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Morocco and the personal diplomacy of King Mohammed VI

On 31st January 2017 the African Union (UA) admitted Morocco as a member State of the organisation. The historical decision, which was taken with the vote of 39 member States out of the total 54, marked the 28th Summit of the heads of State and government of the UA held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. During the session on the same day King Mohammed VI remarked the importance of the admission saying that “it is beautiful to come back home after a long absence”.

Mohammed VI was referring to the empty seat policy that Morocco adopted for more than 30 years. The kingdom quitted the predecessor of the UA (the Organisation of the African Union - OUA) in 1984, to protest against the admission among its founding members of the République Arabe Saharaoui Démocratique (RASD). The RASD is the government in exile established by the Saharawi independent movement, the Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía y Río de Oro, commonly known as the Polisario Front. In the last phase of the decolonization process, the Polisario demanded the independence of the Western Sahara and the recognition of its sovereignty. However, after Spain announced it was willing to relinquish its colonial presence in Western Sahara, on 6 November 1975 King Hassan II announced the Green March, in which thousands of Moroccans advanced into Western Sahara to legitimize the sovereign rights of the kingdom. The Madrid Accord partly recognized Moroccan demands, providing a partition of the territory between Morocco and Mauritania. Since then the Western Sahara became a battleground between the Force Armées Royales (FAR, the Moroccan army) and the Polisario Front, militarily backed and supported by Algeria.

The decision of Hassan II to withdraw from the OUA occurred during the most tense phase of the conflict between Morocco and the Polisario. Nevertheless, the end of the cold war and the changing international landscape created the premises for a ceasefire signed in 1991, which allowed the establishment of a UN mission in charge of organizing a referendum on the status of the Western Sahara (Mission des Nations Unies pour l'organisation d'un referendum au Sahara Occidental – MINURSO).

Despite Morocco's admission of the rights of the Saharawi to make a choice between integration, autonomy or independence, the referendum never took place. The stalemate produced increasing tensions last year, after the former UN Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon visited a refugee camp in Western Sahara, defining the Moroccan control over the territory as an ‘occupation’. Moreover, in December 2015 the Court of First Instance of the EU had already suspended a trade deal with Morocco, stating that the deal failed to explicitly refer to Western Sahara and thus it cannot apply to the disputed territory. In December 2016 the EU Court of Justice reinstated the trade deal, establishing nonetheless that it cannot apply to Western Sahara, as it is not part of the Moroccan territory.

Tensions with Brussels over the trade deal and the firmer stance of different European countries on the Western Sahara issue help to explain Morocco's renewed interest in Africa. Furthermore, the African policy of Rabat seems also a consequence of the increasing isolation of the kingdom in the Maghreb. Beside the historic rivalry with Algiers, in the last years Morocco had also to face strained relations with Mauritania, whose President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz seems more closer to Algeria and the Polisario Front than his predecessors.

Morocco formally demanded to be a member of the AU in September 2016. Despite speculations of Rabat imposing the suspension of the RASD in order to 'come back home', officially no preconditions were made public. In the following months Mohammed VI's regional tours paved the way for the admission. In October the king was in Rwanda, Tanzania and Ethiopia and in November he visited Senegal and Madagascar. However, the personal diplomacy of Mohammed VI (which undoubtedly overshadowed the Prime Minister Abdellilah Benkirane, still busy in long-term negotiations to compose a government) was particularly impressive in December, when the king visited Nigeria to sign different economic partnerships with President Muhammadu Buhari. The deals included the building of a 6,000 km gas pipeline from Nigeria to Morocco and then to the European market. The project, which could also be helpful in providing electricity to the West African countries, represent a major blow to the historical axis between Algiers, Abuja and Pretoria, considered the backbone of the AU. Mohammed VI's intense diplomatic activity provided Rabat with the needed support for its diplomatic action in the continental arena, beyond reaffirming the central role of the king in the Moroccan political system.

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