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“Evolutions in the relations between Morocco and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): a singular illustration of multilateralism in the Arab world”

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## Evolutions in the relations between Morocco and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): a singular illustration of multilateralism in the Arab world

### Introduction :

Since its creation in 1981, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)<sup>1</sup> seems to be treating with extreme caution any request for accession<sup>2</sup>. However, in winter 2011, in the wake of the events of the « Arab Springs », the GCC proposed membership to Morocco and Jordan. These two states are constitutional monarchies<sup>3</sup> that had been able to contain the 2011 protests. Regarding Jordan, several relevant elements can be mentioned: geographical proximity (the country shares a border with Saudi Arabia), their strong economic ties (in terms of trade, financial transactions and labor mobility), and the close ties between the monarchies. Yet, Morocco's situation is different. If the most striking fact is certainly the geographical distance between Morocco and the GCC states, there are many other aspects that lead us to question this proposal for membership.

The proposal for membership was finally transformed, in December 2011, into a strategic partnership between Morocco and the GCC planned over five years (2012-2017), including substantial financial aid for development projects in Morocco (nearly five billion dollars). It was not until November 7, 2012 that the agreement was officially signed in Manama, after an official tour by Moroccan King Mohammed VI in the Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar) from 15 to 24 October 2012, during which he presented a selection of projects in the fields of infrastructures (including transport, health, education and housing) and agriculture.

From proposal of membership to strategic partnership and financial aid, the relations between Morocco and the GCC have undergone major changes in recent years that should be analyzed by placing them in a wider space and time framework. Thus, the « Arab Springs » have not only caused internal reconstructions but have also altered the regional balance and brought new forms of international relations in the region.

In the literature on the Middle East, studies about the sustainability of Arab monarchies are not new<sup>4</sup>. However, two paths seem little explored. On the one hand, there are few studies on the relationship between these monarchies from an internationalist perspective<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, the

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<sup>1</sup> The GCC is a regional organization composed of six countries: Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

<sup>2</sup> The GCC refused the membership of Yemen in 1999 following its formal application. However, it can be assumed that the country would have been a logical geographic extension, and its membership would have permitted to keep an eye on the regional stability.

<sup>3</sup> According to CHARILLON Frédéric and DIECKHOFF Alain, the qualification as a « constitutional monarchy » is not based only on the existence of a constitution, but also on the respect of certain principles (such as the division of powers) and certain practices (political pluralism is one of them). See CHARILLON Frédéric, DIECKHOFF Alain, *Afrique du Nord, Moyen-Orient : la double recomposition*, Paris, La Documentation Française, 2013, p.9

<sup>4</sup> See CHARILLON Frédéric, « La monarchie dans le monde arabe : la légitimité par le charisme, au service d'un nouveau pacte politique ? », *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, vol. 3, n°2, 1996

<sup>5</sup> See in particular HERB Michael, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies*, State University of New York, 1999, and LEVEAU Rémy, HAMMOUDI Abdellah (dir.), *Monarchies arabes : Transitions et dérives dynastiques*, La Documentation Française, Paris, 2002. These books mainly study the internal mechanisms, and divide their work in sections by country.

post-2011 studies focus on the monarchies' internal mechanisms of resistance, but say little about the consequences in terms of international relations<sup>6</sup>. This paper is to be connected to the latter issue.

One can then ask whether these recent developments in the relations between Morocco and the GCC countries are a form of resistance from Arab monarchies, which would share a common destiny, and in which way multilateralism can be a tool for resistance.

While many analyses in terms of interests and power help rationalize these developments for both actors, a look at the perceptions and structures questions the feasibility of their implementation. Finally, we will see to what extent an internationalist outlook on the evolutions invites us to raise questions about the practice of multilateralism in the Arab world today.

### I. A rationalization of relational evolutions between Morocco and the GCC

This proposal of membership clearly appears in the context of the « Arab Springs ». This suggests that the regional geopolitical situation is the trigger. However, a realist analysis of the interests of the states concerned shows that the ground has been prepared for a long time, be it economically, politically or strategically.

