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# Morocco and the African Union

Prospects for Re-engagement and Progress on the Western Sahara

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Strengthening Africa's economic performance



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## Prospects for Re-engagement and Progress on the Western Sahara

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## Executive Summary

On the 50th anniversary of the founding of the first pan-African organisation, this Paper examines Morocco's relationship with the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and its successor, the African Union (AU), in the evolving context of one of the world's most intractable feuds, the dispute over the Western Sahara. Morocco formally withdrew from the OAU in 1984 over the admission of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as a full member of the organisation. SADR claims sovereignty over the whole Western Sahara territory, which Morocco claims as its own. In the nearly 30 years since, Morocco has refused to rejoin the OAU/AU – and remains the only African country that is not a member – unless the membership of SADR, which is only partially recognised internationally, is withdrawn or frozen. This dispute has impaired Morocco's relations with, to varying extents, all African countries and creates serious divisions within the AU.

The spectre of transnational conflict in Africa's Sahel region – punctuated by France's intervention in Mali – has cast a fresh light on the stalemate over the Western Sahara, which has been a pawn in regional power plays for decades. Many analysts have warned that rising instability in the region is a threat to the uneasy peace that has prevailed since the UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991. Conversely, this Paper argues that for all the uncertainty and potential flashpoints the Arab Spring and the crisis in the Sahel have laid bare for the countries of the region, this period of transition – as with major political shifts elsewhere in recent history – may provide a window of opportunity to break the deadlock over the Western

Sahara and thus smooth Morocco's re-entry into the AU. In particular, the need for new forms of economic and security cooperation should fuel a new push for a diplomatic settlement, even if positions over the Western Sahara's status appear as entrenched as ever.

Within Morocco, further internal reform would reinforce the seriousness of its 2007 autonomy proposal for the Western Sahara and help address a number of questions about its viability. For all Morocco's investment in the territory and concerted efforts to bring a Sahrawi elite into the establishment, there is no avoiding the existence of strong nationalist sentiment or the continuing perception on the ground of an occupation. That does not make independence any more of a panacea for the myriad local and regional issues at stake – as AU statements routinely suggest – but it does illustrate that Morocco may need to rethink some of the core arrangements in the autonomy proposal to counter the powerful lure of self-determination.

For its part, the AU has buried its head in the Saharan sands for far too long. If it is to engage meaningfully on this issue, it must engage Morocco, SADR and, perhaps most consequentially, SADR's main backer, Algeria, with new ideas and realistic avenues to break the impasse. Morocco's continuing absence from the AU not only threatens to create a permanent rupture in the organisation but also limits the catalytic role in Africa's economic growth that Morocco, given its relative sophistication and depth of integration with Europe and the Mediterranean and Atlantic basins, is especially well positioned to play.

*We can only speak of Africa when Morocco is included; and of the African Union when it is excluded*  
– A senior AU official

## Introduction

The spectre of transnational conflict in Africa's Sahel region has cast a fresh light on one of the world's most intractable feuds, the dispute over the Western Sahara. In November 2012, the United Nations Secretary General's Personal Envoy for Western Sahara, Christopher Ross, warned that the crisis had lasted 'far too long' and called any acceptance of the status quo a 'serious miscalculation'. He went on to urge the Kingdom of Morocco and the government-in-exile of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) to 'move swiftly into serious negotiations' over the Western Sahara – a territory both claim as their own – and implored the key external actors (notably the United States, France and Algeria) to pressure the two sides to do so. In a region increasingly exposed to multiple, inter-locking security threats – from extremist Islamists, secessionists, displaced persons, drug traffickers and mercenaries, to say nothing of deteriorating civil–military relations – a potentially catalytic conflict such as the one in the Western Sahara 'cannot be allowed', according to Ross, 'to stand still'.<sup>1</sup>

The Arab Spring and the related 'fall-out'<sup>2</sup> underline the potential consequences of inaction over the Western Sahara, which has been a pawn in regional power plays for decades. Many analysts have warned that rising instability in the region is a threat to the uneasy peace that has prevailed since the UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991. Even so, the temptation to let this enduring dispute remain frozen is strong. The Western Sahara is one of several intractable 'intra'-state issues that has defied the international community's efforts to facilitate its 'solution' for decades. A long-time observer of the struggle has called it a 'chronic illness'.<sup>3</sup> In this respect it is not dissimilar to the conflict in Cyprus or even the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, although it elicits nowhere near the global interest that those two struggles provoke. Notwithstanding their diverse origins and different triggers for violence, at the heart of these intractable conflicts lay sharply contrasting interpretations of key historical events, which shape

the opposing communities' identities as well as their sense of justice and what is rightfully *theirs*.

In a year which began with a surprise intervention by France in Mali and a mass hostage-taking of Westerners by Islamist terrorists in neighbouring Algeria, North Africa and the Sahel region are sure to be high on the agenda of Western diplomats and the African Union. Paradoxically, this could diminish the effort to find new mechanisms for the Western Sahara, if it is seen as too risky to launch a diplomatic push when political dynamics in the neighbourhood are so fluid. Despite Ross's warning, the dispute may indeed be destined to 'stand still' for some time yet.

At the heart of these intractable conflicts lay sharply contrasting interpretations of key historical events, which shape the opposing communities' identities as well as their sense of justice and what is rightfully *theirs*

There are compelling reasons why all parties to the conflict should no longer regard this as a viable alternative. In human welfare terms, the Sahrawi people have most to lose by maintenance of the status quo. As many as a hundred thousand Sahrawis live in wretched conditions in refugee camps in southern Algeria; some have been there since the 1970s. Of the remainder of the (est.) 400 000 people of the historically nomadic Sahrawi tribes who live in Western Sahara (some are dispersed in neighbouring countries), they face harsh living conditions and are, according to international human rights groups, subject to violations on a regular basis by Moroccan security forces.<sup>4</sup> Terrorist groups such as Al Qaida in the Maghreb (AQIM) have tried to

exploit such conditions to convince young Sahrawi to join the movement, which is seeking to establish fundamentalist regimes based on Islamic Law (or Sharia) and expel 'foreign' influences from the region. Although over the years they have had limited success due, at least in part, to their conflicting aims (AQIM is anti-nationalist), AQIM has shown an increasing pragmatism in its use of 'outside help'<sup>5</sup> and the fluid situation appears to be evolving in a negative direction. In Mali, AQIM-linked militias and the Touaregs temporarily joined forces in early 2012 to rout government forces in the north of the country, before turning on each other a few months later. In the absence of meaningful progress on the Western Sahara dispute – whatever the outcome – it is hard to imagine how the Sahrawis' plight might improve, with all the related dangers that portends for the region. In an ominous indication of what might well be ahead, French intelligence sources confirm some 300 Sahrawi youth may have been recruited to militant training camps in northern Mali in late 2012.<sup>6</sup>

Since the 1970s, part of the challenge in 'reimagining' the Western Sahara issue has been the failure of leaders on all sides to promote a reasoned debate on the issue with their publics

Equally hard to envisage is how Morocco might re-join the AU unless there is an end to the stalemate over the Western Sahara. The Kingdom left its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), in 1984 over the admission of SADR. This self-exclusion is not just symbolic. It has real and profound consequences for both Morocco and the organisation. The 'distance' created by the Kingdom's absence from the AU – Morocco is the only African country not to be included as a member – could become permanent, as an increasingly dynamic Moroccan state pursues deeper integration in the wider Atlantic area and reinforces its strong European links. This would not be in the AU's – or Africa's – interest. The evolving crisis in Mali is a potent example of how divisions over

the Western Sahara impede potentially vital political and security cooperation on the continent, in this case between regional powerhouses, Algeria and Morocco, both of whom have considerable experience in combating extremism, as well as strong historical and cultural links with the Touareg groups – considered part of the wider Berber diaspora – who are central to any management of the crisis.<sup>7</sup> In economic terms, too, the AU will be less integrated and therefore less effective in realising its laudable aims and tackling some of the emergent challenges facing the continent, so long as Morocco remains outside the organisation and the Western Sahara issue continues to blight relations between its members.



On the 50th anniversary of the founding of the continent's first pan-African organisation, the OAU, this Paper assesses the current scope for Morocco's reintegration with the AU, mindful that positions on both sides of the Western Sahara dispute are deeply entrenched. The merits of the competing claims on the Western Sahara will not be addressed in any detail. Nor is there a focus on the internal concerns and politics of the Sahrawi leadership, though it goes without saying that they are central to any viable agreement. There are a number of excellent studies examining the complex legal, cultural and historical issues which have scuppered all previous attempts to resolve the Western Sahara crisis<sup>8</sup>, but in general the literature and commentary on the subject inclines towards highly partisan analyses, if not plain propaganda. Since the 1970s, part of the challenge in 'reimagining' the Western Sahara issue has been the failure of leaders on all sides to promote a reasoned debate on the issue with their publics. Instead they have defaulted into a Manichean discourse; among their own, those who challenge their official line are typically seen as quislings, outside the sacred national project.

