

MOROCCO JOINS THE AU: MOTIVES AND MEANINGS

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ABSTRACT

Morocco left the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1984 when the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR, also known as Western Sahara), which the Moroccan monarchy considered to be part of its territory, was granted membership of the organisation. This move was tantamount to recognition of the SADR's sovereignty, independence and right to separate statehood. Thirty-four years later, the SADR is still a member of the OAU's new incarnation, the AU. After successfully campaigning to re-join the AU, Morocco was voted back in with an overwhelming majority on 30 January 2017. This raises the question: why did Morocco seek to re-join the AU, and what are the implications for the SADR's bid for recognition as an independent state? This paper shows that Morocco re-joined the AU as part of a longer-term strategy to cement its leadership prospects in Africa and secure its control over Western Sahara. The move also raises important challenges for the AU in dealing with the national objectives of dominant and powerful member states.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

| | |
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| ANC | African National Congress |
| AU | African Union |
| COP22 | Twenty-Second Congress of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change |
| DMZ | demilitarised zone |
| ECOWAS | Economic Community of West African States |
| EU | European Union |
| OAU | Organization of African Unity |
| Polisario | Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro |
| SADR | Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic |
| UAE | United Arab Emirates |
| UN | United Nations |
| US | United States |

UNITY, IN THEORY

On 25 May 1963 the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was formed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The organisation's original 32 signatory member states eventually grew to 53, including almost every African state in its membership. However, the 1982 admission of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) to the OAU led to Morocco's withdrawal in 1984 – a stance it maintained until the organisation's closure.¹ Morocco views Western Sahara as part of its historical territory and controls most of the land. While the SADR claims that the area's inhabitants believe they inhabit an independent state, it is difficult to gauge true public opinion owing to a lack of accurate census data, particularly for those Sahrawi people residing in Algerian territory.

In landmark decisions in 1972 and 1975 respectively, both the UN and the International Court of Justice recognised the territory of Western Sahara as one in need of decolonisation, subject to the outcome of a UN-mandated referendum to generate much-needed census data on the region and ascertain the sentiments of the Sahrawi people.² However, the same court also noted that Morocco could have a claim to the area with respect to pre-colonial boundaries.³

According to a plan set forward by the UN secretary general in 1990, a transitional period was to take place during which his special representative would be solely responsible for organising a referendum, but Morocco and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro (Polisario)⁴ hold fast to their diverging viewpoints on the contents of this plan.⁵ Therefore, the transitional period never began and the referendum has yet to take place.⁶

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- 1 Pazzanita AG, 'Morocco versus Polisario: A political interpretation', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32, 2, 1994, pp. 265–78.
 - 2 International Court of Justice, 'Western Sahara: Advisory Opinion of 16 October 1975', <http://www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/61/6197.pdf>, accessed 2 June 2017; UN, 'Resolution 2983 (XXVII): Question of Spanish Sahara', http://www.un.org/en/decolonization/pdf/decolonization/decon_num_17-4.pdf, accessed 2 June 2017.
 - 3 Gretton J, 'The Western Sahara in the international arena', *The World Today*, 36, 9, 1980, p. 344.
 - 4 The Polisario is a political and military organisation working towards ending Morocco's control over what used to be the Spanish Sahara. The UN recognises it as the legitimate representatives of the Sahrawi people. For more information see Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Polisario Front', <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Polisario-Front>, accessed 23 May 2017.
 - 5 The views of the two parties are accurately summed up by the state-aligned publication *Morocco World News*. A referendum has essentially been hampered by contrasting views on who should be eligible to vote, which comes down to who should be considered Sahrawi. Polisario adopts a much more exclusive definition, while Morocco's view is that anybody with blood or family ties to the region, irrespective of whether they reside there or not, should be granted a vote. For more, see Bennis S, 'Western Sahara: Why the referendum has been impossible since day 1', *Morocco World News*, 15 April 2016, <https://www.morocco worldnews.com/2016/04/184361/western-sahara-why-the-referendum-was-impossible-since-day-one/>, accessed 4 April 2018.
 - 6 MINURSO, 'Background', <https://minurso.unmissions.org/background>, accessed 31 August 2017.

Accepting the SADR as a member of the OAU in 1982 was tantamount to recognition of its statehood – an unacceptable outcome for Morocco, on which it chose to act two years later.⁷ After the admission of countries such as Eritrea, Namibia and South Africa to the OAU in the early 1990s, Morocco, a founding member, was conspicuous by its absence. In fact, Morocco had been a member of the Casablanca bloc in the 1960s, a group of countries calling for the immediate implementation of ‘African unity’.⁸ Today, 34 years later, the OAU has been reimagined as the AU and, after a three-decade absence, Morocco has been voted back in by an overwhelming majority.

The OAU and AU long viewed the status of the SADR as one in need of urgent addressing

The decision to re-admit Morocco to the AU (or, as some would posit, admit it, as it was technically never a member to begin with) seemingly surprised some of the organisation’s leading members opposed to the move, including South Africa and Algeria.⁹ According to Abdallah Saaf, Senior Fellow at Moroccan think tank OCP Policy Center, this may be interpreted as part of the general wave of surprise elicited by Morocco’s initial announcement of its intent to re-join the AU.¹⁰ The OAU and AU long viewed the status of the SADR as one in need of urgent addressing, and had called on the UN Security Council to take a decision thereon for close to three decades – efforts often hampered

7 Pazzanita AG, *op. cit.*

8 Darkoh MBK, ‘The contemporary political map and African unity’, *Transafrican Journal of History*, 11, 1982, pp. 26–64.

9 Neither of these countries’ decisions is surprising. Algerian–Moroccan relations took a downturn in 1994 when the former closed its border with Morocco after the kingdom began imposing visas on Algerian tourists in the wake of a terror attack on Moroccan soil in which Algerians were suspected to have had a hand. South Africa and Morocco have also had tense relations since 2004, when then president Thabo Mbeki wrote to King Mohammed VI explaining that the country could no longer avoid recognising the SADR as a state, prompting Morocco to downgrade its relations with South Africa. ANC, ‘Statement by the African National Congress on the readmission of the Kingdom of Morocco to the African Union (AU)’, 31 January 2017, <http://www.anc.org.za/content/statement-african-national-congress-readmission-kingdom-morocco-african-union-au>, accessed 23 May 2017; Afro-Middle East Centre, ‘Upgrading Morocco–SA ties: Good for both, but no difference for Saharawi’, 9 June 2016, <http://www.amec.org.za/morocco/item/1481-moroccan-south-african-ties-and-the-struggle-for-saharawi-independence.html>, accessed 19 February 2018; ARSO (Association de soutien à un referendum libre et régulier au Sahara Occidental), ‘South Africa recognises the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic’, 1 August 2004, <http://arso.org/MBK.htm>, accessed 19 February 2018; *The Economist*, ‘Open that border’, 27 May 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/16219845>, accessed 19 February 2018.

10 Saaf A, ‘Morocco’s Great Return to the African Union’, OCP Policy Center Policy Brief, 27 February 2017, http://www.ocppc.ma/publications/morocco%E2%80%99s-great-return-african-union#.WfH34VtL_IU, accessed 26 October 2017; Wainscott AM, ‘Morocco’s AU Bid Builds on Years of Strategic Diplomacy’, IPI Global Observatory, 27 July 2016, <https://the-globalobservatory.org/2016/07/morocco-african-union-western-sahara-mohammed-vi/>, accessed 6 November 2017.

by Morocco.¹¹ In turn the UN called on both organisations to address the issue at the continental level, leading to much shifting of responsibility over the years.¹²

Given that the reason for Morocco's initial withdrawal from the OAU – the continued membership of Western Sahara – is still in play at the AU, it is perhaps odd that Morocco chose to join the organisation.¹³ Yet Morocco's return could be seen as a logical step a long time in the making and part of a calculated strategy by its king and government, whose foreign policy has unwaveringly focused on resolving the Western Sahara question.¹⁴

South Africa, a powerful member of the AU – and long-time supporter of the Sahrawis' right to self-determination – worked with Algeria to prevent Morocco's readmission, according to Hichem Ben Yaiche, editor of *New African and African Business*.¹⁵ The South African perspective on the readmission of Morocco to the AU is apparent in a statement issued by South Africa's ruling party, the ANC, which called the decision 'regrettable'. The ANC further noted its concern that the change in AU membership could derail the important matter of resolving the tension between the SADR and Morocco.¹⁶ Western Sahara, meanwhile, has made mixed statements, welcoming Morocco in one breath and criticising its readmission in another.¹⁷

To better understand the issues, some key questions need to be addressed: Why did Morocco seek to return to the AU? How did it manage to garner support for its readmission? And how will its longstanding interest in securing Western Sahara as part of its national territory play out in the AU arena?