- An economic outlook: a win-win partnership?

Before 2011, the Maghreb country where the oil monarchies invested most was Tunisia. « The projects that had been announced in Tunisia are estimated to be nearly 47 million dollars, more than half of the total investments by Gulf countries in the region. Morocco comes second with 18,7 million dollars (23%) », as R. Meddeb stated in 2010<sup>7</sup>. Historically, the financial flows between Morocco and the Gulf were limited to a few real estate investments, including those by Saudi princes (the palace of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, and the gigantic Hassan II mosque in Casablanca in particular), but also through joint ventures such as the Moroccan-Kuwaiti development Consortium (CMKD) or the Moroccan-Emirati company for development (SOMED). Thus, it appears that the trade flows between Morocco and the GCC were historically relatively unimportant, although there is a significant increase in the share of FDI (Foreign Direct Investments) from the Gulf in the total of Moroccan FDI, which rose from 2% to 17% between 2003 and 2008. The importance of the economic relations between Morocco and the Gulf countries before 2011 must be relativized. The main economic and trade partner of Morocco was and remains Europe (to which Morocco sends almost 70% of its exports and which is the source of 80% of Moroccan FDI). The economic relations between Morocco and the GCC are mainly donations (70% of donations in Morocco in 2008 came from the GCC countries). For example, the « TangerMed » port benefited in 2002 from a 300 million dollars subsidy by the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development as a personal gift from Sheikh Zayed (UAE).

Today, the Gulf countries represent one third of sovereign funds worldwide. Therefore, they are seeking for investment areas. For Morocco, these investment capacities of Gulf monarchies are an undeniable opportunity to feed its economy in full expansion. The country has undertaken, since the

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<sup>6</sup> See in particular :

- AGATHANGELOU Anna M., SOGUK Nevzat, Arab Revolutions and World Transformations, London & New York, Routledge, 2013  
- CHARILLON Frédéric, DIECKHOFF Alain, Afrique du Nord, Moyen-Orient : la double recomposition, Paris, La Documentation Française, 2013  
- NOUEIHED Lin, WARREN Alex, The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, counter-revolution and the making of a new era, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2012

<sup>7</sup> MEDDEB Radhi, « Le Conseil de Coopération du Golfe au Maghreb : échange et stratégies d'investissement », IFRI, 2010, p. 12

end of the reign of Hassan II (the 1990s), to implement a policy of economic openness and liberalization, which now allows to have promising sectors with high added value: new technologies, renewable energy, tourism, industry... Furthermore, Morocco has more and more qualified human resources (as testified by the proliferation of high-quality training in Morocco, which attracts people from the whole African continent), an allegedly excellent business climate<sup>8</sup> and an emerging middle class (which is a motor of growth and consumption).

An economic partnership between Morocco and GCC states seems beneficial for both sides. The contrasting situation between a still emerging Moroccan economy and economies with significant financial resources (the Gulf) could be a leverage for complementary investment and trade flows. Regional economic integration between the two types of economies could help to create a situation of global competitiveness that would be beneficial for those economies in transition which are trying to catch up<sup>9</sup>. Such assumptions follow from the results observed in other regional economic integration models such as the EU, the ASEAN or Nafta.

- The creation of a « kings' club » ?

« Rather than an alliance or real regional integration, the GCC is a cooperative structure based on a tacit agreement to reactivate political solidarity and cohesion in response to imminent external threats »<sup>10</sup>. Two elements emerge from this definition: the political aspect and the issue of safety.

The monarchical political systems of the Arab world were shaken by the « Arab Springs » to the extent that the uprisings caused a fear of contagion and a concern about the growing insecurity in the region. This led the Gulf States to conduct foreign policies favoring 'old' regimes (by supporting repression both financially and materially)<sup>11</sup>. In this context, Morocco appears as a politically stable country, which has managed the few social movements by operating reforms, and for which the notions of territorial integrity, security and stability are essential. The Ambassador of Saudi Arabia in Morocco indicated in 2012 that regional and international issues are the subject of almost daily consultation and coordination between the two countries and reiterated the convergence of views of the two states concerning the « issues that challenge the Arab and Islamic Oumma »<sup>12</sup>. This is an example of the proactive nature of the Saudi diplomacy facing the « Arab Springs ». Beyond this contextualization, Morocco's accession would allow the GCC to gain additional political weight in the region, which will have consequences in its relations with third parties such as Iran or the United States (which could potentially be pleased at the creation of an anti-terrorist line in the region, while dreading radicalization and « authoritarianization » of monarchical systems).

