

Never Again The “Gendarme of Europe”? Morocco’s Changing Regional Role and the Migration Question

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Since 2011, Morocco has placed its expansion of influence on the African continent at the center of its development strategy.¹ Indeed, after the turbulent events that ensued as a result of the Arab Spring and the European financial crisis, King Mohammed VI decided to foster greater diplomatic and business relations with his African partners rather than subjecting his Kingdom to the mercy of an ever-weakening Western sphere of influence. Both the Arab Spring and the European financial crisis pushed the King and his business-savvy coterie to act fast in order to mitigate risks and seize opportunities. For instance, the financial crisis caused a general retreat of western banks from Africa and a takeover of Moroccan ones, like Attijariwafa (AwB), Banque Marocaine du Commerce Extérieur (BMCE), and Banque Populaire Marocaine (BPM). Moroccan banks distinguish themselves as they have an above-average acceptance of risk, as a US-based Intelligence consultancy has suggested, “Moroccan banks are showing an increased interest in Africa and are displaying a correlative bigger appetite for risk, exposing themselves to low-grade domestic sovereign bonds in countries that rely on commodity exports.”² In terms of domestic stability, the decision to focus on Africa was also strategic as the country faces high youth unemployment, feuds with neighbors, stagnating growth rates, and little opportunities for business investments.

Another important step Morocco has taken since its “inward-shift” towards sub-Saharan Africa is the restoring of its membership of the African Union in 2017.³ The Kingdom had boycotted the organization for 35 years for having admitted the Sahrawi Arab Democratic

¹ Anonymous interview with employee at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rabat. August, 2019.

²Guerraoui, S. (2019). Moroccan banks doing well in Africa. Retrieved from <https://theArabweekly.com/moroccan-banks-doing-well-africa>

³ Marks, J. (2019). Morocco’s pivot to Africa hints at a new post-colonial order. *FT.Com*, Retrieved from <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:7316/docview/2170772529?accountid=13042>

Republic (SADR) – self-proclaimed government in exile of Western Sahara, a territory claimed by Morocco as its own– as an integral member. This reintegration is especially significant as it foreshadows Morocco’s efforts to gain increased support for its claim over the entirety of the Western Sahara territory, and helps further explain this strategy of rapprochement the Kingdom has adopted towards fellow African states.

As part of this strategy of rapprochement and the opening of new trade routes towards Africa, Morocco has also opened migration routes, and this has meant an increase in freedom of mobility between Morocco and its sub-Saharan African neighbors. While this may be a welcomed outcome domestically, it raised the eyebrows of its neighbor on the other side of the Mediterranean; the European Union (EU). Indeed, the EU feels threatened by Morocco’s openness towards Sub-Saharan Africa as it fears this will cause more migration towards the EU at a time when EU policies and narratives on migration suggest it wants to desperately curb and control it. Thus, although Morocco has become a “Gateway to Africa,” it is feared that it might also become a “Gateway to Europe” for many migrants. This is highly problematic for the EU as it has historically relied on Morocco’s help to limit African migration towards Europe. However, it seems that today Morocco is changing its role from a “second-class” peripheral partner to the EU, to a “first-class” regional leader in Africa.

Against this backdrop, this essay analyzes the apparent paradox that, while the EU is adopting a general narrative and policy of “closed borders” and “limited mobility,” Morocco is working towards establishing greater ties with its African neighbors by promoting open borders, encouraging mobility and freedom of movement. This challenges its historical alignment with EU-dictated policies, and threatens its privileged position with the block.

The EU's "Crisis" Narrative

2015 was characterized by the "migrant crisis" in the EU. It was from 2015 onwards that the EU ramped up its "crisis" narrative on migration, treating it as a pressing security issue to be dealt with.⁴ This narrative of urgency gained political importance at the highest levels and resulted in harsh EU border security measures. The prioritization of border security and this narrative of threat and securitization is best seen in the EU's "strategic agenda 2019-2024" published in June 2019, where it is stated that the EU must ensure the integrity of its territory and "know and be the ones to decide who enters the EU."⁵ Indeed, the report stresses that the "effective control of the external borders is an absolute prerequisite for guaranteeing security, upholding law and order, and ensuring the functioning of EU policies."⁶ Clearly, the underlying narrative of the report is that of securitization and the threat of migration to the EU's stability and well-being.

