

## Morocco's Religious Diplomacy at a crossroads

## GEOPOLITICAL MONITOR

The contemporary Islamic world faces an acute leadership vacuum characterized by sectarian polarization, the delegitimization of traditional religious authorities, and the proliferation of transnational extremist movements. This fragmentation has created an unprecedented opportunity structure for states possessing credible religious capital to project influence beyond their territorial boundaries. Morocco's religious diplomacy emerges within this context as a deliberate strategic response to different converging dynamics: The erosion of traditional regional organizations, such as the Arab League; the intensification of Saudi-Iranian competition for Islamic legitimacy, the weakening of traditional structures across Africa and beyond, and Europe's urgent search for partner states capable of countering radical narratives among diaspora communities. Unlike oil-rich Gulf monarchies that deploy financial resources, or revolutionary Iran that exports ideological commitment, Morocco leverages its unique position as custodian of a millennium-old Islamic scholarly tradition, combined with institutional continuity under the Alaouite dynasty's Commandership of the Faithful. This religious soft power serves multiple objectives simultaneously: enhancing Morocco's diplomatic standing in Africa and Europe, consolidating soft power through religious diplomacy and the diffusion of its training model, and domestically anchoring the monarchical positioning as guardian of Islam al-Wasatiyyah (the Quranic principle of the "middle way" (al-wasatiyyah), rooted in the verse designating Muslims as a "justly balanced community"), cemented in Maliki jurisprudence, Ash'ari theology, and Al Junaid's Tassawuf. The Kingdom's religious diplomacy thus can be considered an investment in symbolic capital that transforms historical assets like Sufi brotherhoods or the Qarawiyyin tradition into contemporary geopolitical instruments.



## Signals to Decode

Morocco's establishment of the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Ulema in 2015 marks a decisive shift from ad hoc religious engagement to institutionalized religious diplomacy. This foundation, alongside the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams in Rabat, demonstrates Morocco's ambition to function as a regional religious authority capable of certifying Islamic knowledge and practice. The Institute has trained over 2,000 imams from Mali, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, France, and Tunisia since its inception, operating on a model that combines traditional Maliki jurisprudence with courses on citizenship and counter-radicalization. This professionalization shows Morocco's understanding that religious influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

requires not merely scholarly legitimacy but bureaucratic capacity to deliver standardized programs at scale. The curriculum emphasizes the Asharite creed and Maliki legal school while explicitly rejecting Salafist literalism, framing Moroccan Islam as intrinsically balanced. Morocco's proven capacity to deliver counter-radicalization training at scale, addresses a critical European need: most European states lack both the Islamic scholarly infrastructure and the political legitimacy to train imams domestically without accusations of state interference in religion. This has pushed some European states, to increasingly outsource the religious formation of their Muslim populations to partner countries like Morocco rather than develop autonomous training capacity. European governments calculate that security anxieties about preventing radicalization will ultimately override concerns about foreign religious influence, particularly when that influence demonstrably promotes moderation over extremism. Throughout Morocco's history, religious brotherhoods have consistently played a pivotal role, with the Moroccan state's relationship to traditional Sufi orders, particularly the Tidjaniyya, Qadiriyya, and indigenous Moroccan brotherhoods, evolving from longstanding coexistence to active collaborative partnership. These orders, whose transnational networks extend across West and Central Africa, now function as informal diplomatic channels exercising religious and cultural influence. The state's sponsorship of international Sufi conferences, renovation of zawiya complexes, and official recognition of brotherhood hierarchies stems from a deliberate policy to deploy Sufism as a counterweight to Salafi-jihadist narratives. This approach leverages Sufism's emphasis on spiritual mediation, allegiance to established authority, and incorporation of local cultural practices, characteristics that align with Morocco's interests in promoting religious conservatism without political radicalism. The 2014 reorganization of the Habous Ministry strengthened oversight of religious endowments and Sufi institutions, reflecting the state's determination to harness these networks.



## Does Morocco have a Role to Play?

Morocco possesses unique structural advantages that position it as a credible religious interlocutor, but its capacity to fulfill European and African expectations remains constrained by these countries' internal contradictions and competitive dynamics. The Kingdom's principal asset lies in its historical continuity: unlike revolutionary regimes or recently established monarchies, Morocco can claim an unbroken chain of Islamic scholarship dating to the Qarawiyyin University's founding in 859 CE, combined with the Alaouite dynasty's three-century tenure as Commanders of the Faithful with putative Sharifian lineage. This genealogical and institutional depth provides a legitimacy that cannot be manufactured through financial resources or political maneuvering alone. Morocco's second advantage is its geographic liminality, simultaneously African, Arab, Mediterranean, and Atlantic, which allows it to position itself as a translator between worlds rather than a partisan in regional conflicts. The absence of oil wealth paradoxically strengthens this positioning by reducing suspicions of hegemonic ambitions that attach to Gulf states' religious initiatives.

