GLOBAL GOVERNANCE & SOVEREIGNTY FOUNDATION

Morocco Radar

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG
Maroc - Mauritanie

POLICY BRIEF °04

Morocco's Middle East Positioning: Balancing Gulf Partnerships and Regional Tensions

GEOPOLITICAL MONITOR

Morocco's foreign policy in the Middle East, particularly with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, is shaped through historical ties, strategic interests, and economic imperatives. These ties are rooted in shared monarchical governance, cultural affinities, and mutual security concerns. The Gulf's strategic importance to Morocco lies in its economic weight and geopolitical influence. The GCC countries, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman, are major oil and gas producers, controlling approximately 20 % of the world's oil supply through the Strait of Hormuz, a critical chokepoint for global energy markets. Morocco, a net energy importer, benefits from Gulf investments and aid, which bolster its economic diversification and infrastructure development. The UAE, in particular, has emerged as a pivotal partner, with significant foreign direct investment (FDI) in Morocco's real estate, tourism, infrastructure, and renewable energy sectors. In 2024, the UAE solidified its position as a leading investor in Morocco, with FDI stock reaching approximately 30 billion US Dollars, reflecting a significant increase from 14 billion US Dollars in 2021. A pivotal moment in this relationship was King Mohammed VI's official visit to the UAE in December 2023, at the invitation of President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Held at the Qasr Al Watan Presidential Palace in Abu Dhabi, the visit resulted in the signing of a joint declaration titled "Towards an Innovative, Renewed, and Consolidated Partnership between the Kingdom of Morocco and the UAE", accompanied by several Memoranda of Understanding (MoU's).

Recent geopolitical shifts, such as the Abraham Accords in 2020, have promoted greater convergence between Morocco and the UAE. Morocco's normalization of relations with Israel, brokered by the United States and resulting in its recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara, follows the UAE's diplomatic strategy, reinforcing a shared alignment with US interests and a pragmatic approach to regional dynamics. The broader Middle Eastern context, marked by competition between regional powers like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, and global powers like the US and China, is capital in Morocco's strategy. The UAE's shift towards diplomacy and soft power since 2021, moving away from military interventions, aligns with Morocco's preference for stability and economic partnerships.

Signals to Decode

The deepening of the UAE-Morocco relations is evident in diplomatic and economic milestones. The UAEs opening of a consulate in Laayoune, in October 2020 was a significant support of Morocco's territorial integrity. This move, coupled with UAE-investments through sovereign wealth funds like the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) and Mubadala, integrates Morocco into the UAEs economic diversification strategy. King Mohammed VI's speech at the 2015 GCC-Morocco Summit in Riyadh laid the foundation for a multipolar approach to Morocco's Gulf relations. The King advocated for a strategic partnership that transcends traditional aid, focusing on mutual investments and joint ventures to address global challenges like energy transitions and regional instability.

For instance, UAE-investments in Morocco's renewable energy sector, such as the Noor Solar Power Complex, support Morocco's goal of achieving 52 % renewable energy capacity by 2030. Second, Morocco's neutrality in intra-GCC dynamics is a strategy to maintain flexibility. During the 2017 Qatar blockade, Morocco's decision to send food supplies to Qatar, despite the Saudi-UAE-led blockade, preserved its relations with all GCC states. This approach ensures continued access to diverse Gulf investments, with Qatar's FDI in Morocco contributing significantly to bilateral economic ties, as evidenced by the 2024 ministerial discussions aimed at reinforcing trade and investment cooperation. On another hand, the developments around the Abraham Accords have reshaped Morocco's Gulf alignment. By normalizing ties with Israel, Morocco has adopted a pragmatic approach, securing US support while strengthening economic ties with Gulf partners. This strategic decision reflects Morocco's adaptation to the regional influence of the United States. The US has solidified its role as the preferred supplier of weapons and arsenals to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, with arms sales to the GCC totaling 138 billion US Dollars between 2017 and 2021. At the same time, Morocco facilitated a substantial US commitment to its defense capabilities. In December 2020, shortly after the agreement with Israel and the US recognition of the Moroccan Sahara, the US approved a 1 billion US Dollars arms sale to Morocco, including precision-guided munitions, Apache helicopters, and HIMARS rocket systems, significantly bolstering Morocco's defense strategies. By leveraging these alignments, Morocco not only strengthens its defense capabilities and economic growth but also enhances its role as a middle power.

Does Morocco have a Role to Play?

