Guinea, 33 French Imams, and 107 Imams from Niger, 79 Chadians Imams and 37 Tunisian Imams have benefited from short training courses for Imams serving in mosques. "We show them that the concepts of democracy and human rights serve purposes rooted in Islamic values, " said institute director Abdeslam Lazaar. Vocational training makes room for electronics, agriculture, or tailoring as a stable source of revenue once the imams are back home. The main objectives of the new institute are to ensure the values of tolerance; balance and moderation are indoctrinated and fight religious radicalism and religious violent extremism among the lower social class.

After the inauguration of the institute, le Matin, a pro-government newspaper published an article stating the essence of such institute which is "preserving the religious identity of Morocco which is balanced, open and tolerant." The author also emphasized the quality of Academic training the personnel receive there focused on "Islamic and human sciences so as to qualify them [the personnel] to undertake research and actively participate in the treatment of current issues and religious debates." Morocco has become an example of an exporter of "tolerant Islam." The country's Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams has become a continental

Mecca, with many African and increasingly European countries sending students to be schooled in the tradition of what observers have called the “next generation of Imams.”

The institute serves as a shield against the threat of extremist ideology and obscurantism and protects the religion from derogatory beliefs and acts. It also promotes Morocco’s distinctive inclusive and spiritual interpretation of Islam. During Pope Francis II visit to Morocco and after that to the institute, two foreign students addressed the king, the papal entourage and leaders of the Moroccan government, and the audience of students; both joined the institute to face and eradicate extremist ideology back home. Hind Usman, a young woman from Nigeria where Boko Haram terrifies innocents in her country, spoke enthusiastically about her experience and how she decided to leave her work as a microbiologist to study Islamic religion in Morocco. Usman declared that she hopes to return home to enlighten her community against extremism, manipulation and “influence tolerance, love, and peaceful coexistence between Muslims, Christians and those of other faiths.”

Similarly, Aboubaker Hmidouch, a French Imam trainee in Mohamed VI Institute and industrial designer by occupation voiced out his grievance and total denunciation of “this ideology of death” in reference to the 2015 terrorist attacks in France. “I knew that those crimes were against religion.” He said and realized that “there was a need for voices to speak up ...against this ideology.” “The Muslim community in France is in great need of imams and female religious preachers to ensure that the values of religion contribute to living together and to the spiritual well-being of society,” he said. Another student Imam told Morocco World News that the pope’s visit is a validation of faith dialogue between Muslims and Christians: “Christians and Muslims are all brothers, all human beings. He further claimed since he comes from a country with a Carrefour of believers of the Abrahamic faiths; “most of my friends are Christians. Even in the same family, you can find Muslims and Christians.” Another department was created at the institute in charge of the religious supervision of the Royal Armed Forces officers and non-commissioned officers. Morocco keeps proving its commitment towards peace and prosperity among all citizens of every faith.

[V]. **Religious Actors as Peace Builders**

It goes without saying that religious leaders can build strong ties and use their spiritual support to address common problems, influence and encourage religious dialogue within and among protagonists. Thus, their role and contribution in formal peace process, conflict prevention and transformation should be given a priority in bridging the gap in faiths and engaging in inclusive trust building and dialogue. In his article ‘Faith-based Organizations: The Religious Dimension to Peace building’, Douglas Johnston examines what he called “the potential of the faith-based approaches to conflict prevention and transformation.” He confirms that faith based approach “represents a viable and – more often than not – effective alternative, as opposed to traditional approaches.” These approaches may intervene in violent conflicts represented by, civil society, NGOs, inter-governmental organizations, the church and other religious institutions.

In the pursuit of the goals of seeking peace, religious leaders and faith-based NGOs have frequently played prominent roles as mediators or other forms of intervention in conflict scenarios. Some religious figures have been able to use their positions of authority to work toward peace and to forward the cause of justice. The late Pope John Paul II, for example, played an important role in Lebanon, Poland and Haiti, among other places where he preached religious tolerance. As respected members of society, individual national religious leaders have often been at the forefront of efforts to deny impunity and bring an end to fighting.

It is a common assumption that Africa has a greater percentage of ideologically based conflicts that have ravaged many countries in this continent. Civil society, NGOs, inter-governmental organizations, the churches and other religious institutions have frequently played prominent roles as monitors and mediators in conflict scenarios and brought an end to fighting and injustice. As examples, local bishops have served as “mediators in civil wars in Mozambique, Burundi and Liberia. The All Africa Conference of Churches brought a temporary end to the Sudanese civil war in 1972, in part through prayer at critical points in the negotiations, and by invoking both Christian and Muslim texts.”

