

SAME OLD SONG AND DANCE: MOROCCAN FOREIGN POLICY UNDER THE JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY



In the aftermath of the Arab revolutions, the electoral success of Islamists worried many in non-Islamist circles, partly due to their prediction that the Islamists would seek to alter the long-established, pro-Western foreign policy axes. Moroccan non-Islamist elites were no exception on this matter, as they did not hesitate to equate the Islamist Justice and Development Party's (PJD) coming to power with a probable shift in the regime's foreign policy priorities towards a more isolationist and more Islamic trajectory. Prior to coming to power, PJD seniors adopted a conciliatory tone and attempted to persuade elites that they harbored no revisionist plans to undermine the state's deep-rooted, pro-Western foreign policy positions. Their foreign policy vision, at most, would be to implement a more balanced approach in Morocco's dealings between the Western and Islamic worlds. However, in a country where the boundaries of foreign policy options, along with countless different domains, were meticulously drawn by the royal palace, the Foreign Ministry of the PJD-led coalition government was destined to act like a conformist rather than a reformist state apparatus.

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The Double-Headed Foreign Ministry

In capturing 12 out of the 31 cabinet posts, including positions in the Foreign Affairs, Justice, and Transportation and Communication ministries, the PJD became the primary partner in a coalition government. Following the relatively democratic spirit of the new 2011 Constitution, Ministers of the Interior Ministry and the Foreign Ministry were chosen from the political parties of the elected government for the first time, instead of being appointed directly by the king. This did not, however, translate into the new government's attainment of full executive clout. The appointment of party-affiliated ministers was counterbalanced by royal authorities, as the palace appointed people with close ties to the king/royal family/crown to be "minister delegates" in critical ministries, such as the Foreign Ministry and Interior Ministry. While Saad-Eddine Al Othmani from the PJD became the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Youssef Amrani was appointed as the delegate minister at the Foreign Ministry to act as a royal watchdog. As these appointments were intended to keep a tight rein on the PJD-led government, they also generated the discussion of a "shadow government." In addition to placing loyal officials into ministries and appointing well-known anti-PJD personality Fouad al-Himma and ex-Foreign Minister Fassi Fihri as his royal counselors, the king did not hesitate to nominate 28 ambassadors without first consulting the Prime Minister, an open contradiction to the new constitution. According to Article 49 of the new constitution, the nomination of ambassadors was implemented upon the presentation of a list of appointees to the Council of Ministers, chaired by the king, to be validated by the king himself. Furthermore, the palace's continuing predominance in politics manifested itself in the direct appointment of personnel unaffiliated with the elected government to ministries such as Agriculture and Fisheries, Defense, and Islamic Affairs. The direct royal control of these ministries was in line with the new constitutional amendments of July 2011, where three issue areas were kept within the royal domain: religion, security, and issues pertaining to "strategic interests," without clearly defining what a "strategic" interest.

Even though the PJD did not give any hint of a revisionist foreign policy vision prior to its participation in the

government, the royally appointed delegate minister to the Foreign Ministry and royal advisors curbed the party's range of action by creating a double-headed foreign ministry. This in turn led to claims that the ultimate clout in foreign policy, as was the case in many other domains, lay in the hands of the royal appointees instead of the popularly elected government's Foreign Minister. Due to this duality within the Foreign Ministry, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with royal advisor Fassi Fihri before meeting with her counterpart, Saad Eddine al-Othmani, during her official visit to Morocco in February 2012. Moreover, in an effort to reduce tensions between the US and Morocco regarding the UN mission in Western Sahara, a group of Moroccan officials, including the royal advisor and ex-Foreign Minister Taieb Fassi Fihri, delegate minister to the Foreign Minister Youssef Amrani, and Moroccan Ambassador to Washington Rachad Bouhlal, met with Secretary of State John Kerry in Washington, DC. At the time however, Kerry's true counterpart, Foreign Minister Othmani, was in Morocco.

In June 2013, Fassi Fihri once again sidelined Foreign Minister Othmani by meeting with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon. As they discussed finding a solution to the decades-long Western Sahara conflict, Fihri demonstrated the royal authorities' determination to take the issue into their own hands instead of leaving it to PM Benkirane's government. Although Othmani was not initially vocal about the confusion of prerogatives within the ministry, he ultimately, unable to hold his tongue any longer, called the delegate minister Amrani and demanded, "I want to know who the Foreign Minister is!"

