

MOROCCAN EXCEPTIONALISM AS FOREIGN POLICY

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Introduction

In April 2019, the *New York Times* published an op-ed article entitled “The Moroccan Exception in the Arab World”, which celebrated the country’s official embrace of its Jewish heritage.¹ It emphasized the role played by the Moroccan monarch, Mohammed VI, in leading the efforts to showcase the kingdom’s religious diversity, which goes so far as to mention Judaism in the preamble of its Constitution. Two years earlier, a lengthy article had reminded the readers of the *Los Angeles Times* that former Sultan Mohammed V “protected the Jews of Casablanca” at the height of World War II.² Another article published on the political news site *The Hill* in the spring of 2020 celebrated Morocco’s “moderation and tolerance” towards its religious minorities.³

These publications, and many others, present Morocco as a land of diversity and inclusion, values generally celebrated by the political, economic and media elites across Europe and North America. By grossly oversimplifying a complex reality, they portray the kingdom in an extremely favorable light. According to such interpretations, Morocco – while certainly far from perfect – represents a beacon of proto-liberalism in a region allegedly marred by “Islamic fundamentalism” and “corrupt autocracies”. Of course, the kingdom is not fully democratic and women still have not attained complete legal equality with men. But perhaps that is the best we can hope for when it comes to the Arab world – or so we are supposed to believe. Such favorable assessments abroad have undoubtedly played a role in sparing Morocco the kind of public criticism usually reserved for countries with similarly abysmal human rights records.

The relatively positive image of Morocco abroad is not the result of chance, though, but the carefully curated product of a decades-old public relations campaign conducted by the ruling elites in Rabat. Morocco employs a number of high-powered lobbying firms in Washington DC that advocate for its policies with surprising effectiveness.⁴ Of course, the North African kingdom lacks the kind of money that allows Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United Arab Emirates an almost unfathomable level

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¹ “The Moroccan Exception in the Arab World”, *New York Times*, 9 April 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/09/opinion/morocco-jews-mohammed-vi.html>.

² “You must remember this: Sultan Mohammed V protected the Jews of Casablanca”, *Los Angeles Times*, 25 April 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-hurowitz-moroccan-king-mohammed-v-20170425-story.html>

³ “As anti-Semitism increases, let’s remember how Morocco saved its Jews”, *The Hill*, 2 February 2020, <https://thehill.com/opinion/civil-rights/480899-as-anti-semitism-increases-lets-remember-how-morocco-saved-its-jews>.

⁴ “The \$20 Million Case for Morocco”, *Foreign Policy*, 25 February 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/02/25/the-20-million-case-for-morocco/>

of influence in the US capital. But Morocco makes up for its limited pecuniary resources through a particularly skillful approach that yields astonishing results, most recently when thwarting any attempts within the Trump administration to pressure Rabat on the status of the Western Sahara. Both Republican and Democratic governments have continued their country's close relations with Morocco in past decades.

The Anticolonial Struggle

To truly understand this phenomenon, we must turn to history and study its origins. During the Moroccan struggle for independence starting in 1944 the leaders of the Istiqlal Party and the Party of National Reform embarked upon a skillfully crafted anticolonial publicity campaign on the global stage.⁵ Besides bureaus in Cairo and Paris, it was the Moroccan Office of Information and Documentation (MOID) in New York that proved most important in disseminating the demands for Morocco's immediate independence from French and Spanish colonial rule. To make their voices heard, the nationalists skillfully wove a web of contacts among leading journalists, diplomats and public intellectuals that spoke out on their behalf; former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas became two of the most important advocates for Moroccan independence following meetings with the anticolonial activists. This campaign resulted in an astonishing amount of positive coverage in the US media, given how little most Americans knew, or cared, about this seemingly obscure nation amidst the dramatic developments of the early Cold War. The colonial powers very much feared the turning of global public opinion against them, which contributed to France's decision to grant Morocco's independence in March 1956, soon thereafter followed by Spain relinquishing its protectorate over northern Morocco as well. That French Prime Minister Antoine Pinay first mentioned his plans for Morocco's "independence" during a speech before the UN General Assembly in September 1955 underlined the role played by the international arena in securing the kingdom's sovereignty.

A quick glance at the MOID's main publications *Free Morocco and Moroccan News Bulletin* reveals the rhetoric employed by the nationalists. According to these monthly newsletters, it was "Morocco's decisive strategic location" that made it a viable partner whose goal was to "strengthen, not weaken, the West". Of course, the Moroccan nationalists were not "extreme" but merely sought to obtain "their own rights and liberties". In this endeavor, "the entire Moroccan people stand firmly behind His Majesty, the Sultan" who remained "above political parties" and was solely driven by "the best interests of his country." The ultimate goal was the creation of a liberal constitutional monarchy with freedoms for all ("Jewish Moroccans will be citizens equal both in law and in fact with Moslems") and lots of investment opportunities for US capitalists through "free competitive enterprise". Such language obviously appealed to North American readers amidst the geopolitical rivalry with the Soviet Union during the 1950s.

Adapting to the Cold War

After Morocco had finally obtained its independence, the now-King Mohammed V won a power struggle against the Istiqlal Party and successfully established himself, and his family, at the center of political power. Part of that successful strategy was turning the monarch into the embodiment

of the Moroccan nation, a process for which the nationalists had inadvertently laid the groundwork when propagating their anticolonial demands abroad. Now the royal palace took over from them, to a large degree by hiring many of those activists that had previously worked at the MOID. Others began to work in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or served as diplomats abroad, including the first Moroccan ambassador to Washington DC, Dr. Mehdi Ben Aboud. Equipped with the necessary human resources and social capital, the monarch could now directly appeal to American public opinion himself.

