

Sacred Bonds and Strategic Influence: The Spiritual Foundations of Moroccan-African Diplomacy

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Abstract

This article examines the spiritual dimension as a constitutive variable in Moroccan-African foreign policy, tracing its evolution from a diffuse historical and emotional heritage into a structured institutional framework of soft power. Drawing on constructivist international relations theory and Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, the study argues that Morocco has systematically transformed its centuries-old religious and Sufi legacy in sub-Saharan Africa into a deliberately engineered form of spiritual diplomacy. The analysis proceeds across two principal axes: first, the historical and doctrinal foundations of the Moroccan-African spiritual commons, encompassing the Almoravid expansion, the Maliki-Ash'ari doctrinal tradition, and the transnational influence of Sufi brotherhoods—most notably the Tijaniyya; and second, the institutional architecture through which this heritage has been operationalized, including the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Scholars and the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams. The article further interrogates the functional deployment of spiritual diplomacy in the domains of security—specifically counter-extremism in the Sahel—and geopolitics, particularly in Morocco's reintegration into the African Union and the management of the Western Sahara issue. Finally, it maps the competitive landscape in which Morocco's spiritual strategy operates, confronting rival religious diplomacies emanating from Algeria, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. The study concludes that Morocco's spiritual soft power constitutes a structurally significant instrument of national interest projection, yet one whose efficacy remains contingent upon sustained institutional investment, regional adaptability, and the management of geopolitical friction.

Keywords: spiritual diplomacy; soft power; Morocco-Africa relations; Tijaniyya; Sufi brotherhoods; counter-extremism; Islamic moderation; Mohammed VI Foundation; African Union; religious institutionalization

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1. Introduction

The academic study of international relations has long been dominated by paradigms that privilege material capabilities: realist accounts foreground military power and strategic interest, while liberal institutionalist frameworks emphasize economic interdependence and multilateral governance. Within this architecture of analysis, the immaterial dimensions of statecraft—the capacity to attract, persuade, and legitimize through shared values, symbols, and cultural resonance—have occupied a marginal status. Joseph Nye's theorization of soft power partially remedied this lacuna by demonstrating that attraction, not coercion, can be a decisive instrument of international influence (Nye, 2004). Yet even within the burgeoning literature on soft power, the specifically religious and spiritual register of diplomatic action has received insufficient systematic attention, particularly as it manifests in relations between Muslim-majority states.

Morocco's relationship with sub-Saharan Africa constitutes a paradigmatic case for examining precisely this neglected dimension. Unlike many postcolonial bilateral relationships, the Moroccan-African nexus was never reducible to political calculation or commercial interest. It was structured, over centuries, by dense organic interactions—trans-Saharan trade routes, the diffusion of Sunni Islam through Maliki jurisprudence, the networks of Sufi brotherhoods, and the institutional prestige of Morocco's religious establishments—that collectively produced what this article conceptualizes as a 'spiritual commons.' This common, historically characterized by its spontaneous, uncoordinated character, has undergone a qualitative transformation over the past two decades, as the Moroccan state has progressively institutionalized it as an instrument of foreign policy.

The central question animating this research is: to what extent has Morocco succeeded in converting its shared spiritual heritage with Africa from a historical and emotional legacy into an institutional apparatus and a form of soft power capable of addressing the security and developmental challenges confronting the African continent? This question generates several subsidiary inquiries: What are the historical and doctrinal foundations of this shared spiritual identity? How has Morocco navigated the transition from classical religious diplomacy to the institutionalized management of the African religious field? What role does the spiritual dimension play in countering extremist penetration and advancing Moroccan national interests? And how does Morocco's spiritual strategy position itself within an increasingly competitive landscape of Islamic influence projection?

