

Policy
brief

°06

Assessing Morocco's Sports Strategy: Football as a driving force

GEOPOLITICAL MONITOR

Over the last fifteen years, Morocco has used sports as a key tool in its national policy. This shift started with the 2008 "Assises Nationales du Sport" in Skhirat. There, a Royal Letter described sports as a way to engage youth, build national unity, and drive economic growth. It also aimed to show Morocco as a modern, stable, and influential country worldwide. This plan has led to a string of successes that have changed Morocco's place in global sports. The Atlas Lions made history by reaching the semi-finals at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. They were the first African and Arab team to do so. This sparked a national realization about the power of sports in geopolitics. Then came the U-23 team's bronze medal at the 2024 Paris Olympics. Most recently, the U-20 team won the 2025 FIFA U-20 World Cup in Chile. They beat Argentina in the final after knocking out powerhouses like Brazil, Spain, France, and the United States. These wins aren't just about sports. They're the result of a long-term plan investing in youth, infrastructure, and institutions, all starting from the Skhirat declaration.



Signals to Decode

A few key developments show how Morocco's sports strategy is evolving and what it means for bigger national goals. First, the setup for Moroccan sports has become much more professional since 2008. The Mohammed VI Football Complex in Salé opened in 2019 for about €60 million Euros. It now hosts all 25 Moroccan national teams and stands as a top technical center worldwide. The Royal Moroccan Football Federation (FRMF), led by Fouzi Lekjaa since 2014, has grown from a basic sports body into a smart tool for sports diplomacy. It has signed deals with 47 African football federations. These provide influence through help with infrastructure, staff training, and CAF-approved stadiums for countries that need them.

Second, the geopolitical side of Morocco's sports policy became clear. Morocco rejoined the African Union in 2017 after 33 years away. After that, it expanded football diplomacy to build ties with English-speaking African countries that often side with South Africa. The FRMF's partnerships go beyond sports.

They support broader goals, like Morocco's stance on the Sahara issue through changes in CAF rules. Lekjaa's election as CAF's third vice-president in 2017 ended a 15-year gap from the CAF Executive Committee. It gave Morocco a way to push its interests, including a 2021 rule change that limits CAF membership to UN-recognized states. Morocco hosting events like the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) and in 2026 the third consecutive Women's AFCON, the Women's Under-17 World Cup 2029, and the 2030 FIFA World Cup shows how football and sports investments turn into real influence. Similar efforts can be seen in athletics (Diamond League Meetings, African Games 2019), golf (PGA Champions Tour), or tennis (ATP Tour). Emerging plans include a potential Formula 1 Grand Prix circuit near Tangier and rumors of an Olympic bid, which would push for a more diversified multi-sports infrastructure.



Does Morocco have a Role to Play?

Morocco has clearly carved out a role for itself, but it remains to be seen how sustainable this is. In football, the national team's success has made it a leader for African and Arab football. This gives Rabat strong soft power. Off the field, Morocco is turning this into a position as a partner for sports and infrastructure across Africa. The Mohammed VI Sports Complexes host training for other African athletes. They act as tools for sports diplomacy, backing up political and economic moves on the continent. This model reminds of the Qatar Aspire Academy that influences sports diplomacy on an elite global level since 2004. Outside Africa, Morocco's joint hosting of the 2030 FIFA World Cup with Spain and Portugal is a first-of-its-kind cross-continent partnership. It could change how big events are run. This setup links Africa and Europe, the Global North and South. If it works, the Morocco-Spain-Portugal approach could become a model for future Olympics and World Cups. It would spread costs, benefits, and prestige while cutting risks for single hosts. Morocco's success in building top facilities and organizing events, starting with the 2025 AFCON as a test run, will decide if its model catches on or stays limited.



Points of Vigilance

Football's focus has brought quick gains in geopolitics and national pride, making it the main driver. But this heavy emphasis calls for care. Morocco needs to watch out for the "white elephant" problem that has hit past World Cup and Olympic hosts. Big stadiums can turn into costly burdens if plans for the time after the event aren't clear. Building costs are just 20-30% of total expenses over time. Running, maintaining, and using them decide if they help benefit their surrounding communities or drain funds. Morocco requires designs that mix in commercial, cultural, and community spaces with sports. South Africa's 2010 World Cup stadiums, some now barely used, offer a warning. Planners need solid legacy plans for each site, including ways to repurpose them, before building ends. Another key concern is avoiding a single-sport focus that pulls too many resources from other areas, like athletics where Morocco has a strong history, or new sports. These are key for a balanced national sports mix.