Although it claims to remain steadfast in its support for African unity, Morocco is beginning to force the Western Sahara issue onto the table in a potentially divisive manner (as will be expanded upon in following sections). In the meantime, the fate of Western Sahara hangs in the balance. The Sahrawi people are at the centre of discussions on peace and security at the UN and AU, and have been for almost 50 years. Naturally, with Morocco's departure from the OAU, a key negotiating partner left the table, allowing

Although it claims to remain steadfast in its support for African unity, Morocco is beginning to force the Western Sahara issue onto the table in a potentially divisive manner

11 Seddon D, 'Western Sahara tug-of-war', *Review of African Political Economy*, 52, 1991, p. 113; Zunes S, 'Algeria, the Maghreb Union, and the Western Sahara stalemate', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 17, 3, 1995, p. 23.

12 Gretton J, *op. cit.*

13 Pazzanita AG, *op. cit.*

14 Saaf A, *op. cit.*; *Fernandez-Molina I, Moroccan Foreign Policy under Mohammed VI, 1999–2014*. New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 1991.

15 Louw-Vaudran L, 'ISS Today: Morocco's King Mohammed VI woos African leaders at COP22', *The Daily Maverick*, 24 November 2016, https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-11-24-iss-today-moroccos-king-mohammed-vi-woos-african-leaders-at-cop22/#.WafbwT6g_IU, accessed 31 August 2017.

16 ANC, *op. cit.*

17 BBC, 'Western Sahara welcomes Morocco's African Union membership', 31 January 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-38808811>, accessed 23 May 2017; Bachir RS, Speech presented at seminar on Morocco's Re-admission into the African Union and the Western Sahara Question, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, 6 April 2017.

tensions to rise over three decades. As the kingdom resumes its seat at the table, the time is ripe to consider the implications of this shift in participation, and whether it will change the status quo or preserve it more powerfully than before.

MOROCCO: CHAMPION OF AFRICAN UNITY

Although Morocco was not a member of the AU at its inception in 2002, it was a strong proponent of the formation of its predecessor, the OAU. ‘Unite we must,’ said Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah at the launch of the OAU.¹⁸ Morocco was one of the first countries to support Nkrumah’s brand of pan-Africanism, which advocated African unity, and along with other members of the Casablanca bloc called for its immediate implementation. On paper the country did not stray from this commitment to unity, and when the OAU charter was signed in Ethiopia in 1963 Morocco was among the 32 original signatories.¹⁹

In practice, however, Morocco’s relationship with the OAU and its fellow members was complicated by a divergence between its rhetoric and actions. While most of the OAU’s members agreed to respect their countries’ colonial-era borders after independence, Morocco and Somalia failed to do so.²⁰ The Algerian–Moroccan border conflict of 1963 was the first occasion when the clash between the country’s national ambitions and proclaimed loyalty to the continent was made clear. While confirming the OAU’s support for each member state’s sovereignty and territorial integrity at the time of signing its founding charter, Morocco’s national politics were seized with the matter of defining its borders, which were only partially defined in some places, including with neighbouring Algeria. After gaining independence in 1956, Morocco announced its claim to territory in the Sahara Desert that was located in then French Algeria. When Algeria gained independence in 1963, Morocco wasted little time acting on this claim and invaded the area in question, with Algeria retaliating by occupying areas around Figuig in Morocco.²¹ Morocco tried to occupy Tindouf in Algeria, where the local population reportedly identified as Moroccan rather than Algerian. Morocco’s troops retreated soon after finding the Algerian army firmly in control of the area, with notable assistance from Egypt and Cuba. Although the OAU quickly defused the conflict, this was only a taste of what was to come.²²

18 *New African Magazine*, ‘Kwame Nkrumah – “The people of Africa are crying for unity”’, 26 July 2012, <http://newafricanmagazine.com/kwame-nkrumah-the-people-of-africa-are-crying-for-unity/#sthash.Z70RMflz.dpuf>, accessed 2 June 2017.

19 Wild PM, ‘The Organization of African Unity and the Algerian–Moroccan border conflict: A study of new machinery for peacekeeping and for the peaceful settlement of disputes among African states’, *International Organization*, 20, 1, 1966; Makinda SF, Okumu FW & D Mickler, *The African Union: Addressing the Challenges of Peace, Security, and Governance*. London: Routledge, 2015.

20 Darkoh MBK, *op. cit.*

21 Mundy J, ‘Algeria and the Western Sahara dispute’, *The Maghreb Center Journal*, 1, 2010.

22 An added point of tension here was the context of the Cold War. Morocco’s ties to the West meant that it was distrusted by the members of the Non-Aligned Movement, including a great many African states. Algeria was allied with anti-Moroccan nationalist movements and

In 1975 Morocco made another attempt to redraw its post-independence borders. Its then foreign minister informed the UN General Assembly that the nation's borders compromised its territorial integrity by ignoring its historical claims to many territories then considered to be its 'neighbours'.²³ Thus Morocco's National Liberation Army advanced on the resource-rich Western Sahara, which Morocco has historically viewed as an integral part of its own territory.²⁴ At the time the area was a Spanish colony. Morocco had already made similar advances on it in 1957, which were easily rebuffed by the Spaniards with the assistance of the French, collaborating in Operation Ecouvillon.²⁵

In the decades that followed, the Spanish colony underwent a national consciousness awakening, spurred by the economic changes that resulted from the discovery and exploitation of phosphate deposits. In the early 1970s this national awakening culminated in the formation of the Polisario, a guerrilla movement consisting of nomadic Sahrawis controlling a small portion of Western Sahara.²⁶ Other movements formed in reaction, such as the Partido de la Union Nacional Saharoui, a creation of Spanish Sahara's colonial administration, which hoped to co-opt Sahrawis into a moderate cooperative independence group that would counter the Polisario. A second movement was the Mouvement de Resistance des Hommes Blues, a creation of Edouard Moha (suspected to be a false name),²⁷ which sprang from the Organisation for the Liberation of Saquet el-Hamra and Oued el-Dhahab.²⁸ Ultimately, these alternative nationalist movements failed to demonstrate true legitimacy as Sahrawi bodies.

Cuba, lending it the support of many nations in the third world. The Tindouf territory that Morocco sought to invade had originally been part of the kingdom, but had been transferred to Algeria by France. Cervenka Z, 'The settlement of disputes among members of the Organisation of African Unity', *Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, 7, 2, 1974, pp. 117–138; Mundy J, *op. cit.*; Rubin M, 'Why the Western Sahara matters', *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, 28, 2015; Wild PM, *op. cit.*

23 Wild PM, *op. cit.*

24 Jefri RJ, 'Morocco's Constitution of 2011', [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Morocco_2011.pdf?lang=en), 2012, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Morocco_2011.pdf?lang=en, accessed 3 June 2017.

25 Assidon E, 'De l'opération "Ecouvillon" à l'intervention en Mauritanie', *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 1978, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1978/02/ASSIDON/34617>, accessed 18 February 2018.

26 Gretton J, *op. cit.*

27 Moha is suspected to be the alias of former policeman Bashir Figuigui, who claimed to be a Sahrawi liberationist. He travelled to Algeria and initially won the support of Algerian officials, who even gave him office space. When questioned later it emerged that he was not a Sahrawi, and when the UN visited Western Sahara they could not find a single member of the organisation or even anybody who had heard of it. After failing to win continued support Moha moved to Rabat and began to support Morocco's claim to Western Sahara. San Martin P, *Western Sahara: The Refugee Nation*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010, p. 184; Janos B, *Western Sahara*. Pécs: Publikon Publishers, 2009, pp. 67.

