

# Morocco: Positive Neutrality

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# Morocco: Positive Neutrality

by Noamane Cherkaoui

Stretching back centuries, Morocco and Libya have an ancient history of geographical, ethnolinguistic, cultural, and religious connections. Politically, their bilateral relations were mostly favourable until 1969, when they began to deteriorate after Mu‘ammar Gaddafi deposed King Idris I in a military coup. This would launch the start of a frictional relationship, in which Libya became a Maghreb neighbour with antipathetic policies towards Morocco. During Gaddafi’s era, there were various lows, with the most enduring becoming his support for the Polisario Front, a separatist group founded in 1973 and based along the Algerian–Moroccan border.<sup>1</sup> Gaddafi provided them with consequential backing and aid for decades and his support was initially indispensable for the Front’s armed conflict against Morocco. Another low was when the late King Hassan II accused Tripoli of backing a coup against him in 1971 – Libyan media had been among the first to offer support to the unsuccessful putschists.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, with bilateral relations strained, Morocco began playing an important role in Libya’s opposition movement. In 1982, the Libyan opposition group National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL) held its inaugural “National Council” in Rabat.<sup>3</sup> That relationship essentially continued until 1984, when a thaw in Libya-Morocco relations began to ostensibly be observed. The two nations signed the Arab-African Union treaty, the apex of King Hassan II and Gaddafi’s newfound reconciliation, with developments like Libya withdrawing from Chad<sup>4</sup> and the establishment of a joint legislature<sup>5</sup> transpiring shortly thereafter. Additionally, as a sign of goodwill, Rabat deported a prominent Libyan opposition figure, Omar Muhayshi, to Tripoli – the latter had safe haven in Morocco for years.<sup>6</sup> Gaddafi’s support for the Polisario Front also declined considerably as a result of the treaty<sup>7</sup>, though he kept their Tripoli office

1 Shoji Matsumoto, ‘Manchukuo and the Self-Declared SADR International Law of Recognition and the Sahara Issue’ January 2021, <https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/PP%20-%202002-21%20%28%20Soji%20Matsumoto%29.pdf>

2 ‘Soldiers attack Moroccan palace; King keeps power’, 11 June 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/07/11/archives/soldiers-attack-moroccan-palace-king-keeps-power-hassan-on-radio.html>

3 Al-Sadiq Shukry, ‘A thundering in politics and history’, 7 June 2006, [http://archive.libya-al-mostakbal.org/MinbarAlkottab/June2006/assadeq\\_shukri\\_hadraza070606p2\\_11.htm](http://archive.libya-al-mostakbal.org/MinbarAlkottab/June2006/assadeq_shukri_hadraza070606p2_11.htm)

4 Edward Schumacher, ‘Morocco justifies union with Libya’, 18 September 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/09/18/world/morocco-justifies-union-with-libya.html>

5 ‘Around the world ; Libya and Morocco Move Toward Union’ 7 July 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/07/world/around-the-world-libya-and-morocco-move-toward-union.html>

6 Adrar Nefoussa, ‘In the memory of Kikhia, and for history ... the disappeared Forcibly Omar Abdullah Al-Mahishi’ 10 Decemeber 2009, [http://archive.libya-al-mostakbal.org/MalaffatKhasa/adrar\\_nafosa\\_almheeshi\\_101209.html](http://archive.libya-al-mostakbal.org/MalaffatKhasa/adrar_nafosa_almheeshi_101209.html)

7 Christopher Paul et al. ‘Western Sahara, 1975–1991’, 2013, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.7249/j.ctt5hhs-jk.46.pdf>

open.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the reconciliation would prove to be short-lived, and King Hassan II abrogated the treaty in 1986, to the “pleasure and delight” of the United States.<sup>9</sup> This step did not happen in a vacuum, with dynamics including how Gaddafi had initially aimed to use Rabat and its diplomatic network via the treaty to assuage U.S. concerns about Gaddafi’s links to international terrorism.<sup>10</sup> Yet, following the 1986 West Berlin discotheque bombing, the US launched retaliatory air strikes against Libya,<sup>11</sup> and this escalation all but ensured a hardline stance was to prevail. Another notable dynamic was King Hassan II’s hosting of Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres for talks in Ifrane a few months afterwards.<sup>12</sup> This was a move that was denounced by hardline Arab nations, particularly Libya, and would prove to be the nail in the coffin for the treaty and bilateral relations. Rabat used the resultant Libyan-Syrian communique as a pretext to abrogate the treaty and jettison the corrosive connection with Gaddafi,<sup>13</sup> a development which noticeably preceded the rescheduling of its external debt after years of issues.<sup>14</sup> Incidentally, following these events, Gaddafi reportedly plotted to have Morocco’s monarch assassinated in 1987.<sup>15</sup>