The analysis of these combined factors refers to Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which argues that states are so interdependent that their security issues cannot be analyzed or resolved in isolation. Within the framework of this Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), Morocco emerges as a middle power with significant influence in the MENA region, particularly in its relations with the Gulf. Middle powers occupy a position between small and great powers, exerting influence primarily within their region through advantageous geography, cultural ties, and diplomatic agility. Morocco's strategic location, monarchical stability, and proactive foreign policy position it as a pivotal actor in the Gulfs security and economic landscape. Morocco's role as a mediator is evident in its neutral stance during intra-GCC disputes, such as the 2017 Qatar crisis, where it avoided taking sides to preserve economic and diplomatic ties. The neutrality position, nurtured by Morocco, gives credibility to the Kingdom among the GCC. Morocco's participation in Gulf-led security initiatives, such as the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, until 2019 and the anti-Islamic State coalition, further demonstrates its role as a security partner, bolstered by military cooperation agreements with the UAE, including joint training programs, and ongoing discussions for the transfer of 30 Mirage 2000-9E fighter jets to the Royal Moroccan Air Force (RMAF) by 2027. Economically, Morocco serves as a gateway for Gulf investments into Africa, leveraging its "Gateway to Africa" strategy to align with the UAEs ambitions for continental influence. Moroccan companies have reciprocated, with outward FDI to the UAE rising from 525 million Moroccan Dirhams in 2018 to 1.55 billion Moroccan Dirhams in 2021, and continuing to expand through 2024, as shown by the 2023 UAE-Morocco Joint Economic Committee (JEC) session's commitment to double bilateral investment exchanges by 2030. This mutual economic engagement, exemplified by the UAE's significant investments in Morocco, strengthens the kingdom's position as a regional hub, facilitating trade and investment flows between the Gulf and Sub-Saharan Africa. A key example is the UAE's financial and technical contribution to the 25 billion US Dollars African-Atlantic Gas Pipeline from Nigeria to Morocco. Morocco's diplomatic alignment with the Gulf states opens for strategic leverage within the MENA region. However, the Iranian challenge, marked by Morocco's 2018 severance of diplomatic ties with Tehran over its alleged support for the Polisario Front, underscores the complexities of countering Iran's regional ambitions.

Points of Vigilance

First, tensions with Iran pose a significant risk, driven by Iran's asymmetric response capabilities and alleged support for the Polisario Front. Morocco's severance of diplomatic ties with Iran in 2018, citing Tehran's backing of the Polisario via Hezbollah, highlighted Iran's efforts to go against Morocco's territorial integrity. Iran's asymmetric strategies, including proxy warfare and drone supplies, were unveiled with reports in 2024 suggesting Iranian training of Polisario fighters through Syrian intermediaries. These actions threaten Morocco's security, particularly along the Southern border, and complicate its Gulf alignments, as Saudi Arabia and the UAE view Iran as a primary regional adversary, within the framework of the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT).Morocco's silence during the 2025 attacks on Iran's nuclear program facilities, signals the status quo since Morocco's position, insisting that any normalization would require Iran to halt support for Polisario and to cease any interference in North and West African affairs. To counter Iran's influence, Morocco has leveraged its African Union membership, securing recognition of its Moroccan Sahara sovereignty from over 20 African states since 2020. However, Iran's expanding proxy network in the Sahel, including cultural outreach in Mauritania, stresses the persistent challenge of managing regional destabilization efforts.Second, maintaining European partnerships while deepening Gulf ties presents a delicate balancing act, as Gulf partnerships often represent a counter-model to European economic and political frameworks. Europe, particularly France and Spain, remain Morocco's primary trading partner, with EU-Morocco trade reaching 60 billion US Dollars in 2024, underpinned by long-standing agreements like the EU-Morocco Association Agreement. In contrast, Gulf investments, such as the UAE's 30 billion US Dollars FDI, prioritize rapid development, offering an alternative to Europe's regulatory and conditioned frameworks. Morocco's increasing reliance on Gulf capital, particularly in infrastructure and renewable energy, could be framed as a shift away from the EU. To sustain its strategic leverage, Morocco must diversify its engagements, ensuring Gulf partnerships complement rather than undermine its European ties, which are crucial for trade and diplomatic support.

OPPORTUNITIES & RISKS

Opportunities

Economic Diversification through UAE Investments

The UAE's substantial foreign direct investment (FDI) in Morocco's renewable energy, real estate, infrastructure, and telecommunications sectors significantly bolsters Morocco's efforts to diversify its economy away from traditional sectors like agriculture and phosphate exports. A potent example is the deal signed in May 2025, involving a consortium of the Mohammed VI Investment Fund, UAE's TAQA, and Morocco's Nareva, to construct four desalination plants in Tangier, Nador, Tiznit, and Tan-Tan, with a combined annual capacity of 900 million cubic meters. The 2025 Morocco-UAE consortium for water security and energy independence, valued at 2 billion US Dollars, exemplifies this commitment, focusing on sustainable development projects that align with Morocco's Vision 2030 to achieve a balanced and resilient economic framework. Additionally, Etisalat, a leading Emirati telecommunications company, holds a majority stake in Maroc Telecom, Morocco's premier telecommunications firm. These investments not only provide capital but also facilitate technology transfers and expertise sharing, as seen in projects like the Noor Solar Power Complex, which has positioned Morocco as a leader in renewable energy in the MENA region. Morocco's ambition to become a renewable energy hub is amplified through partnerships like the UAE's TAQA and Morocco's Nareva deal, which aims to expand solar and wind energy capacity to support Morocco's goal of 52 % renewable energy by 2030.