Cambodia is also a model to investigate in peace building process through the intermediation of Buddhism is highly appreciated and respected by almost all the social strata there. If some religious values strengthen diplomacy, they can provide tools for managing, perhaps even resolving, religious disagreements and easing religious conflicts. In the post-Cold War period since 1990, religion has also grown more central in international politics (and hence diplomacy). This has occurred with the increase in religious/ethnic/national conflict on all continents, including the collapse of governing structures.

It will be worth it to indicate here how Morocco slowly but surely establishes its geopolitical interests, economic reform-minded in multiple sectors in a win-win relation. It also provides its internationally recognized expertise

in counterterrorism to regional and continental entities as well as participates in peace making process within the context of the African Union. Indeed, these efforts will take time to bear the fruits. This new trend of leadership paved the way to a south-south economic diplomacy officially announced by king Mohamed VI at the African Heads of State Summit in Addis Ababa. For him, the move has a cultural and economic benefit, as well as a strategic one.

The king stated in one of his speeches that “Strong bilateral relations have thus been significantly developed. Since 2000, Morocco has signed nearly a thousand agreements with African countries, in various fields of cooperation.” Unfortunately, there seems to be a set pattern of human relationship which will not be wise to neglect or to gloss over. Therefore, the challenge is to generate practical and applicable measures to address present misunderstandings and sources of conflict.

VI. Foreign policy in Africa and Faith Diplomacy

Bennett and other advocates for the religion agenda seek to persuade their listeners that religion and religious actors are especially relevant to global politics because they are uniquely equipped to contribute to relief efforts, nation building, development, and peace building. Good religion is an agent of transformation. It is important and necessary for politics and public life to unfold democratically and for religious freedom to flourish globally. “Peace building is too important to leave only to those in high office who sign peace accords on mahogany tables. If that were the case, most common people in conflicted environments would not experience peace.”

King Mohammed VI delivered remarks highlighting the tradition of coexistence in Morocco between Muslims and Jews and openness to other religions, according to the report. “My country is sending a strong signal, reflecting its determination to set off a new dynamic – one that would enable us to pave the way, together, for innovative pathways to ensure respect for cultural and religious diversity as well as a common commitment to the virtues of dialogue and respect for others, King Mohammed VI said in his speech. Morocco has also been an active mediator which helped achieve substantial progress towards peace, namely in Libya and the Mano River region.

Tidjania has currently become a transnational Sufi lodge in the historical city of Fez due to its popularity in West Africa mainly disciples from Senegal, Mauritania, and Mali. . It plays an important regional as well as national political role in the Moroccan state. What counts in this article is the focus on its international function and its diplomatic implication. At the international level, this Sufi order contributes to strengthening relations between Morocco and its African neighbors and ending some hostilities on the continent.

In 1984, Morocco withdrew from the Pan-African organization linked to the Organization for African Unity’s recognition of the sovereignty of the Sahara. Since that time, “Morocco has been carrying out numerous bilateral cooperation projects with its African neighbors to compensate for its isolation from the OAU and to gain support for its territorial and economic interests. The Tidjaniyya members have played a fundamental role in fostering the bilateral relations between the Moroccan state and its West African neighbors. Similarly, The Senegalese spiritual leaders in particular have been acting as “informal diplomatic agents and have been lobbying towards strengthening relations between Morocco and Senegal, these two countries being tied to each other by the Tidjania order.”

No one can deny that religious leaders, thanks to their moral authority, bridge the gap between faiths, develop trust, build strong relationships and engage in soft power advocacy in addressing common issues. A priority that has long pushed forward the Moroccan diplomacy to win approval and recognition from both continental and international counterpart for the conflict which has been going on for decades and standing as stumbling block in the face of consolidating the Maghreb Arab Union.

Nevertheless, Moroccan diplomacy has taken new perspectives and trends in the new international relations context since the death of the former king Hassan. II. The end of the Cold War has pushed Morocco to adapt its diplomatic trends and hence new priorities were determined in accordance with Morocco’s national interests. The cold war era used by Morocco to win the western block of Sahara was insufficient. The war on terrorism doesn’t lead to a positive outcome. Hassan II had more than one card in his sleeves to lobby about the first national concern of his country. Religious brotherhood and communities were considered as springboard to provide mediation and consolidate their transnational ties. Sakhivel calls Morocco’s religious diplomacy a “symbolic, soft power gesture to Sahel, made in the knowledge that it cannot compete with Algeria militarily.”