28 Boudraa N & J Krause, *North African Mosaic: A Cultural Reappraisal of Ethnic and Religious Minorities*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, p. 372; Schmid AP & AJ Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concept, Data Bases, Theories and Literature*. London: Transaction Publishers, 1988, p. 694.

Faced with mounting local agitation, pressure from Mauritania and Morocco (the territory's neighbours, which both claimed rights to it) and the waning strength of General Francisco Franco's dictatorial regime, Spain announced its withdrawal from Western Sahara in 1975.²⁹ Ignoring a The Hague ruling in favour of the territory's right to self-determination – one which outlined that Morocco and Mauritania's claims to historic sovereignty over the area did not amount to a right to rule the territory – Morocco's monarch dispatched 350 000 citizens to Western Sahara.

While the deployment of citizens rather than troops may have given this mass migration a pacific appearance, it was a tactical political move, with the king himself appearing on radio and television and calling on his subjects to occupy the territory to bolster Morocco's claims of sovereignty.³⁰ Bowing to this pressure, Spain granted the territory to the kingdom in the Madrid Accords signed by Spain, Mauritania and Morocco. The accords divided Western Sahara between the latter two, with two-thirds of the territory ceded to Morocco.³¹

In the years that followed, Morocco's control over the territory increased, facilitated by Mauritania's abandonment of its territorial claims, which allowed the Moroccans to claim it in its entirety.³² In 1981 Morocco began constructing the 20th century's largest defensive structure, a 2 500–2 700km sand wall (Berm) surrounded by millions of mines and guarded by over 100 000 Moroccan troops, to separate the areas controlled by Morocco from those controlled by the Polisario.³³ The Polisario claims that the Moroccan state has also used napalm bombing against it.³⁴ This area is comparable to some of the tensest military buffer zones in the world, such as the demilitarised zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea and the Finnish–Russian border. These zones are smaller in size owing to the shorter length of the borders between the relevant countries, but the Korean DMZ is also rife with landmines and in 2016 the Finnish–Russian border was fortified on Russia's side with the addition of anti-aircraft missiles.³⁵

29 Paul C *et al.*, *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies*, 'Western Sahara, 1975–1991', RAND Corporation, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.46.pdf>, accessed 3 November 2017; Encyclopædia Britannica, 'Western Sahara', <https://www.britannica.com/place/Western-Sahara>, accessed 3 June 2017.

30 Weiner JB, 'The Green March in historical perspective', *Middle East Journal*, 33, 1, 1979, pp. 20–33.

31 Lee I, 'Timeline of Western Sahara', Cultures of Resistance Network, http://culturesofresistance.org/sites/default/files/Western_Sahara_Archival%20Timeline_Jan_2014_0.pdf, accessed 3 June 2017.

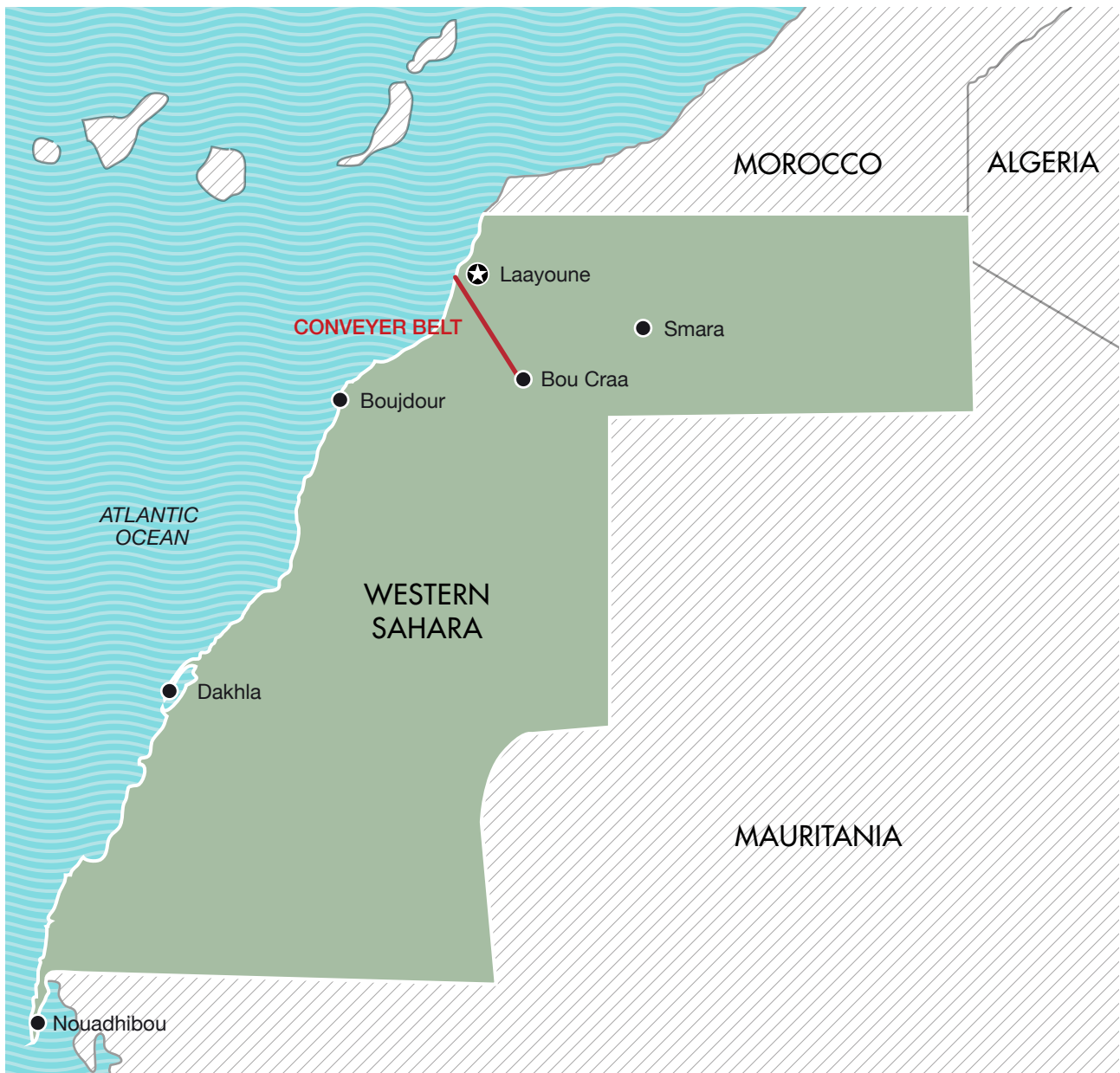
32 Gretton J, *op. cit.*

33 The reported length of the Berm ranges from 2 500–2 700km. Bhatia M, 'The Western Sahara under Polisario control', *Review of African Political Economy*, 28, 22, 2001, pp. 291–298; Lee I, *op. cit.*

34 Bhatia M, *op. cit.*

35 *The Moscow Times*, 'Russia places S-400 anti-aircraft missiles on Finnish border', 21 September 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russia-places-s-400-anti-aircraft-missiles-on-border-with-finland-55421>, accessed 31 August 2017.

FIGURE 1 MAP OF WESTERN SAHARA INDICATING THE BERM (RED LINE)



Note: This map also indicates the location and length of the conveyor belt transporting phosphates from the Bou Craa mine to a port.

Source: Kmusser, 'Westersaharamap.png', <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Westersaharamap.png>, accessed 25 March 2018

Throughout Morocco's 33-year absence from the OAU and AU it remained a dedicated contributor to Africa's development, signing cooperation agreements with several African countries, offering numerous scholarships to African students and contributing thousands of troops to ongoing UN peacekeeping missions and mediation efforts in Africa

Thus, when Western Sahara was admitted to the OAU as a member in 1982, Morocco reacted with hostility, declaring it would be boycotting the upcoming 19th OAU summit. It urged other member states to do so as well, and gained such support for its position that the summit had to be postponed because of the absence of a quorum.³⁶ Nonetheless, the OAU's decision to admit Western Sahara (supported by 26 of the 50 member states at the time) was tantamount to recognition of its statehood, directly threatening the legitimacy of Morocco's ongoing presence there and prompting the monarchy to withdraw from the organisation in 1984.³⁷

Determined to ignore the UN, the International Court of Justice and the principles of the OAU's founding charter regarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its members, Morocco felt it had little choice but to leave the organisation. While in hindsight this was to be expected, what was unexpected was its bid to re-join the organisation's successor, with many of the same conditions still in place, 33 years later.³⁸

THE 33-YEAR ITCH: HOW DID MOROCCO PURSUE READMISSION – AND WHY?

