**INTRODUCTION:**

**The Main Aspects of the Moroccan Initiative on the Autonomy of the Sahara Region Regarding the Choice of its Development Model**

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I wish to thank the Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Morocco to the United Nations in Geneva for having invited me to chair this international research seminar on the topic: “What Development Model for Autonomous Regions?” It is an honour and a pleasure to take part in this important event with such distinguished academics and experts on autonomous regions.

The recourse to autonomy as a solution to protracted conflicts has demonstrated its viability and superiority in many cases such as Aceh in Indonesia, Muslim Mindanao in the Philippines or Iraqi Kurdistan. These autonomy arrangements are attractive because they allow to combine respect for territorial integrity of states with the capacity of minorities or regions to manage their own affairs and determine their future. They avoid the violent radicalization of disputes that occur in the case of separatism or independence of entities that are not viable economically or politically. They aim to protect the fundamental rights and specific identities of the concerned populations as well as their voluntary choice of a development model.

I will introduce today’s topic by first recalling that, on 11 April 2007, Morocco presented to the Secretary-General of the United Nations a document entitled “Moroccan Initiative for Negotiating an Autonomy Statute for the Sahara Region” in order to break the stalemate in negotiations on the status of Western Sahara.[[2]](#footnote-2) Indeed this conflict has been one of the most protracted ones on the African continent. And when we occasionally hear about the human sufferings that still result from this conflict, especially in the refugee camps, we can only support initiatives aiming at offering a negotiated solution and putting an end to this situation. This is all the more necessary today that this part of North Africa has become threatened by destabilizing factors that may affect the security of many states of the region and beyond. This is why the Security Council has assessed this proposal as “serious and credible” and kept a constant assessment recognizing the efforts deployed by Morocco to develop it.

In order to promote discussion on the various aspects of its Initiative, Morocco has initiated, among others, a number of international academic seminars: one in2009 with my organization, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy;[[3]](#footnote-3) another one in 2011 in Dakhla, Morocco, on “The Democracy and Human Rights Dimensions of the Moroccan Initiative”; others in Geneva in 2012 on “Governance in the Statutes of Autonomy: Institutions and Mechanisms” and on “Managing Natural Resources in Statutes of Autonomy”; in2013 on “Representation and Legitimacy in Autonomy Negotiations; and on “Autonomy Statutes and Regionalization: Solidarity and Equalization between Regions”. Morocco published the proceedings of all seminars in separate reports. Such rich material can only be helpful to the negotiators in addressing all the elements of an autonomy statute for the Region of Sahara as a final political solution to the ongoing conflict. Indeed, those seminars have brought together academics, practitioners, government representatives and civil society organizations who had a chance to witness the development and implementation of autonomy arrangements throughout the world. These events form a forward-looking exercise that seeks to capitalize on the diversity of perspectives to enrich the debate on the merits of autonomy.

Today’s seminar will pursue the same objective as the previous ones. It will offer an opportunity to compare practices followed by some states and/or territories or regions which are already autonomous or aspire to become so with regard to the choice of a development model. In this regard, it will be interesting to hear the President of Morocco’s Economic, Social and Environmental Council present the New Development Model of the Southern Provinces which it launched recently to contribute to the success of the Autonomy Plan for the Sahara Region.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Autonomy arrangements are global in their scope and integrate various aspects such as the political, social, economic, security, wealth-sharing, cultural parameters that render such arrangements modern, dynamic and consistent with international law. However, the success of an autonomy arrangement depends to a large extent on the model of development that it carries. It is all part of an integrated vision that goes beyond solving a political problem. This is why, without constraining our discussion, I would like to identify the following questions for our comparative analysis, and briefly recall the provisions of the Moroccan Initiative regarding the choice of a development model for the Sahara Region:

1. Does the autonomy statute of the territory provide for a process for the choice of its development model? What are such provisions? If this is not the case, does the agreement or the autonomy statute leave this choice to the autonomous region only, to the central government only or to both entities jointly, e.g. within the framework of a negotiation on revenue sharing? In the Moroccan Initiative, Article 5 provides that “the Sahara populations will themselves run their affairs democratically, through legislative, executive and judicial bodies enjoying exclusive powers. They will have the financial resources needed for the region's development in all fields, and will take an active part in the nation's economic, social and cultural life.” Article 12 enumerates the extensive powers that the Region will exercise, and which include: economic development, regional planning, promotion of investment, trade, industry, tourism and agriculture; infrastructure; social affairs (housing, education, health, employment, sports, social welfare and social security); cultural affairs, and the environment.
2. What are the criteria of the choice of a development model? Are they based on the current resources of the autonomous region or integrated into a development plan applicable to the whole country? Is the trend to develop the current potential of the autonomous region or to diversify its economy? The Moroccan Initiative, in its Article 13, lists the resources that the autonomous Sahara Region will have at its disposal for its development: regional taxes, duties and levies; proceeds from the development of natural resources allocated to the Region; share of proceeds from the development of regional natural resources; funds allocated on the basis of national solidarity; and proceeds from regional assets.
3. Is the choice of a development model for the autonomous region subject to consultation of the economic and social actors (professional or labour unions, civil society organizations) of the autonomous region? Are the economic and social actors of the central state associated to this consultation process? In the Moroccan Initiative, the Regions’ populations will be represented in the national Parliament and will thus be able to take part in national decisions on the country’s development model. But they will also have their own parliament and Economic and Social Council that will comprise representatives from economic, social, professional and community groups.
4. Is the selected development model an evolutionary one? Is it periodically reviewed depending on the evolution of the economic and social situation of the autonomous region and/or the central state? In the Moroccan plan for the Sahara Region, “the Sahara populations will themselves run their affairs democratically, through legislative, executive and judicial bodies enjoying exclusive powers” (Art. 5). It can thus be assumed that those populations will decide on their development model and will adjust it to the evolution of the Region’s economic situation.
5. Do the central state and/or the autonomous region call on external actors (international or regional organisations, NGOs, consultants, donors) in order to make an informed choice of the development model of the autonomous region? According to Art. 15 of the Moroccan Initiative, the State will exercise its responsibilities for external relations in consultation with the Sahara Region for those matters having a direct bearing on the Region’s prerogatives. In addition, the Region will be able to establish cooperation relations with foreign regions to foster inter-regional dialogue and cooperation. In this respect, global, regional and sub-regional organizations will have an important role to play to support such a process.

It is important to keep in mind that the contents of the Moroccan Initiative are intended as proposals for negotiation within the United Nations by all the parties involved in the conflict: they do not prejudge the final outcome of these negotiations, which will have to be approved by the concerned populations in a consultation. Indeed, through a broad process of national and international consultations, the autonomy proposal is meant to be an essential building block in the negotiation process. In this spirit, I am now pleased to give the floor to our guest speakers who will present their own experiences of various cases of regional autonomy regarding the choice of a development model and compare them with the Moroccan Initiative.

First of all, we will hear the presentation of the “New Development Model for the Southern Provinces” by Mr **Nizar Baraka**, President of the Moroccan Economic, Social and Environmental Council. Then, we’ll listen to Dr **Carlos Eduardo Pacheco Amaral**, Professor of Social and Political Philosophy at the History Department of the University of the Azores, who will talk about the autonomous regions of the Azores and Madeira in Portugal. He will be followed by Mr **Hiwa Osman**, Journalist, CEO and Founder of *mediawan*, and editorialist for the *Rudaw* newspaper, who will talk about Iraqi Kurdistan. Then Mr **Benedicto R. Bacani**, Executive Director of the Institute for Autonomy and Governance at Notre-Dame University in Mindanao, Philippines, will present the case of the Muslim Mindanao Region. Finally, Mr **Philippe Destatte**, President of the Destrée Institute in Namur will present a paper by Mr **Philippe Suinen**, Vice-President of the same Institute and Senior Lecturer at the Free University of Brussels, about the Wallonia Region in Belgium. The author had to cancel his own presentation at the last moment.

In the end, I will try to outline some conclusions of our discussions.

1. Senior Programme Advisor and Senior Fellow, Emerging Security Challenges Programme, Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). The author expresses here personal views. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See United Nations, Document S/2007/206 of 13 April 2007 (<http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/MINURSO%20S2007206.pdf>) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Can Autonomy Fulfil the Right to Self-determination?”, *Geneva Paper* No. 12, 2010 ([www.gcsp.ch/content/download/1652/13782/download](http://www.gcsp.ch/content/download/1652/13782/download)) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See: <http://www.ces.ma/Documents/PDF/Synthese-NMDPS-VAng.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)