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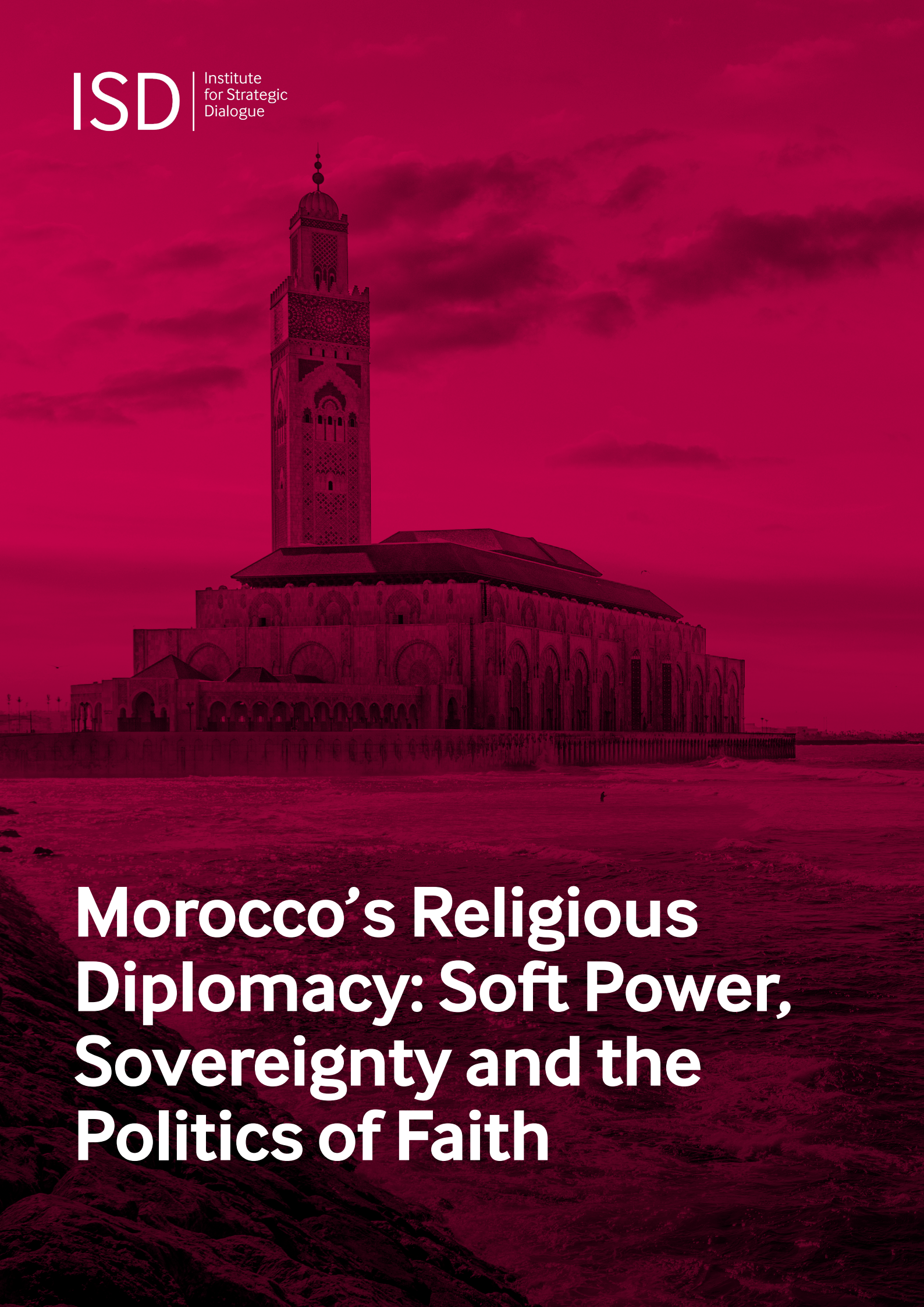

Morocco's Religious Diplomacy: Soft Power, Sovereignty and the Politics of Faith

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Introduction

Terrorist attacks in Casablanca in 2003[1] exposed vulnerabilities in Morocco's religious infrastructure. The country began a comprehensive programme of religious reforms, centralising authority, expanding religious reach and promoting a moderate discourse. These efforts extended beyond national borders, targeting Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe through institutions like the Mohammed VI Institute and the *Rabita Mohammedia* of Muslim scholarship.

This report seeks to portray this national religious infrastructure, often referred to as "Moroccan Islam". It comprises a unique combination of theological elements:

- The *Maliki* school of jurisprudence, universally accepted in Sunni circles,
- *Ash'ari* theology, seen as one of the "orthodox" versions of theology within Sunni Islam,
- Sufi spirituality, with its multiple networks of historic and well-established leaders.

By emphasising moderation, tolerance and spiritual depth, this model differs from more rigid or politicised interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism[2].

Moroccan Islam is also characterised by a unique symbiotic relationship between religion and the state. The king embodies a dual authority as both head of state and 'Commander of the Faithful' (*Amir al-Mu'minin*). This enables the state to project religious influence domestically and internationally. The king also leverages religious legitimacy through his claims of lineage to the Caliphs and Imams who succeeded the Prophet Mohammed.