The PJD's Foreign Policy Priorities

Since 1997, the PJD's foreign policy has revolved around protecting Moroccan territorial integrity with regard to the Western Sahara dispute, engaging in a dialogue with Spain in order to liberate two Spanish-occupied Moroccan cities and some islands, and reinforcing collaboration with its Maghrebi neighbors, other African countries, and the Islamic world in general. Cooperation with the Arab and Islamic world was exemplified with the establishment of an Arab and Islamic Common Economic Market. These issue areas

were accompanied with an unconditional support for the Palestinian cause and resistance against any sort of explicit or implicit normalization efforts with the “Zionist entity,” as was plainly stated in official documents.

Rejecting an isolationist foreign policy, the MPDC, which later transformed into the PJD, underlined its determination to pursue a “policy of openness” and “a culture of dialogue” in its 1997 election manifesto by quoting from the Qur’anic Surah “al-Hujurat” (49:13): “Indeed, we have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another.” This understanding did not exclude engagement with the West, as Morocco is commonly viewed as being strategically situated at the crossroads between Africa and the Arab world on one side, and Europe on the other. While cooperation with the West was not outright rejected under this view, the strengthening of ties with the Muslim world took priority. In this vein, the PJD tried to draw attention to what they considered the “imbalance” in world politics. This “imbalance” referred to the absence of a permanent representative state from the Muslim world sitting on the UN Security Council, growing American hegemony in the aftermath of 9/11, and what they perceived as the West’s increasing disregard for the Muslim world’s interests. Hence, instead of severing relations with the West, the PJD advocated for a recalibration of the structure of relations, whereby mutual interests would be recognized.

With the intention of upholding Morocco’s Arab-Islamic identity, the PJD warned against Western cultural and political domination by resorting to the en vogue term, “globalization.” The party adopted a critical stance toward the concept due to its fear that globalization would dilute the Islamic character of Moroccan culture by bringing Western practices into the heart of its traditional society. In various platforms, PJD party seniors underlined the absolute necessity of protecting the cultural specificities of the Moroccan people, which was mainly associated with the Arab-Islamic identity in the Islamist jargon.

The traditional critical attitude toward the West began to evolve toward a more risk-averse approach with the lead up to the November 2011 elections. Abdelilah Benkirane, the head of the PJD, emphasized on various occasions the PJD’s full awareness of Morocco’s immense economic ties with the West by toning down his

party’s usual Western criticism. The PJD’s 2011 electoral manifesto’s foreign policy section in particular seemed to be formulated in order to assuage the fears of its skeptics. While cooperation with the West was pushed toward the bottom of the priority list in previous electoral manifestos, the 2011 manifesto highlighted the party’s determination to support “traditional partnerships” with the West. While attempting to appease its skeptics, the manifesto also put an important emphasis on the activation of the Arab-Maghreb Union and strengthening ties with African countries.

What was interestingly lacking in the latest PJD manifesto, however, was the usual unconditional support for the Palestinian cause, a crucial component of previous manifestos. Although the absence of a Palestinian emphasis does not mean that the PJD had abandoned the long-running project of supporting the Palestinian cause, the focus on reinforcing relations with African countries and reinvigorating the Arab-Maghreb Union underscored the primary foreign policy parameters of the PJD in the new era. In a way, putting an accent on strengthening regional relations with the Maghrobi and African nations was an attempt to revisit the one-dimensional, pro-Western foreign policy through a more multidimensional lens.

As the Arab Spring generated new opportunities by restructuring domestic politics and reorienting external relations in the region, to some extent it also strengthened the PJD’s hand in pushing for a new, robust regional cooperation. Though short of an alternative to cooperation with the EU, a reinvigorated Arab-Maghreb Union would certainly allow Morocco to assume an important regional role, materialize a deeper economic and political integration, and establish a stronger regional security bulwark against growing religious extremism in the region.