The specific point of departure in this Paper is Morocco's relationship with Africa and the AU in the evolving context of what is commonly referred to as the 'Western Sahara question'. Lack of meaningful progress on this question has come at significant cost, especially to Africa. Should it continue there is a danger of permanent damage to the pan-African organisation. The Paper argues, however, that for all

the uncertainty and potential flashpoints the Arab Spring and the crisis in the Sahel have laid bare for the countries of the region, this period of transition – as with major political shifts elsewhere in recent

history – may provide a window of opportunity to break the deadlock over the Western Sahara and thus smooth Morocco's re-entry into the AU.

## Background

On 26 February 1976, the colonial power, Spain, officially withdrew from what was then called the Spanish Sahara – a vast, sparsely populated territory with about 1 100 kilometres of Atlantic coastline, with seemingly few resources apart from fishing grounds and phosphate mines. The following day the Polisario Front<sup>9</sup> – a liberation group founded in May 1973 in Mauritania by students from the Spanish Sahara studying in Morocco – proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as a government-in-exile. Backed, armed and harboured by Algeria, the Polisario Front initiated a guerrilla war against Morocco and Mauritania, which inherited part of the Spanish Sahara territory.<sup>10</sup>

Since then Morocco – which gained its independence from France in 1956 – has engaged in a costly struggle with the Algerian-backed Polisario Front, first on the battlefield, then in international capitals and the halls of the United Nations. In general, the international community has been equivocal in the face of each side's competing claims, encouraging dialogue and emphasising the need for a peaceful resolution. While Morocco has lobbied for international acceptance of its claim to the territory, Algeria and Libya (under Gaddafi) have actively sought recognition for SADR, a process which has seen several reversals with formal recognition extended and withdrawn by foreign governments over the past two decades.

A UN Peace plan was accepted by all parties in 1988 and subsequently a Settlement Plan was endorsed by the Security Council in June 1990<sup>11</sup> and the following year the UN brokered cease-fire was

implemented on 6 September 1991.<sup>12</sup> The Settlement Plan effectively gave Morocco most of the territory (including the entire Atlantic coastline) whilst SADR 'administered' the remaining (largely uninhabited) eastern part which bordered Mauritania and Algeria from its base in camps around Tindouf in the southwestern part of Algeria. The two areas were separated by a berm – a land-mined embankment in the desert stretching more than 2 000 kms, built by the

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Moroccan army in the 1980s. The Plan comprised a transitional period, the repatriation of refugees, the exchange of prisoners of war and the setting up of an international peace-keeping force referred to as 'MINURSO'<sup>13</sup> to monitor the cease-fire and the planning and the organisation of a referendum. However, the identification of eligible voters for the self-determination referendum became a permanent stumbling block – both parties rejected alternating referendum proposals in which their putative voters were at a numerical disadvantage.<sup>14</sup> During his time as the UN Secretary General's envoy to the Western Sahara from 1997–2004, former US Secretary of State, James Baker, put forward a series of proposals to break the deadlock over the terms of the referendum, but none succeeded.<sup>15</sup>

## OAU to AU

The seminal moment in African–Moroccan relations came in February 1982 when at the 69th Council of Ministers conference of the OAU, the

Western Sahara was admitted into its membership. In response, Morocco immediately suspended its participation in the OAU. Then, two years later, in

November 1984, Morocco officially withdrew from the organisation.

There is nothing that is not disputed about this episode. Nearly all aspects of this chapter are contentious and subject to sharply contrasting interpretations by both governments and scholars. The overwhelming view within Morocco is that the decision was borne of back room deals and the strong-arming of many small and diplomatically-weak African countries by others, especially Morocco's neighbours Algeria and Libya. Special opprobrium is reserved for the then OAU Secretary General, Edem Kodjo. Strong evidence suggests that he exceeded his mandate in determining the legal basis of Western Sahara's admission, in particular by allowing – without prior consultation with the then OAU chairman, Kenyan president Daniel Arap Moi, or the newly-established Implementation Committee on the territory's future – a self-proclaimed republic to take a seat as a member *before* a referendum on its status organised and supervised by the organisation was held.<sup>16</sup> Chaos followed Kodjo's decision and 19 states walked out in protest at the Secretary General's unilateral move.<sup>17</sup> The affair plunged the OAU into an unprecedented predicament that threatened the very existence of the organisation.

That the historical controversies are unlikely to ever be resolved is evident in the contrasting reflections on the episode by two of the major protagonists, Kodjo and Olusegun Obasanjo, the former President of Nigeria and one of two surviving members of the OAU's ad hoc committee of African leaders ('Wisemen') established in 1978 to seek a solution to the Western Sahara question compatible with the right of self-determination.<sup>18</sup> Following his spell as OAU Secretary General, Kodjo, who later served twice as Prime Minister of Togo, has been equivocal, at best, about the Western Sahara's claim to statehood. He has suggested that SADR no longer possesses the conditions that had motivated its endorsement at the OAU and attempted to shift the blame for the imbroglio onto sitting African heads of state at the time.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, Obasanjo remains convinced that the decision to admit the Western Sahara in 1982 was correct and its claim to full independence should be facilitated through the mechanisms of the AU.<sup>20</sup>

The AU's predecessor, the OAU, was founded in the wake of decolonisation and based on the

principles of state sovereignty and non-interference. The main impetus behind its establishment was to consolidate newly-independent African states, prevent the balkanisation of the continent and, critically, *gain* independence for a number of new nations.

Morocco was a major force in the OAU's establishment, through 'The Casablanca Group' – an organisation of 'progressive' states which included Algeria, Egypt, Ghana and Morocco – which merged with its rival, the Monrovia Group, and eventually led to the creation of the OAU in 1963. More broadly, Morocco perceived itself as a major contributor to African solidarity and ardent supporter of various liberation movements across the continent. Consequently, when Morocco withdrew from the

In 1963 Morocco was one of two countries that had made strong reservations and abstained from voting in favour of the sanctity of frontiers at the formation of the OAU

OAU it was very much as a deeply disillusioned state, which believed that the OAU had acted perversely against its own founding charter, which stipulated that the territoriality of states was a *sine qua non* condition for their membership. This was all the more so because the Polisario was never recognised by the OAU as an African liberation movement and the SADR was not a sovereign, independent state with control over its territories. In 1963 Morocco was one of two countries (the other was Somalia) that had made strong reservations and abstained from voting in favour of the sanctity of frontiers at the formation of the OAU, pointing out that their territorial integrity was not yet achieved. This goes some way to explaining its different interpretation of 'decolonisation' in the context of Spain's withdrawal from the Spanish Sahara.

Nevertheless, from the Moroccan perspective the damage was done. In response Morocco closed its embassies in several African countries and concentrated more heavily on greater Euro-Mediterranean integration, its membership of the Arab league, and

establishing free trade agreements with European countries and the United States. In 1987, Morocco even applied to join the then European Economic Community. This was arguably a more symbolic than quixotic gesture: Morocco knew from its advance diplomacy that it stood no chance of admission, as much due to its poor human rights record and lack of democracy as geography. Nonetheless, Morocco's reigning monarch, King Hassan II, persevered with the application, a clear signal to sub-Saharan Africa that Morocco's future laid elsewhere.<sup>21</sup>

The AU was broadly modelled on the European Union, with a number of comprehensive frameworks and governing institutions covering its main areas of concern

The OAU, meanwhile, was faltering badly. It was derided internationally as 'the Dictators Club'. Corruption, poverty and authoritarianism were pervasive amongst its members, many of whom became entwined in proxy conflicts fought on behalf of the Cold War superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Although civil wars abounded, the OAU stood on the sidelines and did not intervene; it was rendered impotent, as much by its own now-anachronistic charter as by the failings of its leaders.

By the end of the 1990s a number of key African leaders, notably Libya's Muammar Gaddafi – eager to create a new platform for his grandiose political aims – were pushing for a radical rethink of the OAU. The result was the AU, formed in 2002. This new organisation was recast from the vestiges of the OAU into a new continental body that was committed to increase Africa's development, combat poverty and corruption, and, critically, end Africa's many conflicts, if necessary through intervention.

The AU was broadly modelled on the European Union, with a number of comprehensive frameworks and governing institutions covering its main areas of concern: The Assembly, comprised of heads of state; The Executive Council and the all-important Commission, which does the lion's share of the policy

implementation; The Peace and Security Council (PSC), the body which was established to intervene in African conflicts to protect the security of the continent; the Pan African Parliament; the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC); the Court of Justice; and other entities, such as the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). There are also far reaching plans to set up more integrated financial institutions, and by 2023 an African Economic Community with a single currency.