Throughout Morocco's 33-year absence from the OAU and AU it remained a dedicated contributor to Africa's development, signing cooperation agreements with several African countries, offering numerous scholarships to African students and contributing thousands of troops to ongoing UN peacekeeping missions and mediation efforts in Africa. From 1956 to 1999, 515 bilateral cooperative agreements were signed between Morocco and various African countries.³⁹ When King Mohammed VI ascended the throne after his father's death in 1999, he made it clear that pursuing African unity was a priority for Morocco.⁴⁰ 'It is so good to be back home,' he said upon his country's readmission to the AU, signalling a longstanding desire to return to the organisation.

This return to the AU and the resultant potential for enhanced integration within Africa hints at one of Morocco's possible motives for re-joining: the need for new and diverse

36 Naldi J, 'The Organisation of African Unity and the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic', *Journal of African Law*, 26, 2, 1982.

37 *Ibid.*

38 OAU (Organization of African Unity), 'OAU Charter', http://www.au2002.gov.za/docs/key_oau/oau_charter.pdf, accessed 23 May 2017.

39 As noted in King Mohammed's speech to the AU in January after Morocco's successful readmission. See *Morocco World News*, 'Full Speech of King Mohammed VI at 28th African Union Summit', 31 January 2017, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2017/01/207060/full-speech-king-mohammed-vi-28th-african-union-summit/>, accessed 23 May 2017.

40 The king has signed 949 agreements to date, solidifying bilateral ties with African countries. See *ibid.*; Haddad L, 'The African dream of the king of Morocco', *Morocco World News*, 25 October 2016, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2016/10/199808/african-dream-king-morocco-lahcen-haddad/>, accessed 23 May 2017.

allies and trading partners.⁴¹ Rather than forming a motive in and of itself, Morocco's push to establish such partnerships speaks to its domestic need for stability, which is crucial in securing its national identity and sovereignty.⁴² Although it has achieved some success in pursuing these interests in the Maghreb region and, more successfully, with Europe and the US, changing global dynamics have shifted these once potentially powerful alliances.

The Maghreb lacks a unified vision and effective cooperation on political or economic affairs; in fact, it is the least integrated subregion in the world, as per World Bank analysis.⁴³ The Arab Maghreb Union has become a stagnant, paralysed body in which Morocco has lost faith (despite remaining committed to Arab unity itself). It seeks new regional economic alliances, such as membership of ECOWAS.⁴⁴ While its relations with the Maghreb countries are not bad, given Morocco's interest in drawing closer to Tunisia as well as its attempts to contribute to peace and stability in Libya, they are weak and leave much to be desired. Further afield in the Middle East, Morocco enjoys good relations with many Arab nations, especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).⁴⁵ While some suggest that the US is considering repositioning its approach to North African countries through an African rather than a Middle Eastern lens, Morocco and the US remain strong allies, according to Moroccan Minister of Industry and Commerce Moulay Hafid Elalamy.⁴⁶ Morocco's relationship with Europe, rooted in a 1996 association agreement and a Morocco–EU free trade agreement, has been affected by the EU's indecision on the Western Sahara question.⁴⁷ The relationship is potentially further

41 For more on the importance of such relationships to Morocco, see Prinsloo C & C Rawhani, 'Morocco's African Ambitions: Right of Readmission Reserved', SAIIA (South African Institute of International Affairs), forthcoming.

42 Fernandez-Molina I, *op. cit.*

43 World Bank, 'Economic Integration in the Maghreb', October 2010, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMENA/Resources/Maghrebpublish.pdf>, accessed 6 November 2017.

44 *Morocco World News*, 2017, *op. cit.*

45 Hernandez Martinez D, 'Morocco and the GCC: Between Saudi Arabia and Qatar', London School of Economics and Political Science, Middle East Centre blog, 25 September 2017, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2017/09/25/morocco-inside-the-gcc-between-saudi-arabia-and-qatar/>, accessed 18 February 2018.

46 Elalamy MH, 'Why Morocco matters to the US', *Forbes*, 21 November 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kerryadolan/2013/11/21/why-morocco-matters-to-the-u-s/#47cb17374f75>, accessed 6 November 2017; Gabriel EM, 'Morocco's return to the African Union: Strengthening the continent's future', *The Ambassadors Review*, Spring 2017, <http://www.americanambassadors.org/publications/ambassadors-review/spring-2017/morocco-s-return-to-the-african-union-strengthening-the-continent-s-future>, accessed 3 June 2017.

47 Bruneau C, 'EU deeply divided over Western Sahara policy', *Al Monitor*, 22 March 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/morocco-western-sahara-eu-exports-polisario-front.html>, accessed 6 November 2017; Sidati M, 'The EU's Morocco problem', *Politico*, 23 December 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-eus-morocco-problem-western-sahara-trade-judgment/>, accessed 6 November 2017.

compromised by recent analysis that questions its assumed underlying benefit: economic gain.⁴⁸

Thirty-two years after its 1984 withdrawal, Morocco thus requested readmission to the AU, originally conveyed by King Mohammed's top advisor, Taieb Fassi Fihri, to the then AU Commission chairperson Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma in a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2016. For reasons that remain unclear, Dlamini-Zuma appears to have delayed conveying the request to the AU, sparking suspicion that she was attempting to block Morocco's readmission.⁴⁹ Eventually King Mohammed wrote to the then AU chairperson, Chadian President Idriss Deby, declaring his country's desire to re-join.⁵⁰ In framing his request he claimed that Morocco's departure from the OAU in 1984 had been necessary to preserve Africa's unity and that Morocco 'had sacrificed its membership in the OAU' to secure this more important interest.⁵¹

During the remainder of 2016, the Moroccan monarch embarked on an extensive public relations tour across Africa, strengthening bonds with the leaders of Ethiopia, Madagascar, Nigeria, Rwanda and Tanzania, courting their vote in support of his country's bid to re-join the AU.⁵² Morocco signed 21 partnership agreements with Tanzania, for example.⁵³ Rwanda and Morocco signed 21 bilateral treaties. As a direct result of this interaction, Rwanda is now expected to receive \$100 million in investments from Morocco, in projects ranging from tourism to low-cost housing construction (courtesy of private sector investment).⁵⁴ The king's engagements culminated in the hosting of the 22nd Congress

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- 48 Yousef A, *Europe's Relations with North Africa: Politics, Economics, and Security*. London: IB Tauris & Co., 2017.
- 49 Reuters, 'Morocco accuses African Union chief of obstructing readmission', 30 November 2016, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-morocco-africa/morocco-accuses-african-union-chief-of-obstructing-readmission-idUKKBN13P22W>, accessed 26 October 2017.
- 50 Reuters, 'Morocco asks to rejoin African Union', *defenceWeb*, 19 July 2016, http://www.defenceweb.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=44361:morocco-asks-to-rejoin-african-union&catid=56:diplomacy-a-peace&Itemid=111, accessed 3 June 2017.
- 51 Aman A, 'Why Morocco really wants back in the African Union', *Al Monitor*, 27 July 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/morocco-join-african-union-western-sahara-dispute-egypt.html#ixzz4htRiIilw>, accessed 23 May 2017; *The Moroccan Times*, 'King Mohammed VI's letter to join the African Union', 19 July 2016, <http://themoroccantimes.com/2016/07/20237/morocco-join-african-union>, accessed 31 August 2017.
- 52 Bennis S, 'Political ramifications of King Mohamed VI's East Africa tour', *Morocco World News*, 28 October 2016, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2016/10/200039/political-ramifications-king-mohammed-vis-east-africa-tour/>, accessed 23 May 2017; Nseshe M, 'Africa's richest king visits Nigeria on official trip', *Forbes*, 2 December 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mfonobongnsehe/2016/12/02/africas-richest-king-visits-nigeria-on-official-trip/#511d36763024>, accessed 31 August 2017.
- 53 Koigi B, 'Tanzania and Morocco cement bilateral ties with 21 new partnership agreements', *Africa Business Communities*, 25 October 2016, <http://africabusinesscommunities.com/news/tanzania-and-morocco-cement-bilateral-ties-with-21-new-partnership-agreements.html>, accessed 31 August 2017.
- 54 Mugisha IR, 'Rwanda eyes over \$100m investments from Morocco', *The East African*, 3 April 2017, <http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/business/Rwanda-eyes-over--100m-investments>

of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP22) from 7–18 November 2016. In the lead-up to the convention Morocco launched the Adaptation of African Agriculture to Climate Change Initiative, aiming to reduce the vulnerability of African agriculture.⁵⁵ During COP22 Morocco announced plans to invest extensively on the continent, a continuation of its economic muscle-flexing.⁵⁶ In addition, the kingdom hosted an African Action Summit for the continent's leaders, the outcome of which was a common stance on global warming by the more than 20 leaders in attendance.⁵⁷