The thaw moderately renewed after King Mohamed VI’s ascension and the cascade of developments following the 11th of September 2001. Gaddafi became more obliged to accept U.S. stipulations, such as dismantling Libya’s modest nuclear program, and tilt westwards<sup>16</sup>. This essentially marked the beginning of quasi-normal relations between Rabat and Tripoli, with the influence of the principal stumbling block, the Polisario Front, already waning significantly by that time due to the 1991 ceasefire and the conflict’s evolution. Nevertheless, the developing apathy meant Morocco would view the events that eventually transpired in 2011 with great interest.

8 Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, ‘South–South Educational Migration, Humanitarianism and Development’ 14 November 2017, <https://www.routledge.com/SouthSouth-Educational-Migration-Humanitarianism-and-Development-Views/Fiddian-Qasmiyeh/p/book/9780815379362> (p.110)

9 Edward M. Gabriel, ‘King Hassan II Abrogated a Treaty with Libya in 1986: The United States was “Delighted”’ 18 January 2019, <https://moroccoonthemove.com/2019/01/18/king-hassan-ii-abrogated-a-treaty-with-libya-in-1986-the-united-states-was-delighted-ambassador-edward-m-gabriel-ret/>

10 Ronald Bruce St. John, ‘Terrorism and Libyan Foreign Policy, 1981-1986’ July 1986, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/40395836?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/40395836?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

11 Steven Erlanger: ‘4 Guilty in Fatal 1986 Berlin Disco Bombing Linked to Libya’ 14 November 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/14/world/4-guilty-in-fatal-1986-berlin-disco-bombing-linked-to-libya.html>

12 Judith Miller: ‘Peres and Hassan in talks; Syria breaks Moroccan ties’ 23 July 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/07/23/world/peres-and-hassan-in-talks-syria-breaks-moroccan-ties.html>

13 ‘Morocco canceling treaty aimed at union with Libya’ 30 August 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/08/30/world/morocco-canceling-treaty-aimed-at-union-with-libya.html>

14 François Soudan, ‘Sahara : Mohammed VI ou l’art du deal’ 21 December 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1093888/politique/edito-sahara-mohammed-vi-ou-lart-du-deal/>

15 ‘Morocco-Libya: Gaddafi Plotted to Assassinate Hassan II, CIA Reveals’ 21 January 2017, <https://northafrica-post.com/16081-morocco-libya-gaddafi-plotted-assassinate-hassan-ii-cia-reveals.html>

16 Målfrid Braut-Hegghammer, ‘Libya’s Nuclear Turnaround: Perspectives from Tripoli’ 2008, <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/mei/mei/2008/00000062/00000001/art00004>



## Foreign Policy Towards Libya Since 2011

After Gaddafi was deposed in 2011, Rabat kept a keen eye on unfolding events. While there was no deliberate policy per se, Rabat aimed to ensure Libya did not become a failed state. Morocco was one of the most active actors during the revolution; it was quick to establish a military hospital on the Tunisia-Libya border for displaced Libyans in March 2011,<sup>17</sup> a member of the Libya Contact Group, one of the first to recognise the nascent National Transitional Council (NTC), and the location of the former interim Prime Minister el-Kib's first official visit in 2012. Indeed, unlike the suppressive reflex of dictatorships in the region, Rabat's underlying doctrine was not opposed to the Arab Spring or political reforms, which is a historical characteristic. By way of example, after an Islamist party was poised to emerge victorious in Algeria's first free parliamentary elections in 1992, Rabat's reaction was to encourage letting the wheels of democracy turn.<sup>18</sup> However, elections were instead annulled by military coup, leading to a civil war and a brutal 'black decade' in Algeria.<sup>19</sup> The Moroccan monarchy also benefits from domestic legitimacy, and its pragmatic response to protests in 2011 allowed it to assuage public concerns effectively. The shock absorber is robust under Morocco's monarchy - which dictates the nation's foreign policy, not parties or politics - and even craftily co-opted Morocco's most prominent Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party (JDP).<sup>20</sup> Incidentally, the rope the JDP, in power since 2011, has been given as a legitimate electoral candidate has allowed citizenry to evaluate the party mostly on its merits. Moreover, as the events of 2011 transpired, an opportunity likewise presented itself for Rabat to undercut Algeria's foreign policy in general, and its approach to Libya's revolution in particular. Algiers seemed to be sympathetic to Gaddafi's cause and provided refuge for his family, and an undercutting opportunity, due to entrenched regional dynamics, is rarely unwelcome.