A strategy to tackle this issue, as discussed in the report, is that of partnering with African countries in order to advance and promote EU policies and values. This is not a new strategy; in reality, since the end of the Cold War, the EU has been outsourcing its fight against migration to countries of origin to create a buffer zone for itself. In this regard, one of the most important partners of the EU to whom this "dirty job" has gone is Morocco. However, countries such as Morocco have no real interest in curbing migration as they benefit from remittances and have no long-term benefit in stopping migration.⁷ Yet, they carry out this role because they get political concessions and EU financial "aid." This worked well until 2011, where, in light

⁴ Andersson, R. (2019, September 12). The Cobra Effect: "Fighting" Migration Gets Europe Nowhere. Retrieved from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/the-cobra-effect-fighting-migration-gets-europe-nowhere/>

⁵ European Council. (n.d.). A New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024. Retrieved from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024.pdf>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Anonymous interview with employees at the Ministry of Foreign and Internal Affairs in Rabat. August, 2019.

of the Arab Spring developments, Morocco has decided to follow a migration strategy of its own setting itself as a regional trendsetter instead of a mere follower of EU migration policies.

What is clear since 2015 is that rather than enhancing and promoting human development and freedom of movement, the EU has turned its political narrative on migration into fear-mongering and established policies that reflect it, through the hyper-securitization of its borders. Furthermore, there is a clear divergence of migration policies between the EU and some of its traditional African partners, such as Morocco, that have, until recently, undertaken the “dirty job” of curbing migration flows towards the EU.

From follower to trendsetter: Morocco’s divergence from EU-dictated policies

Since 2011, Morocco has heavily invested in key sectors that allow it to exploit its strategic position at the nexus of Europe and Africa.⁸ For instance, Morocco has upgraded its transport infrastructure by launching the biggest port in the Mediterranean and Africa; Tanger MED, which hopes to become the principal calling point for container shipping between Africa, Asia, and Europe.⁹ In addition to trade infrastructure, Morocco has also revamped its national airline strategy by expanding Royal Air Maroc’s (RAM) flight network to make Casablanca the principal transit hub for Africa-bound travels in and from Europe, the US, and Asia. As of today, RAM caters to more than 20 destinations within Africa, and is set to become the first African airline to join the prestigious Oneworld Alliance in 2020, which counts amongst its members some of the best carriers in the world, such as Qatar Airways, Emirates Airways, and Qantas.¹⁰ Such changes have resulted in 85% of Morocco’s 2016 outward foreign

⁸ Kede, S. (2019, May 20). Morocco continues its push into Africa. Retrieved from <https://africanbusinessmagazine.com/1C7cw>

⁹ Eljechimi, A. (2019, June 27). Morocco's Tangier port to become Mediterranean's largest. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-morocco-economy-ports/moroccos-tangier-port-to-become-mediterraneans-largest-idUSKCN1TR2G0>

¹⁰ Russell, E. (2018, December 5). Royal Air Maroc to be Oneworld's first African carrier. Retrieved from <https://www.flightglobal.com/news/articles/royal-air-maroc-to-be-oneworlds-first-african-carri-454183/>

direct investment (FDI) – approximately \$4.7bn – to go towards Africa, according to the African Development Bank (AfDB).¹¹ Overall, improved connectivity and infrastructure are key pillars of the Kingdom’s development strategy.

Morocco has also been working towards evidencing its African identity in the face of its multicultural and composite Amazigh, Arab, African, Islamic, Jewish, Andalusian, and Mediterranean identity. The late King Hassan II described Morocco as a tree that has its roots in Africa, its trunk in the Arab-Muslim world, and its branches in Europe.¹² This multiculturalism was further evidenced in the preamble of the 2011 Moroccan constitution, which states that Morocco’s unity is forged by “the convergence of its Arab-Islamist, Berber and Saharan-Hassanic components, and nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Hebraic and Mediterranean influences.”¹³ Thus, because or in spite of this *brassage de cultures*, Morocco has always been at the margins of these geographical denominations, which translated into a sort of geopolitical alienation and “follower” mentality. However, by embracing its strategic geographical location and multicultural identity, Morocco sees an opportunity to become a regional leader, rule-setter, and influencer through the adoption of an openly assertive forward-looking strategy evidencing its African heritage and identity.