It is worth noting that these efforts began before 2016. In 2013 King Mohammed travelled to Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Mali and Senegal, followed by 2014 visits to Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Guinea and Mali. As a result, 24 agreements spanning industries ranging from agriculture to tourism were signed with Gabon, for example. That same year the country hosted bilateral meetings with Angola, Benin, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Togo and Uganda, on the sidelines of the AU's 22nd Ordinary Summit in Addis Ababa. In 2015 Salaheddine Mezouar, Morocco's Minister of Foreign Affairs, travelled to Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Guinea and Senegal, following which Côte d'Ivoire raised \$222 million in bonds, most financed by Morocco. In 2016 new Moroccan embassies were opened in Kenya, Mozambique, Rwanda and Tanzania. Additionally, before the 27th AU summit in July 2016, Morocco dispatched some of its top diplomats to visit Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan, Tunisia and Zambia, undoubtedly to sway state leaders to support its bid to re-join the AU and support its agenda thereafter. Most importantly, in 2013, 2015 and 2016 respectively, Gabon, Senegal and Niger all expressed their support for Morocco's plan to grant Western Sahara autonomy within Moroccan sovereignty. One day after Morocco formally stated its desire to re-join the AU, 28 countries put forward a motion calling for Western Sahara's suspension from the AU.⁵⁸

According to some, the tour was a 'bribery expedition', encouraging countries to accord more weight to their own economic benefits than the SADR's right to self-determination.⁵⁹ Yet, as alluded to in a public discussion by the Ambassador of the SADR in South Africa

[-from-Morocco/2560-3875990-b4ws6b/index.html](#), accessed 1 September 2017.

55 AAA (Adaptation of African Agriculture) Initiative, 'Presentation of the initiative', <http://www.aaainitiative.org/initiative>, accessed 19 February 2018.

56 Louw-Vaudran L, 'ISS Today: Morocco's King Mohammed VI woos African leaders at COP22', *The Daily Maverick*, 24 November 2016, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-11-24-iss-today-moroccos-king-mohammed-vi-woos-african-leaders-at-cop22/#.WRnMW2l97IU>, accessed 23 May 2017.

57 Okello C, 'African leaders unite against climate change on Cop22 sidelines', *rfi (Radio France Internationale)*, 17 November 2016, <http://en.rfi.fr/environment/20161117-african-leaders-unite-against-climate-change-cop22-sidelines>, accessed 19 February 2018.

58 Sidiguitibe C, 'Retour du Maroc dans l'Union africaine: Quels sont les soutiens du royaume?', *Telquel*, 20 July 2016, http://telquel.ma/2016/07/20/retour-du-maroc-lunion-africaine-les-soutiens-du-maroc_1507114, accessed 6 November 2017; Wainscott AM, *op. cit.*

59 Lamin HM, 'What's on Morocco's agenda as it rejoins the African Union', *Al Monitor*, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/02/morocco-agenda-join-african-union.html>, accessed 23 May 2017; Mabor BG, 'South Sudan: Strategic choice between bribery and

Morocco's relations with many of the African countries it has courted have deep roots. Long before the king's recent tour of African nations Morocco had supported numerous African liberation movements in their fight against colonialism

His Excellency Radhi Bachir, Morocco's economic promises could be impossible to sustain, given that they are largely premised on access to the SADR's natural resources (including phosphates, potential oil and gas reserves, and fishing grounds teeming with sardines, among the richest in Africa).⁶⁰ Nonetheless, Morocco's economic outlook remains strong in light of its diversified economy, which is projected to grow from 1.7% in the short term to 3.5% per year in the medium term (three to five years).⁶¹ Work on its deal with Nigeria (a gas pipeline linking Europe and Africa) began in December 2016. Its deal with Ethiopia included a plan to make the country self-sufficient in producing fertiliser – it currently depends on phosphate imports from Morocco.⁶² Furthermore, it is worth noting that Morocco's relations with many of the African countries it has courted have deep roots. Long before the king's recent tour of African nations Morocco had supported numerous African liberation movements in their fight against colonialism.⁶³

Ultimately, in January 2017 during the 28th Ordinary Summit of the AU in Addis Ababa, 39 of the AU's 54 member states voted in favour of Morocco's joining the organisation, making it its 55th member.⁶⁴ Anticipating a positive outcome, King Mohammed was present at the summit and took the opportunity to assure his peers that Morocco's membership would enhance the AU's unity, resulting in the advancement of Africa. 'You will see,' he said, 'as soon as the kingdom becomes a member and is able to contribute to the agenda of activities, its action will ... help bring about unity and progress.' This was presumably a reference to economic advancement, as the monarchy's political system differs considerably from those on the continent – even in its own region it is somewhat of an outlier politically.⁶⁵ Interestingly, regional powerhouses such as South Africa and Algeria that had sought to rally support against Morocco's bid to re-join the AU were politically outmanoeuvred. South Africa could not even ensure the allegiance of the countries in its immediate region: Swaziland did not support its position.

right to self-determination for Saharawi people', *Sudan Tribune*, 22 January 2017, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article61455>, accessed 23 May 2017.

60 Bachir RS, *op. cit.*

61 World Bank, 'Morocco's Economic Outlook: Spring 2016', <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/morocco/publication/economic-outlook-spring-2016>, accessed 3 June 2016.

62 Castel V, 'Morocco', African Economic Outlook, <http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/en/country-notes/morocco>, accessed 23 May 2017; Reuters, 'Nigeria and Morocco sign gas pipeline deal to link Africa to Europe', 4 December 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/nigeria-pipeline-morocco-idUSL8N1DY007>, accessed 31 August 2017.

63 ANGOP (Agencia Angola Press), 'Morocco/Angolan ambassador praises Morocco's contribution for Africa liberation', 27 May 2010, http://www.angop.ao/angola/en_us/noticias/politica/2010/4/21/Morocco-Angolan-ambassador-praises-Morocco-contribution-for-Africa-liberation,6923679d-b007-4689-ae55-5780c35d474e.html, accessed 19 February 2018.

64 Allison S, 'Analysis: Morocco's big African Union win comes at the expense of Western Sahara and South Africa', *The Daily Maverick*, 31 January 2017, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-01-31-analysis-moroccos-big-african-union-win-comes-at-the-expense-of-western-sahara-and-south-africa/#.WRWrEmmGPIU>, accessed 23 May 2017.

65 *Morocco World News*, 2017, *op. cit.*



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A conveyor belt transporting phosphate from the Moroccan-controlled Bou Craa mine in Western Sahara

South Africa's attitude on the matter was seen as problematic from the outset, owing to the position adopted by Dlamini-Zuma. Her delay in announcing Morocco's bid to re-join the organisation was viewed as a tactic to prevent or stall the kingdom's return to the AU, which the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation has implied was on South Africa's orders.⁶⁶ The country is an outspoken critic of what it perceives to be Morocco's colonisation of Western Sahara, according to Ambassador Mohammed Dangor, special advisor to South Africa's minister of international relations and cooperation. This has further soured relations between the two states and informed its attempt to prevent Morocco's unconditional admission to the AU. Discussing the readmission at an informal public dialogue on 6 April 2017, Dangor confirmed that South Africa would continue to call for the liberation of the Sahrawi people.⁶⁷

66 *Morocco World News*, 'Morocco denounces AU Chairperson Dlamini-Zuma for delaying Morocco's re-entry', 30 November 2016a, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2016/11/202660/morocco-denounces-au-chairperson-dlamini-zuma-delaying-moroccos-re-entry/>, accessed 31 August 2017.