Morocco's foreign policy is driven primarily by its soft power, and it has made noteworthy inroads in the African continent in the last two decades. After King Mohammed VI's ascension, Rabat orchestrated a thoughtful shift towards Africa, with dozens of bilateral agreements being signed and a focus being placed on strategic partnerships. This approach has reaped fruit, and its pragmatic policy making saw it rejoin the African Union in 2017. Moreover, its strategic location along the strait of Gibraltar and long-term vision have allowed it to leverage its capabilities and develop into a valuable partner for Western allies. Morocco's soft power, focused mainly on diplomatic and humanitarian aspects, has likewise been actively deployed in Libya.

17 Abdul Rahman Al-Ash'ari, 'Tunisia honors the staff of the Moroccan Military Field Hospital' 29 Decemeber 2011, <https://www.arrabita.ma/blog/>

18 Mohammed Jaabouk, 'Quand Abbassi Madani rassurait Hassan II sur la position du FIS sur la question du Sahara' 25 April 2019, <https://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/77536/quand-abbassi-madani-rassurait-hassan.html>

19 'Algeria Conflict Insight' April 2020, <https://media.africaportal.org/documents/ALGERIA-Conflict-Insights-.pdf>

20 Mohammed Masbah, 'His Majesty's Islamists: The Moroccan Experience' 23 March 2015, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/03/23/his-majesty-s-islamists-moroccan-experience-pub-59442>

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Following the outbreak of the 17th of February revolution, it supported efforts to isolate Gaddafi, being privy to the Arab League's suspension of Libya and its request for a no-fly zone on the 12th of March 2011, and attending the Paris Summit for the Support of the Libyan People on the 19th of March.

Morocco's then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Taieb Fassi Fihri, said that Rabat believed that the solution in Libya could only be "political and forward-looking,"<sup>21</sup> a view it still shares now, with its desired outcome remaining consistent: the Libyan people being put at the forefront of any sustainable settlement.

In Rabat's view, the revolution in Libya offered this brotherly nation an opportunity to introduce new political players and develop a lively public sphere, particularly given factors such as political parties being hitherto outlawed. In this regard, it considered some Arab countries' stances against forces affiliated with the Arab Spring as counterproductive.<sup>22</sup> For Rabat, the preferred approach is to encourage dialogue among stakeholders; a political path is ultimately more conducive to stability and formalises the capacity to co-opt, unlike the violence in Libya that has introduced fragmented and localised actors.

The guiding principles of Morocco's foreign policy in Libya are three-fold. Firstly, while Morocco regards Libya in fraternal terms, it also benefits from the latter's stability. Conflict in the country has had significant reverberations in the region, including in the Sahel, where an arms and combatant flow has exacerbated violent extremism and threatened Morocco's national security. Another dynamic is Rabat's economic interests with Libya, which can act as a gateway to sub-Saharan Africa for Morocco. Morocco is also a net energy importer, so Libya's possession of the largest proven crude oil reserves in Africa can be a conduit for a mutually profitable relationship.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, Morocco wants to counter Algeria's professed regional hegemony and advance its relationships with allies. This would allow Rabat to consolidate its anti-encirclement strategy and expand its power projection capabilities. In the post-Cold War era, Algeria's sphere of influence in the Maghreb has included Mauritania and to a lesser extent Tunisia, while Morocco likewise views Tunisia as a constructive partner, which leaves Libya as a wildcard that dovetails with Rabat's longstanding holistic links with the country. Thirdly, the role that Morocco's southern provinces play is important. The Polisario Front, for years aided and abetted by Algiers in bad faith, has been reduced as a force and Rabat would like to avoid the revitalisation of its separatist aspirations. As a result, Rabat has a strong preference in seeing partners in Libya that are not in the Gaddafist mould and respect its sovereignty – the latter also a concept its efforts have aimed to preserve within Libya.