By the same token, Morocco's restoration of Jewish synagogues, creation of museums documenting Jewish-Moroccan history, and official recognition of Hebrew as part of national heritage is both genuine historical continuity and strategic diplomatic positioning. Unlike most Arab states where Jewish communities were entirely displaced, Morocco maintains a living, if diminished, Jewish population and preserves a millennium-long tradition of Jewish-Muslim coexistence that constitutes an authentic dimension of Moroccan identity. This historical reality provides Morocco with a distinctive asset in contemporary diplomacy: the Kingdom can credibly present itself as embodying religious pluralism rooted in actual experience rather than merely aspirational rhetoric. The restoration of the Fez mellah, the opening of the Bayt Dakira museum in Essaouira, and the protection of Jewish cemeteries serve to preserve this heritage while simultaneously waving to international audiences Morocco's differentiation from regional norms. The diplomatic utility of this heritage is undeniable, positioning Morocco as a credible mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and demonstrating to Western governments a model of coexistence. The King's role as chairman of the Al-Quds Committee, combined with Morocco's resumption of diplomatic relations with Israel in 2020, illustrates how historical religious heritage can be mobilized to construct contemporary diplomatic identity.



## Points of Vigilance

The most critical vigilance point concerns the structural transformation of how religious authority is consumed, particularly among diaspora Muslim communities who constitute a primary target audience for Morocco's religious diplomacy. Traditional institutional models, mosque-based learning, formal theological training, hierarchical scholarly transmission, are being rapidly displaced by digital platforms where religious authority is established through social media metrics rather than scholarly credentials. TikTok sheikhs, Instagram imams, and YouTube preachers with minimal theological training but sophisticated content production capabilities now command audiences of hundreds of thousands or millions, particularly among second and third-generation European and North American Muslims who are digitally native but religiously unmoored. These self-proclaimed scholars operate without institutional oversight, quality control, or accountability to established Islamic scholarly traditions, yet they shape religious understanding and practice for vast populations through algorithmically amplified short-form content designed for viral engagement rather than theological rigor.

The Moroccan and broader North African diaspora in Europe represents a particularly vulnerable population: disconnected from traditional religious institutions in countries of origin, often isolated from mosque communities in host countries due to language barriers or cultural alienation, and seeking Islamic guidance that addresses their specific experience of navigating Muslim identity in secular societies. This population increasingly turns to social media for religious content, where they encounter a chaotic marketplace of religious interpretation ranging from hyper-literalist Salafism to progressive Islam to conspiratorial narratives that blend religious rhetoric with political grievance. The absence of credible, accessible, digitally-competent religious guidance from established institutions like Morocco's leaves a vacuum that is being filled by individuals whose primary qualification is technical skill in content creation and algorithmic optimization rather than depth of Islamic scholarship. These digital religious entrepreneurs often provide simplistic, decontextualized answers to complex questions, promote theological positions at odds with the moderate, jurisprudentially-grounded Islam that Morocco seeks to project, and in extreme cases serve as entry points to radicalization pipelines precisely because they appear authentic, relatable, and responsive in ways that formal religious institutions do not.

Morocco recognizes this challenge by investing in quality religious content through initiatives like Assadissa, a dedicated religious television channel that broadcasts Quranic recitation, theological instruction, and religious programming grounded in Moroccan Islamic tradition. Assadissa represents an important foundation for digital religious outreach, providing credible, institutionally-sanctioned content that reflects Morocco's moderate theological positioning. However, the strategic vigilance required concerns the gap between broadcast television models and the digital consumption patterns of target audiences, particularly younger diaspora Muslims. Assadissa operates on a traditional media model, scheduled programming, long-form content, passive viewership, while the populations Morocco seeks to influence increasingly consume religious content through algorithmically-curated social media feeds, on-demand short videos, interactive platforms, and mobile-first formats. A diaspora youth in Paris or Brussels seeking guidance on a specific religious question is far more likely to search YouTube, scroll TikTok, or ask in a Reddit thread than to tune into a television broadcast at a scheduled time. The challenge is not absence of quality content but rather distribution and format mismatch.

## OPPORTUNITIES & RISKS



### Opportunities



#### African Religious Integration:

Morocco's religious diplomacy serves as a mechanism for deeper integration into sub-Saharan African institutional frameworks beyond the purely economic or political. By positioning itself as a provider of religious education and infrastructure—training imams and building mosques, Morocco creates durable networks of influence that complement its recent return to the African Union and its infrastructure investments across the continent. This religious dimension offers Morocco a competitive advantage over foreign countries' purely material-driven agendas. Religious training creates elite ties that can translate into diplomatic support on issues like the Sahara, while also generating soft power among populations for whom Islam constitutes a core identity marker. The opportunity lies in Morocco's potential to become the reference point for African Sunni Islam, displacing Gulf influence while avoiding the suspicions that attach to overtly political or security-focused engagement.



