

The Reasons Behind the Spanish-Moroccan Crisis

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Jun 25, 2021

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Brief Analysis

In order to understand the recent surge in migrants to Spanish enclaves in Morocco, one must understand the lopsided economic relationship between the EU and African countries.

On May 17, around 8,000 would-be Moroccan and sub-Saharan immigrants attempted to cross into the Spanish-controlled enclave of Ceuta, located at the northern tip of Morocco. Videos of the massive attempt went viral on social media, shocking the Moroccan and foreign public alike. Surely, many believe those images did a disservice and caused reputational damage to Morocco, giving the impression that many Moroccans are waiting for the slightest chance to cross to the other side of the borders. The Spanish government and media have also claimed that this was a premeditated attempt from the Moroccan government to allow a breach in security, a claim that cannot be clearly verified. Whether this is in fact the case is a question that may never be answered.

Prominent Spanish media, which has arguably shown a [historical bias \(https://www.amazon.com/Imagen-del-Magrebi-Espa-na-Perspectiva/dp/8472901335\)](https://www.amazon.com/Imagen-del-Magrebi-Espa-na-Perspectiva/dp/8472901335) against Morocco in its reporting, were quick to claim that Morocco is seeking to “blackmail” Spain and compel it to espouse Morocco’s position on Western Sahara. Some unsubstantiated claims about the role of the Moroccan government and the intentionality of the migrant surge have varied. Some reports have stated that local Moroccan employees in the Interior Ministry told the local population the borders were open. Still others have claimed that adolescent Moroccans were tricked into believing they could [watch \(https://elfarodeceuta.es/ninos-marruecos-engano-diciendo-ronaldo-jugaba-ceuta/\)](https://elfarodeceuta.es/ninos-marruecos-engano-diciendo-ronaldo-jugaba-ceuta/) Cristiano Ronaldo play in Ceuta.

While many aspects of the Moroccan government's role in the incident remain unclear, what is known is that there was a reduced presence of Moroccan police at the Spain-Morocco border. That there were fewer police than usual likely influenced the sudden influx of irregular migrants that we witnessed in on May 17-18. In this sense, it would be disingenuous for anybody to deny that there was a relaxation of Morocco’s border patrols that monitor the flow of irregular migrants.

Yet beyond the specific details of this isolated incident, there are also larger, systemic issues motivating these

migrants. One cannot make sense of the Ceuta migratory crisis without factoring in the disastrous impact that COVID-19 has had on the Moroccan economy, especially in Morocco's northern territories. Also relevant is Morocco's decision, long before the outbreak of the pandemic, to close its borders (<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2020/03/296067/morocco-closes-ceuta-melilla-borders-as-covid-19-spreads>) with Ceuta and Melilla and crack down (https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2019/12/10/inenglish/1575972423_610599.html) on the pervasive contraband economy there, which has had a deleterious impact on the surrounding region of northern Morocco. Taken together, these issues have caused (https://elpais.com/politica/2019/12/09/actualidad/1575915828_433491.html) thousands of families to lose their sources of income. Given these factors, crossing the border has become the only alternative for many in this region.

Spain's response to the migrant surge was summary pushbacks, which enabled it to return over 6,000 migrants to Morocco in less than 48 hours. In reference to the move, Secretary General of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles Catherine Woollard has said, "a situation where people are being collectively expelled without individual assessment is a situation that is both illegal under EU and international law."

Moreover, the incident highlighted the role that Morocco is playing in ensuring the success of the implementation of the EU immigration priorities, even as many of the continent's economic woes arguably stem from centuries of European (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/2015-06-16/plunder-africa>) plundering of African wealth and resources. If Europe is serious about tackling the migration crisis, it must also focus on its root causes: the lopsided global economic system in which Western countries impose their own set of rules on African countries. Not only is the economic system unfair and detrimental to African countries, but the latter seldom receive even a small part of foreign investments or development assistance.

The economic ties between Morocco and Spain illustrate some of this underlying inequality. While Spanish businesses invest heavily in a number of Latin American countries, the Spanish private sector's cumulative investments in Morocco did not exceed (<https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20190211/46362498104/espana-primer-socio-comercial-de-marruecos-busca-ahora-avanzar-en-inversion.html>) €4.5 billion in 2019, and stood below one percent (https://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/afkar/afkar-ideas-19/24Paredes_inversiones_espana_marruecos.pdf) of Spanish investments overseas in 2007.

And while Morocco did stand as Spain's third largest recipient (<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/26d68de7-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/26d68de7-en>) of official development assistance in 2019, the assistance that European countries devote to Africa is practically nullified by the massive subsidies EU governments grant to their own agricultural sectors in order to keep them competitive. A number of studies have demonstrated how these subsidies have a devastating effect (<https://www.un.org/french/pubs/chronique/2003/numero3/0303p68.asp>) on the agricultural sector in most African countries, where farming makes up the primary livelihood of large sectors of the population. The European agricultural subsidies make African products uncompetitive at both the global and local markets.