Religious diplomacy has existed in various forms throughout history as a powerful tool to enhance states' diplomatic leverage. In recent decades, however, it has gained renewed attention as a quasi-formalised strategic persuasion in international relations. Morocco is a unique example of such a project where religion, state influence and foreign policy are deeply intertwined as the country seeks to position itself as a regional actor promoting a moderate form of Islam.

This report examines the ways in which Morocco instrumentalises its version of Islam as a diplomatic tool. It analyses the institutions, strategies and narratives underpinning Morocco's religious diplomacy, assessing its effectiveness in advancing national interests, countering extremism and shaping regional dynamics. By drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship and fieldwork, this study contributes to the growing literature on religion and international relations and offers insights into Morocco's model.

Methodology

The report combines an in-depth literature review spanning multiple disciplines (including international relations, religious studies and political science) with qualitative interviews and targeted surveys.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with experts from different fields. These included academics, Muslim scholars and government representatives such as the Secretary-General of the *Rabita Mohammedia*. To ensure accessibility and cultural relevance, bilingual questionnaires in both English and Arabic were drafted for respondents who preferred providing written answers. This approach allowed for a comprehensive, culturally sensitive analysis across diverse perspectives.

Part 1: Historical and political context

Religion in Morocco has long served as a fundamental pillar of national unity and political stability[3]. It is not merely a cultural or spiritual force but a central component of statecraft and governance. The Moroccan monarchy has traditionally positioned itself as the guardian of religious orthodoxy, relying on Islam as a tool to foster a cohesive sense of belonging among its citizens and to legitimise political authority.

The king's role as *Amir al-Mu'minin* ("the Commander of the Faithful") is central to this dynamic. The title is rooted in Islamic history and is not merely symbolic: it is a constitutional and theological designation that grants religious legitimacy, positioning the monarch as the supreme religious authority in the country. The fusion allows the king to act a religious authority and a political leader, reinforcing his influence across multiple domains. This is different to other Muslim-majority states where religious leadership is often separate from political power[4].

This framework has historical roots that date back to the *Idrissid* dynasty and has been reinforced through successive regimes. The *Maliki* school, with its emphasis on communal consensus and local customs, aligns well with Morocco's diverse cultural landscape. *Ash'ari* theology, known for its rationalist approach, provides a counterbalance to literalist interpretations of scripture. Sufism, with its focus on spiritual purification and inner transformation, adds a layer of mysticism that appeals to popular religiosity. Together, these elements create a religious identity that is both authentic and adaptable, capable of addressing contemporary challenges while remaining rooted in tradition.

Morocco's religious diplomacy can perhaps be best understood through the lens of the post-secular turn in international relations. Joseph Nye's concept of soft power (defined as the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce) provides a useful framework for analysing how Morocco uses religious identity, institutions and discourse to shape perceptions and build alliances[5].

"Aisha", a member of the *Murshidat* programme, however, offered a perspective ingrained in lived experience. As a *murshida* (a female religious guide), her insights are inspired by direct engagement with Moroccan women. Her position allowed her to observe how religious narratives are received, adapted and practiced on the ground. Her framing is likely shaped by a belief in 'one Islam' expressed through multiple adapted versions that respond to the different contexts and needs of local populations. Both Dr El Mostafa Rezrazi, crisis management and security studies professor at Mohammed VI Polytechnic University, and Mountassir Hamada, a scholar of political Islam, echoed this belief.

Part 2: Defining the model – identity, governance and religious influence

In the field of literature examining Moroccan Islam, religious infrastructure is defined as resting on four interrelated pillars: *Maliki* jurisprudence, *Ash'ari* theology, Sunni Sufism and the monarch as *Amir al-Mu'minin*. This combination is perceived to provide the engine of Morocco's domestic religious legitimacy and external projection. The experts interviewed for this report describe "four interdependent foundations" that have "produced a religious identity that is moderate, open, and firmly rooted" in national heritage, while enabling outward reach (training, networks and diaspora guidance).

This connects the dots to governance, with the king's role being a unifying religious reference presiding over the Supreme Council of *Ulama* (exclusive fatwa authority). At the same time, the king safeguards spiritual security, stabilising the religious field and protecting against factionalism and sectarian conflicts. These claims were reflected in multiple answers on our survey, where the king was portrayed as the "backbone", "guarantor of unity" and "protector from the '*fetwā* chaos'," while presenting this model as the centre of moderation and state-society alignment.

Ahmed Abadi, Secretary-General of the *Rabita Mohammedia*, suggested in an interview that the premise of jurisprudence that underwrites Morocco's reforms helps explain their model of moderate Islam. Abadi noted "sharia evolves with "places and times... conditions, customs and norms." Abadi argued that the binary of "text and context" challenges static interpretations and legitimises renewal and adaptation. This principle gives intellectual and religious legitimacy for policy-level adjustments (curricular revisions, centralised fatwa, imam/*murshidat* training) without appearing to directly challenge the text. In this context, Morocco's post-2003 consolidation can be seen as an example of that process, not a deviation from it. Abadi cites jurisprudential maxims such as "the rulings of Islam change by time and place" to demonstrate the inherent flexibility and dynamism within their understanding of jurisprudence. At the same time, Abadi seeks to root it within the particular space, i.e. a Moroccan context, as well as laying the foundation for an adaptive approach to policy by the state which is congruent with the religious authority.[6]

Scholars also caution against uncritical acceptance of Morocco's religious narrative. Hmimnat warned that religious diplomacy can become a mechanism of state control, reinforcing authoritarian structures and suppressing dissent[7]. Kaya and Drhimeur[8], and Nejjar[9] similarly described the tension between strategic interests and genuine religious engagement, a challenge Morocco must navigate carefully. These critiques underscore the need to examine both the strategic logic of religious diplomacy, and its normative implications and internal contradictions.