From a religious point of view, the fact that Morocco is a Sunni monarchy is undoubtedly significant. The accession of Morocco to the GCC could be analyzed as the desire to create a Sunni axis, whose purpose could be to counter the Shia threat (Morocco severed its diplomatic relations with Iran in 2009) or not. In addition, there are important links between the royal families of the Gulf and the Moroccan royal family. First, the royal families of Morocco and Jordan have a powerful symbolic weight for all the Arab world because they are descendants of the Prophet (the Alawite and Hashemite dynasties are 'cherifian', i.e. they are descendants of Muhammad through his daughter Fatima, via one of her two grand-sons, Hassan and Hussayn). The king of Saudi Arabia also has symbolic importance for all royal families in the muslim world because he has the title of «

<sup>8</sup> Morocco is ranked 87th out of the 189 countries in the Doing Business 2014 ranking published by the World Bank. It was ranked 114th in 2011 and has experienced significant progress in 2012 (up to the 94th place).

<sup>9</sup> ADHAGHI Nabil, « Le Maroc et le Conseil de Coopération du Golfe », IRES, 30 avril 2013

<sup>10</sup> DAZI-HENI Fatiha, « Le Conseil de Coopération du Golfe : une coopération de sécurité et de défense renforcée ? », CERI Sciences Po, September 2011

<sup>11</sup> KIENLE Eberhard, « The Security Implications of the Arab Spring », GCSP Geneva Papers, Research Series n°10, January 2013, p.8

<sup>12</sup> Declarations of Mr. AL BICHR Mohamed Abderrahmane, in : Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Morocco, « Déclarations de personnalités sur les relations Maroc-pays du Golfe », 2012, p.5

Guardian of the Holy places », in reference to Mecca and Medina, since 1924. These symbolic and religious weights strengthen the ties between the royal families of the Gulf, Morocco and Jordan. Moreover, the royal families have maintained these relationships over centuries by frequently organizing inter-family marriages<sup>13</sup>. These elements contribute to creating a sense of sharing a « common destiny » in the Gulf monarchies and the Moroccan monarchy.

- Reinforced safety and strategic imperatives

From a strategic point of view, Morocco is not only a window on the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, but also a potential contribution of military and police staff that can be mobilized if an uprising occurs in a member country of the GCC<sup>14</sup>. This question is all the more important as the Gulf countries have long been accustomed to using « coup-proofing strategies » which consist in leaving the most important senior leadership positions to members of the ruling dynasty while massively recruiting non-citizens for security staff. This both allows to ensure full support of the military regime (and thus reduce the risk of a military coup or that of an army supportive of the popular uprisings) and to recruit Sunnis to ensure their majority in the territory (especially as these recruitments may result in facilitated naturalizations). These different mechanisms involved in the construction of the security apparatus in the Gulf, described especially by L. Louër<sup>15</sup> and J. T. Quinlivan<sup>16</sup>, make Moroccans a « valuable source of trained Sunni manpower »<sup>17</sup>. In this context, it can be assumed that the 2011 changes have accelerated the development of a common security and defense policy between the GCC members. For the first time since its creation, the GCC conducted a joint military action on March 14, 2011 in Bahrain, under Saudi leadership. As highlighted by F. Dazi-Heni, perception of common threats by members of the GCC has not permitted the achievement of a collective vision on security so far. Yet, the challenges of insecurity seem to be a *raison d'être* of this Arab regional pact. The Iran-Iraq war in 1980, the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the security threats in Yemen and the ongoing instability in Iraq are all factors that have contributed to the perception of a 'hostile' environment.