Morocco in particular has faced the effects of this lopsided global system. Over the past decade, Morocco shifted from being a transit country to being a destination for many sub-Saharan migrants. With the closure of European borders, Morocco has had to address the situation of tens of thousands of sub-Saharan Africans who found themselves stuck in the country. In 2014 and 2016, Morocco launched two campaigns that regularized the status of 53,000 immigrants, despite lacking an economy truly capable of absorbing the newcomers. And while Morocco represents the EU's second largest (https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/north-africa/morocco_en) cooperation portfolio on migration, the country still faces significant challenges in this area—including EU subsidies that the Moroccan government estimates cover just 20 percent of its costs as a host country. Moroccans see this economic situation as affected in turn by the insufficient size of investments Morocco receives from the EU, the unfair terms of EU-Morocco

trade, the continuation of the Sahara conflict, and the contraband economy that flourished for decades in Ceuta and Melilla.

To address these issues, Spain could invest in the areas of northern Morocco bordering Ceuta and Melilla. For decades, this region has suffered the disastrous effects of the contraband economy (<https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2020/02/293762/closure-of-borders-exposes-ceuta-melilla-dependence-on-morocco>) emanating from Ceuta and Melilla. Rather than encouraging the mega projects (<https://www.aies.at/download/2020/AIES-Fokus-2020-08.pdf>) that Morocco has launched over the past two decades to foster economic development in the region, Spain has seen these attempts as aiming to suffocate Ceuta and Melilla (https://blogs.elconfidencial.com/mundo/la-historia-no-acaba-aqui/2021-01-20/marruecos-asfixia-ceuta-melilla_2913992/).

Most importantly, were the Sahara conflict settled, the billions of dollars (<https://fr.ossin.org/maroc/435-ce-que-nous-coute-le-sahara>) that Morocco has spent on defending its territorial integrity could be reallocated to building a brighter future. Due to this conflict, Morocco buys weapons it barely uses or will never use—funds that could have been used instead to overhaul the country's infrastructure, upgrade its economy, and strengthen its competitiveness at the regional and global levels.

Were Morocco's economic situation bettered, Moroccans desperate to find decent job opportunities would think twice before emigrating to Europe. In addition, Morocco would have greater capacity to integrate part of the growing number of sub-Saharan Africans who pursue their legitimate dreams to lead a decent life and provide for themselves and their loved ones.

As long as the EU and Spain do not put migration into its broader political, economic, and historical context, their security-driven policies will fall short of producing the desired outcome.

A more viable remedy to alleviate the pressure of undocumented immigration could be for the EU, after reviewing the terms of trade agreements between the EU, Morocco and African economies, to lift restrictions or quotas on Moroccan exports to the European market.

This measure should be accompanied by the imposition of greater incentives for Spanish companies to invest in the Moroccan economy. Furthermore, the EU as a whole could increase official development assistance for Morocco, and the impact of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) on external countries must also be considered. The adoption of such policies would undoubtedly contribute to increasing the competitiveness and viability of Moroccan and African companies across a range of sectors where they have a competitive advantage. In turn, this would result in the creation of more job opportunities and the improvement of the living conditions of the middle class and low-income communities. Though these decisions would not put a complete end to the EU's appeal for scores of Moroccan youths, it would reduce the number of would-be immigrants seeking to escape extreme poverty.

However, the EU should also open its border to legal immigration by assigning quota to each country depending on their needs for qualified and unqualified workers; in addition to lessening the burden on Morocco, this will also work to offset the ongoing population decline of Europe's aging population.

When it comes to Spain itself, the government will have to address the status of Ceuta and Melilla head-on and come to terms with the fact that the historic trafficking of contraband merchandise through the two enclaves has done significant economic damage to northern Morocco. For the past seven decades, the two enclaves have lived off the contraband economy, a prosperity achieved at the expense of the Moroccan economy—which the Moroccan government estimated in 2018 to amount to \$560 million lost in tax revenues. Over the past decades, Morocco has given clear signs (<https://atalayar.com/en/content/morocco-will-build-free-trade-zone-border-ceuta#:~:text=The%20Moroccan%20authorities%20have%20officially,from%20the%20border%20with%20Ceuta.>) that it was not content with the status quo and that it could not tolerate an illicit economy that annihilated any chances

for the creation of a sustainable and competitive economy in northern Morocco and throughout the country.

A number of studies have demonstrated the detrimental effect

(<https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20170426/422065460534/el-norte-de-marruecos-esta-improductivo-por-la-invasion-de-productos-de-ceuta.html>) that Ceuta and Melilla have had on the overall Moroccan economy. The mega projects that Morocco has launched across the region—including Tangier Med port, the port of Nador, the construction of an industrial zone in Tetouan—all aimed at creating an alternative economy, and are likely to provide the local population with decent job opportunities and create prosperity.

While the closing of the border in 2020 may have put an end to this contraband economy for now, a sustainable, cooperative solution to the two enclaves is still required. No matter how dismissive Spain may be of Morocco's claims, the Spanish government will at some point have to sit at the negotiations table with Morocco to discuss a viable solution to the economic activities in Ceuta and Melilla that could preserve the two's parties' strategic interest and safeguard their privileged partnership.

In the end, Morocco and Spain are neighbors and will remain so. It would behoove the two countries to find a formula that could help them overcome their recurring misunderstandings and build their bilateral ties on more solid grounds. ❖

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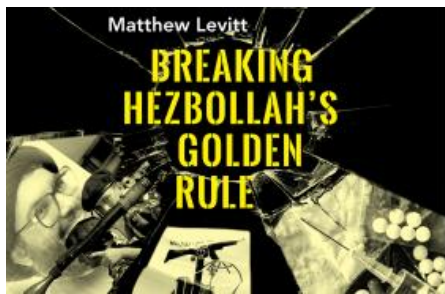
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