The article's analytical framework integrates four methodological approaches: a historical method for tracing the deep roots of Moroccan-African spiritual entanglement from the eleventh century to the contemporary period; a descriptive-analytical method for mapping the operations and outputs of relevant institutions; a neo-institutionalist framework for understanding how informal religious legacies are codified into formal

policy instruments; and a comparative method to situate Morocco's approach against rival models—Saudi, Turkish, Algerian—of religious diplomacy in Africa.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes the historical and doctrinal foundations of the Moroccan-African spiritual commons. Section 3 analyses the institutionalization of Morocco's religious diplomacy through constitutional frameworks and dedicated organizations. Section 4 examines the functional deployment of spiritual soft power in geopolitical and security domains. Section 5 maps the competitive environment confronting Morocco's spiritual strategy. Section 6 offers conclusions and policy recommendations.

2. Historical and doctrinal foundations of the moroccan-african spiritual commons

2.1 *The Historical Expansion of Morocco into Sub-Saharan Africa*

The structural entanglement of Morocco with sub-Saharan Africa predates the modern state system by nearly a millennium. Its earliest systematic expression is located in the Almoravid movement, which emerged from the Sanhaja Berber confederacy of the western Sahara around 1040 CE. The Almoravids, as Al-Tazi (1986) documents, established a unified political-religious order that extended from the Maghreb and al-Andalus into the western Sudan, propagating Sunni Islam of the Maliki school as its doctrinal foundation. Their military intervention in Ghana (1076 CE) and the capture of Aoudaghost (1054 CE) embedded Moroccan religious and cultural influence within the networks of the western Sudanic world (Al-Tazi, 1986, p. 145).

The trans-Saharan trade routes that flourished under and after the Almoravids served not merely as arteries for gold and salt, but as vectors for the transmission of Islamic jurisprudence, Arabic language, and religious learning. The caravan networks connecting Sijilmasa—the great Moroccan entrepot—with Timbuktu were staffed not only by merchants but by scholars, judges, and Sufi teachers. By the fourteenth century, Timbuktu had become one of the most important nodes of Islamic intellectual life in the world, its scholarly networks deeply intertwined with those of Morocco. Ibn Battuta's celebrated account of his visit to Mali in 1352 CE attests to the vitality of Islamic cultural exchange between Morocco and the Sudan (Hmimnat, 2015, p. 204).

The University of al-Qarawiyyin in Fes, founded in 859 CE, functioned as a central institution for the formation of African Muslim scholars throughout this period. Ibn Khaldun, writing in the fourteenth century, noted the convergence of scholars from al-Andalus, the Maghreb, and surrounding regions upon this institution, testifying to its role as a civilizational hub (Ibn Khaldun, 2010, p. 534). Moroccan religious influence reached its geopolitical apex at the end of the sixteenth century with Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur al-Dhahabi's military expedition to the Sudan (1591), which brought the Niger Bend region

under Moroccan sovereignty and further consolidated the integration of Moroccan and African political-religious space.

2.2 Sufism and the Zawiya Networks as Mechanisms of Spiritual Consolidation

2.2.1 The Social and Religious Function of Sufi Brotherhoods

If the Almoravid and Saadian expansions established the geopolitical parameters of Moroccan-African engagement, it was Sufism that provided its deepest and most durable civilizational cement. Sufi brotherhoods (*turuq*) and their associated lodges (*zawaya*) constituted the primary institutional form through which Moroccan religious influence was transmitted, reproduced, and internalized across sub-Saharan Africa over centuries.

The Qadiriyya brotherhood, originating in the eastern Islamic world through Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, found its African vocation through Moroccan intermediaries. As Al-Shukrawi (2011) documents, the brotherhood established a prominent presence in the western Sudan through the agency of the scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim al-Maghili, who played a central role in its diffusion across the Sahel and northern Niger (Al-Shukrawi, 2011, p. 44). The *zawaya* served simultaneously as centers of religious learning, nodes of Maliki jurisprudential transmission, and institutions of social mediation, facilitating the resolution of local conflicts, the organization of pilgrimage routes, and the protection of trade caravans (Al-Amari, 2012, p. 85).