Finally, a rapprochement with the GCC is crucial for Morocco because it ensures an official support by the Gulf countries to the Moroccan plan in the conflict of the 'Western Sahara'. In fact, on November 25, 2014, at a meeting in Doha, the Foreign Ministers of the member states of the GCC and Jordan reiterated their « support for the serious and credible autonomy initiative, which was presented by Morocco as a basis for negotiations to find an irrevocable solution to the regional dispute over the Moroccan Sahara »<sup>18</sup>.

## II. Beyond interests: practical difficulties and differences in perception

Considering that Arab monarchies are setting up a « kings' club » to fight against the emergence of a pro-democratic republican front in the region would be an oversimplified view of reality. Many factors lead us to qualify such a vision.

- Theoretical challenges and political heterogeneity

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<sup>13</sup> See HERB Michael, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies*, State University of New York, 1999

<sup>14</sup> NOUEIHED Lin, WARREN Alex, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, counter-revolution and the making of a new era*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2012, p. 256

<sup>15</sup> LOUËR Laurence, « Sectarianism and Coup-Proofing Strategies in Bahrain », *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 36, n°2, 2013, pp. 245-260

<sup>16</sup> QUINLIVAN James T., « Coup-proofing: Its practice and consequences in the Middle East », *International Security*, vol. 24, Issue 2, 1999, pp. 131-165

<sup>17</sup> NOUEIHED Lin, WARREN Alex, *Ibid.*, p. 256

<sup>18</sup> Morocco World News, « Western Sahara: GCC countries, Jordan support Morocco's autonomy plan », Tuesday 25 November 2014

According to P. Ardant, it seems difficult to establish a « theory of Arab monarchies » given their geographical diversity (the monarchies are distributed from the Atlantic coast to the southern end of the Arabian peninsula, and have territories of various sizes), historical (some monarchical systems are old while others were born with the fall of the Ottoman Empire or decolonization in the 19th and 20th centuries, that actually did not have the same format and the same consequences everywhere), economic (beyond a difference of wealth and resources, the economic structures of monarchical systems differ), institutional (some monarchies have a constitution, some have a federal structure...) and 'democratic' specificities (multipartism and popular control mechanisms are more or less developed)<sup>19</sup>. Although these five categories of differentiation between the monarchies of the region were proposed in 2002, they still remain relevant today, in a post-Arab Springs context, leading us to nuance the establishment of a « theory of Arab monarchies » which would postulate the idea of a common destiny.

Politically, the Arab monarchies (even within the GCC) do not speak with one voice. There are many tensions and rivalries between them. This in particular explains the fact that the GCC had announced measures that were ultimately not implemented, and this has happened several times since its creation (in particular, we can mention the single currency project). These differences also imply that some GCC states do not consider preventing a potential expansion of popular revolts in their own territory as their only goal, but also aim to increase their influence on specific topics in countries displaying instability (such is the case of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which did not hesitate to use financial leverage).

Finally, a same political regime (monarchy) does not guarantee homogeneity in the modes of governance and transfer of power. As R. Leveau et A. Hammoudi<sup>20</sup> highlighted it, some monarchies of the Arab world have opted for the order of primo-geniture while others proceed to a more random designation within the group. The exercise of power may also differ: while the Moroccan King governs in an individual manner relying on plebeian networks to govern instead of the royal family, the Saudi monarchy works as a system within which 10,000 princes are eligible to occupy the highest state jobs. These different relationships between royalty and the structures of power could predict different trends over time, especially changing the decision-making process in case of a popular revolt. This leads us to qualify the assumption that there might be a monarchical diplomatic « circuit » that regulates the relations between Arab monarchies and avoids conflicts between them. Complicity between royal families may allow the creation of a structuring diplomatic axis but does not make disputes disappear, as evidenced by the underlying rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar<sup>21</sup>.