Moroccan Islam as a contested label and a shared practice

One recurring debate in the interviews focused on whether Morocco's external religious engagement is best grasped as modern religious diplomacy, or as the historic extension of domestic Sufi religious and political traditions. [10] Dr Rezrazi, the executive director of the Moroccan Observatory on Extremism and Violence, argued that both are true. The modern label includes strategic coordination (institutions, agreements and security synergies); the substance echoes older, transregional networks considered influential within and outside the country. These orders are levers of influence but also means to influence governments[11]. Another expert interviewee argued for a more historical interpretation, pointing to *bay□a* ("loyalty") traditions among West African Sufi elites as a long-standing relational substrate that modern programs (such as imam/*murshidat* training and scholarly foundations) reactivate in an updated form. The dual character, old roots with modern tooling, is precisely the source of Morocco's advantage, both in terms of religious and political legitimacy.

While most interviewees insisted on the existence of a distinct Moroccan Islam, one *Murshidat* member interviewed called for more precision. Using the terminology "Moroccan choices of religiosity", this frames the model as a theology rooted in the *Maliki* school that is attentive to customs and local practices[12] rather than a distinct creed separate to Islam's Sunni core. Moroccan Islam's uniqueness stems from how these choices were organised and sustained by institutions. This includes the politico-religious authority of the king as Amir al-Mu'minin and the long tradition of Sufi networks binding Morocco to the 'Greater Maghreb' and West Africa. Other respondents echoed this distinction: they noted a historical continuity (*Idrisis*, *Almoravids/Almohads*, *zawāyā*) alongside a modern institutional reality. These insights help to bring a sharper focus on the

defining characteristics of what was meant by Moroccan Islam as something concrete, rather than merely how it influences the nature of religious diplomacy as a subset of it (or an 'attitude' influenced by it).

This speaks to a vision of Islam rooted in centuries of theological heritage, both as high culture and in its scholarly tradition and across the country's many religious institutions, seminaries and places of learning, religious edicts, and fatwa. This historical dimension is in part encapsulated by its theological orientation (*Ash'ari*), a blend of logical and rational parameters to both temper and guide investigation into scriptural paradigms, and beliefs and parameters of "orthodoxy" (connected to the *Maliki* rite). It is a tradition with more than a millennium of learnings dealing with practical religious issues, social and political developments, and even navigating colonialism.[13] The *Junaydi Sufi* spiritual path also connects this approach to the many large, distinctly Sufi *turuq* ("ways") or orders. These are both hugely influential on the populations but were also significant in providing support, legitimacy and guidance to rulers and those in power.[14]

Interrogating the Moroccan model

While the Moroccan state presents its religious model as inherent to its system, some scholars argue that Moroccan Islam is not an ancient and organically distinct religious tradition but a colonial construction. Burke claims that what scholars and officials later called Moroccan Islam was largely produced through French colonial knowledge work rather than a preexisting and coherent national creed[15]. He insists that French ethnographers and policy bureaus, during the protectorate period from 1912 to 1956, assembled and reclassified disparate local practices, "*marabout* cults"[16], *sharifian* claims, Sufi networks and regional customary law into a single analytic object that made Morocco legible to metropolitan planners and diplomats[17]. He concludes that this discursive construction emerged amid the diplomatic and financial conjunctures surrounding the Moroccan Question (circa 1900–1912) and was institutionalised by the *Mission scientifique du Maroc*, the *Villes et Tribus* series and the colonial administration. This produced binaries (*makhzan/siba*, Arab/Berber, urban/rural), simplifying and re-shaping Moroccan social reality for governance[18].

Most Moroccan thinkers and writers, however, point to the existence of a localised intellectual and religious tradition that predates colonialism. This local tradition is an integral aspect of Islamic tradition. It includes the notion of the "practice of the people of Fez" (*Amal Ahl al-Fās*) as a specific way of interpreting religious scripture (*Ijtihād*) and adapting juridical rulings and decisions according to the prevailing custom, rather than relying exclusively on standard religious rules. It also includes strong consideration being given to the "commonweal" (*maslahah*), a localised practice of Islam that was distinctly not just Moroccan but shaped by local considerations, norms and public interests. All of this lends weight to it being a normative part of endogenous religion[19], rather than externally imposed by colonial powers. The prevailing nature of a localised religious tradition is further highlighted by the fact that these were the means often used to resist cultural colonialism (Western or from other forms of Islam[20]).