During periods of weakened central authority, the *zawaya* assumed expanded social and economic functions, providing services that state institutions could not deliver and thereby accruing significant legitimacy and influence within African communities (Qasim, 2018, p. 225). This historical pattern of Sufi institutional authority has direct implications for contemporary Moroccan spiritual diplomacy: it means that Morocco's engagement with African Muslim communities is not merely state-to-state but mediated through pre-existing networks of religious loyalty and institutional trust.

2.2.2 The Tijaniyya: Transnational Spiritual Influence and Moroccan Centrality

The most consequential single vehicle of Moroccan spiritual influence in sub-Saharan Africa is the Tijaniyya brotherhood, founded by Sidi Ahmad al-Tijani in the late eighteenth century and definitively anchored in Fes following the founder's settlement there in 1796 (Triaud, 2010, p. 118). The Tijaniyya's subsequent expansion into the Senegambia, the Sudan, and the Chad basin—driven by figures of the stature of al-Hajj Umar al-Futi and Ibrahim Niass—created a transnational community of believers whose spiritual center of gravity remained the *zawiya* in Fes (Kane, 1994, p. 67).

The geopolitical significance of this configuration cannot be overstated. An estimated one hundred million adherents of the Tijaniyya across West and Central Africa maintain a devotional relationship with Morocco that transcends the formal inter-state domain. Tijaniyya pilgrims from Senegal, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria travel regularly to the shrine of

the founder in Fes, generating flows of persons, capital, and symbolic attachment that constitute a unique form of soft power—one that pre-dates and structurally undergirds Morocco's contemporary diplomatic engagement with the African Union (Al-Amari, 2012, p. 82).

Importantly, Moroccan Sufi influence was never reducible to a single confraternal network. The combined presence of the Qadiriyya, the Tijaniyya, and numerous smaller brotherhoods produced a pluralistic landscape of Moroccan-mediated Islamic spirituality across sub-Saharan Africa, characterized by its embrace of local traditions, its resistance to scripturalist and puritanical reform movements, and its social embeddedness in the rhythms of everyday life. As Qasim (2018) argues, Moroccan Sufism functioned not merely as a religious phenomenon but as a 'civilizational mechanism' for the consolidation of social cohesion and cultural communication across the Saharan divide (p. 228).

3. The institutionalisation of morocco's spiritual diplomacy

3.1 Constitutional and Legal Foundations

The transformation of Morocco's spiritual heritage from a diffuse historical resource into a structured foreign policy instrument required a prior process of domestic institutionalization. The 2011 Moroccan Constitution provides the foundational legal architecture for this project. Article 41 enshrines the King as Commander of the Faithful (Amir al-Mu'minin), vesting him with exclusive authority over the country's religious affairs and monopoly over the issuing of religious edicts (fatawa). Article 55 designates the King as the supreme representative of the state in international affairs and the arbiter of strategic foreign policy orientations (Government of Morocco, 2011).

The institution of the Commander of the Faithful, as Al-Hayyan (2021) argues, is not circumscribed by the geographical boundaries of the Moroccan state. It carries historical Bay'a (allegiance) relationships and spiritual extensions that reach into West and North Africa, conferring upon the monarchy a supra-territorial religious legitimacy that no other Moroccan institution possesses (Al-Hayyan, 2021, pp. 112-115). This legitimacy constitutes the symbolic capital upon which Morocco's spiritual diplomacy is built, enabling the Kingdom to position its engagement with African Muslim communities not as external cultural projection but as the exercise of a historically grounded pastoral responsibility.

The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (Wizarat al-Awqaf wa al-Shu'un al-Islamiyya) serves as the principal bureaucratic vehicle for translating this constitutional mandate into foreign policy action. Since 2012, the Ministry has dramatically expanded the volume of bilateral religious cooperation agreements with African states: from fewer than five agreements in the period 1975-1999 and eighteen in the decade 2000-2011, to

approximately thirty-six in the five years following 2012 alone, representing a qualitative acceleration unprecedented in Moroccan diplomatic history (Mipa Institute, 2026).