#### - Divergent economic and social choices

Morocco and the GCC countries have very different economic structures. The GCC states are almost all rentier states, whose revenues mostly come from oil, with strong investment capacities. On the other hand, Morocco is not an oil country and its economy is still fragile in many aspects. Its GDP is largely based on its revenues from taxes. Even if it could be possible to overcome these structural differences, geographic distance would make the practical establishment of a free trade area difficult. In addition, Morocco would become the most important demographic weight of the GCC in the case of its accession (with 32 million inhabitants), which can lead to questions about the functioning and sharing out within the organization.

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<sup>19</sup> ARDANT Philippe, « Vers une théorie des monarchies arabes ? », in LEVEAU Rémy et HAMMOUDI Abdellah (dir.), *Monarchies arabes : Transitions et dérives dynastiques*, La Documentation Française, Paris, 2002, pp. 9-11

<sup>20</sup> LEVEAU Rémy, HAMMOUDI Abdellah (dir.), *Monarchies arabes : Transitions et dérives dynastiques*, La Documentation Française, Paris, 2002, p.16

<sup>21</sup> See CHARILLON Frédéric, « Quelle place pour les monarchies arabes dans les relations internationales ? », in LEVEAU Rémy et HAMMOUDI Abdellah (dir.), *Monarchies arabes : Transitions et dérives dynastiques*, La Documentation Française, Paris, 2002, p.83

By broadening the focus, it appears that many differences remain between Morocco and the Gulf countries regarding societal choices, especially in relation to the place of religion. While the Gulf countries apply a strict reading of Islamic law, Morocco has opted for so-called « moderate Islam ».

Thus, if a purely realist approach in terms of interests and power enables to rationalize the proposal of membership, further study of sociological logics and perceptions invites us to qualify these arguments. In this respect, it is interesting to look at the process of decision-making itself within the GCC. The decision to invite Morocco and Jordan as members was officially announced on May 10, 2011, at the summit in Riyadh. The decision, which appears to have been taken on the impetus of Saudi Arabia, was headed by the Saudi-UAE binomial, a relatively new situation in the GCC policy, which can be explained by the urgency of the situation. However, other member states are said not to have welcomed the decision as favorably as Saudi Arabia would have liked. As K. Koch highlights it<sup>22</sup>, the details and modalities of these memberships have not been developed, suggesting divergent views within the multilateral body.

### III. South-South cooperation and perception of alterity: the new challenges of Arab monarchies in contemporary multilateralism

The Kingdom of Morocco seems to have preferred establishing a privileged partnership rather than a membership. In official justifications, Morocco wished to reaffirm its Maghrebi belonging (also in the 2011 Constitution<sup>23</sup>). Morocco seems to be facing a choice between Maghrebi integration and its participation in the GCC, assuming a certain incompatibility between the two types of integration<sup>24</sup>. A look at multilateralism in the region, including the use of the concept of South-South cooperation, is necessary to understand these interweavings.

- What role for South-South cooperation?

In recent years, the concept of « South-South cooperation » has become a central aspect of the Moroccan official statements in terms of foreign policy. This rhetoric has replaced that of pan-Arabism to justify partnerships (including economic ones) between Morocco and the Gulf countries. However, South-South cooperation can take several aspects that may overlap but must remain quite consistent. By reaffirming its North African roots and by prioritizing them before a membership in the GCC, Morocco highlights this coherence and gives credibility to its South-South cooperation speech: it is not about looking for the most lucrative partnerships with southern countries, but about creating a symbolic of a united and autonomous regional block relative to the North. For Moroccan leaders, if that South-South cooperation must be selective in the choice of partners, the selection must respect a regional, if not geographical, coherence.

Although this choice is not surprising insofar as that regional integration between Morocco and the Gulf countries is geographically difficult, the Moroccans' argument of the Maghrebi belonging may seem surprising. Indeed, given the paralyzed diplomatic relations between Morocco and Algeria and the relative failure of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the perspective of a Maghrebi integration seems difficult. It is with the South of the Sahara that Morocco is currently developing most actively its South-South cooperation, gradually positioning itself as an African hub. This in particular leads to reflect on the possibility of a South-South triangular or trilateral cooperation between Morocco, GCC countries and Africa, in which Morocco would be a gateway to the African continent.