A strong evidence of the focus on faith diplomacy’s role played by the Tidjani brotherhood rather than the traditional ways is the incident in the United Nations. Many years ago, the former Senegalese president, Abdou Diouf’s permanent representative of diplomacy at the United Nations supported officially “the Algerian position, backing thus the Polisario Front, the rebel movement that fought for years an attrition war against the central government in Rabat.” Immediately after, King Hassan II sent his emissary to Dakar to meet with Sheikh Tall

Moltaka, then the leader of the Tijaniya movement, who arm-twisted the President to pull out his back up to the Polisario Front. As a result, “the Senegalese President caved in and the permanent representative of Senegal at the United Nations was removed. Hassan II would later on back Abdou Diouf in his campaign to win a second mandate. All in all, the Tidjanis brotherhood and successors served to maintain privileged relations between the Tidjanis of sub-Saharan Africa and those of Morocco.

Religious diplomacy guided by his Majesty and the brotherhood communities in Morocco and elsewhere prepared a strong ground for the granting of an autonomy status to this geographic area. Active diplomatic actions and foundations were set in the city of Layoune which is officially ready to “host intense diplomatic activity during the coming months, including bilateral joint commissions between Morocco and its African partners and the Forum between Rabat and the Pacific countries.”

The opening of some African consulates in Layoune, Moroccan Sahara was a sign of success of the country’s efforts. In the past few years, Morocco has been escalating its diplomatic efforts and presence at the AU to “replace the” empty chair” era which consequently allowed the pro-Polisario parties to stab Morocco’s position on the conflict. “We are currently witnessing positive dynamics that would strengthen the Moroccan identity of the Sahara.” said Bourita, the Moroccan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs and his counterpart from Comoros, Souef Mohammed El Amine during the Inauguration ceremony of the Comoros general consulate on December 2019. The inaugurations of such diplomatic representations in the southern provinces will mainly strengthen the vocation of the region as the gateway to Morocco on the African continent in accordance with King Mohammed VI’s vision.”

The African consulates are rapidly established in the area. Since the end of 2019, Ten African States have opened diplomatic services in the Moroccan Sahara under their mission to Rabat. The latest, Burundi, plans to open one in either Layoune — the largest city in the western block of Sahara region run by Morocco — or in the city of Dakhla. These consulates will accumulate Morocco’s diplomatic as well as economic gain on the Sahara issue. The dynamic of the foundation of these diplomatic representations is a clear message sent by Morocco to those who wish to find a solution of granting autonomy but under the full Moroccan sovereignty over its southern provinces and the territorial integrity of the Kingdom.

The opening of those diplomatic spots in the region constitutes the expression of the “strong” position and the constant support of the African countries for Morocco’s position. A few years ago, Morocco has dramatically invested in south-south clear-sighted collaboration. As a result, Moroccan authorities plan to spend more than 4.5 billion euros (\$5.2 billion) on the region’s development by 2021. “This is a very rich region;” said Rokia Derham, Morocco’s secretary of state for foreign trade. The area, situated at the door to sub-Saharan Africa is a hub of the “opportunities” in sectors such as renewable energy, maritime fishing, tourism and construction. “There is great potential in industry, fishing, agriculture or the relocation of services. We want to see foreign investors coming,” she told AFP.

Finally, Morocco is showing how a modern and moderate Islam can and must help to catalyze ideological, political and moral solutions to the contemporary crises—if implementation fulfills the vision of programs like the Mohammed VI Institute, Morocco may recreate or even surpass the great historical successes represented by al-Qaraouiyyine.”King Mohamed VI, under the divine blessing and the status of Commander of the Faithful has undertaken to revive and promote a cosmopolitan Moroccan ecumenical Islam that is capable of maintaining cultural and religious differences. The objective is to help build more peaceful bilateral and multilateral relations and thus create an environment conducive to development and growth.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to map out the connection between the religious domain and conflict resolution and has put forward a theoretical framework for future consideration. Religion has moved from being marginal and often mostly a source of conflict to a core element in international relations and global order. Religious disciples and faith based organizations can be a springboard for conflict resolution and contribute to advocacy, mediation and reconciliation for. The Moroccan government still lacks a holistic and sustainable Multi faith dialogue and pluralism as conflict resolution strategies to move up to a higher level. This paper calls for a new dimension of new research to determine the positive impact of religious approaches to conflict resolution. A key priority for the government is to ensure long term global engagement by fostering all-inclusive faith dialogue.

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