Burke further argues that the colonial invention of Moroccan Islam was not merely descriptive but performative. According to Burke, the categories created by French ethnographic practices became instruments of rule, informing legal regimes, education policies and the protectorate's strategies of indirect authority. They survived into postcolonial statecraft where they were reused by nationalist and monarchical projects[21]. These claims are rebutted by many academics and Morocco's local scholars belonging to said tradition.

A significant factor in moving this religious tradition from an implicit to a more explicit role was the 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks: five suicide attacks targeted restaurants, a hotel and Jewish cemetery in central Casablanca, killing 44 people and wounding hundreds of others. These attacks exposed the vulnerabilities within the country's religious substructures where radical groups and ideologies could form and freely operate. This prompted a comprehensive state-led reform of the religious landscape and discourse[2223]. These governmental measures did not stop at the national level. Seeking to establish theological authority and geopolitical relevance beyond state borders, Moroccan state officials have since promoted their religious model abroad, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe where large Muslim populations share historical, cultural and theological ties with the kingdom[24].

The Moroccan state is not the only actor that seeks to assert religious influence across the Muslim world through religious diplomacy [25]. Algeria promotes its own Sufi networks as a counterweight to Morocco's influence. Egypt relies on *Al-Azhar*'s global reputation and scholarly network[26] [27]. Turkey, through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), funds mosques and supports Islamic education abroad, often infused with neo-Ottoman symbolism.

Mohamed Abdelouahab Rafiqui, a Moroccan Islamologist who has extensively studied Salafi currents clashing with

the local religious habitus, explained in an interview that there were "fights and confrontations" predominately "between older generations that believed in "Moroccan Islam" and youth who embraced Salafism". He identified 2003 as the decisive year in which the state began to realise "that the religious field was not organised". He said that this prompted broad reforms that helped "reconstruct the religious field and religious identity." However, Rafiqui cautioned that the "competition from social media is very fierce". This concern was echoed by "Aisha", who argued that short-form video ecosystems now outpace legacy pamphleteering, "creat[ing] a disorderly religious framing" outside of institutional control. This testimony marks the shift towards social media platforms as a challenge to religious governance: doctrinal coherence can be curated on air; online, it is contested in real time[28].

Part 3: reforming institution – restructuring the domestic religious field

Building on post-2003 reforms initiated in response to the Casablanca bombings, Morocco undertook/initiated a comprehensive restructuring of its religious institutions. This included general authority, professionalising religious instruction and regulating discourse to reinforce the monarchy's spiritual leadership. These attacks exposed the vulnerabilities of Morocco's religious infrastructure and prompted a state-led effort to centralize religious authority, professionalize religious instruction and regulate religious discourse. The reforms were not merely reactive: they were part of a broader strategy to consolidate the monarchy's role as the ultimate religious authority and to protect the country from transnational ideological groups.

The reconfiguration of religious institutions was central to these reforms. The Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs (*Habous*) was given the power to oversee mosque management, religious education and the training of imams. The Supreme Council of Ulema was restructured to serve as the sole body authorized to issue fatwas; this eliminated competing sources of religious interpretation. The *Rabita Mohammedia of Ulema* emerged as a key intellectual hub, tasked with producing and disseminating religious knowledge aligned with state doctrine.

One of the most innovative aspects of these reforms was the inclusion of women in religious leadership. The introduction of *murshidat*, female religious guides trained to provide spiritual counselling and community education, marked a significant departure from traditional gender norms in Islamic institutions[29,30]. These moves sought to improve the state's legitimacy locally and internationally, reinforcing its narrative of promoting a tolerant and modern Islam. The *murshidat* programme reflects a broader effort to align religious governance with contemporary social values while maintaining strict state control over religious discourse[31].

The reforms also extended to legal and educational domains. Religious curricula were revised to emphasise values such as coexistence, tolerance, moderation and civic responsibility. Textbooks were updated, and new pedagogical frameworks were introduced to align religious instructions with national identity and belongingness to the Moroccan 'Ummah', or nation/people. These efforts were supported by a network of scholars and religious intellectuals who helped articulate the theological foundations of "Moroccan Islam". The result was a tightly controlled religious field in which the monarchy stood as the central node of authority and legitimacy[3233].

Many scholars have emphasized the symbolic and performative dimensions of these reforms. The king's role as 'Commander of the Faithful' is a functional position that allows him to shape religious discourse, intervene in theological debates and project spiritual leadership amongst his subjects. This dual role, political and religious, gives the monarchy a unique capacity to integrate domestic religious governance with foreign policy objectives. The king's religious legitimacy is a key asset in Morocco's diplomatic engagements, particularly in Muslim-majority countries[34].

In addition to its core theological curriculum, the programme also incorporates modules on comparative religion, civic engagement and conflict resolution, reinforcing Morocco's vision of religion as a tool for social cohesion. Graduates of the programme are expected to return to their countries and assume leadership roles in mosques, religious councils and educational institutions. In doing so, they help disseminate the Moroccan model of Islam and reinforce its theological stance against extremist interpretations.

In addition to the Imam training programme, Morocco has signed a series of bilateral religious agreements with African countries. These accords formalise cooperation in areas such as mosque construction, Quran distribution, religious education and scholarly exchange. They also provide a framework for institutional collaboration, allowing Morocco to extend its religious influence through official channels. For example, agreements with Mali and Senegal have led to the establishment of joint religious councils and the exchange of religious scholars, further embedding Morocco's religious model in the region[35].