The PJD’s Participation in Government

The PJD has not demonstrated an alteration from the regime’s long-established, pro-Western foreign policy vision throughout its nearly two years in government. While Foreign Minister Othmani’s efforts to diversify relations by bolstering the Arab-Maghreb Union should not be underestimated, the PJD-led government’s foreign policy options demonstrate the coloration of the

status quo, aside from the occasional individual-level skirmishes between PJD seniors and the royal advisors. In an effort to institute a multidimensional foreign policy, Foreign Minister Othmani has gone to great lengths to activate the moribund Arab-Maghreb Union by meeting with its leaders. The Western Sahara dispute, which lies at the heart of Moroccan-Algerian tensions, did not prevent Othmani and Algerian President Bouteflika from coming together to find ways to develop the problem-ridden bilateral relations. Although it is questionable whether these meetings would ever lead to the reopening of the border between Morocco and Algeria, which has been closed since 1994, it nevertheless demonstrated the PJD's willingness to bring a new dynamism to regional diplomacy and cooperation.

Apart from Maghrebi collaboration, the first Foreign Minister-level visit by Morocco in 25 years was conducted in Turkey, resulting in the establishment of a high-level strategic cooperation between the two countries. As was indicated in its 2011 Electoral Manifesto, the PJD also advocated boosting relations with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). However, in the eyes of the GCC members, it is the Moroccan monarchy, and not the Islamist-led PJD government, that functions as their true counterpart. Gulf monarchies, already wary of Islamist movements within their own countries, are on the same page with King Mohammed VI, who makes no secret of his mistrust of and reservations against the Islamist project. It is due to this commonality that both the Moroccan king and his counterparts in the Gulf demonstrated an open welcoming for the new Egyptian administration in July 2013. When it comes to financially and politically supporting the monarchical regimes in the MENA region, the Gulf monarchies are extremely generous, mainly in order to guarantee the durability of the Arab monarchical regimes. In this vein, in September 2013, the UAE provided Morocco with \$100 million for the construction of solar and wind power plants. In inter-monarchical relations, the active role in Gulf diplomacy fell into the hands of King Mohammed VI in his official trip to Saudi Arabia in late 2012. As Morocco was guaranteed \$1.25 billion from Saudi Development Funds between 2012 and 2016, the king and his advisors' presence throughout the visit received the majority of media attention, overshadowing the government ministers.

Morocco: A Unique Bastion of Stability?

Mirroring previous administrations, the PJD-led government equally appropriated the regime's and Western powers' mantra of "Morocco as the epitome of stability in the North Africa." Regarded as an important stronghold of stability, albeit not necessarily democracy, Morocco has been supported economically, militarily, and politically by the US and the EU. Along with economic cooperation dating back to a 1960 commercial agreement between Morocco and the European Community, joint efforts in counter-terrorism and illegal immigration made Morocco an indispensable ally for the West. The bloody hostage crisis at the In Amenas gas complex in Southern Algeria, the clashes between Tunisian security forces and militant groups along the Algerian-Tunisian border, and the recently-discovered terrorist cells in Tunisia and Morocco provided clear warning signs of the religious extremists' expansionist aims. These, in turn, only further cemented Morocco's crucial importance in international counter-terrorism efforts.

As a founding member of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), Morocco has been working with European and African governments in intelligence sharing, assisting in joint operations and participating in training maneuvers. Morocco's multidimensional counter-terrorism strategy makes the nation a critical partner to international efforts to combat religious extremism in North Africa, despite ongoing criticism by human rights activists due in part to the indiscriminate nature of its crackdowns. In combating extremism, Morocco participated in the US Department of State's Antiterrorism Assistance Program and the US Congress allocated funding to support counterterrorism and socio-economic development initiatives. Recently, the former US ambassador to Morocco, Edward M. Gabriel, drew attention to the strategic importance of Morocco, praising the country as being "progressive, stable, the most consistent and oldest ally of the US in this vast swath." He singled out Morocco in North Africa and the Sahel due to its "stability, hard-won security, and progressive political and economic reforms." In the aftermath of the US embassy attacks in Libya, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also called out Morocco specifically, praising the country and labeling it as a "leader and a

model" for the region.