3.2 Key Institutional Mechanisms

3.2.1 The Mohammed VI Foundation for African Scholars

Established by Royal Decree No. 1.15.75 in June 2015, the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Scholars (Mu'assassat Muhammad al-Sadis lil-'Ulama' al-Afriqiyyin) constitutes the most architecturally significant institution of Morocco's spiritual diplomacy. The Foundation operates under the direct presidency of the King and is designed to serve as a high-level diplomatic platform for coordinating the efforts of Muslim scholars across Africa in defense of Maliki-Ash'ari Islamic moderation and the rejection of extremism.

In the address delivered at the Foundation's inaugural session, King Mohammed VI explicitly framed the institution's mission in terms that rejected any narrow interest-driven logic: the Foundation was presented as a response to formal requests from African partner states seeking assistance in protecting their communities from the ideological penetration of extremist movements (Al-Salami, 2022, p. 105). By 2021, the Foundation had established forty-eight branches across African countries, each operating in conformity with local national legislation while remaining networked to the Moroccan secretariat-general, thereby creating a continental influence architecture grounded in legal compliance and institutional trust (Foundation Secretariat Reports, 2021, pp. 12-19).

3.2.2 The Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams

Established by Royal Decree No. 1.14.103 in July 2014, the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Guides and Morshidat constitutes the academic and professional arm of Morocco's religious soft power projection. The Institute offers a comprehensive curriculum that integrates the traditional Islamic sciences—Quran, hadith, Maliki fiqh, Ash'ari theology, and Junaydi Sufism—with modern disciplines including the social sciences, constitutional law, and the national legislations of beneficiary countries, thereby equipping graduates to function as effective religious authorities within their own national contexts (Al-Tawfiq, 2018, p. 89).

The Institute's international intake has expanded rapidly since its foundation. In 2015 alone, it hosted 447 foreign students, including 212 from Mali, 100 from Guinea, and 75 from Cote d'Ivoire. By 2023, cumulative alumni from sub-Saharan Africa had exceeded 3,000, drawn from states including Libya, Gabon, Somalia, Guinea-Conakry, Burkina Faso, and Chad (Al-Azouzi, 2023, p. 54). A defining feature of the enrolment pattern is its correlation with security fragility: the majority of sending states are those confronting active Jihadist insurgencies, intercommunal religious conflict, or acute deficits of trained religious leadership—suggesting that Morocco's spiritual diplomacy functions not merely

as cultural projection but as a form of preventive security cooperation (Al-Benhamou, 2018, p. 122).

3.2.3 Mosque Construction and Religious Infrastructure

Morocco's spiritual diplomacy extends into the built environment through an ambitious program of mosque construction and religious infrastructure development across sub-Saharan Africa. Beginning in 2013, Morocco has funded and constructed several landmark mosques in the region, including the Mohammed VI Mosque in Conakry (Guinea) at a cost of USD 14.3 million, and the Mohammed VI Mosque in Abidjan (Cote d'Ivoire). These edifices, built in distinctive Moroccan Andalusian architectural idiom, serve as cultural and civilizational poles that complement the institutional work of the Foundation and the Institute, anchoring Moroccan spiritual presence in the material landscape of African cities (FMES, 2023, pp. 8-11).

4. THE FUNCTIONAL DEPLOYMENT OF SPIRITUAL DIPLOMACY

4.1 *Spiritual Diplomacy and the Western Sahara Question*

Morocco's spiritual strategy in Africa has been deployed, with considerable deliberateness, in the service of its core territorial interest: the consolidation of international support for its position on Western Sahara. Morocco's withdrawal from the Organization of African Unity in 1984, and its consequent exclusion from the continental body until its readmission to the African Union in 2017, inflicted significant reputational and diplomatic costs, reducing the country's effective African engagement to what former Education Minister Abdallah Saaf described as 'Royal Air Maroc diplomacy'—bilateral relations limited to states served by Moroccan aviation (McNamee et al., as cited in translated article on Morocco's return to the AU).