67 Dangor M, Speech presented at the University of Johannesburg on Morocco's Re-admission into the African Union and the Western Sahara Question, Johannesburg, 6 April 2017.

Ultimately, the division of votes for and against Morocco's readmission may be explained by how AU members viewed the underlying reasons for its return. Morocco's successful campaigning was an indication that the kingdom returned to the AU stronger and more politically astute than before. Its strength vis-à-vis individual members must have proved a convincing bargaining tool in drumming up votes – what remained to be seen was its strength vis-à-vis the institution and how that might manifest.

The minority that voted against its re-entry largely consists of those that not only believe that it has colonised Western Sahara but also fear that it wants to use its power to gain influence at the AU and oust the SADR from the organisation. Without a published breakdown of the vote for Morocco's readmission, it is difficult to determine individual country motivations. However, it stands to reason that those that voted in its favour may have believed that the decision would lead to shared growth and development for all, as a result of greater cooperation with one of Africa's leading economies.⁶⁸ This also seems to be King Mohammed's belief. It is also likely that Morocco's increasing economic strength renders ideological matters such as the status of Western Sahara less pressing to African states on the lookout for strong partners on the continent.

Why was Morocco readmitted, and why did it seek readmission? Ultimately, for Morocco, when a territory that it considers to be part of the Moroccan state has AU membership, this is tantamount to a violation of its sovereignty and its constitutional ideals of national unity

So, why was Morocco readmitted, and why did it seek readmission? Ultimately, for Morocco, when a territory that it considers to be part of the Moroccan state has AU membership, this is tantamount to a violation of its sovereignty and its constitutional ideals of national unity.⁶⁹ Using its soft power to protect this unity and remove the SADR from the AU would be a logical step. At the same time, this does not exclude the aim of using its economic strength to develop Africa, as a prosperous continent would also provide it with better markets in which to invest and from which to benefit. Lastly, by its own admission, its options for regional cooperation are limited, as unity in the Maghreb is fading (at best a tense union, historically), particularly owing to the strained relationship between Morocco and Algeria. Although tensions between the two are to be expected, owing to the latter's support for the Polisario, relations recently reached a new low when Morocco withdrew its envoy to Algeria following allegations by the country's foreign minister that Moroccan banks laundered drug money.⁷⁰

The Arab world seems sharply divided when it comes to siding with Morocco versus the Polisario.⁷¹ Morocco has lost faith in the Arab League (giving up its right to host the institution's summit in 2016 after the kingdom stated it did not want to perpetuate

68 *Morocco World News*, 2016a, *op. cit.*

69 Jefri RJ, *op. cit.*

70 *Al Jazeera*, 'Morocco recalls envoy over Algeria FM's drug accusation', 21 October 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/morocco-recalls-envoy-algeria-fm-drug-accusation-171021172343618.html>, accessed 26 October 2017.

71 While Morocco and the Gulf states boycotted the 2016 Africa–Arab Summit over the Polisario's attendance, other Arab League member states chose not to do so. Benslimane G, 'Morocco, GCC countries boycott Arab–African Summit due to Polisario participation', *Morocco World News*, 22 November 2016, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2016/11/202030/morocco-gcc-countries-boycott-arab-african-summit-due-polisario-participation/>, accessed 23 May 2017.

a false idea of Arab unity).⁷² In addition, when it became clear that the Cold War-era Communist ‘threat’ had dissipated, the US, Morocco’s valued ally, found that it had a less pressing need for a surrogate in the region.⁷³ Although the relationship rebounded, largely owing to Morocco’s help with the US’ global war on terror, it came under strain after the US Department of State had mentioned the kingdom in its 2015 report on human rights practices, following which the US ambassador to Morocco was severely rebuked by Rabat’s foreign minister.⁷⁴ This is indicative of a wider trend in the Middle East, where relations between the US and various states are in decline owing to perceptions that the US’ military and political power is on the wane. The aftermath of the US’ most recent Iraqi invasion has also contributed to its decreased influence in the region.⁷⁵

MOROCCO: DAVID OR GOLIATH?

Morocco’s membership will have repercussions that AU members should be prepared for – not only in terms of its manoeuvring at upcoming summits but also in terms of its longer-term interactions with the organisation. Readmitting a country that some perceive as Africa’s last colonist and the coloniser of Africa’s last colony (no doubt encouraged by Ban Ki-moon’s reference to Morocco’s ‘occupation’ of the SADR in 2016) while the UN calls for Western Sahara’s self-determination, sends a strong message.⁷⁶ It is not clear whether the AU has thought through this message or its meaning. Furthermore, Morocco has returned to the AU as a strong nation with a clear agenda: to become an African leader and consolidate national sovereignty. The AU, in turn, remains as it has always been (even in its earlier iteration as the OAU): unable to enforce adherence to its principles of upholding unity and respecting sovereignty when matters become confusing and strong agendas are in play. It is difficult to say what the AU’s lack of a strategy for dealing with strong states means for the organisation.

Morocco’s membership will have repercussions that AU members should be prepared for – not only in terms of its manoeuvring at upcoming summits but also in terms of its longer-term interactions with the organisation

72 *The Moroccan Times*, ‘King Mohammed VI: Let’s not sell dreams. Arabs are not united, so no Arab Summit’, 20 February 2016b, <http://themoroccantimes.com/2016/02/18117/king-mohammed-vi-lets-not-sell-dreams-arabs-are-not-united-so-no-arab-summit>, accessed 26 October 2017.

73 Zoubir YH, ‘The US and Morocco: The long-lasting alliance’, in Looney R (ed.), *Handbook of US–Middle East Relations*. New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 249–261.

74 Pham JP, ‘Why Morocco is mad at the US State Department’, *The National Interest*, 20 May 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/why-morocco-mad-the-us-state-department-16284>, accessed 26 October 2017.

75 Zoubir YH, *op. cit.*

76 Bachir RS, *op. cit.*; UN General Assembly, ‘Secretary-General urges concrete action to advance decolonization agenda as Pacific Regional Seminar convenes’, 31 May 2016, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/gacol3290.doc.htm>, accessed 23 May 2017; Dujarric S, ‘Statement attributable to the Spokesperson of the Secretary-General on Western Sahara’, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2017-04-28/statement-attributable-spokesperson-secretary-general-western-sahara>, accessed 19 February 2018; Lulie H, ‘The word that reignited the Western Sahara debate’, *ISS Today*, 26 April 2016, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/the-word-that-reignited-the-western-sahara-debate>, accessed 3 June 2017.

The first time in the OAU's history that one of its members encroached on a neighbour's territory was during the 1963 border conflict between Morocco and Algeria, known as 'the Sand War'. At the time the organisation held firm to its ideal of balancing the imperative of continental unity with respect for national sovereignty, dispatched its first peacekeeping force, and facilitated a negotiated resolution.⁷⁷ Yet the second time Morocco acted, this OAU approach was jettisoned. In fact, Morocco's 1975 annexation of Western Sahara, the result of a political settlement despite its contravention of an International Court of Justice ruling, brought very little sanction from the international community or the OAU.⁷⁸

Of course, this has not been the only border conflict between Africa's post-colonial states. In 1978, for example, Ugandan head of state Idi Amin annexed Tanzania's Kagera Salient. Here the context was different, as a bitter personal rivalry between Amin and Tanzania's president Julius Nyerere was a key cause, and came to affect OAU politics too. Although this border violation escalated into a war, by 1979 it had concluded and the result was Amin's fall from power after eight years of brutal rule.⁷⁹ Ethiopia and Somalia also have had a history of conflict since 1964 – here more relevant to the Moroccan example, as it dates back to the colonial demarcation of their shared border. The ongoing conflict often attracts the involvement of other states in proxy wars.⁸⁰ Ethiopia withdrew its troops in 2016, but this was a result not so much of an easing of tensions as a lack of international support. Thus far the underlying causes of the war, political and territorial, still remain.⁸¹ In both cases the OAU/AU failed to act. Although Tanzania had sought a diplomatic resolution, the OAU did not act decisively, forcing it to declare war.⁸²

Thus, the OAU/AU's reactions to these different (but not entirely unrelated) conflicts created the space in which cross-border invasions, albeit of a border possibly in need of review and redefinition, went unpunished. These precedents engendered an environment that enabled Morocco to remain in what it deems to be 'its' Sahara (the SADR).⁸³ This culture persists to this day and Morocco has taken advantage of it, using it to further legitimise its control over Western Sahara.