The scale of ambitions for the AU is vast, but the organisation is a direct reflection of Africa itself – it is struggling to reform its governing structures and progress towards its laudable aims has in some areas been painfully slow, if not non-existent. With huge financial and organisational barriers, the AU has a mountain to climb before it can claim to be 'fit for purpose'. The burdens and expectations on the AU – perhaps most especially in its formidably challenging peacekeeping missions – are enormous. And there have been some very significant failures, notably its inability to devise an effective response to the Zimbabwean crisis of the 2000s.<sup>22</sup>

Several experts have rightly observed, however, that regional and continental bodies in Europe, Asia and Latin America also took many years to establish themselves and grow into their charters.<sup>23</sup> In 2012 the organisation moved into its striking new headquarters (funded and built by the Chinese as 'a gift

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to Africa') in Addis Ababa and elected an impressive new Chairperson of the Commission, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, one of South Africa's most respected government ministers. Ultimately, however, the AU's success will hinge on the realisation of one of its founding principles, that Africa's conflicts must be resolved before the continent can achieve prosperity. On that score, there are new grounds for optimism. Its most ambitious mission is the AU peacekeeping

force in Somalia, a battle-hardened army of nearly 18 000 uniformed personnel. Security experts argue that this mission has been more effective in restoring a measure of stability to the country's chaotic, war-torn capital than any other foreign force, including the American mission in the 1990s.<sup>24</sup>

The one conflict which creates the most strain within the institution itself is the Western Sahara. By its own admission<sup>25</sup>, however, the AU Commission 'has more or less buried its head in the sand'. The body has done little more than continually reiterate its support of the on-going efforts by the UN<sup>26</sup> to

find a solution to the conflict consistent with relevant Security Council and General Assembly resolutions that will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara. The only statements made by successive Commission Chairpersons 'start and stop with the assertion that Morocco is an important part of Africa and has an important contribution to make to the development of the continent, and with an expression of hope that a solution will be found so that Morocco can "re-join the African family"'.<sup>27</sup>

The question is whether Morocco can do that outside the AU.

## Re-engaging Africa

Following Morocco's exit from the OAU in the 1980s, its bilateral relations narrowed in scope and became confined to specific areas, such as oil imports from Nigeria and humanitarian aid. Its diplomatic approach was characterised by Abdallah Saaf, Minister of Education from 1998 to 2002, as '*Royal Air Maroc* [the national airline] *diplomacy* – almost totally symbolic. It means that we only have relationships with countries that our airline serves. Southern African countries are ignored and our representation in South Africa is more symbolic than effective'.<sup>28</sup>

Since 2000, however, Morocco has made a determined effort to re-engage with Africa (especially French speaking African countries) on several fronts. The Kingdom re-opened several diplomatic representations, both resident and non-resident; and it reinforced its presence in several African-related

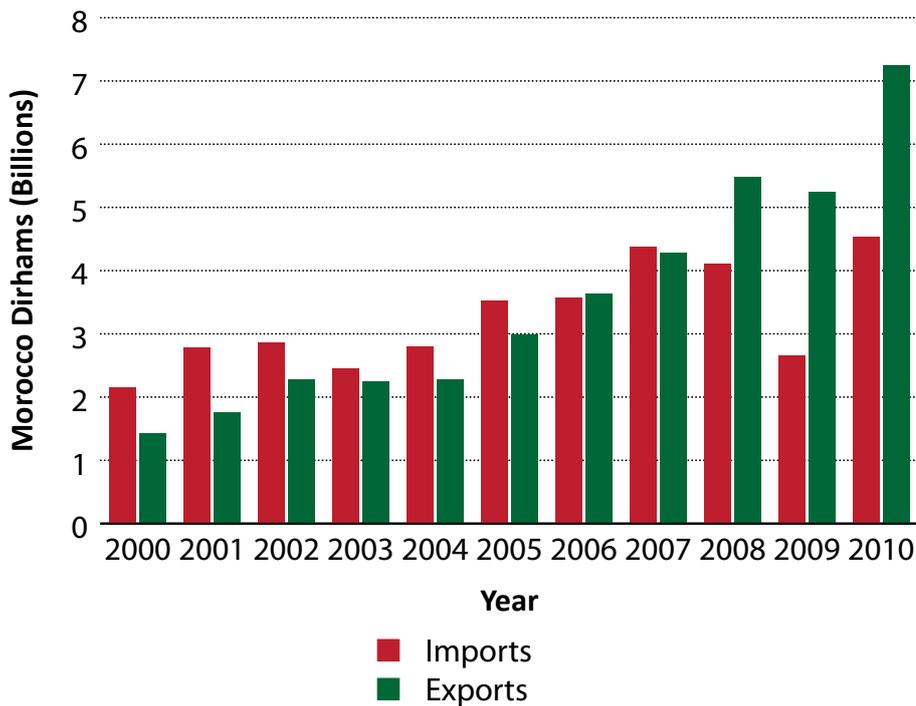
from these states. In the field of education, a grant programme for African students was launched; today over 7 000 grants to African students from 35 countries are awarded annually for study at Moroccan universities. He also made numerous official visits to African countries, which have resulted in the conclusion of 17 bilateral trade agreements.

In November 2010, the then Moroccan minister of foreign affairs and cooperation, Taib Fassi Fihri, proposed the creation of an Alliance for development in Africa as a framework to coordinate bilateral, regional and international initiatives related to the African continent. Morocco also launched in 2009 the ministerial conference of Atlantic African countries (African states on the Atlantic Ocean coast) and established a permanent secretariat in Morocco. The second ministerial conference, which took place in Morocco on 15 November 2010, adopted an action plan for cooperation and coordination in the fields of politics, security, economics and the environment.<sup>29</sup> In parallel, with support from the European Commission's Bureau of European Policy Advisors (BEPA), Morocco has organised an even more ambitious series of international forums, which met in 2009 and 2012 in Shkirat, outside Rabat, with the goal of creating a broader 'Atlantic Community' linking the African states on the ocean's littoral with their European and American counterparts.<sup>30</sup>

Of the 252 international accords Morocco signed in 2010, 96 were with African countries in the field of telecommunications, water management, electricity, fisheries, air-transport and banking. The majority of

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forums, such as the Franco–African summits and the first Euro–Africa summit in 2000. During the latter's proceedings, Morocco's King Muhammad VI (who succeeded his father King Hassan II in 1999) announced a debt forgiveness plan for Africa's least-developed countries, and the eradication of the custom duties to be levied on the products imported

**Figure 1: Imports and exports to sub-Saharan Africa**

these accords were related to projects involving private Moroccan businessmen though it includes some public bodies operating in African markets or investing directly in African companies.<sup>31</sup> In the 1990s, Moroccan trade with sub-Saharan Africa amounted to an average of \$300 million annually, barely 2 per cent of Morocco's foreign exchange. Between 1998 and 2008, however, the volume improved dramatically, averaging \$529 million annually and reaching \$1 billion in 2008. Nevertheless, it is still 'far below its potential', a Ministry of Finances report concluded in 2007. Between 1998 and 2008, for example, sales of agricultural products on the African market never exceeded 0.3 per cent of Morocco's agricultural exports and 0.05 per cent of Africa's total imports of the same. Likewise, less than 0.7 per cent of Moroccan textile exports go to African countries, an amount equivalent to barely 0.35 per cent of their textile imports, while just 2.5 per cent of Morocco's chemical products are exported to Africa, equivalent to 0.3 per cent of the total amount imported by the rest of the continent.<sup>32</sup>

Morocco's political re-engagement with Africa under King Mohammed VI is doubtless borne of numerous practical and strategic considerations.

The underlying message to Africa, however, is that Morocco is a country of serious political and economic clout, integral to the continent's development and prepared to play a leading role in its future – but perhaps not unconditionally. Morocco would not budge on its position on re-taking its seat at the AU: it would not re-join unless the membership of 'SADR' was frozen. After 1984, Morocco expended a huge amount of diplomatic and financial muscle on trying to get SADR out of the OAU. Although to no avail, for years the subject was deemed too sensitive to be discussed at the annual OAU summits. Moreover, since the organisation had acted decidedly in favour of the Western Sahara by admitting them as a full member, the OAU's potential role in acting as a neutral negotiator between Morocco and SADR to end the conflict was fatally undermined.

On 15 September 2004, just over two years since the AU was founded, Moroccan officials were left reeling after the 'shock' recognition of SADR by South Africa. Hitherto, Moroccan officials believed strongly that they had turned the tide of African opinion on the Western Sahara question and were winning the diplomatic argument. South Africa's 'principled position' on SADR – 'delayed' for 10 years

despite clear commitments made by Nelson Mandela as apartheid fell – was ‘based on its rejection of colonialism in all its forms and the support for achieving a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara.’<sup>33</sup> The principles which underpinned this stance included:

1. The centrality of the AU and UN in the resolution of the conflict; and
2. The sanctity of inherited colonial borders in Africa and the right of peoples of former colonial territories to self-determination and independence as contained in the Constitutive Act of the AU.

Morocco swiftly withdrew its ambassador to Pretoria and condemned South Africa’s ‘partial, stunning and ill-timed’ decision, noting in its official response ‘the pioneer support it has continuously provided to the legitimate struggle of the South African people for its dignity and freedom,’ referring to the ANC’s struggle against apartheid.<sup>34</sup> Yet formal recognition by such a significant African player – South Africa constitutes 25 per cent of the AU’s economy – only served to redouble Morocco’s effort to re-invigorate its African linkages and relationships.