Morocco's reintegration strategy relied substantially on its religious networks. As Boussouf (2026) argues, the symbolic centrality of the Commander of the Faithful institution, the organizational credibility of Morocco's religious management apparatus, and the establishment of the Mohammed VI institutions all served as powerful signals to African Muslim-majority states of Morocco's commitment to substantive Pan-African religious cooperation—signals that were received, in the vocabulary of Sufi politics, as expressions of reliable and spiritually grounded partnership (Boussouf, 2026).

The Tijaniyya networks proved particularly instrumental in this regard. Given the profound reverence in which the Tijaniyya leadership is held by political elites across West Africa—from Senegal and Mali to Niger and Chad—Morocco's custodianship of the Tijaniyya zawiya in Fes constituted a form of structural leverage that no other African state could replicate. Tijaniyya leaders' advocacy for Morocco's AU membership within their respective national contexts, while unquantifiable in precise terms, represents a dimension of diplomatic influence that operates beneath the threshold of formal interstate

politics yet carries concrete consequences for voting behaviour and political positioning (Kane, 1994).

Bonkhe and al-Najawi (2025) further argue that Morocco's spiritual soft power has had measurable, if variable, effects on African states' positions regarding the Western Sahara. In states with significant Tijaniyya constituencies and strong historical ties to Morocco—Senegal, Mali, Guinea—the influence appears direct and substantial. In more contested cases, such as Nigeria, the effect has been to moderate hostility and reduce active opposition rather than generate active support, a distinction that nonetheless carries strategic significance (Bonkhe and al-Najawi, 2025, p. 4).

4.2 Spiritual Diplomacy and Counter-Extremism Security Architecture

The most consistently articulated rationale for Morocco's spiritual diplomacy—in royal addresses, ministerial statements, and institutional documentation—is the imperative of countering the penetration of extremist ideologies in the Sahel and West Africa. This framing reflects a genuine strategic calculation: Morocco has long recognized that the security of its southern approaches is inseparable from the ideological stability of its African neighborhood, and that 'hard' security approaches—military operations, intelligence sharing, and border control—are insufficient to address the foundational ideological drivers of Jihadist mobilization.

King Mohammed VI articulated this position most explicitly in his address at the inauguration of Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in September 2013: 'Any international initiative coordinated without according adequate importance to the cultural and doctrinal dimension will be destined to fail.' This statement constituted Morocco's most authoritative formulation of a comprehensive counter-extremism doctrine in which religious and spiritual intervention is positioned not as a supplement to but as a precondition for durable security (Mipa Institute, 2026).

Morocco's 'soft' counter-extremism architecture functions through several complementary mechanisms. The training of imams at the Mohammed VI Institute immunizes communities against extremist recruitment by providing graduates with both the theological competence to refute radical doctrines and the credibility—as locally embedded religious authorities—to do so effectively. The Foundation's continental branch network provides an institutional infrastructure for the dissemination of the 'Islam of the middle way' (Islam al-wasatiyya). Targeted religious media initiatives—including a weekly radio program in Niger—extend reach to publics beyond the formal institutional circuit. Scientific conferences, such as the International Symposium on Spiritual Security held in Uganda in February 2024, generate academic and professional networks that reinforce Morocco's positioning as the intellectual hub of African Islamic moderation (FMES, 2023, pp. 8-11).

This approach has garnered significant international validation. Morocco's presentation of its counter-extremism experience before the United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee in New York on 30 September 2014 represented a formal recognition by the international community of the strategic value of Morocco's model—and an implicit endorsement of its replicability (Mipa Institute, 2026). The model has attracted interest from European states and the United States, which have identified in Morocco's approach a capacity to address the ideological deficits that conventional military counter-terrorism strategies cannot fill.

A further strategic objective of Morocco's religious diplomacy in the security domain is the circumvention of Algeria's efforts to monopolize the Sahel security agenda. Algeria has consistently sought to exclude Morocco from Sahel-related security frameworks on the grounds that Morocco lacks a territorial frontier with the Sahel region, as evidenced by the composition of the Joint Operational Staff Committee (CEMOC) established in Tamanrasset in September 2010. Morocco's religious diplomacy, by operating through transnational confraternal networks rather than through territorial contiguity, bypasses this exclusion, enabling Morocco to maintain a meaningful presence in Sahel security governance through non-territorial means (Mipa Institute, 2026).