On this note, an important break Morocco has taken from EU-dictated policies is on migration. Indeed, Morocco is moving away from the EU’s policies and setting its own terms, no longer accepting to be Europe’s “gate-keeper.” Of course, this is a delicate move to make as the EU accounts for more than half of Morocco’s international trade, and provides Morocco with billions of euros for security aid, and development. This is why, since its independence in 1956, Morocco been on good terms with one of its primary economic and political lifelines,

¹¹ Kede, S. (2019, May 20). Morocco continues its push into Africa. Retrieved from <https://africanbusinessmagazine.com/1C7cw>

¹² Chtatou, M. (2018, July 27). Is Morocco the New "Andalusia" for Multicultural Diversity? Retrieved from <https://intpolicydigest.org/2018/07/27/is-morocco-the-new-andalusia-for-multicultural-diversity/>

¹³ Ibid.

and has taken the job of helping protect Europe's borders, all while limiting freedoms of movement. Indeed, in 1987, Morocco had even hoped to join the EU and applied to the European Communities, precursor to the EU; but, it was denied on the grounds that it is not a "European country." Today times have changed, and as the EU is becoming less relevant, Morocco seeks to grow, modernize, and engage in business ventures outside the EU's sphere of influence.

Reputation dictates Morocco's new approach towards migration

On the question of migration, Morocco has never been concerned with migrants staying in the Kingdom.¹⁴ In reality, since 2013, Morocco has loosened its migration policies making them more humanitarian and welcoming. For example, Morocco grants renewable residency permits to sub-Saharan migrants who are not necessarily asylum-seekers and who end up becoming permanent settlers. Morocco is also skeptical at how effective and sustainable EU anti-immigration policies enforced in North Africa are. In fact, Moroccan policymakers are realizing that Europe is pushing for the Kingdom to take-on the full burden of migration so long as it keeps it off its shores. This became especially clear when, in 2018, the EU proposed to build offshore asylum centers in Morocco to hold migrants from reaching Europe. Morocco's foreign minister, Nasser Bourita, vehemently opposed this idea citing his concern for it becoming a way for the EU to externalize its migration problem without addressing it. Overall it is clear that, domestically, Morocco has a preference towards facilitating mobility and upholding the principle of freedom of movement of migrants. However, due to its dependency on EU markets and political support, it has thus far worked to prevent migrants from reaching European shores.

¹⁴ Anonymous interview with employee at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rabat. August, 2019.

Today, this dynamic between Morocco and the EU is slowly changing, and after decades of economic manipulation, Morocco is finally adopting a more assertive approach to its dealings with the EU in order to defend its interests and build a mutually beneficial relationship.¹⁵ Indeed, the “EU needs to reconsider its neo-colonialist approach to its economic relations with Morocco. For years, the North African nation has been a good neighbor, an understanding partner, a flexible negotiator and an active cohort in every common pursuit with Europe; yet, the European attitude has been arrogant, hypocrite and condescending.”¹⁶ Nowadays, however, Moroccan policymakers know they hold greater leverage vis-à-vis Europe since the Kingdom has built strong commercial ties with other partners – such as China – weakening its dependence on the EU alone. Thus, it is no surprise that Morocco’s newfound markets and partnerships are offsetting EU influence on the Kingdom’s economic, social, and political decisions. This is becoming a niggling reality for the EU, especially in regards to Morocco’s effort to loosen its migration policies.

Indeed, as Morocco focuses on building stronger relationships within Africa, the question of freedom of movement becomes a priority. This priority is encapsulated in the Kingdom’s “Africa Policy,” in which migration is an important point of cooperation between the Kingdom and its African partners.¹⁷ For instance, as previously mentioned, to show its goodwill towards its new sub-Saharan partners, Morocco launched a comprehensive migration reform in 2013, which included two regularization campaigns that offered legal status to more than 40,000 migrants.¹⁸ Additionally, in the same year, the Moroccan Ministry of Education granted public school access to all children from migrants of Sub-Saharan origin.¹⁹

¹⁵Masiky, H. (2017, February 6). Morocco Should Stand Up to the European Union Trade Provocations. Retrieved from <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2017/02/207569/morocco-stand-european-union-trade-provocations/>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Anonymous interview with employee at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rabat. August, 2019.

¹⁸ A. Tasnim (2017). “A Tale of Two Agreements: EU Migration Cooperation with Morocco and Tunisia.” *European Institute of the Mediterranean*. https://www.euromesco.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/EuroMeSCo-Paper_A-tale-of-two-agreements.pdf

¹⁹ Bendra, I. (2019). Sub-Saharan migrants’ life circumstances under the new ... Retrieved from <http://migratingoutofpoverty.dfid.gov.uk/documents/bendra-moroccos-new-migration-policy-update.pdf>