Additional impetus was given by the impending secession of South Sudan, which achieved independent statehood and full international recognition in July 2011. Morocco feared that the South Sudan ‘precedent’ might soften key international opinion against SADR’s case for formal sovereignty over the Western Sahara territory. The emergence of Africa’s newest state, however, cut both ways. While supporters of the Polisario argued that it strengthened the case for the creation of an independent Western Sahara, the fact that it shattered the precedent that African states conform to colonial borders also undermined one of the principal pillars of claim for a separate Saharan entity based on the boundaries of the Spanish protectorate.

Eighteen months on from the independence of South Sudan, there is no evidence that its experience has made independence more likely for other would-be states in Africa, including Somaliland, which aside from its demonstrated commitment to democratic rule can also legitimately claim – at least more than any other sub-state entity – to fulfil the Montevideo criteria for statehood (a permanent population, a defined territory, government, and the capacity to defend and represent itself), as well as near universal popular support for independence.<sup>35</sup> South Sudan’s troubled beginnings – economic warfare with the North, the emergence of Kashmir-like scenarios on its northern border, renewed internecine conflicts inside the country – may have only cemented international opinion against any further ‘balkanisation’ of Africa.

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At the time of writing, Morocco is accorded a special status within the AU and benefits from some of the services and institutional arrangements available to all AU states, such as the African Development Bank. In recent years Morocco has worked with the AU Commission in various international partnerships between the AU and different regions and countries, and has even sent representatives for meetings held at the AU in Addis Ababa – this would have been unheard of in the mid 2000s. Outside the halls of the AU summit in Addis Ababa in July 2012, Morocco’s Foreign Minister Saad-Eddine El Othmani was engaged in intensive diplomatic activities. Some have taken it as a sign that Morocco may feel the tide of opinion at the AU is turning in its favour.<sup>36</sup>

## Irreconcilable Differences?

Morocco's renewed political and economic engagement, with Africa aside, the fundamental position on re-joining the AU remains more or less exactly the same: if SADR occupies a seat as a member state, Morocco will stay out of the AU. In 2007 Morocco unveiled a plan offering broad autonomy to the Western Sahara covering executive, legislative and judicial matters whilst Rabat would retain defence, foreign affairs and the currency, as well as the religious prerogatives of the king. Officially called the Moroccan Initiative for Negotiating an Autonomy Statute for the Sahara Region in 2007, it has received considerable international endorsement. Subsequent UN Security Council resolutions renewing MINURSO's mandate have described it as 'serious' and 'credible' and the French, Spanish and US governments expressing support for it.<sup>37</sup> In the words of then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, 'Morocco's autonomy plan is serious, realistic, and credible – a potential approach to satisfy the aspirations of the people in the Western Sahara to run their own affairs in peace and dignity'.<sup>38</sup>

'Morocco's autonomy plan is serious, realistic, and credible – a potential approach to satisfy the aspirations of the people in the Western Sahara to run their own affairs in peace and dignity'

For senior SADR officials, the autonomy plan was a non-starter; they remained singularly focused on achieving full statehood. Autonomy was only relevant insofar as it could be one of the options that the Sahrawi people could choose in the promised UN-organised referendum on the Western Sahara's future, so long as outright independence was also on the ballot. The African countries that support SADR, such as South Africa, generally concurred that this was a clear case of self-determination.

There is a lack of unanimity on this issue, both internationally and among member states of the AU,

however. As of 2012, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic has been recognized by 85 states, although 32 states have 'frozen' or 'withdrawn' recognition for a number of reasons. A total of 40 states currently maintain diplomatic relations with SADR, though Sahrawi embassies exist in only 18 states. Within Africa, 38 states have recognised SADR though more than a dozen have 'de-recognised' it. Kenya, for example, suspended its decision to recognize SADR in

Within Morocco, the struggle to preserve sovereignty over this disputed territory has been viewed as something of a sacred obligation

2006, apparently so it could act as a mediating party. But under the AU Charter, just like the UN Charter, there is no provision for de-recognition. In technical and legal terms, therefore, it is immaterial how many African countries derecognise SADR.<sup>39</sup> According to a senior AU official, the political position of the AU with regard to Morocco's membership boils down to the following: The Constitutive Act of the AU gives a window to Morocco to come back – but it must do so without any conditions. Effectively, then, this 'position' means 'acceptance of the Western Sahara as a separate country'.<sup>40</sup> Not only is this currently – and doubtless for the foreseeable future – unacceptable to Morocco but it is difficult to imagine any Moroccan government even considering it as an option.

Within Morocco, the struggle to preserve sovereignty over this disputed territory has been viewed as something of a sacred obligation, by the King of Morocco as much as ordinary citizens. For all King Mohammed VI's genuine popularity and importance to national identity – which has helped keep the Arab Spring largely at bay in Morocco – it is widely argued that the existence of the monarchy in its present form is dependent on the outcome in Western Sahara, since it has become its principal rallying cry. So sensitive is the issue within Morocco that criticism of its security forces' response to unrest in Sahrawi refugee camps in November 2010 prompted

hundreds of thousands to take to the streets of the country's largest city, Casablanca, in protest. (The criticism was levelled by an opposition political party in Spain.) Internationally, Morocco's main supporters fear that its 'loss' of the Western Sahara would severely weaken one of the main bulwarks for moderation and stability in the region.

In talks on the Western Sahara's future, the autonomy proposal remains the anchoring framework for Morocco and its international backers. The proposal is brief, with less than two dozen substantive clauses, and borrows heavily from experiences elsewhere, particularly European models.<sup>41</sup> There are a host of unanswered questions – the exact borders of the autonomous region, the division of resources, police and army presence, flag, even what the region would be called – but Morocco believes they needn't

Internationally, Morocco's main supporters fear that its 'loss' of the Western Sahara would severely weaken one of the main bulwarks for moderation and stability in the region

preclude the plan from serving, at a minimum, as an entry point for negotiations. Other commentators have raised questions about the efficacy of the plan given that the proposed autonomous entity would, in its legal and institutional make-up, be fully democratic while the 'parent state' would continue to function as a monarchy where the King effectively controls the key levers of the state. Whether a democratic, self-governing Western Sahara could be embedded within a less-free but infinitely more powerful Morocco is an open question.<sup>42</sup>

For SADR, its own position is complicated by the lack of intellectual and legal consensus on the concept of self-determination. International law provides few pointers in deciding on independence movements, in Africa as elsewhere, where the principles of 'self-determination' and 'territorial integrity' collide, with no clear track to reconcile the two. At the founding of the OAU in 1963, for instance, the former Portuguese protectorate of Cabinda was

ranked by the organisation as the 39th state still to be decolonised and Angola as the 35th. The enclave of Cabinda had a separate history and legal status as a Portuguese colony and was for much of its history (although not all) governed separately from Angola. In this and other respects it was similar to the Spanish Sahara. Yet since the Alvor Agreement granting Angola independence was signed in 1975, and Cabinda – which refused to sign the agreement – was forcibly subsumed into Angola proper as a province by MPLA<sup>43</sup> (and Cuban) troops, the OAU and its successor the AU have effectively accepted the Angolan *fait accompli* without so much as a murmur. That Cabindans saw its incorporation into Angola then (and now) as a clear violation of their right to self-determination has never garnered much interest beyond its borders.

The right to unilaterally establish a new state based on the principle of self-determination *outside* the colonial context is not recognised in international law. Morocco has steadfastly argued that SADR's claim falls 'outside', whereas its supporters assert that it is a clear case of decolonisation. Yet the wisdom of applying an understanding of self-determination framed exclusively by decolonisation and 'all-or-nothing' propositions is problematic, according to some legal experts.<sup>44</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, there has been much greater emphasis placed on the idea of self-determination as less an automatic right to statehood than a right to democratic governance. To complicate matters further, often there is no shared vision of what constitutes 'self-determination' between locals and their putative representatives who sit at the AU table or regional fora. Some African 'leaders' patently do not control the territories they purport to represent: not so much ungoverned spaces as spaces governed by the ungoverned.<sup>45</sup>

Any discussion of self-determination for SADR must also reflect on the role of Algeria, which still refuses to allow a census of the Sahrawi population in its camps. Morocco's supporters charge that Polisario is not only backed and funded by Algeria but in fact has no sovereign decision-making power; its leaders take direct orders from Algiers, which is less committed to the Sahrawi people than it is to 'whatever may unsettle Morocco'.<sup>46</sup> To be sure, Algeria has used the Western Sahara as a pawn in its fight for regional supremacy and a means to consolidate domestic



support in a country still struggling with the consequences of its brutal, murky civil war and the myriad sources of potential instability within its borders. But so, to a more limited extent, has Morocco. The legacy of mistrust between the two countries has kept their shared border closed since 1994 and fuelled a dangerous arms race. In May 2012, the Moroccans declared the UN Envoy, Christopher Ross, biased in favour of Algeria.