5. THE COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE: REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RIVALS

5.1 *Algeria's Competing Spiritual Diplomacy*

Morocco's spiritual strategy in Africa operates within an intensely competitive environment, in which Algeria represents the most consequential and structurally proximate rival. Algeria's engagement with African religious diplomacy intensified significantly from 1999 onward, as the Bouteflika administration systematically integrated Sufi confraternal networks into the conduct of its foreign policy in the Sahel and West Africa (Bel'our and Al-Aqrid, 2024).

Algeria's principal asset in this competition is its own relationship with the Tijaniyya—specifically, the zawiya of Ain Madi in the Algerian Sahara, birthplace of the brotherhood's founder Ahmad al-Tijani. Under Bouteflika, Algeria invested substantially in the promotion of Ain Madi as an alternative pilgrimage and educational centre to the Fes zawiya, organizing international conferences on the Tijaniyya (notably the 2006 symposium at the University of Laghouat attended by scholars from twenty-nine countries) and facilitating the continental travel of Algeria's Tijaniyya khalifa (Bel'our and Al-Aqrid, 2024).

The transfer of the remains of a Tijaniyya leader from Senegal to Algeria, and the subsequent diplomatic ceremonies surrounding this event, exemplified Algeria's strategy of using confraternal symbolism to challenge Morocco's custodial claims over the

Tijaniyya heritage. Algeria has also deployed the Alawiyya brotherhood—a Sufi order with a progressive reputation for interfaith dialogue, gender equality, and environmental stewardship, and with a significant international following—as a vehicle for projecting an image of tolerant, cosmopolitan Islam that complements its Tijaniyya strategy.

Under President Tebboune, Algeria has continued to prioritize the reconstitution of its Sufi confraternal networks as instruments of cultural foreign policy, promoting a religious reference framework grounded in Maliki jurisprudence, the Warsh Quranic recitation, and a discourse of moderation and anti-extremism that closely mirrors Morocco's own positioning (Bel'our and Al-Aqrid, 2024). The convergence of these two states' religious diplomacy frameworks—both invoking Maliki moderation, Sufi legitimacy, and anti-Wahhabi positioning—means that their competition in Africa is less about substantive doctrinal difference than about the institutional capacity to project and sustain influence.

5.2 Turkey and Saudi Arabia as Rival Religious Actors

Beyond the Maghrebian competition, Morocco's spiritual strategy confronts the expanding religious diplomacies of Turkey and Saudi Arabia, each mobilizing different assets and pursuing different models of Islamic influence projection in Africa.

Turkey's engagement with Africa has been dramatically reconfigured since the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) accession to power in 2002, reversing decades of Kemalist disengagement from African Muslim populations. The AKP's neo-Ottoman framing of Turkish foreign policy has led to a sustained effort to capitalize on the memory of Ottoman administrative presence in North and East Africa (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan between 1536 and 1912) as a basis for relational credibility (Zawawi, 2011).

Turkey's African religious architecture is multi-layered. The Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs) operates through its international foundation to spread Turkish-inflected Hanafi Islam, building mosques, distributing Qurans, and running Imam Khatib schools across the continent. The Maarif Foundation, established as the state's designated operator of international educational services, has absorbed the schools previously associated with the Gulen movement, expanding Turkey's educational footprint in Africa. Turkish humanitarian organisations—notably IHH (the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief) and foundations associated with the Naqshbandi Sufi order—operate complementary networks of social provision and religious outreach (Balci and Binate, 2026).

Turkey's deployment of cultural soft power through translated television drama series has also proven remarkably effective in generating popular affinity for Turkish culture and, by extension, for Turkish Islamic references, in African Muslim societies. This media dimension of religious diplomacy—largely absent from Morocco's toolkit—represents a

significant asymmetric advantage for Ankara in the competition for African Muslim publics (Nada, 2026).