UAE Partnership as a Counter-Model

The UAE's partnership with Morocco offers a strategic alternative to Western economic and political models, providing flexible investment frameworks and potential support for major projects like the Nigeria Morocco Atlantic Gas Pipeline. Unlike Western partnerships, which often impose regulatory and governance conditions, the UAE's 30 billion US Dollars FDI in Morocco prioritizes rapid development, aligning with Morocco's economic diversification goals. Potential UAE investments in the Atlantic Gas Pipeline, a 25 billion US Dollars project aimed at transporting Nigerian gas to Europe via Morocco, could accelerate Morocco's energy security and position it as a key energy hub in Africa. This partnership reduces Morocco's reliance on Western financial frameworks, offering greater autonomy in strategic projects while leveraging UAE's expertise in energy infrastructure.

African Market Access

The UAEs' 59.4 billion US Dollars investments in Africa over the past decade complement Morocco's "Gateway to Africa" strategy, which aims to establish the Kingdom as a conduit for economic engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa. Through the Gulf partnerships, Morocco expands its economic presence in key sectors such as trade, infrastructure, and finance, particularly in West and Central African markets. Moroccan companies, such as OCP Group and Attijariwafa Bank, could capitalize on UAE-backed initiatives to penetrate African markets through joint ventures. By bridging Gulf and African economies, Morocco fosters sustainable growth and reinforces its strategic influence across the continent, solidifying its role as a regional hub.

Risks:

Geopolitical Entanglement

Morocco's alignment with the UAE and Saudi Arabia increases its exposure to geopolitical entanglement, risking regional conflict spillover, proxy competition, and security commitment pressures. Participation in Gulf-led initiatives positions Morocco within anti-Iran coalitions, heightening the threat of retaliation through Iran's asymmetric strategies, notably its alleged support for the Polisario Front in the Sahara. Reports from 2024 indicate Iran provided training to Polisario fighters via Syrian intermediaries, signaling a potential proxy conflict extending into North Africa. Moreover, Gulf expectations for increased military contributions could overextend Morocco's resources.

Economic Vulnerabilities

A decline in global oil prices, which historically affects Gulf economies, could reduce UAE's investment capacity, as seen during the 2014-2016 oil price slump when GCC FDI inflows to Morocco dropped by 12 %. Such fluctuations threaten projects critical to Morocco's Vision 2030, including the 25 billion US Dollars Atlantic Gas Pipeline, which depends on sustained foreign investment to achieve energy security and export capabilities. Moreover, over-dependence on Gulf capital risks crowding out domestic investment and skewing economic priorities toward Gulf-aligned sectors, potentially undermining Morocco's trade diversification efforts with Europe. This economic exposure highlights the need for Morocco to balance Gulf partnerships with broader international economic engagements to mitigate the risk of sudden capital withdrawal or shifting Gulf priorities.

Regional Backlash Risks

Morocco's deepening ties with the UAE and Saudi Arabia expose it to regional backlash risks, as hostile voices may exploit these relationships to undermine Morocco's position. Algeria, a regional rival, could leverage Morocco's Gulf alignment to rally support among non-aligned African Union states, portraying it as prioritizing Gulf interests over African solidarity, potentially weakening Morocco's diplomatic gains on the Moroccan

Sahara. Iran's alleged support for the Polisario Front, could be considered as an asymmetric response to Morocco's firm stance regarding Iran.

FORESIGHT

Looking ahead, a plausible scenario envisions Morocco transforming its strained relationship with Syria from one exploited for hostile actions, such as Syria's alleged role in facilitating Polisario Front trainings, into a strategic partnership. Following a hypothetical political transition in Syria that reduces Iran's influence, especially following the apparent rapprochement of Syria's new government with Saudi Arabia, Morocco is showing willingness to start on a new footing with the new Syrian regime. Morocco's potential strategic partnership with Syria highlights its capacity to reposition its Middle East presence, as it navigates regional rivalries. Morocco's pragmatic approach positions it as a pivotal actor in the evolving multipolar MENA landscape, contributing to discussions on regional dynamics, often in partnership with the GCC countries.

Global Governance & Sovereignty Foundation

5 rue Ibn Tofaïl. Les Orangers,
10060, Rabat
Maroc

amoutaib@ggs.foundation
+212 537 73 45 13

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE & SOVEREIGNTY FOUNDATION

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

N. 24 Angle Av. Abdelkrim Benjelloun et Rue
Mly. Yaacoub, B.P. 559 Hassan-Rabat
10010, Rabat, Maroc

steven.hoefner@kas.de
+212 537 76 12 32 / 33

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG
Maroc - Mauritanie