On the face of it, therefore, the positions are irreconcilable. On 11 to 13 March 2012, a ninth round of UN-backed informal talks on the Western Sahara was held in New York. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon's summary of the meeting conveyed more or less the same gloomy message as the previous rounds:

The parties discussed and disagreed sharply on the purpose of the negotiating process. Morocco argued that the process was meant to negotiate the details of its autonomy proposal in preparation for a referendum of confirmation. Frente Polisario countered that it was meant to open the door to all possibilities in preparation for a referendum with multiple options. Each side continued to reject the other's proposal as the basis for negotiation.<sup>47</sup>

Against these entrenched divisions, the past may not be a helpful guide for new ideas to break the stalemate. Where alternatives may emerge is in a consideration of Africa's evolving security and economic landscapes, particularly Morocco's changing role.

## Africa's new security landscape

From Africa's Mediterranean coast to the southern Sahel there are grave concerns that no country will be immune from the rising tide of insecurity. The main threats – terrorism, insurgency and transnational organised crime – are spilling over the region's porous borders. No one quite foresaw how the Arab Spring would exacerbate and complicate these challenges. Just how unpredictable the future trajectory of these threats could be was underlined by France's surprise intervention in Mali. That a number of extremists from the Boko Haram Islamist movement in Nigeria are reported to have aided rebels in the north of the country is testament to the potential spread of the crisis.<sup>48</sup> There is a potential upside in all this, however: an increasingly fragile and uncertain environment could set the stage for new forms of political and security cooperation.<sup>49</sup> For Morocco, it could also soften some of the intractable divisions – in particular with Algeria and the AU – over the Western Sahara.

Africa – and particularly the AU – must lead in defining its own changing security landscape and devise an effective, comprehensive and coherent approach. Piecemeal efforts by one country alone will achieve little. In North Africa and the Sahel, there is an urgent requirement to strengthen logistical coordination and intelligence cooperation among all affected countries and pool resources and materiel

for joint security operations. The success of any multi-lateral response would be undermined by Morocco's exclusion, given its political, military and economic clout, as well as its direct experience of terrorism. As recently as April 2011 Morocco itself fell victim to AQIM-linked terrorists, who attacked the country's number one tourist destination, Marrakech. By joining the AU, Morocco – which boasts military and intelligence services as advanced as any in the wider region – would also join the Joint Military Staff Committee of the Sahel Region (CEMOC), which

**Africa – and particularly the AU  
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has taken a leading role in coordinating anti-terrorist operations.<sup>50</sup> Benjamin Nickels argued recently that 'AU member states could also benefit from Morocco's relations and strong political and economic interests with the European Union, and its membership in the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue (which also includes Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania), to strengthen military cooperation with these major entities. This cooperation may include intelligence

support, and permission to land military forces in the Sahara, where terrorist groups and criminal gangs carry out their criminal activities.<sup>51</sup>

Given the limited resources and technical capabilities of most African states, foreign assistance will play an important part in tackling the interlocking security challenges affecting the Sahel region. Nevertheless, recent events have highlighted the need for regional powers with in-depth knowledge of a highly complex and fluid security terrain to lead the response. France's intervention in Mali to halt the

'The tendency in the west to look at Islamic extremism as a global threat and a global phenomenon, at the expense of local dynamics, has led to a string of policy failures.'

advance of Islamist militias on the capital, Bamako, has been met with broad approval in the region – but ultimately France's actions will be judged on its long-term effectiveness in promoting stability, which is far from certain.<sup>52</sup> For its part, the United States is beginning to question the effectiveness of its costly pan-Sahelian counter terrorism initiative, launched in 2002 to train the region's armed forces

in countering violent Islamists. In three of the four states which received US assistance – Mauritania, Niger and Mali – the army has seized power. In the fourth, Chad, the army came close in 2006.<sup>53</sup> 'The tendency in the west', argue some experts in the region, 'to look at Islamic extremism as a global threat and a global phenomenon, at the expense of local dynamics, has led to a string of policy failures'.<sup>54</sup>

Morocco's contribution to an African-led solution or approach to the crisis would be greatly enhanced by a rapprochement between the Kingdom and Algeria – which has a *de facto* veto over Morocco's involvement – something which both publics would enthusiastically welcome. Both administrations are under pressure to deliver wider political reform whilst avoiding Arab-Spring-type uprisings. That Morocco's new foreign minister made Algiers his first foreign trip in January 2012 may reflect their shared anxiety over the pace of reform as well as the rise of extremist parties within their midst,<sup>55</sup> but it might also hint at the possibility of normalisation in their relations. One should not underestimate the reservoir of mutual suspicion that still exists, however. Algeria's President Bouteflika was the country's foreign minister when the Polisario was established in the 1970s (Morocco's current King was just ten years old) and his regime comprises a cadre of war-hardened officials not easily given to compromise, not least with their bitter rival next door.<sup>56</sup>

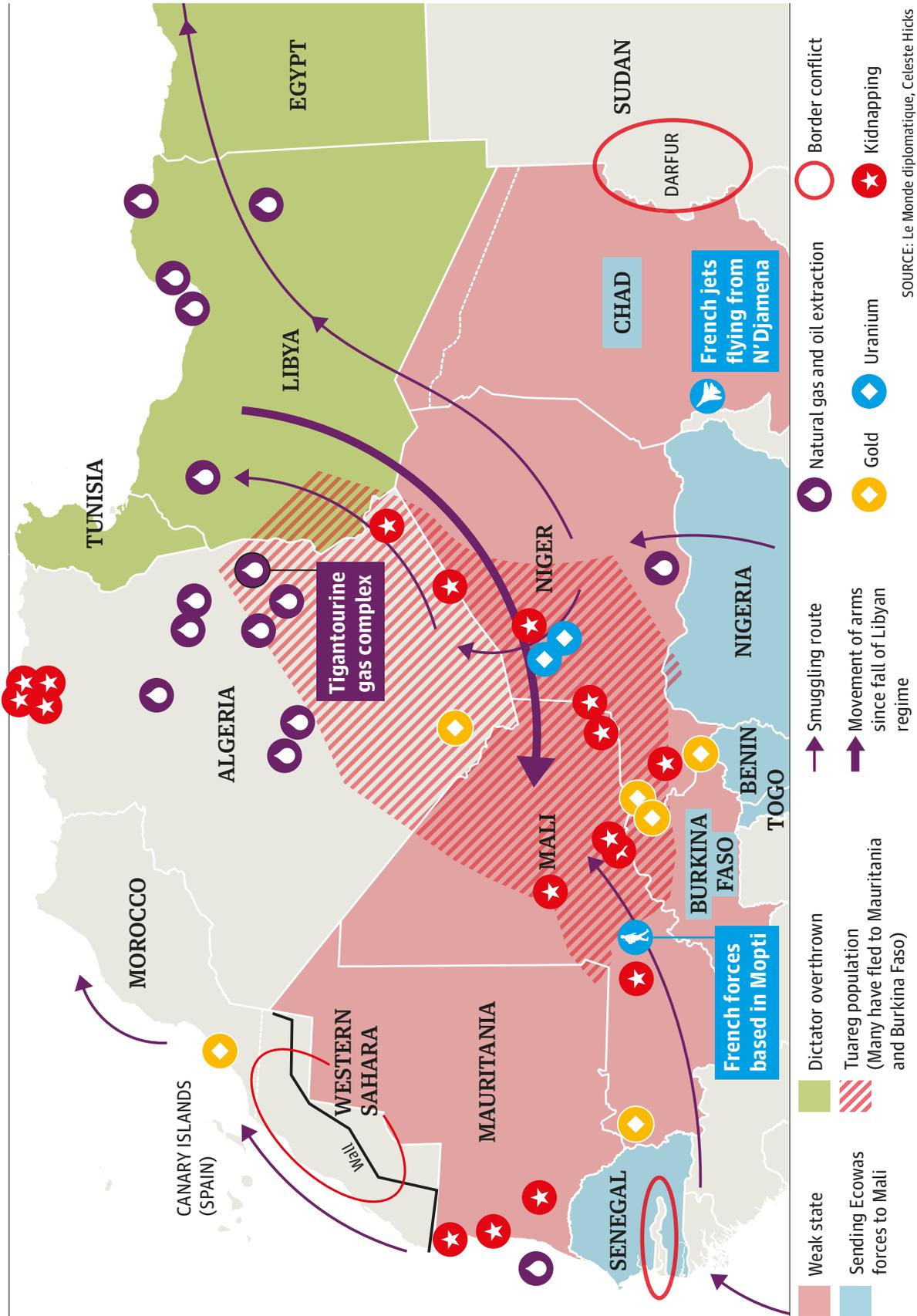
## Economic integration

Morocco's fight with Algeria over the Western Sahara impedes regional economic integration at least as much as security cooperation. This lack of integration has blocked potentially enormous opportunities for development in the areas of infrastructure, transport and energy, which could have a transformative impact on poverty, job creation and food security across a broad swathe of the continent.