77 Cervenka Z, *op. cit.*

78 Wild PM, *op. cit.*

79 Roberts G, 'The Uganda–Tanzania War, the fall of Idi Amin, and the failure of African diplomacy, 1978–1979', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 8, 4, 2000, pp. 692–709.

80 *The Guardian*, 'FAQ: War between Somalia and Ethiopia', 27 December 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/dec/27/ethiopia>, accessed 1 September 2017.

81 *BBC News*, 'Ethiopia withdraws troops in Somalia over "lack of support"', 26 October 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-37775555>, accessed 1 September 2017.

82 *Daily Monitor*, 'Revisiting the Tanzania–Uganda war that toppled Amin', 26 April 2014, <http://www.monitor.co.ug/SpecialReports/Revisiting-the-Tanzania-Uganda-war-that-toppled-Amin/688342-2293306-110gx19/index.html>, accessed 1 September 2017; Welz M, *Integrating Africa: Decolonization's Legacies, Sovereignty and the African Union*. Oxford: Routledge, 2013, p. 92.

83 Bennis S, "'Western Sahara': King Mohammed VI's clear message to the United Nations", *Morocco World News*, 8 November 2014, <https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2014/11/143537/western-sahara-king-mohammed-vis-clear-message-to-the-united-nations/>, accessed 3 June 2017.

Using an old strategy of drumming up support for a boycott of an international event, Morocco encouraged eight other countries (Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Somalia, the Sultanate of Oman and Yemen) to abstain from attending the Africa–Arab Summit in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea in 2016 after learning of the Polisario’s invitation.⁸⁴ This is a worrying throwback to the OAU’s 19th summit, which had to be cancelled after similar machinations on the part of Morocco, for similar reasons.⁸⁵ The same tactics were also used to obstruct the proceedings at the joint annual meetings of the AU Specialised Technical Committee on Finance, Monetary Affairs, Economic Planning and Integration and the UN Economic Commission for Africa’s Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development that was meant to be held in Dakar from 23–28 March 2017, resulting in the postponement of the events.⁸⁶

While continuing to build relations with African countries, often based on trading Western Sahara’s natural resources, Morocco has never strayed from its self-established path of becoming an African leader.⁸⁷ The OAU/AU has, in the meantime, become ever more tolerant of violations of its founding principles. Interestingly, despite the fact that Morocco opposed the participation of the SADR in an AU–EU conference in Abidjan from 29–30 November 2017, even reporting in its national news outlet that the entity would not be invited, the SADR’s AU embassy published a statement confirming both its invitation and attendance.⁸⁸ While Morocco proclaims its support for African unity for all to hear, its behaviour in multilateral international forums and with regard to the SADR in particular threatens this unity to its core.⁸⁹ The country pressures members of the multilateral forums in which it participates to choose its side and obstructs proceedings when they do not.⁹⁰

84 Benslimane G, *op. cit.*; *The Moroccan Times*, ‘Morocco, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and 4 others withdrew from Pan Arab–African summit to protest Polisario Front presence’, 23 November 2016, <http://themoroccantimes.com/2016/11/21685/morocco-saudi-arabia-uae-qatar-and-4-others-withdrew-from-summit-pan-arab-african-summit-to-protest-polisario-front-presence>, accessed 31 August 2017.

85 Mitchell C, ‘OAU meeting postponed’, *UPI*, 25 July 1982, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1982/07/25/OAU-meeting-postponed/4333396417600/>, accessed 26 October 2017.

86 Embassy of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in Australia, ‘Morocco once again fails to prevent SADR from participating in AU–ECA conference’, 4 April 2017, <http://www.sadr-emb-au.net/morocco-once-again-fails-to-prevent-sadr-from-participating-in-au-eca-conference/>, accessed 2 May 2017; UNECA (UN Economic Commission for Africa), ‘50th Session of the Commission for Africa: Conference of Ministers 2017’, <http://www.uneca.org/cfm2017>, accessed 2 June 2017.

87 Bachir RS, *op. cit.*; *Morocco World News*, 2017, *op. cit.*

88 SADR Permanent Mission in Ethiopia and AU, ‘AU–EU Summit of Abidjan: Confirmed participation of SADR’, 1 November 2017, <http://www.sadr-emb-au.net/au-eu-summit-of-abidjan-confirmed-participation-of-sadr/>, accessed 13 November 2017.

89 *Morocco World News*, 2017, *op. cit.*

90 Benslimane G, *op. cit.*; Naldi J, *op. cit.*

ROUND ONE

In July 2017 Morocco formally participated in its first AU summit. Given its recent actions in the multilateral arena and the unresolved issue of the SADR's sovereignty, as well as the yet-to-be-conducted referendum, it is pertinent to reflect on what Morocco's membership may mean for the AU, as well as for the future of the SADR. The AU's Constitutive Act is clear about the status of the SADR in the organisation: it recognises its president (currently Brahim Ghali, the secretary general of the Polisario) as Western Sahara's head of a state; and as a member state, its sovereignty should not only be respected but also protected.⁹¹ Unfortunately, the AU's inability to translate this rhetoric into action has been problematic, at best.

Morocco's joining the group of states with considerable influence at the AU creates an opportunity to review Western Sahara's sovereignty, as the kingdom's determination to prioritise its own national interests at the expense of the AU's values could prove challenging (although it is important to note that honouring the AU's respect for sovereignty is difficult in this case, given Morocco's decision *not* to support African countries' borders at independence).⁹² In addition, Morocco's economic and military strength makes it a welcome addition to an AU that is struggling in both areas.⁹³

Morocco's need to secure a market for its raw materials and inward investment, combined with its waning relationship with the EU, is likely to ensure that it will proceed with caution.⁹⁴ Yet its return to boycott tactics, its continued refusal to allow a referendum in Western Sahara and its use of economic influence to broker deals and garner loyalty point to a willingness to use a multi-pronged approach to further its interests.⁹⁵ Representatives of the SADR and South Africa are convinced that Morocco's decision to re-join the AU should be viewed along a continuum of its past actions, framing (what they deem to be) its expansionist outlook.⁹⁶

Ultimately, it appears that Morocco re-joined the AU primarily to settle the question of the sovereignty of Western Sahara in the kingdom's favour, and secondly as part of a larger

91 AU, 'Constitutive Act of the African Union', http://www.achpr.org/files/instruments/au-constitutive-act/au_act_2000_eng.pdf, accessed 23 May 2017.

92 Darkoh MBK, *op. cit.*

93 Makinda SF, Okumu FW & D Mickler, *op. cit.*

94 Bachir SR, *op. cit.*

95 Benslimane G, *op. cit.*; UN General Assembly Fourth Committee, 'Fourth Committee approves 20 texts for General Assembly action, passing 4 by recorded vote, 16 by consensus', 10 October 2016, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/gaspd612.doc.htm>, accessed 23 May 2017.