"Moroccan exceptionalism" has been promoted by numerous Moroccan experts and politicians, who are largely uneasy or hesitant to discuss the democratic deficiencies of the country. Specifying the chaotic and indeterminate nature of revolutions throughout the region allows the Moroccan state apparatus to emphasize the value of its own relative stability. While this approach strengthens the hands of proponents of the established order, who have so far paid lip service to substantial democratization efforts, it also excites the West, which urgently needs the assistance of "stable" partners. This "stability emphasis" was embraced and internalized by PJD seniors as soon as they were incorporated into the executive apparatus. For instance, at the 43rd World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2013, Prime Minister Benkirane acknowledged the existence of some problems in his country, but also pointed out "these problems do not touch Morocco's stability." Moreover, the PJD-led government's spokesman, Mustafa Khalfi, explained the Moroccan democratization efforts during of the Arab Spring as a "third way" between authoritarianism and revolution, stressing "reform within stability."

Morocco, the West, and the PJD

The EU is Morocco's largest trading partner, accounting for around 50% of the country's total trade. Remittances represent approximately 7% of GDP and come from nearly 3 million Moroccan immigrants in Europe, which represents 10% of the Moroccan population. The indispensability of the West for the Moroccan economy is undeniable for the PJD-led government. Reminiscent of the US endorsement, the EU awarded Morocco an "advanced status" within its European Neighborhood Policy in 2008, singling out the country as the "most advanced country in the Arab Maghreb." This made Morocco, according to the agreement, "less than a member but more than a partner to the EU." Following this, the European Commission granted €205 million in development aid to Morocco in 2009. In 2010, Morocco became the first country in the North African region to host an EU summit.

Building on the Association Agreement between Morocco and the EU in 2000, which guaranteed tariff-free trade for many products, negotiations for a Deep and

Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) were launched on March 1, 2013, during the tenure of the PJD-led government. The primary goals of the DCFTA are the deepening of free trade agreements, increasing the protection provided for investments, and ensuring better guarantees regarding competition and respecting intellectual property rights. Although Morocco does not push for EU membership, the aforementioned agreements aim at integrating the Moroccan economy, albeit gradually, into the EU single market by bringing Moroccan trade-related requirements closer in line with EU legislation.

Prior to the PJD-led government, Morocco was designated a "major non-NATO ally" in 2004 by former President George W. Bush, mainly due to its steady cooperation in the US-led war on terror, which paved the way for increasing US arms sales to Morocco. In the same year, the two countries signed the Morocco-US Free Trade Agreement, aimed at reducing tariff barriers to boost trade relations, which so far appears to favor US exports to Morocco more than Morocco's to the US. This was later accompanied by the US Foreign Aid Agency Millennium Challenge Corporation's \$697 million in aid to Morocco in August 2007, intended to reduce poverty and stimulate economic growth through investments in five projects.

Although espousing an openly critical position toward American foreign policy in the opposition seats, especially in the post-9/11 era, the PJD-led government chose to pursue a conciliatory, rather than a revisionist, approach to its relations with the US. The determination to advance the economic, military, and political ties between the two countries persisted in the aftermath of the PJD-led coalition's rise to power, as the two counties recently launched a Strategic Dialogue on September 13, 2012. This is a formal framework aimed at deepening bilateral relations in strategic issues and high priority objectives, such as counterterrorism cooperation, democracy promotion, and regional economic development. This strategic cooperation was recently strained, though not irreparably damaged, when a US initiative touched on a sensitive issue for the majority of Moroccans. A short-term friction occurred between the two countries due to the US-led initiative to broaden the mandate of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) to include the

investigation of human rights violations. Interpreted as a “biased and unilateral initiative” by the PJD-led government’s spokesman and Communication Minister Mustafa Khalfi, various opposition parties took a similar stance, labeling the initiative as an attack upon Moroccan national sovereignty. Accepting the indispensability of both national sovereignty and territorial integrity as one of the most important components of its foreign policy platform since its establishment, the PJD’s position was not a change but a continuation of its long-term nationalist disposition. Not having the luxury to impair relations with its strategic ally in North Africa, the US withdrew its proposal in the face of nation-wide opposition in Morocco, by prioritizing security concerns over human rights promotion.

PJD At Odds With Its Grassroots Movement

Feeling constricted within the royal-designated political boundaries, the PJD even found itself at odds with its grassroots movement, the Movement for Unity and Reform (MUR), in regards to the issue of French intervention in Mali. While PM Benkirane applauded France for its “bold move” and Foreign Minister Othmani agreed with the Interior Ministry on its commitment to sustaining the territorial integrity of Mali, the PJD’s social movement wing embraced a very critical position vis-à-vis French intervention. Along with senior Moroccan Salafists and the largest Islamist association, the Justice and Charity Movement, the MUR openly opposed French intervention, calling it yet another example of foreign interference in Muslim countries. Amidst Islamist criticism, Morocco, along with Algeria and in contrast to Tunisia, opened its airspace for the French air force to carry out strikes in Northern Mali.