Morocco's engagement in Libya has been most conspicuous through the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) of 2015, co-mediated by Morocco under the auspices of

<sup>21</sup> Souhail Karam, 'Gaddafi envoy holds talks in Morocco' 19 April 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/lib-ya-morocco-idAFLDE73I00B20110419>

<sup>22</sup> Antonino Occhiuto and Giorgio Cafiero, 'Why the downward spiral in Morocco-UAE relations?' 31 March 2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/03/31/why-the-downward-spiral-in-morocco-uae-relations/>

<sup>23</sup> "Country Analysis Brief: Libya" 19 November 2015, <https://www.eia.gov/international/overview/country/LBY>

the United Nations (UN). It was signed in 2015 in Skhirat and represented a significant success for Moroccan diplomacy. The LPA was an opportunity to bring actors together around a unity government - ultimately the Government of National Accord (GNA) - with Libya requiring a political settlement to move forward constructively. Rabat has maintained that, as in the words of its Minister of Foreign Affairs Nasser Bourita, the Libyan conflict is a "strategic nonsense and a no-win situation for all in the long run."<sup>24</sup> The LPA was also an attempt to offer a consensus-based solution to domestic ails that had already torpedoed internal organic peace processes. It was only a first step, and since then its gaps have regrettably been exploited in bad faith by adverse actors, both internally and abroad. Rabat's next notable soft power projection came in 2020; it organised several meetings in Bouznika and Tangier with



*Entrance to G5 Sahel Building*

representatives of institutions legitimised by the LPA. In Rabat's view, the LPA remains a sufficiently flexible and UNSC-endorsed framework for Libya's conflict resolution, a fact recognised by the UN's recent preparatory phase roadmap that states that it builds on the LPA "as a general framework for the political solution."<sup>25</sup> As a result, Rabat has aimed through solution-oriented mediation to facilitate headway on some existing stalemates in Libya via the deal's mechanisms, including Article 15 to manage sovereign positions. These meetings occurred after the Berlin Conference in January, which Morocco did not receive an invitation to – a myopic decision rued in the capital and likely an attempt to placate Libya's neighbour, Algeria.

<sup>24</sup> 'Libyan Dialogue is an Important Milestone that Transforms Years-long Impasse into Real Momentum: FM' 30 September 2020, <https://www.mapnews.ma/en/actualites/politics/libyan-dialogue-important-milestone-transforms-years-long-impasse-real-momentum>

<sup>25</sup> UNSMIL, 'Roadmap "For the Preparatory Phase of a Comprehensive Solution" ' 9 November 2020, [https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/lpdf\\_-\\_roadmap\\_final\\_eng.pdf](https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/lpdf_-_roadmap_final_eng.pdf)

Ultimately, Morocco has a deposition towards UN-backed and internationally-recognised institutions in Libya. While adverse efforts by internal and external spoilers have been a staple of Libya's conflict dynamics and political landscape, Morocco's open channels with all sides is indicative of its pragmatism and aim to support, not negative interference of which it has been critical. Furthermore, some aspects of the East-based counterrevolutionary Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) are in disharmony with Rabat's regional strategy. This includes its head Khalifa Haftar's reliance on Madkhali-Salafism, a brand of Islamism that clashes with Morocco's moderate Maliki-Sufism - a key part of its soft power - and his penchant for a structurally unstable autocrat model.

Additionally, a key backer of the LAAF, Egypt, and its President al-Sisi are aiming to establish better ties with Algeria, the location of al-Sisi's first official visit abroad after assuming office in June 2014.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, suspicions have emerged of coordination between Cairo and pro-Polisario circles, with the former refusing to support Morocco's stance on the issue and hosting Polisario delegations in 2015 and 2019.

### Moving Forward

A decade on from Libya's revolution, Morocco's foreign policy towards Libya is still dictated by an emphasis on the traditional dyad of security and stability - and therefore a representative political settlement. Rabat wants to see an equitable solution that unites institutions and turns the page on Libya's conflict, and that Libya becomes in a position to employ its considerable resources to progress and prosper. Unfortunately, festering tensions and the Sirte-Jufra line's consolidation by the LAAF and its allies, coupled with the new UN-backed Government of National Unity's (GNU) limitations, means a sustainable conflict resolution may remain elusive for the foreseeable future. The aim of some foreign backers also continues to be divide and rule, and military build-ups will not vanish overnight. As a result, Rabat's position is expected to remain flexibly steadfast; it will not budge on a democratic Libyan-Libyan solution, but its pragmatism means the particulars of this scenario are not fixed. With respect to the new UN-backed government, Rabat believes this momentum should be reinforced predominantly towards facilitating secure elections in December, when the issue of domestic legitimacy is scheduled to be resolved. However, as it knows too well, a transitional period does not necessarily go as planned. In any case, the objective for Morocco, and the basis of its positive neutrality, will remain the same: a successful political track and a thriving, stable Libya.

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<sup>26</sup> 'Egypt's Sisi make Algeria his first foreign trip, security tops agenda' 25 June 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/instant-article/idAFKBN0F01SZ20140625>





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