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<sup>22</sup> The National, June 12, 2011. Specialist of security and defense questions at the Gulf Research Center.

<sup>23</sup> In the preamble of the 2011 Constitution, Morocco asserts its « belonging to the Great Maghreb », and states as an objective to « strive for the construction of the Maghreb Union as a strategic option ».

<sup>24</sup> AMARA Amine, « Le Maroc et le Conseil de Coopération du Golfe : perspectives géostratégiques et opportunités économiques », Institut Amadeus, June 20, 2011, p.3

- A sociological approach: the perception of alterity

Cooperations and unity drafts do not build as efficiently as when the actors have a common enemy<sup>25</sup>. In 2011, the GCC countries thought they shared with the Moroccan state the threat of revolutionary movements in the Arab world. Although relations between Morocco and the Gulf do not exclusively date from this period, there was renewed intensity and a change in the nature of these relationships embodied in the proposal of membership. However, several issues may be raised since this alterity is subject to change.

In 2011, the « alterity », for Arab monarchies, was composed of the republican regimes of the area, the victims of social movements and overthrowing of the rulers. In front of this alterity, Gulf and Moroccan monarchies suddenly appeared as a common identity front. Three years later, it would be more accurate to talk about « alterities » in the plural, insofar as the internal situations of concerned states followed different paths. Other variables are added and complexify the simple dichotomy 'State with an Arab Spring'/'State without and Arab Spring'. If we consider for example the question of the relation between religion and the political system in a post 9/11 context, the Moroccan choice to implement a branding strategy of « moderate Islam »<sup>26</sup> distinctly separates it from Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. Thus, it is necessary to go beyond a purely realist analysis that would see in the Morocco and GCC rapprochement a simple question of interests for a maximization (or backup) of power, and integrate the dimension of how threats are perceived.

An analysis of perceptions is especially relevant in this case because ruling leaders play a major role in the decision-making process of the monarchical states in the Arab world. The centrality of the royal person in the process of political and economic decisions is well established. The royal families of the Gulf countries and Morocco are acquainted and their ancestral symbolic links introduce not only a sense of sharing a common destiny but also a form of socialization. These individual dimensions cannot and should not be ignored in the analysis of international relations in the area.

Conclusion : Where and how is multilateralism intervening?

Relations between Morocco and the GCC countries have significantly evolved in recent years: they tend not to be composed only of a sum of bilateral cooperations (Morocco-Saudi Arabia, Morocco-UAE, etc.), but to stem from the establishment of a partnership between a state (Morocco) and a multilateral body. However, one may wonder if the decision to offer membership to Morocco was taken in a multilateral way (or unilaterally - by Saudi Arabia).

Finally, 'old' governance models (monarchies) are using a very modern tool to manage tensions and governance on the international scene: multilateralism. The use of this instrument enables monarchical regimes to be armed to face the challenges raised by social transformations (especially challenges of economic development and improvement of social conditions) and ideological ones (the rise of radical islamism). This also offers a way to supersede a euro-centric vision of the monarchical form, as doomed to disappear, or to survive without any other power than a symbolic one (as in Britain, Spain or Belgium). By using multilateralism, Arab monarchies integrate themselves into the international system by modernizing their tools in the same way as republican regimes. These evolutions show that Arab monarchies have developed an « international expertise »<sup>27</sup> and multilateral practices.

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<sup>25</sup> Reflection developed by the philosopher RICOEUR Paul in his book *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris, Seuil, 1990. He also applied it to the European case : « Quel éthos nouveau pour l'Europe ? », in KOSLOWSKI P., *Imaginer l'Europe: le marché intérieur européen, tâche culturelle et économique*, Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 1992

<sup>26</sup> See the analysis by REGRAGUI Ismaïl, *La diplomatie publique marocaine : une stratégie de marque religieuse*, L'Harmattan, 2013

<sup>27</sup> LEVEAU Rémy and HAMMOUDI Abdellah (dir.), *Monarchies arabes : Transitions et dérives dynastiques*, La Documentation Française, Paris, 2002, p.15



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