Morocco is a member of the moribund Arab Maghreb Union (AMU). Arguably the worst performing regional economic community (REC) in Africa, the AMU comprises Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania and Libya. It was founded in 1989 on high hopes of future economic and even

political unity, rooted in their shared Arab/Berber culture and language, Muslim religion and experience of French colonialism. The AMU has not convened a meeting since 1994, however. Again, the principal (though not only) source of division has been the Western Sahara question. The consequences for intra-regional trade have been palpable: current estimates put it between 1.2 to 2 per cent, one of the lowest levels recorded for regional trade in the world.<sup>57</sup> If the AMU had instead realised its goal of a fully-fledged free trade area, it would nearly double the level of commercial relations within the Maghreb region, according to one recent study,<sup>58</sup> and significantly raise overall GDP.

Figure 3: North and west Africa: A region in turmoil



The Arab Spring, and perhaps especially the removal of the polarising figures of Gaddafi and Tunisian leader Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, appears to have breathed new life into the AMU, with Tunisia leading the effort to revive the union. The hope is that some long-delayed projects, particularly the Trans-Maghreb Highway, which could have a catalytic impact on development across the region, might finally be realised. Greater energy trade could also have a huge multiplier effect. The potential for complementarity between oil-rich Algeria, which exports almost nothing to other Maghreb countries, and Morocco, with its sophisticated banking, manufacturing and resources (mainly phosphates) sector, is vast.

Of course, potential is one thing, reality another. In the past all North African states have played their part in the region's pernicious balance of power game, often using the Western Sahara as a political football, despite all the fine-sounding words about Maghreb unity.<sup>59</sup> Attempts to influence Libya's Transitional National Council to fall behind Morocco's claim on the Western Sahara or recognise SADR is a case in point. Nevertheless, long-time observers of Maghreb politics believe the Arab Spring together with the emergence of a new generation of economic elites in Algeria, seemingly keen to forge a *détente* with Morocco, could rescue the AMU.

The potential for Morocco to serve as one of the continent's key hubs for integration and commerce is clear

Morocco is also at the forefront of African integration beyond the borders of the Maghreb. The Kingdom has sought to assume leadership of CEN-SAD – the Community of Sahara–Sahel States. The least known of Africa's RECS, CEN-SAD ballooned to 28 members under Gaddafi's largesse, covering a vast area of the continent. But it lacked a viable *raison d'être* and appeared doomed to oblivion after the death of the Libyan leader in 2011. CEN-SAD was given a lifeline when members lobbied Morocco to take command of the organisation, which includes major continental powers

Kenya and Nigeria. For the Kingdom it represents, according to Nickels, a unique opportunity to project its influence in a grouping that draws 'Africa's Arab and Muslim North into the continent's south.' This would allow Morocco to engage more fully in a region where it has deepening security concerns and wishes to broaden its economic links – and without worrying about an Algerian 'veto'. Algeria is the only Muslim country in Africa that has refused to join the organisation. In joining, Algeria believes it would be tantamount to recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara, which borders the Sahel (Algeria does not consider Morocco a Sahelian country).<sup>60</sup>

In less than a decade, Morocco went from an economic straggler to one of the top five recipients of foreign investment in Africa

The potential for Morocco to serve as one of the continent's key hubs for integration and commerce is clear. The inter-continental Tanger Med port and the expansion of Casablanca airport are only two of several existing projects which demonstrate what might be possible, if linked to other countries' investments in road and rail infrastructure. As a member of the AU, Morocco would also be well positioned to serve as a channel for internal aid to African infrastructure projects, with Moroccan firms serving as the implementation agents in sectors such as agriculture, health and water.<sup>61</sup>

Morocco's rapid development over the past 15 years puts it among very few African countries that can genuinely claim to be an economic model for the rest of the continent. The President of the Congo Republic and former AU Chairperson, Denis Sassou Nguessou, said as much in early 2012, in a speech advocating deeper economic ties in Africa: 'The Moroccan model should be taken into account for the free trade area project in Africa'. He reportedly added that Morocco should return to the AU though provided no recipe for its re-admission.

In less than a decade, Morocco went from an economic straggler to one of the top five recipients

of foreign investment in Africa. Once best known as a *louche* retreat for European travellers, Morocco is today home to some of the most ambitious manufacturing, infrastructure and tourism schemes in Africa.<sup>62</sup> Through a solid programme of macro-economic reforms and economic diversification Morocco has been able to raise gross national income

In some areas, Morocco still faces enormous socio-economic challenges, especially in education and literacy

per person five-fold from US\$550 in the 1970s to US\$2,850 in 2010. The average life expectancy increased from 55 years to 73 in 2009. Over the past ten years, poverty rates have declined by more than 40 per cent.<sup>63</sup> A few decades ago, less than 15 per cent of Moroccans had access to water; today only about 10 per cent do not. The former managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) described Morocco as a 'pillar of development in the region' and an example of progressive reform for Arab and African countries alike.<sup>64</sup>

In some areas, Morocco still faces enormous socio-economic challenges, especially in education and literacy.<sup>65</sup> And for all the progress on the processes of democratisation and the consolidation of the rule of law, the implementation of the reforms announced by the King in 2011 have been, at best, sluggish. Nevertheless, Morocco's political and economic progress in recent years led to its selection as the first country in the region to be granted 'advanced status' by the European Union, which makes it a pioneer in the European Neighbourhood Policy. The agreement constitutes a 'roadmap' which widens the sphere of EU–Morocco bilateral relations. Morocco is already the foremost beneficiary in the region of European funds allocated to Neighbourhood Policy countries (€654 million for 2007–2010).<sup>66</sup>

Morocco's main economic, financial and social relations are with Europe and as such it has cultivated a high degree of dependency on its northern neighbours. At the same time, Morocco does not have a seat at the European table. So as Europe reshapes itself, Morocco will effectively remain prisoner to

that situation, with little or no power to affect outcomes that bear heavily on its economic and political priorities. 'We have to follow what is happening in Europe and we have little control over how our relations evolve with the rest of the continent', according to former minister Abdalla Saaf. 'And in spite of the historical legacy of our past with Europe (mainly France and Spain), we are considered as a country that belongs to its margin. We are seen like Ukraine and Moldova for instance.'<sup>67</sup> His comments were made before the 2008 global financial crisis and the years of austerity which have ensued. Today, the current crisis in the euro zone has 'raised new questions about the future of the EU and the degree of European openness to societies on its periphery'.<sup>68</sup>

Beyond Europe, Morocco retains considerable influence in the Muslim world – as a founding member of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and a member of the League of Arab States. This is particularly true of the Gulf states, as more summits of the two bodies have taken place in Morocco than any other Arab or Muslim country (the frequent visits of Saudi Arabia's king and the United Arab Emirates' leader is a case in point).

Until the impasse over the Western Sahara question is broken Morocco's full contribution to Africa will never be realised

Returning to Africa, even without being a member of the AU, Morocco has in the last decade served as president of the Africa Group in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and president of the Group 77. Going forward, in theory there is nothing preventing Morocco from remaining outside the AU *ad infinitum* whilst retaining its current informal links both through various missions and in Addis Ababa. The scale of its ambition in Africa in the political and economic spheres is clear. How engaged Morocco will be in the future is by no means certain, however. Until the impasse over the Western Sahara question is broken Morocco's full contribution to Africa will never be realised. As for the AU, Morocco

remains keen to resume its membership but there may come a point when it decides to turn its back

on the AU permanently, a move that could have far-reaching consequences for the organisation.

## New Directions for Morocco and the AU?

This analysis of Morocco's troubled relationship with Africa in the context of the Western Sahara question has focused mainly on high politics and relations between leaders and governments. The views of ordinary Moroccans on the issues discussed above tell a different, perhaps even more revealing story.

Africa is not part of the worldview or consciousness of most Moroccans. Speak to any young professional or student in Morocco today and there can be no doubt that for the vast majority their compass still points in only two directions – north towards Europe and west towards North America. Notwithstanding the commercial links established in (especially West) Africa by top Moroccan businesses, African countries are places which have become 'other': rarely visited or experienced by Moroccans, and for the most part neglected. For decades 'Africa' has been what transits through their country in the form of migrants, seeking a better life in Europe via the continent's closest crossing point on Morocco's coast. Since Morocco's economy took off in the 2000s, 'Africa' has started to stay in the country in increasing numbers, as migrants from poorer sub-Saharan countries secure construction work and other manual jobs that Moroccans generally avoid.<sup>69</sup> Beyond this, Africa appears to hold little interest. Several years ago the respected Centre for Cross Cultural Learning in Morocco's capital, Rabat, attempted to develop a programme for learning English in Ghana, geared to Moroccan students as an alternative to more expensive destinations for language instruction such as the US and UK. The project never got off the ground because no students (or parents) expressed any interest whatsoever in learning English in an African country. 'We realised then', remarked the head of the Centre, the level of 'misconceptions concerning Africa, particularly English Speaking Africa which is little known in Morocco.'<sup>70</sup>

This blinkered perspective is not restricted to Africa. The comparative dearth of Moroccans working or even travelling in places like India or China speaks to the hegemony of Western culture among

the country's elite and youth, which is perhaps surprising in a country that boasts such a rich *melange* of Islamic, Berber, Maghrebi, Arab and Jewish traditions. The neglect of Africa is all the more pronounced for the fact that the continent *is home* to Morocco.