The role of the king

The king's religious office operates as an integrator. Doctrinally, it establishes *Ash'ari* theology, *Maliki* jurisprudence and Sufi spirituality as the authorised reference framework. Institutionally, it coordinates the work of scholarly councils (*ulamā*), regulates the issuance of fatwās and oversees mosque administration. Diplomatically, it projects religious soft power by promoting training agreements, facilitating scholarly

exchanges and expanding outreach initiatives across Africa and Europe.[36]

Rezrazi claimed that situating fatwā competence exclusively in the Supreme Council "protects society" from what he described as "unregulated fatwas." The monarchy's legitimacy, rooted in the religious oath of fealty known as *baya*, binds religion, identity and political authority. "Aisha" provided examples of royal mediation in national debates (e.g. family law reform, language policy). She argued that the office's authority permits religiously grounded arbitration during polarized times. In the survey, entries repeatedly described the king as the guarantor, consolidating policy and creed as well as representing Morocco.

The phrase *Amir al-Mu'minin* literally translates to the "commander of the Faithful" and is often rendered as "Prince of the believers". It was used for the first time in historic records by an aide to the second Caliph of Islam Umar who found the term "successor to the successor to the prophet" unwieldy. Introducing the concept of the 'commander of the faithful' was significant for establishing the legitimacy of the ruler, whether they were a monarch or president. This is coupled with the lineage and heritage of the king, from the Prophet's family and as a direct descendent of his daughter Fatima: this claim is instrumental in challenging extremist narratives, which seek to delegitimise all political authorities in Muslim majority states, and in challenging the claim that Moroccan Islam is an invention without real authenticity.

In its multi-dimensional inscription of power, scholars have highlighted how the concept of *Amir ul-Muminim* serves to sustain existing power structures in Moroccan society[37]. In practice, this legitimacy is reproduced through a dense institutional system (including the Mohammed VI Institute, the *Rabita Mohammedia*, and the *Murshidat* program) which anchors religious authority in both historical symbolism and modern state structures. Interviewees emphasised that the title functions not as a mere honorific but as a mediating authority during societal religious polarisation. This could be seen during the *Mudawanna* reforms and in current family law debates. By acting as mediator between liberal and conservative ideological camps, the monarchy seeks to define the acceptable interpretive boundaries of Islam. According to Hashas, a professor at Tor Vergata University in Rome, the combination of historical lineage, institutional depth and the king's role as arbiter maintains the status quo: it situates Moroccan Islam within an "ancient aura", and ties Morocco's religious tradition to the everyday rules, institutions and educational structures of the modern state.

Gender and religious authority

Morocco's *murshidat* programme enhances women's visibility in religious spaces. However, it does not grant them theological leadership or interpretive authority: their roles are limited to guidance and social support, not religious decision-making. *Murshidat* operates within a state-controlled framework that restricts their speech and actions. Their empowerment is shaped by state agendas, particularly Morocco's effort to project a moderate Islamic image internationally. Despite its limitations, the *murshidat* programme reaches marginalised groups (e.g. women, youth and rural communities) and provides counselling, literacy education and ethical guidance. Their presence in mosques and public institutions contributes to a shift in public perception of female religious authority.

One interviewee indicated that there were around 1,200 *murshidat* by 2022 with plans for 2,000 by 2030. They pointed to placements across mosques, prisons, schools and civic associations which provide a hook for gendered religious and community-level prevention. Women had been "totally excluded" previously: although the current framework is "not perfect", it "gives access" and "empowers women" to address sensitive matters with other women. Another expert echoed the tangible visibility of female religious actors (from *murshidat* to female scholars in official councils); at the same time, they noted that their focus is more educational/social than interpretive, reflecting broader societal constraints. By emphasising the interplay of religious instruction, social work and a budding diplomatic role via international cohorts, the *murshidat* are presented as more than merely symbolic: they are embedded operators in a prevention-oriented ecology with gendered outreach increasingly integrated into delivery systems rather than treated as an add-on. Experts interviewed stressed pragmatic gains from the programme, including access for women to seek guidance on intimate matters, and visible female leadership in mosques, councils and programming. At the same time, they acknowledged structural limits (e.g. restricted interpretive authority or proportional under-representation).

Part 4: Religious diplomacy as geopolitical outreach – Morocco's Africa strategy

> "Africa must trust in Africa"
> *HM King Mohammed VI,*
> *Moroccan-Ivorian Forum, 2013*

Morocco's religious diplomacy in Africa reflects its broader soft power strategy, blending theological outreach with geopolitical ambition. Most observers agree that Morocco's Africa strategy is both expansive and deliberate; it involves a range of institutional, symbolic and diplomatic initiatives[38]. At its core, the strategy seeks to position Morocco as a central religious and therefore political authority in the region. By training imams, establishing religious institutes and engaging in interfaith dialogue, Morocco aims to counter extremist ideologies, foster regional stability and build strategic alliances. This religious outreach also serves to reinforce Morocco's political influence, economic partnerships and cultural leadership across sub-Saharan Africa.