Saudi Arabia, for its part, has historically deployed vastly greater financial resources in Africa than Morocco, funding mosque construction, Quranic school networks, and the training of African scholars at Saudi institutions aligned with Wahhabi-Salafi doctrine. However, the social consequences of Saudi-funded Salafism in West Africa—its corrosive effect on Sufi traditions, its contestation of local Islamic practices, and its indirect contribution to the ideological environment in which Jihadist movements have flourished—have progressively undermined the Saudi model's legitimacy and generated space for Morocco's alternative positioning. Morocco's consistent self-presentation as the antithesis of Wahhabi influence—rooted in Maliki legal tradition, Ash'ari theology, and Junaydi Sufism—thus derives much of its persuasive power from the failures, real and perceived, of Saudi-funded religious projection (Bayloc and Halwa, 2016, p. 115).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Key Findings

This article has argued that Morocco's spiritual diplomacy in Africa constitutes a structurally significant and analytically undertheorized dimension of contemporary Islamic soft power politics. Four principal findings emerge from the analysis.

First, Morocco has accomplished a historically unusual transition: the conversion of a spontaneous, centuries-old civilizational heritage into a deliberately designed institutional architecture of foreign policy. The establishment of the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Scholars and the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams represents not merely the bureaucratization of religious diplomacy but the creation of a genuinely novel instrument of interstate soft power—one that operates through the formation of human capital rather than the projection of financial or military resources.

Second, spiritual soft power has demonstrably contributed to Morocco's core geopolitical objectives, most notably its reintegration into the African Union in 2017 and the management of African states' positions on Western Sahara. The Tijaniyya networks, in particular, function as a form of structural diplomatic leverage that no rival power can fully replicate, grounding Morocco's influence in a pre-political domain of religious loyalty that persists independently of formal interstate relations.

Third, the functional coupling of spiritual diplomacy with counter-extremism security policy represents one of Morocco's most innovative contributions to the architecture of Sahel governance. By positioning Islamic moderation as a preventive security instrument, Morocco has articulated a comprehensive doctrine of spiritual security that complements rather than displaces conventional security cooperation, and that has attracted meaningful international validation.

Fourth, Morocco's spiritual strategy operates in an increasingly competitive environment in which Algeria, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia each contest Moroccan religious influence through distinct but overlapping mechanisms. The convergence of Algeria's Maliki-Sufi framing with Morocco's own positions means that this competition is increasingly about institutional capacity and network depth rather than doctrinal differentiation.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations emerge from the foregoing analysis:

- Deepening interdisciplinary research on the nexus between spiritual security and other security domains (energy, economic, humanitarian) is essential for a comprehensive understanding of Morocco's 'guarantor' role in African strategic partnerships.
- Morocco should invest in the digitalization of its spiritual diplomacy—expanding targeted religious media to address African youth populations through social media platforms—to counter extremist online recruitment with authoritative, locally resonant Islamic discourse.
- The institutional capacity of the Mohammed VI Institute should be expanded to cover underserved geographical areas, particularly Central and East Africa, where Moroccan religious presence remains limited relative to Turkish and Saudi competition.
- The strategic role of Sufi brotherhoods as agents of Morocco's 'parallel diplomacy' should be more formally acknowledged and systematically coordinated, enabling these networks to act as structured channels for soft power projection rather than informal adjuncts to state diplomacy.
- Morocco should develop a more rigorous framework for evaluating the impact of its spiritual diplomacy, producing evidence-based assessments of its effects on African states' policy positions, security outcomes, and public opinion.

In sum, Morocco's spiritual soft power represents one of the most sophisticated and historically grounded instruments of religious diplomacy in the contemporary Muslim world. Its further development—through institutional investment, adaptive strategy, and rigorous evaluation—remains essential both to Morocco's national interest and to the broader project of stabilizing the religious field in an African continent confronting the severe challenges of extremism, fragmentation, and contested Islamic authority.

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