For years the issue of the Western Sahara was taboo in Morocco, something that was never spoken about in terms other than the official narrative – i.e., the Western Sahara is an ineluctable part of Morocco and always has been, end of story. More recently the taboo has lessened somewhat, with Moroccan media less constrained in its reporting of the on-going negotiations and even contentious issues such as the Sahawri refugee camps in Tindouf.

Moroccan intellectuals and civil society have a potentially vital role to play in devising ways to address the challenge of Sahawri self-determination

Nevertheless, many would argue that the state's firm monopoly of the Western Sahara question and the management of this issue is still intact. Moroccan intellectuals and civil society have a potentially vital role to play in devising ways to address the challenge of Sahawri self-determination, but thus far they have been largely absent from the debate.<sup>71</sup>

The situation might be very different had the crisis over the Western Sahara not culminated in Morocco's exit from the pan-African organisation it helped form. Fifty years on from the founding of the OAU, the return of Morocco to its successor would allow, as one official in Addis Ababa put it, 'Africa to stop being divided', and rid the organisation of its greatest source of friction and strain. 'We can only

speak of Africa when Morocco is included; and of the AU when it is excluded.’

At present, there could be no bitterer pill for Morocco to swallow than a resumption of its place at the African table while SADR still occupied a seat. For Rabat this would be tantamount to an acceptance of the AU position. This is not technically the case, according to a senior legal expert at the AU, however. Morocco could take up AU membership without *de facto* recognition of the SADR, not least

In taking up membership of the AU, Morocco would be joining a more effective continental organisation of far greater promise than its much maligned predecessor

since a large number of African countries do not recognise (or have derecognised) the entity diplomatically. And the AU Charter does not allow for the exclusion of states once they have become members: it has no power of de-recognition or expulsion (although there is nothing that prevents the revision of the Constitutive Act either by consensus or, ‘failing which, by a two-third majority’ of the AU Assembly to provide for such a possibility – an outcome that Morocco is likelier to achieve within the AU, rather than outside of it).<sup>72</sup>

The AU has been at pains to remind Morocco it left the OAU, an organisation which no longer exists. In taking up membership of the AU, Morocco would be joining a more effective continental organisation of far greater promise than its much maligned predecessor. If Morocco becomes a member of the AU, it will be ‘speaking as part of Africa on African issues – you are part of the software and hardware of Africa – and you can access African markets which are moving to integration.’

Conversely, should the UN-sponsored talks on the Western Sahara finally result in a political settlement, it will be deeply embarrassing for the AU to have a member state that exists in name only. Over time, the AU’s partial position towards the Western Sahara conflict will almost certainly erode

its credibility as a continental body. One could go further still and assert that the fundamental principles and objectives of the AU – uphold African unity and deepen continental integration – are threatened by Morocco’s continuing absence. The current security crisis in the region, together with other emergent dynamics which should promote much greater cooperation and integration, have created a significant opportunity to bring Morocco back into the African family, though it may prove short-lived.

The dispute over the Western Sahara was once inextricably linked to the Cold War; riven by ideological differences and evincing many of the attributes of a classic East–West proxy war. Today the conflict is deeply enmeshed in the politics of the Maghreb and the wider region, in particular the struggle for dominance between Algeria and Morocco. This is not to say that self-determination and sovereignty are not central to understanding the dispute and any viable resolution, but rather that future developments on the Western Sahara will be measured more by political decisions made in Rabat and Algiers than these core principles. A staunch supporter of Western Sahara’s right to statehood, Olusegun Obasanjo, has nevertheless also acknowledged that no movement on this issue is possible without a renewed diplomatic dialogue between the two rivals. In the former

The current security crisis in the region, together with other emergent dynamics, have created a significant opportunity to bring Morocco back into the African family, though it may prove short-lived

Nigerian President’s view, the AU’s task, however, is to firstly ‘persuade Morocco that common defence and security will be greatly enhanced’ by its willingness to let Sahrawis decide their fate for themselves.<sup>73</sup>

Critical to any resolution of the crisis is to stop the negotiations from being held hostage to some of the ‘unworkable and unattractive alternatives’ currently on the table. For more than two decades there

has been, for instance, no progress on the timing and terms of a popular referendum. Moreover, there are a number of mechanisms and concepts in the conflict resolution ‘toolkit’ – such as associate statehood, shared sovereignty, free association and so on – that have not yet been adequately considered by either camp.<sup>74</sup> The 2007 autonomy proposal currently put forward by Morocco as the sole basis of its approach to negotiations has not proved acceptable to SADR, though arguably too little has been done to rethink some of its core arrangements.

Decentralisation would provide a vehicle to satisfy the cultural, political and economic aspirations of hitherto voiceless communities and tribes

Considerable attention has turned to the road-map for regionalisation announced by the King in November 2008 and emboldened two years later with the creation of the Advisory Committee on Regionalisation (CCR).<sup>75</sup> The stated objective of the CCR is to insert autonomy for Western Sahara into a larger framework of regionalism in Morocco, broadly based on the Spanish model. In theory, this would give far greater scope for Morocco’s long-neglected regions to run their own affairs and eventually result in the establishment of local governments. Decentralisation would provide a vehicle to satisfy the cultural, political and economic aspirations of hitherto voiceless communities and tribes, which could become a template for the wider region.

To be sure, the Western Sahara question cannot be tackled in isolation from dynamics which affect all countries in the region: ‘by resolving Western Sahara, you don’t really resolve the wider problem; the region is infinitely more complex than that’.<sup>76</sup> The Sahara Desert represents an area bigger than the United States, yet it does not make up a state but part of one. Any political settlement on the Western Sahara is likely to have ramifications for other countries in the region – such as Mauritania, Algeria and Libya – which have within their borders the potential for other Saharan states.<sup>77</sup> It is worth recalling that the forefathers of the Polisario, after

all, wanted to liberate the entire Sahara region not just the present-day territory of the Western Sahara. When weighing up the viability of any strategy, for the Western Sahara as much as other existing or simmering conflicts, the region’s history speaks to the acute importance of identity. The region comprises some of the poorest populations in the world but also some of the strongest identities, most of which are not confined to one state. In attempting to forge a common will of living together, the colonial legacy does not necessarily point to the most effective means to promote stability, prosperity and safeguard peoples’ identities.<sup>78</sup>

Thinking in ‘regionalisation’ terms may be sensible in theory for all states in the region, but diplomatically for Morocco a heavy emphasis on regionalisation may have the opposite effect insofar as negotiations over the Western Sahara. The symbolism of the date of the King’s announcement of the regionalism proposal in 2008 – the 33rd anniversary of the Green March, when hundreds of thousands of Moroccans crossed into the Western Sahara to assert its sovereignty over the territory – was not lost on anyone. However sincere the proposal, in diplomatic terms it is likely to widen the gap because it negates any claims of distinctiveness on the part of SADR; in effect the Western Sahara becomes one of several equally distinct claims within one Moroccan nation.

The region comprises some of the poorest populations in the world but also some of the strongest identities, most of which are not confined to one state

At present Morocco is a highly centralised state, which is one of the reasons many analysts have argued that the autonomy proposal would prove unworkable. At the same time, the instincts of Morocco’s relatively young King are reformist. Morocco is not a democracy but its process of democratisation is more advanced than any country in the region. The Western Sahara will be an important litmus test. Progressive minds are under no illusions about the

strength of the nationalist sentiment in Western Sahara. For all Morocco's investment in the territory and concerted efforts to bring a Sahrawi elite into the establishment<sup>79</sup>, there is no avoiding the continuing perception on the ground of an occupation, complete with endless checkpoints, mistreatment by security forces and the like.<sup>80</sup> That does not make independence any more of a panacea, but it does illustrate that Morocco has much work to do to counter the almost irresistible lure of self-determination.

Further internal reform would reinforce the seriousness of the autonomy proposal and help address the problematic question of hybridity (democracy inside monarchical-based rule). One of the leading Moroccan analysts of the plan, Abdelhamid El Ouali, suggests that it confirms 'the irreversibility of the process of democratisation which the country is experiencing, as autonomy has its own requisites, the most significant being the effective implementation of democracy on both national and local scale. Territorial autonomy is so associated and interwoven with democracy that the former is unimaginable without the latter.'<sup>81</sup> Although Morocco's fiercest critics regard the proposal as nothing more than a ruse to avoid a referendum, within the Kingdom there is a deep conviction in the 'autonomy' concept as the most promising and viable means to address the Western Sahara question.<sup>82</sup> Over the past 30 years, Rabat's diplomacy has been underpinned by the belief that the liberation struggle will turn out to be a 'blip in the *longue durée*', an idea that will eventually burn itself out, just as many self-determination movements have, over time, been compelled to scale back their once-steadfast ambitions for statehood.<sup>83</sup> The autonomy plan suggests that Rabat is genuinely committed to altering the status quo, but the proof may well rest in its acceptance of some previously unthinkable compromises.