The cornerstone of this strategy is the Imam training programme, housed at the Mohammed VI Institute in Rabat. This programme attracts students from across West Africa, Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and even European countries such as France[3940]. Students receive training in theology, pedagogy, communication and cultural sensitivity. Expert interviews and survey answers reflect the assumption that the Mohammed VI Institute is the operational backbone of Morocco's religious diplomacy model. The aim is to produce religious leaders who embody the Moroccan model of Islam and can counter the spread of ideologies that diverge from Morocco's doctrinal model.

Building on the domestic institutional reforms discussed above, Morocco extended its religious outreach through transnational networks such as the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Ulema[41]. The foundation organises conferences, publishes scholarly work and facilitates exchanges between stakeholders aimed at promoting "Moroccan Islam"[42]. At the same time, it seeks to counter what it sees as extremist interpretations that aim to build legitimacy through Salafi narratives. It serves as a theological platform as well as a diplomatic tool, allowing Morocco to assert its influence and leadership in "Islamdom", seeking influence within cultural institutions[43] and through alliances with African states[44].

Nonetheless, this strategy is also deeply political. Rachid[45] and Hmimnat[46] highlight how religious diplomacy is used to support Morocco's position on Western Sahara. By cultivating religious and political ties with African countries, Morocco succeeded in gaining immense diplomatic support and isolate the separatist Polisario Front. Religious diplomacy thus becomes a form of geopolitical manoeuvring, complementing economic and security initiatives. The king's personal involvement enhances the visibility and legitimacy of Morocco's religious diplomacy project through mosque inaugurations, Quran distribution and meetings with African religious leaders. Therefore, Morocco draws on its history as a hub of Islamic leaning, uses its religious networks to reinforce its influence, and presents these efforts as means to counter extremism and gain credulity with African states and Western partners.

Hmimnat warned that symbolic gestures and institutional outreach must be accompanied by genuine theological engagement and long-term capacity building[47]. Without this depth, the initiatives led by Morocco risk appearing superficial, limited and unsustainable over time, with a danger that the country creates a superficial religious network that lacks credibility and resilience. Additionally, scholars have warned that the political use of religious diplomacy may compromise the authenticity of Morocco's religious outreach[4849]. When religious diplomacy is seen as instrumentalised by the state, it may diminish or erode the moral authority of Morocco's religious institutions. This could in turn provoke skepticism among both local communities and international partners. In practice, this could also limit Morocco's ability to project soft power and even invite accusations that the kingdom's initiatives are manipulative.

Regional religious competition

Kaya and Drhimeur add another layer to this analysis by comparing Morocco's religious diplomacy with that of Turkey[50]. They argue that both countries use religion to engage diaspora communities and to assert regional influence. They add that Morocco's model is distinguished by its integration of the monarchy, religious legitimacy and doctrinal coherence[51]. This comparison highlights the competitive landscape of religious diplomacy in the Muslim world, where states vie for theological authority and geopolitical relevance.

Wainscott suggests that rather than propagating a specific theological doctrine, Moroccan Islam takes a more generalised moderate and pragmatic approach which

considers tradition and local dynamics. In this context, "what is exportable is the ability to be pragmatic."[52]

However, experts agree that the long-term success of Morocco's outreach will hinge on its ability to cultivate meaningful, enduring relationships with religious leaders beyond institutional formality. Symbolic gestures and institutional outreach must be accompanied by genuine theological dialogue and long-term capacity building. The risk of superficiality is real, especially if Morocco fails to cultivate loyal and well-integrated religious elites in Africa.

Religious influence beyond Africa

While Morocco's religious diplomacy in Africa has received considerable attention, its engagement with diaspora communities in Europe is equally strategic and deserves deeper analysis. Literature reveals that Morocco's religious outreach to its diaspora is not only about preserving cultural identity but also about extending state influence across borders. This transnational dimension is evident in the kingdom's efforts to regulate religious discourse among Moroccan communities in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK. This led to criticism from some European countries such as Belgium which has accused Morocco of infiltrating mosques[53]. This was strongly rebutted by the Moroccan government, which stated that the accusations were directed at Moroccans who were merely employees of the mosque. Subsequently, no charges had been made against them. In fact, despite further tensions and claims, none have been upheld. However, they have instead been used to apply other forms of pressure on issues such as irregular migration into Belgium[54].

Bruce[55] and Kaya and Drhimeur[56] argue that Morocco's diaspora policy is rooted in a logic of surveillance and symbolic control. Institutions such as the Hassan II Foundation and the European Council of Moroccan *Ulemas* are mobilised to maintain religious cohesion and prevent ideological fragmentations. These bodies provide religious instruction, sponsor cultural events and share religious materials that reflect the Moroccan model of Islam.

The king's role as Commander of the Faithful is projected beyond national borders through high-profile visits, mosque inaugurations and public prayers. These performative aspects of religious diplomacy are central to Morocco's soft power strategy, especially in the European context where Islam is often politicised and securitised.

Part 5: from strategy to execution – challenges in implementing the model

Expert interviews and survey answers highlight four key challenges for effective implementation of the "Moroccan Islam" project.