OPPORTUNITIES & RISKS



Opportunities



Economic Transformation through Sports Tourism:

The 2030 FIFA World Cup sets Morocco up to ride a wave in global tourism. Data from the 2022 Qatar World Cup showed online searches for Morocco jumped five times after the Atlas Lions' semi-final run. This led to lasting tourism growth. Morocco saw 17.4 million visitors in 2024, passing Egypt as Africa's top spot. The World Cup could speed up the goal of 26 million visitors. It would bring in new types of tourists and longer stays. Adding 40,000 hotel rooms to hit 330,000 by 2030 creates jobs in building and hospitality.



Continental Leadership and Institutional Influence:

Morocco's sports diplomacy opens doors to more sway in African groups beyond CAF. As host of the Africa Investment Forum and with sports ties to 47 countries, Morocco can turn athletic links into wider economic and political alliances. The Mohammed VI Football Academy is a model others want to copy. This creates chances to export Moroccan know-how in training and, building soft power.



Infrastructure Legacy and Urban Development:

The almost 1 billion US Dollars spent on upgrading and building stadiums ensures great hosting and leaves modern facilities. These could boost local economies and tourism in places like Benslimane, Fez, or Tanger. The 2030 FIFA World Cup speeds up big infrastructure projects that would take decades otherwise. It reshapes Morocco's land connections and economy. Within five years, the 430 kilometer long Kenitra-Marrakech high-speed rail line will be completed. It is part of a broader 10.3 billion US Dollars plan to link 43 cities by 2040. The needs for convenient travel options for millions of sports tourist speeds these plans significantly.



Risks:



Mono-Sport Vulnerability and Talent Diversion:

Football taking most resources creates weaknesses that hurt overall sports growth in Morocco. The focus on funding, media, and business in football pulls talent from other sports where Morocco is strong. Athletics has given Morocco steady Olympic medals but faces shortfalls in finding rural talent and coaching outside top spots.[SH4] If football performances decline, whether through generational talent gaps or competitive failures, Morocco risks having sacrificed diversified excellence for mono-sport fragility.



Financial Sustainability and White Elephants:

Past mega -events show a pattern: quick economic boosts, then slowdowns as building jobs end, tourism dips back, and maintenance costs rise. Brazil's 2014 FIFA World Cup left unused stadiums and missed tourism goals. Morocco's smaller spending compared to Qatar's 200 billion US Dollars lowers risks, but it is still a big commitment for Morocco's economy.



Reputational Warfare and Digital Vulnerability:

Hosting big events puts Morocco in the global spotlight. This opens it to attacks like smear campaigns, fake news, and hacks aimed at damaging its image and operations. The 2022 Qatar World Cup showed how hosts face organized efforts, often with political aims. Cyberattacks represent an equally serious threat: critical infrastructure supporting tournament operations, ticketing systems, transportation networks,

stadium security, broadcast facilities, could be targeted by state or non-state actors seeking to disrupt the event or extract ransoms. The reputational damage from a major cybersecurity breach, data leak exposing sponsor or FIFA communications, or successful disinformation campaign could be more devastating than physical security incidents, as digital narratives achieve global reach instantaneously and persist indefinitely in search algorithms and social media ecosystems.

FORESIGHT

Morocco's sports path since the 2008 Skhirat Assises shows a country that has smartly turned sports wins into geopolitical power. Football has been the main way to gain influence in Africa and prestige worldwide. The 2030 FIFA World Cup is both the peak of this plan and a key turning point. It will show if Morocco's investments pay off long-term or become costly reminders of short-lived success. By 2035, the real test will be moving beyond football reliance. The most likely outcome is strong football leadership with some wins in sports like athletics and boxing, backed by focused programs. The Qatar Aspire Academy model has worked well, creating champions in athletics, swimming, and gymnastics through talent spotting, top coaching, and combined school-sports training. Morocco could adapt this, using its football setup to build multi-sport centers that find and develop talent nationwide. But without shifting resources and building grassroots sports, the dream of Morocco as a full sporting power stays unfinished. The big question is whether the government and sports groups can create a system where football's profits fund and sustain other sports.

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