#### European Security Partnership:

Europe's securitization of Islam creates demand for partners capable of delivering counter-radicalization credibility that European governments cannot generate themselves. Morocco has positioned itself as the indispensable provider of this service, leveraging training programs, fatwas against extremism, and the dispatch of religious advisors to European mosques. This partnership generates multiple benefits, it cements Morocco's status as a privileged European interlocutor, potentially translating into economic cooperation, trade preferences, or political support; it provides Morocco with a significant position over European Muslim communities, many of whom have Moroccan heritage; and it creates institutional dependencies that make Morocco strategically valuable beyond its traditional role in migration gatekeeping. The deepening of this partnership can push Morocco from a peripheral concern of European foreign policy into a core security partner comparable to Turkey's historical role in NATO.



#### Interfaith Platform Leadership:

Morocco's unique Jewish heritage and its geographic position between Europe and Africa allow it to construct a platform for interfaith dialogue that transcends the usual Christian-Muslim or Muslim-Jewish binaries. The valorization of Jewish heritage, combined with Morocco's historical experience of religious pluralism, puts the Kingdom at the forefront of trilateral dialogues that include African Christianity, Mediterranean Islam, and European Judaism. This platform could extend beyond symbolism to address concrete challenges of religious coexistence in mixed societies, pilgrimage site management, heritage preservation, and education about religious diversity. Success in this arena would elevate Morocco to a unique diplomatic status as a convener of civilizational dialogue, generating international prestige.



### Risks:



#### Competitive Religious Marketplace:

Morocco's religious diplomacy operates within a crowded and competitive marketplace of Islamic authority where Gulf states, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and transnational movements all vie for influence. Saudi Arabia's massive financial resources allow it to build mosques, fund Islamic centers, and support clerics worldwide at a scale Morocco cannot match. Turkey's neo-Ottoman religious diplomacy leverages both state resources and other global networks. Al-Azhar University retains prestige as the oldest center of Sunni learning. This competition creates a risk that Morocco's religious diplomacy becomes drowned out in the noise, unable to differentiate itself sufficiently to capture attention and allegiance. The specific risk is that Morocco's emphasis on moderation and traditionalism positions it in an uncomfortable middle ground:

too conservative for secular liberals, too moderate for religious conservatives, too traditional for those seeking Islamic modernism. In a polarized religious marketplace, the center may prove untenable.

### ➔ **Unintended repercussions:**

Morocco's religious diplomacy success creates a paradoxical risk: the deeper European states integrate Moroccan religious training into their domestic security and integration frameworks, the more Morocco becomes locked into serving European policy priorities that may diverge from its own strategic interests. When France, Belgium, or Spain rely on the Mohammed VI Institute to train imams as part of their counter-radicalization strategies, Morocco assumes responsibility for outcomes it cannot fully control, the behavior of graduates operating in contexts shaped by specific European problems that Morocco neither creates nor can remedy. A radicalization incident involving any Moroccan-trained imam, regardless of actual causation, should not become Morocco's political liability. The risk is particularly present given that religious cooperation with Morocco often serves European governments' short-term counter-terrorism imperatives but may not survive political backlash if incidents occur or if public opinion shifts decisively, in a European context already convulsed by an existential identity crisis in which Islam occupies an increasingly contested place.

### ➔ **European Political Volatility:**

Morocco's deepening partnership with European governments on religious matters creates exposure to European domestic political volatility. The rise of far-right parties across Europe, shifts in government coalitions, and changing public attitudes toward Islam and immigration could rapidly alter the political landscape in which Morocco operates. This political volatility means Morocco's religious diplomacy investments, training infrastructure, bilateral agreements, institutional relationships may not generate the long-term returns anticipated if European partners prove volatile.

## **FORESIGHT**

Morocco has constructed an impressive religious diplomacy infrastructure unmatched in its comprehensiveness: the Mohammed VI Institute trains imams in a sophisticated curriculum combining Maliki jurisprudence, counter-radicalization, and citizenship education; Sufi networks extending across West Africa provide organic channels of cultural influence; the Kingdom's authentic Jewish heritage offers credible interfaith positioning; and bilateral agreements with European governments formalize Morocco's role as religious partner. Yet a fundamental paradox emerges: while Morocco possesses unique religious assets that genuinely differentiate it from its counterparts, these distinctive strengths remain largely unknown to the primary audiences whose religious formation Morocco might seek to achieve, specifically, second and third-generation North African diaspora youth in Europe who constitute both the target population for Moroccan religious guidance and the demographic most vulnerable to online radicalization. Morocco's communication infrastructure, by contrast, remains oriented toward institutional and governmental audiences rather than grassroots populations. The Kingdom effectively communicates with European interior ministries about imam training programs, with African governments about religious cooperation agreements, and with international media about interfaith initiatives. But Morocco has not developed equivalent capacity to communicate directly with diaspora about why Moroccan Islamic tradition matters. The result is a communication ecosystem where Morocco's most distinctive assets remain abstract institutional achievements rather than emotionally resonant narratives that shape how diaspora youth understand their Muslim identity. Morocco confronts an important challenge about whether and how to address this communication deficit. Morocco must fundamentally invest in narrative infrastructure that makes its unique religious assets visible and compelling to digital-native audiences. This means not merely putting existing content online but developing entirely new communication capabilities. The Kingdom possesses genuinely unique religious assets, but without solving the communication deficit, these assets may remain invisible.

**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