First, they pointed to an urgent need to strengthen multilingual and digitally native religious communication. Respondents consistently pointed to a gap on the global stage: Morocco lacks influential voices who can carry its doctrinal language into youth-dominated digital spaces. Building a network of credible and tech-savvy communicators connected to the Mohammed VI Institute and religious councils can help correct this imbalance.

Second, the idea of supervised plurality emerged as essential from respondents. Survey answers suggested that structured, bounded debate – e.g. through annotated fatwa discussions or tailored manuals – is essential for its implementation. This approach has the potential of maintaining a unified religious message that is relevant enough so that citizens do not drift toward outside or extremist foreign religious voices online.

Third, interviewees and survey respondents suggested that cross-ministerial integration should be tightened. Without buy-in across diplomatic, cultural, education and economic sectors, the model risks remaining symbolic. One expert interviewed identified a structural dissonance between religious institutions and other branches of the state. Ministries and religious councils operate with doctrinal clarity and institutional rhythm. However, other sectors (particularly political and diplomatic) often fail to internalise the religious literacy necessary to leverage the model's full potential. This gap blunts religious governance's impact and reflects a broader concern: the lack of strategic integration across government portfolios. Without a shared narrative, the model risks becoming effective in its own domain but disconnected from the broader institution of governance. Religious establishments may offer coherence, but without collaboration between different sectors, their influence remains partial.

Finally, leading voices in literature emphasised how religious prevention efforts must be paired with socio-economic initiatives to be effective. Rafiqui highlighted that radicalisation stems from multiple causes, underscoring the need for holistic programming. When imams or *murshidat* engage in prevention, they should also offer pathways to employment, civic engagement and youth entrepreneurship, he argued, transforming trust into tangible opportunity.

Interviews with experts, critics and practitioners point to a religious-diplomatic model whose credibility is based on doctrinal coherence, institutional orchestration and the integrating authority of the *Amir al-Mu'minin*. Its exportability stems from its root in both historical ties and modernised instruments. At the same time, its vulnerabilities lie in a tendency for over-centralisation, digital narrative competition and uneven cross-government adoption.

The *murshidat* programme illustrates the Moroccan model's adaptive capacity. It has moved from symbol to system, with tangible social dividends and soft-power reach, respondents noted. However, the Moroccan model is still bound by interpretive ceilings that may need re-negotiation to sustain momentum.

In practical terms, respondents see the path forward as less about inventing new pillars but more about deeper execution: the goal is to speak the world's languages online with trusted voices, invite plural debate within the frame, mainstream religious literacy across state portfolios and braid prevention with livelihoods. This is how a doctrinal "quadrilateral" seeks to be a societal flywheel at home and a durable soft-power asset abroad.

Part 6: Contextual challenges to the "Moroccan Islam" project

Beyond these implementation-oriented challenges, several broader intellectual and socio-political factors pose further obstacles for the effectiveness of Morocco's religious diplomacy project in both a domestic and regional context.

Intellectual tensions

There is a tension between building a shared sense of identity which is strongly felt across Moroccan society broadly speaking, while allowing for a diversity of identities, both culturally and religiously.[57] Culturally, the tension between Amizagh identity and Arab identity is significant despite a shared religion. Conflict over the Western Sahara has been ongoing since 1975[58]. Morocco linked its territorial integrity to a shared Sunni Islamic narrative, constitutionally grounded in the King's role and historically reinforced through narratives of allegiance between certain Sahrawi tribes and the monarchy[59]. Claims for Sahrawi separation are not framed solely as political demands but as challenges to a broader religious-national project. This shapes how Sahrawis are perceived and complicates claims to separation over territory, while also making it difficult to advance a unified religious agenda such as the Moroccan Islam project.

Secondly, the lack of uniformity in linguistic heritage between Arabic and Darījaadds leads to cultural conflicts between ethnic identities.[60]Nevertheless, a sense of Moroccan identity was key to the country's resilience against extremist recruitment at the peak of the Islamic State (IS) group's rise. Interviews, workshops, online discourse analysis and surveys in 2017 showed this sense of belonging to a single community was found across gender, class and tribal affiliations and throughout major cities and towns.[61]

On the cultural and religious level, Sunni Islam dominates with a distinct predominant form that is Sufi, *Ash'ari* and *Māliki*. At the same time, the rise of a publicly active Salafi[62] strand is shifting the nature of religious discourse from the "traditional" outlook to a more austere and scripturalist persuasion.[63]

This shift toward Salafism has been countered by loyalist and politically moderate sensibilities of many well-known and popular preachers[64]. They seek to differentiate[65] themselves from more radical and intellectually revolutionary Salafism and root themselves in a version of *Malikiism*, seeking to "graft" themselves onto the Moroccan religious-intellectual world view.