A number of constructive ideas have been put forward by legal experts and political analysts that might, conceivably, soften opposition to the autonomy plan amongst SADR officials and their supporters. Some specific proposals, such as the removal (in a final agreement) of language expressly forbidding secession, would doubtless meet with fierce resistance in Morocco. Yet the act of recognising a 'moral right to secede' could, in itself, give a measure of dignity to the Sahwari people that helps to build confidence in

the negotiating process, even where there is unlikely to ever be consensus on the precise conditions under which both sides would allow for the 'right' to be exercised. Moreover, international experience has shown that autonomous arrangements are never likely to be perceived as concrete, fixed for all time, because the minority in multi-national states will always reserve the right to challenge them if they believe their core interests are at stake. The 'permanent' solution to secessionism is, in fact, a chimera.<sup>84</sup> The recent push for a vote on independence in the Catalan region of Spain – the model for Morocco's regionalisation strategy – emphasises the point. In reality, perhaps the best governments seeking to manage deep political and cultural cleavages within their midst can hope for is a *modus vivendi*, a second best solution.

Morocco's process of democratisation  
and declared commitment to  
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agreement on the Western Sahara

The good news is that evidence from around the world suggests that Morocco's process of democratisation and declared commitment to human rights, if realised, bodes well for a peaceful and viable agreement on the Western Sahara.<sup>85</sup> The new constitution adopted in July 2011 outlines a more democratic future for Morocco, as well as a new emphasis on sub-Saharan Africa. The Sahel is explicitly highlighted, and it follows only the Maghreb and the *umma* (and precedes the Mediterranean world) in the document's listing of Morocco's regional priorities.

The bad news is that Moroccan–African relations may have hit a high-water mark; in the absence of real progress on Morocco's re-integration into the AU, we may not witness any further deepening of African–Moroccan relations but rather some significant reversals, especially in the political sphere. The AU is seeking to strengthen its internal cohesion in the face of serious and potentially divisive continental challenges. Some of the most troubling threats were laid

bare at the AU Summit in 2012, which was dominated by political and security crises – instability and the rise of ‘Jihadism’ in parts of West Africa and the Sahel, renewed violence in the DRC and the ongoing crisis between Sudan and South Sudan. And this was before France intervened in Mali.

The AU has buried its head in the Saharan sands for far too long. If it is to engage meaningfully on this issue, it must engage Morocco, SADR and, perhaps most consequentially, Algeria with new ideas and realistic avenues to break the impasse. It may suit AU leaders personally to avoid the highly contentious argument that there ought to be a different classification for a member if their final international status is still pending, but such evasion could eventually have serious consequences for the organisation, especially if more countries de-recognise the Western Sahara.

A Moroccan reversal would have some echoes in the current situation with Turkey and the European Union. For decades Turkey craved EU membership but was kept outside the Union for various political and cultural reasons. Today, many would argue that

newly-confident and economically powerful Turkey needs Europe, whose reputation has taken a beating due to political infighting and financial crises, a lot less than Europe needs Turkey – though it remains to be seen how strong the pull of membership still is in Ankara. ‘The clock is winding down’, according to one expert, ‘you could push Morocco so far away that it never comes back.’<sup>86</sup>

The political instability and insecurity sweeping across a growing expanse of Africa highlight the importance of not just regional efforts but indeed a trans-regional strategy to counter the proliferation of armed groups and tackle the key, inter-locking drivers of conflict. Morocco has a vital role to play, but its contribution will be circumscribed so long as the Western Sahara issue infects relations within the key body which should be leading the fight – the AU.

*This analysis was complemented by several interviews conducted between 2010 and 2012 with officials in Morocco, Addis Ababa (African Union) and South Africa, many of whom spoke on condition of anonymity.*

## Endnotes

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- 2 When the Gaddafi regime in Libya collapsed in October 2011 due to an Arab Spring uprising, up to 5 000 Touareg from Mali, who had been recruited into Libya’s armed forces and were fighting on behalf of the dictator, returned to Mali. ‘Resentful and well-armed’, the Touaregs’ successful operations against Mali’s military led to the ongoing political and security crises affecting the country. See, for instance, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/george-joff%C3%A9/chaos-in-sahel>.
- 3 Interview with Professor Mohammed Benhammou, Moroccan Centre for Strategic Studies, Rabat, 29 November 2012.
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- 5 J Peter Pham, ‘The Dangerous “Pragmatism” of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb’, *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* (Vol. 2, No. 1, January–June 2011), pp. 15–29.
- 6 François Soudan, ‘Mali: Polisario Connection’, *Jeune Afrique*, 8 November 2012, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2703p010-013.xml0/>.
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- 8 See, for instance, Jacob Mundy and Stephen Zunes, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism and Conflict Irresolution* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse Studies on Peace and Conflict, Resolution, 2010); Yahia H. Zoubir and Daniel Volman (eds.), *The International Dimension of the Western Sahara Conflict* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993); Ali Bahaijoub, *Western Sahara Conflict: Historical, Regional and International Dimensions* (London: North–South Books, 2010); Toby Shelley, *Endgame in the Western Sahara*:

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- 9 From the Spanish abbreviation of *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro* ('Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro').
- 10 Mauritania withdrew from the fight in 1979 and recognised SADR's sovereignty, although Moroccan forces quickly moved into the areas it vacated.
- 11 The Settlement Plan is in UN Security Council document S/22464, 19 April 1991. See also Resolution 690, 1991.
- 12 UN Security Council Resolution 658, 1990.
- 13 MINURSO: The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara.
- 14 Throughout the 1990s Moroccan actions, in particular, served to bog the voter identification process down through a series of appeals based on a much wider interpretation of 'eligibility' than SADR's, as described pointedly by Jeremy Harding, 'Behind the Sandwall', *London Review of Books* (Vol. 28, No. 4, 2006).
- 15 Spector, *Op cit.*, p. 128.
- 16 At the instigation of Morocco's King Hassan, an Implementation Committee, mandated by the OAU assembly to work out the modalities of a cease-fire and referendum, was established in 1981. It held its second ordinary session in Nairobi, on 8–9 February 1982, which was preceded by a meeting of the Foreign Ministers which drew up details of the referendum and the cease-fire. OAU Doc.AHG/IMP.C/WS/Dec.2, (II), Rev.2., 8–9 February 1982.
- 17 *Jeune Afrique*, Paris, No 1106, 17 March 1982, pp. 20–23; *Le Monde*, 25 February 1982, p. 1; the walk out was made by Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Comoros, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, The Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mauritius, Morocco, Niger, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, Upper Volta and Zaire.
- 18 The other surviving member is Mali's former president Moussa Traoré. Aside from then Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo and Traoré, the *ad hoc* committee comprised the heads of state of Guinea, Ivory Coast, Tanzania and Sudan.
- 19 Interview published in *Jeune Afrique*, 1997. See also <http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/000720/2000072037.html>.
- 20 Interview with Olusegun Obasanjo, 12 February 2013.
- 21 Morocco also has a free trade agreement with the United States, in effect since 2006. Bilateral trade in goods between the two countries is valued in excess of \$2 billion per year.
- 22 See <http://www.cfr.org/africa/african-union/p11616>.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 See [http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/a/african\\_union/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/a/african_union/index.html). Also see Greg Mills, 'Amisom – An African Success Story?', *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), 14 October 2012.
- 25 Correspondence with senior AU official, 7 December 2010.
- 26 See <http://allafrica.com/stories/201101240002.html>.
- 27 Correspondence with senior AU official, 7 December 2010.
- 28 See Faycal Lescarret-Benhassain, *African Business* (No. 303, November 2004).
- 29 Communication with Ali Bahaijoub, 6 June 2011.
- 30 See <http://www.itca.hcp.ma/>.
- 31 Statement to parliament in Rabat on 4 November 2011 by Morocco's minister of foreign affairs and cooperation, Taib Fassi Fihri.
- 32 Kingdom of Morocco: Ministry of Finance and Economy (*Royaume du Maroc: Ministère de l'Economie et des Finances*), Study and Financial Planning Department (*Direction des Etudes et des Prévisions Financières*), *Point sur les relations du Maroc avec les pays de l'Afrique Subsaharienne*, Mai 2010, 7 (brief on Morocco's relations with sub-Saharan states).
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- parliamentary-question-dirco-saharawi-sudan-ivory-coast-asean-etc&catid=53:People&Itemid=117.
- 34 See <http://www.afrol.com/articles/13961>.
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- 37 French Brigadier General Jean Maurin reiterated France's support for the autonomy plan in his address to the Marrakech Security Forum, the largest annual security forum held in Africa, 25 January 2013.
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- 40 *Ibid.* It is unclear how 'official' – or, more importantly, how prescriptive – this position is. A 2005 AU Commission report by then Deputy Chair Patrick Mazimhaka effectively concluded that the independence of Somaliland would not necessarily be problematic for the AU. 'Objectively viewed,' the 2005 report states, 'the case should not be linked to the notion of "opening a Pandora's box"'. Yet the status of Somaliland has not changed despite this 'position'.
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- 68 Lesser et al., *Op cit.*, p. 15.
- 69 See <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/10/03/121091.html>.
- 70 Interview with Abdelhayy Moudden, 30 November 2012, Rabat.
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