96 ANC, *op. cit.*; Bachir RS, *op. cit.*; Bachir RS & A Gallous, 'Africa and the euphoria of decolonisation – Morocco's continual illegal occupation of Western Sahara: the great stalemate', Thabo Mbeki Foundation, 10 July 2017, <https://www.mbeki.org/2017/07/10/africa-and-the-euphoria-of-decolonisation-moroccos-continual-illegal-occupation-of-western-sahara-the-great-stalemate/>, accessed 1 September 2017.

foreign policy strategy to cement its role as an emerging leader in Africa. It surprised many countries by rescinding its previous demand to the OAU that the SADR be expelled from the organisation. Some experts and politicians, including the SADR's foreign minister, even believe that Morocco's readmission could be considered a small victory for Western Sahara, as the kingdom's decision to sit at the same table signals a level of respect for and recognition of the Sahrawis.⁹⁷ Seemingly supporting this sentiment is King Mohammed's speech at the AU upon Morocco's readmission, in which he stated, '[W]e have absolutely no intention of causing division, as some would like to insinuate!'⁹⁸

Others are less confident. 'We do not trust Morocco,' said Bachir in April 2017, echoing a sentiment shared by many AU members that believe Morocco would use its position to secure its territorial sovereignty over Western Sahara.⁹⁹ These suspicions are not entirely unfounded, given that King Mohammed had said in 2014, 'Morocco will remain in its Sahara, and the Sahara will remain part of Morocco, until the end of time.'¹⁰⁰ This is an extension of the king's decentralisation strategy announced in 2008, according to which he will focus on the Moroccan Sahara region, where he proposes to allow Sahrawi autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty.¹⁰¹

Should Morocco seek to pursue this goal actively and publicly, it will have to rally the support of two-thirds of the AU, roughly 36 or 37 countries, in a vote by the organisation's assembly.¹⁰² While the AU's Constitutive Act is not clear on matters pertaining to revocation of membership, Article 7 par. 1 one states that 'the Assembly shall take its decisions by consensus or, failing which, by a two-thirds majority of the Member States of the Union'.¹⁰³ As mentioned, Morocco appears to have already secured the support of 28 states, based on those that had submitted a motion for revoking the SADR's membership. It follows that the kingdom needs to get the support of at least seven more countries, which should prove to be an easy target for this seasoned political manoeuvre. In fact, the process may have already begun, as AU Commission Chairperson Moussa

97 Whether these statements from Morocco constitute a legitimate viewpoint or the maintenance of a 'brave face' by the ministry of foreign affairs is not clear. Cropely E, 'In tilt from Europe, Morocco rejoins African Union', *Reuters*, 31 January 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-africa-summit-morocco-idUSKBN15F18Z>, accessed 3 June 2017; *Peace and Security Council Report*, 'A shaky start for Morocco in the AU', 3 April 2017, <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/on-the-agenda/a-shaky-start-for-morocco-in-the-au>, accessed 3 June 2017.

98 *Morocco World News*, 2017, *op. cit.*

99 Bachir RS, *op. cit.*

100 Bennis S, *op. cit.*

101 Ben-Meir Y, 'Morocco's regionalization "roadmap" and the Western Sahara', *International Journal on World Peace*, 27, 2, 2010, pp. 67–68.

102 AU, *African Union Handbook 2017*, <https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/31829-file-african-union-handbook-2017-edited.pdf>, accessed 6 November 2017.

103 AU, 'Constitutive Act of the African Union', *op. cit.*

Morocco has not strayed from its foreign policy position of upholding unity above all else. However, in practice this manifests in contradictory ways

Faki Mahamat visited King Mohamed in Rabat from 3–4 November 2017, where they undoubtedly discussed the Western Sahara question, among other priorities.¹⁰⁴

Ultimately, Morocco has not strayed from its foreign policy position of upholding unity above all else. However, in practice this manifests in contradictory ways, perhaps owing to the tension between national unity and the effects that upholding it have on the unity of the continent.¹⁰⁵ Morocco's call for national unity, which emphasises the inclusion of Western Sahara in its territory, threatens to compromise the aims of African unity when numerous African states, including South Africa and Algeria, view the kingdom's claims to sovereignty over the SADR as colonialism and contrary to the AU's Constitutive Act.

Morocco's initial interest in re-joining the AU was accompanied by a request from King Mohammed that the organisation correct the 'historical error' it had made with respect to the SADR, which he labelled a 'pseudo-state'.¹⁰⁶ Seemingly, the request did not gain much traction and has since been dropped. However, while Morocco has not expressly requested that the SADR be expelled from the AU upon its return, it has not taken the matter off the table either. Indeed, the kingdom has returned to the AU stronger than before and with far more economic clout, which it has used not only to ensure its return but also, according to some, to buy support among members.¹⁰⁷ A prime example is King Mohammed's November 2017 meeting with then president of South Africa Jacob Zuma on the sidelines of the AU–EU Summit in Abidjan, with plans for economic and political cooperation announced shortly thereafter.¹⁰⁸

This is the material issue that AU members need to keep in mind: in practice, the country remains committed to furthering its own interests, like every state. It is unclear what Morocco's reaction will be the next time its national and domestic interests require it to deviate from the AU's values, and how it may leverage its newfound seat of power in the AU to do so.

CERTAIN UNCERTAINTY

Celebrating Morocco's readmission to the AU, King Mohammed said the country had come back home and that he was confident that its membership would bolster Africa's

104 Kalondo E, 'Note to Editors: Visit of the Chairperson of the Commission of the African Union to the Kingdom of Morocco', AU, 4 November 2017, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20171104/note-editors-visit-chairperson-commission-african-union-kingdom-morocco>, accessed 13 November 2017.

105 *Morocco World News*, 2017, *op. cit.*

106 Gaffey C, 'Morocco, after 32-year absence, wants to rejoin the African Union', *Newsweek*, 18 July 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/morocco-after-32-year-absence-wants-rejoin-african-union-481359>, accessed 6 November 2016.

107 Bachir RS, *op. cit.*; Castel V, *op. cit.*

108 Du Plessis C, 'South Africa and Morocco set to re-establish diplomatic relations', *Mail & Guardian*, 30 November 2017, <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-11-30-south-africa-and-morocco-set-to-re-establish-diplomatic-relations>, accessed 19 February 2018.

unity, a cause to which Morocco's commitment had 'never wavered'. To an extent this is true.¹⁰⁹ Had Morocco chosen to pressure AU members into taking sides in deciding on Western Sahara's statehood on its readmission, it could well have endangered African unity. However, by re-joining with the same contentious issue still on the table, while trying to use its clout to sideline the SADR from international politics, it threatens African unity all over again. This does not bode well for the SADR and points to a larger problem for the AU: its lack of an effective strategy in positioning itself vis-à-vis the agendas of strong member states.

While Morocco remains committed to its position as the rightful guardian of Western Sahara, the AU has softened the stance of its predecessor by tiptoeing around the question of Western Sahara's right to self-determination and failing to raise the SADR issue when Morocco first submitted its bid to re-join. The AU and its leading members could not have been surprised by Morocco's readmission, yet they certainly appeared to be caught off-guard. It is in part this lack of preparedness that has allowed Morocco, one of the AU's strongest members – albeit a recent addition – to champion its own causes in this international forum.

Ultimately, the SADR issue could play out in one of four ways. First, Morocco could place the issue firmly on the agenda. This would force countries to take sides, compelling AU members to stand up for their principles and defend the SADR. Such a move may divide the AU at a time when its members are vulnerable to being influenced by various parties, threatening continental unity.

Second, Morocco could continue to sweep the SADR issue under the carpet, upholding African unity on the surface while working behind the scenes to stall its participation in regional forums where the issue could be discussed, and sparing no effort to bar the SADR's participation at the international level.

Third, the AU could defer the matter to the judgement of the UN, supporting its endeavours to reach a compromise on self-determination that is agreeable to all parties concerned.

The fourth option, perhaps both the best and the worst, would be for the status quo to be maintained as it is, with the statehood of Western Sahara remaining in question. This would only damage the reputation and soft power of an AU already accused of failing to translate rhetoric into action when it counts most.

The common theme in all four potential scenarios is that of a passive AU, reacting to Morocco's manoeuvres without taking a stand on key matters such as the question of Western Sahara's sovereignty. Thus the kingdom's re-admission to the AU has significant implications not only for the future of this issue but also in terms of demanding that the AU formulate frameworks that will enable it to engage its strongest members, like Morocco, while remaining effective.

Political clout is now up for sale, and Africa's sixth largest economy is buying

109 Morocco World News, 2017, *op. cit.*

Morocco's readmission to the AU only makes uncertainty certain, it seems. For decades, the kingdom lacked the political clout to insist on the SADR's expulsion from the AU. Its readmission signals that political clout is now up for sale, and Africa's sixth largest economy is buying.¹¹⁰

110 Africa Ranker, 'Top 20 largest economies in Africa', <http://www.africaranking.com/largest-economies-in-africa/5/>, accessed 3 June 2017.

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