Domestic socio-political challenges

Economic and social issues naturally have an impact on the social wellbeing within a society. According to the Arab Barometer,[66] "58% of Moroccans appear to consider either the economy, the quality of public services or corruption the most important challenges for the country."[67] This has led to a youth movement which demands both a resolution to economic degradation which is causing them to suffer, both educationally and physically, and an improvement in their basic rights.[68] Like Algeria, Morocco previously managed such an uprising by successfully engaging them early on, such as during the Arab Spring.[69]

Regional challenges

There has been a long-standing conflict with Algeria that led to a freeze in diplomatic relations in 2021 (Algeria has taken in many refugees who have fled the Western Sahara[70]). Morocco managed to successfully gain recognition for its sovereignty over the Western Sahara by the United States, especially as the call for independence has lost momentum[71]. It has effectively presented itself as the "realistic" governors of the territory, receiving support and recognition. This is widely seen as a complex diplomatic manoeuvre engaging the US and an agreement with Israel (a deal which effectively relied on recognising the state in exchange for recognition of Morocco's sovereignty).[72]

This creates its own challenges especially considering the ongoing war in Gaza [7374]. Morocco has joined other Arab countries in condemning Israel's actions in the region; it has been particularly critical of speeches describing a "Greater Israel", describing it in a joint statement as a "flagrant violation of International law."[75]

Conclusion

This report has examined how the Moroccan state uses religious diplomacy to advance national interests, counter extremism and build regional alliances. Through institutions like the Mohammed VI Institute and the *Rabita Mohammedia of Ulema,* Morocco has implemented a model of Islam that emphasises moderation, tolerance and spiritual depth. This model has been exported to Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe, where it serves both theological and geopolitical purposes.

The expert interviewees credit the project of Moroccan Islam with three core strengths:

- **Coherence of reference**: Having one religious authority reduces interpretive drift and enables consistent planning in education, sermons and media.
- **Institutional articulation**: From central fatwa to training channels and media curation, the pieces align, which is why sectarian fragmentations is lower than in neighbouring settings.
- **Symbolic leadership**: The *Amir al-Mu'minin* office grants convening power at home and credibility abroad. ""Aisha's" description of the king as "protector of unity" illustrate why Morocco can mediate sensitive debates and negotiate religious partnerships externally.

The historical and political context of Morocco's religious diplomacy reveals a complex interplay between theology, governance and international strategy. Religion in Morocco is not a fringe concern; it is a central bloc around which national identity and political legitimacy are constructed. As previously noted, Morocco's religious identity is anchored in the *Maliki–Ash'ari–Sufi* framework. Building on his role as *Amir al-Mu'minin,* the king actively shapes religious discourse and projects spiritual leadership, reinforcing the monarchy's centrality in both domestic and foreign policy[76]. As Morocco continues to navigate the challenges of regional competition, ideological fragmentation and global pressures, its religious diplomacy will remain a key instrument in shaping its national and international trajectory.

Morocco's religious diplomacy faces internal contradictions stemming from the tension between its religious values and the aspirations of Salafi jihadist movements. While the state promotes a normative view of 'moderate Islam', it is juxtaposed with the beliefs of jihadist groups which exploit religious narratives to justify violence. The normalisation of relations with Israel has sparked debate within Moroccan society. Critics argue it undermines Morocco's commitment to justice and solidarity with the Palestinian cause. This tension reflects a broader crisis of legitimacy that affects the reception of Morocco's religious diplomacy.

Additionally, the centralisation of religious authority may stifle theological diversity and suppress alternative interpretations of Islam. The challenge is to balance strategic interests with genuine religious engagement, ensuring that Morocco's outreach is not seen as merely transactional or opportunistic.

At the heart of the project is a recurring tension: the desire for religious unity often comes at the expense of intellectual and spiritual diversity. Several respondents caution that such unity, while seemingly stabilising, can become a mechanism of constraint. One expert warned that the "centralised, standardised model" risks flattening the rich and local Sufi expressions that are foundational to the tradition itself. The challenge is to ensure it remains flexible enough to accommodate pluralism. Religious coherence must not become a tool of erasure but one that lets diverse voices resonate without being silenced.

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Appendix

Interview Questions:

- How would you define "Moroccan Islam"? What distinguishes their approach to Islam from other places?
- What role does the title "Prince/Leader of the Faithful" play, alongside religious institutions (such as those under Muhammad VI), in the lens of Shariah, in tackling extremist thought?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of Moroccan "religious diplomacy"? How would they respond to political criticism beyond being merely spiritual?
- What is the influence of the Murshidat programme on religious expression and the role of women? Does it have a tangible reality, or is it merely a technical formality?
- What are the biggest challenges facing Morocco in reconciling its religious origins and partnering with other institutions—specifically in its relations with other states such as Algeria, Turkey, or the Gulf states?

Arabic version:

- كيف تعرّفون «الإسلام المغربي»، وما الذي يميّزه عن النماذج الإسلامية الأخرى في المنطقة؟
- ما دور لقب «أمير المؤمنين» والمؤسسات الدينية (مثل معهد محمد السادس) في تعزيز الشرعية ومواجهة الفكر المتطرف؟
- ما هي نقاط القوة والضعف في الدبلوماسية الدينية المغربية، وكيف تردّون على الانتقادات التي تعتبرها أداة سياسية أكثر من روحية؟
- ما أثر برنامج المرشدات على الخطاب الديني ودور المرأة: هل هو تمكين حقيقي أم تمثيل رمزي؟
- ما أبرز التحديات التي يواجهها المغرب في التوفيق بين الأصالة الدينية وترويج نموذج مؤسساتي، خاصة عند المقارنة مع دول مثل الجزائر أو تركيا أو

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