All of this came to its logical conclusion during an official visit by Mohammed V to the United States in late 1957. Months of meticulous planning – including the printing of a new book about the king and an interview with CBS – had preceded the trip, which culminated in a number of memorable publicity coups: the monarch visited the Metropolitan Opera as well as Disneyland, wore a cowboy hat on a ranch in Texas and petted animals at the Bronx Zoo. The US media provided extremely positive coverage. In particular, the decision to let his unveiled daughters appear in public alone resonated very well, causing *The New York Times* to call the monarch a “champion of constitutional monarchy, democratic elections and the political emancipation of women.”⁶ That assessment might not have been particularly accurate, but it did not matter. Mohammed V had managed to present himself, and by extension his entire nation, in the most favorable light possible. At a time when the PR industry was still just an emerging actor in the field of politics, we must consider the king’s visit to North America an impressive achievement. Moreover, it successfully laid the foundations for the close geopolitical alliance between Rabat and Washington that still persists.

Following the end of colonial rule, the North African kingdom also established very close relations with the former colonizers.⁷ King Hassan II, who succeeded his father on the throne in 1961, successfully portrayed Morocco as a crossroads of civilizations while firmly positioning himself in the Western camp during the Cold War.⁸ As he put it in his autobiography, “Morocco is like a tree nourished by roots deep in the soil of Africa, which breathes through foliage rustling to the winds of Europe ... horizontally, it looks to the East, with which it is bound by ties of religion and culture.”⁹ His personal friendships with foreign leaders, especially in France, allowed him to mask a brutal and undemocratic regime at home, as Gilles Perrault revealed in his seminal book *Notre ami le roi* (1990).

Moroccan Foreign Policy Today

Today, Morocco’s ability to project its soft power abroad has become abundantly clear, most prominently with the country’s pivot to Africa. For example, the training of imams from Mali and elsewhere to spread a “moderate Islam” and counter “religious extremism” has become a central pillar of Morocco’s regional foreign policy alongside numerous business initiatives.¹⁰ King

⁶ “Westernmost Arab King—Mohammed V”, *New York Times*, 26 November 1957, p. 5.

⁷ An overview of Moroccan foreign policy during the early Cold War can be found in Abdelkhaleq Berramdane, *Le Maroc et l'Occident: 1800-1974* (Paris: Karthala, 1987).

⁸ For an example of Morocco’s ability to remain a junior partner of the United States while nonetheless acting independently diplomatically and militarily, see the forthcoming publication: Farid Boussaid, “Brothers in Arms: Morocco’s Military Intervention in Support of Mobutu of Zaire During the 1977 and 1978 Shaba Crises”, *The International History Review* (2020).

⁹ Hassan II, *The Challenge* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 169.

¹⁰ Ann Marie Waincott, *Bureaucratizing Islam: Morocco and the War on Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), ch. 8

Mohammed VI has become a frequent guest in capitals across Africa, and a 2016 report by the African Development Bank stated that 85% of the country's foreign direct investment went to the continent.¹¹ This approach ultimately enabled Morocco to rejoin the African Union in January 2017 with the goal of serving as a "bridge" between Europe and Africa, despite the intergovernmental organization's refusal to expel the Western Sahara.

Morocco continues to curate its positive image in European circles. The close relationship between the royal palace and leading French journalists and politicians certainly helps in this regard.¹² In addition to forcefully repressing African migrants on their way to Spain, the kingdom has also established itself as a reliable ally by making the fight against terrorism and international security cooperation central tenets of state policy.¹³ The secular French state has even begun importing Moroccan imams to offset subversive preachers in the nation's mosques. Spain has now surpassed France as Morocco's most important trade partner, thus underlining the diversification of the country's trans-Mediterranean relations. Both the European Union and the United States consider Morocco a "strategic" partner.

Conclusion

The foreign policy pursued by Rabat since the end of colonial rule has thus been remarkably successful, at least when viewed from the vantage point of the country's political elites. Governments come and go, but the royal palace's almost total control over diplomatic relations has led to a remarkable level of consistency over the years. For a mid-sized country with limited economic resources, this is a truly remarkable achievement. The ability to consciously project a positive image abroad has been central to these efforts. Whether this actually serves the interests of the Moroccan people is, of course, an entirely different question. After all, the Moroccan state has always used its good reputation to avoid any annoying questions about the lack of truly democratic structures, extremely unequal regional economic development, and the concentration of the nation's wealth in the hands of the royal family and its allies. Most Westerners see a modernizing monarch surrounded by camels and solar panels when looking at Morocco, not show trials for regime critics.

To understand Morocco's foreign policy today, we thus need to comprehend its genealogy. The unique resources acquired by those advocating for the country's independence in the mid-twentieth century were subsequently absorbed by the independent state under the aegis of the royal palace. And the ability to present the kingdom in an extremely favorable light to Western audiences remains a skill that few have mastered as well as those working on behalf of the Moroccan state. The idea of Moroccan exceptionalism remains central to the country's foreign policy. When seen within this context, Morocco's ability to punch above its weight on the international stage appears somewhat less surprising. History thus offers us important tools for understanding international relations in North Africa and beyond.

¹¹ "Why Morocco is cosying up to sub-Saharan Africa", *The Economist*, 19 July 2018, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/07/19/why-morocco-is-cosying-up-to-sub-saharan-africa>.

¹² Omar Brousky, *La République de Sa Majesté : France-Maroc, liaisons dangereuses* (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2017).

¹³ Blanca Camps-Febrer, "Counter-Terrorism as a Technology of Securitization: Approaching the Moroccan Case", ed. Michael Butler, *Securitization, Revisited* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 69-90.