In addition to clashing views on Mali, another event, which pitted the PJD against its social movement wing, was the MUR’s accusations that the PJD attempted to normalize relations with the Islamists’ arch-enemy, namely the “Zionist entity.” The PJD’s invitation of Ofer Bronchtein, a believer in a two-state solution, activist in promoting Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and President of the International Forum for Peace, to the party’s 7th Congress in July 2012, created uproar within MUR circles and was seen as a clear challenge to the PJD’s longstanding anti-normalization policies. Facing growing criticism from its hawkish members

and its grass-roots wing, the PJD released an official apology underlining its lack of intention to normalize relations with Israel with Bronchtein’s invitation. Although PJD elites increased the level of interaction with the Moroccan Jewish community, including Benkirane attending synagogue openings in Fez and his presence at the Casablanca funeral of Simon Levy, a leading figure among Jewish-Moroccans, some of its MPs have not put an end to their anti-Zionist vigilance in various domains of life. PJD MPs, for example, accused Moroccan director Kamal Hachkar’s documentary, “Tinghir-Jerusalem, Echoes from the Mellah,” which traces the history of Moroccan-Israeli Jews, of possessing a “Zionist vision”.

The Egyptian army’s crackdown of the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013 was somewhat echoed differently within the PJD, its social movement wing (the MUR), and the Foreign Ministry, which is headed by a PJD MP. The Moroccan Foreign Ministry, which is unable to act independently from the royal orbit, neither congratulated the new administration nor condemned the events. Instead, it issued an indifferent statement by underscoring the necessity for Egypt to “preserve its national unity and ensure the people’s security.” Differing from the Foreign Ministry, the PJD sought a middle way approach, which aimed at avoiding burning bridges neither with its youth base nor with its royal patron. In this vein, neither did it congratulate the Egyptian Interim President, as did the Islamist-wary King Muhammed VI, nor did it become the flag bearer of the pro-Morsi Islamist camp. The Minister of State, Abdellah Baha, did not hesitate to label the military’s intervention as a “coup d’état and a move against a legitimate democracy” which placed the party at odds with the monarchy. Similar to its party-level abstainment from participating in the Moroccan Arab Spring initiative February 20 movement rallies, the PJD did not participate in pro-Muslim Brotherhood rallies spearheaded by Islamist groups such as the MUR, the PJD’s youth wing, the Justice and Charity Movement, and the Salafists. This absence, however, did not deter PM Benkirane from utilizing the symbol of “Rabaa Adaweya” in his party’s youth meeting in August, a move symbolizing both his personal support for the Muslim Brotherhood and an attempt to appease the pro-Morsi youth base. By not acting as an ardent supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, as

is the case with the Turkish Justice and Development Party, the PJD emphasized the differences between its and the MB's political agendas across various platforms. Evidently, the intention is to stifle the ambitions of the anti-PJD status quo forces, who are more than willing to see a similar end for the PJD itself. Both the PJD and the MB have at times been subjected to political exclusion, and at times partially included in the political process. Despite such commonalities however, PM Benkirane, in a February 2013 interview given to the French24 channel, openly rejected any claims likening his party to the Muslim Brotherhood and their lack of intention "to Islamize society or interfere in people's personal lives." Considering the fate of the Egyptian MB, Benkirane's deliberate aloofness from his party's ideological cousin seems to be an appropriate strategy to pursue if the aim is to safeguard the already-made political gains and to keep their present clout in government intact.

Overall, considering the extreme difficulty of both staying in power and pushing for fundamental reforms which have the potential to challenge the embedded interests of the royal cronies, the PJD is oscillating between keeping its promise of pursuing change and bowing to the pre-set rules of the status quo. The foreign policy domain, which has been traditionally dominated by royal authorities, presents a very narrow space for the PJD to pursue an independent agenda. This in turn makes the PJD foreign policy team yet another group of "men of the palace," responsible for implementing royally ordained policy options, despite their democratically elected status.

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