Evidently, the EU is not particularly pleased with this migration reform, and would like Morocco to not only receive back migrants rejected from residing in Europe, but also engage in the arduous task of repatriating them. Yet, repatriating migrants remains deeply unpopular in the Kingdom due to several reasons. On the one hand, it would threaten Morocco's relations with newly-found partners in Sub-Saharan Africa; and on the other, Morocco would come across as a human-rights abuser and a "gendarme for the EU."²⁰ Indeed, for years, in response to European pressures to clamp down on migration, Morocco has arbitrarily arrested, detained, and deported immigrants and asylum seekers grossly overlooking their human-rights.²¹ Most notably, Morocco is known to control with an iron fist the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in the north of the country. Such actions have caused the Kingdom international embarrassment it is no longer willing to endure for the sake of the EU because, as is widely argued, "Morocco despises humiliation on the international stage."²²

On the Western Sahara Question

An additional reason why Morocco is reengaging with the African continent more proactively is to seek support for its claim over the disputed Western Sahara territory. Indeed, the Western Sahara question has always been a top priority of Moroccan foreign policy; however, until now, it was directed more towards Western support. Nevertheless, upon realizing that key western allies, such as France and the United States, are adamant about maintaining their "neutrality" on the Western Sahara question, and upon noticing increased sensitization of African nation-states towards the cause of the SADR and Polisario – Sahrawi

²⁰ A. Tasnim (2017). "A Tale of Two Agreements: EU Migration Cooperation with Morocco and Tunisia."

²¹ De Haas, H. (2008). The myth of invasion: the inconvenient realities of African migration to Europe. *Third world quarterly*, 29(7), 1305-1322. DOI: 10.1080/01436590802386435

²² Norman, K. P. (2016). Between Europe and Africa: Morocco as a country of immigration. *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 7(4), 421-439. DOI: 10.1080/21520844.2016.1237258 p.430

rebel national liberation movement claiming territoriality over the Western Sahara, – Morocco’s foreign policy has shifted its focus towards Africa.

Ever since Spain’s forfeiture of the Western Sahara, there have been disputes between the Moroccan government and the Polisario about the ownership status of the territory. On the one hand, Morocco claims sovereignty and provides historical data that shows how the five ruling dynasties of Morocco had controlled the Western Sahara; on the other, the Sahrawi people dismiss the fact that their land was *terra nullius* before the Spanish conquest and claim full sovereignty.²³ Apart from significant social and political reasons for which Morocco refuses to drop the Western Sahara affair, perhaps the most important reasons are economic. The Western Sahara holds significant amounts of phosphate, a lucrative fertilizer ingredient. This is important, as Morocco is a large exporter of phosphate to many countries such as the United States, which is Morocco’s biggest phosphate trading partner with more than 710.000 metric tons of powder imported in 2012 alone.²⁴ Furthermore, this region allows Morocco to uphold its Fisheries Partnership Agreement with the EU, which is the most important fisheries agreement between the EU and a third world country.²⁵ This agreement allows EU states to fish in Moroccan waters, which include waters off the coast of Lâayoune – claimed as the capital of Western Sahara by the SADR and Polisario, bringing Morocco more than €36.1 million annually.²⁶ Thus, revenues from the Western-Sahara account for a large percentage of Morocco’s profits and therefore further the Kingdom’s economic agenda.

This explains why Morocco would go to great lengths to protect its claimed sovereignty over this region and seek allies that would support it; and so far, since the 2013 migration reform, Morocco’s strategy seems to be working. For example, in 2013, Senegal’s President

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Watch, W. S. R. (2015). P for Plunder: Morocco’s Exports of Phosphates from Occupied Western Sahara, 2012–2013.

²⁵ Jönsson, H. (2012). The EU-Moroccan Fisheries Partnership Agreement: A process-tracing case study of the potential extension in 2011.

²⁶ Ibid.

Macky Sall announced that the ideal solution for the Western Sahara conflict is for Morocco to grant broader autonomy (not full sovereignty) to the region, which is exactly what Morocco has been pushing for at the United Nations Security Council for decades, and which the SADR and Polisario have refused to accept. The Senegalese President was not the only one to be persuaded by Morocco regarding this question. Even the Ivorian government has shown its support for Morocco's claims by recently opening an honorary consulate in the Moroccan city of Lâayoune.²⁷ Support of these states for Morocco translated into better treatment of their immigrants in Morocco, even though this is not an officially stated action. For instance, Senegalese and Ivorian migrants are acknowledged to receive better treatment, find jobs, and integrate more easily into society.²⁸ All this suggests that an important factor explaining Morocco's openness towards Sub-Saharan migrants and its general turn towards Africa is its interest in the Western Sahara question.

A genuine care for migrant rights?

In December 2018, Morocco hosted the Intergovernmental Conference to Adopt the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, as well as the 11th summit of the World Forum on Migration in the red city of Marrakech. Both these events aimed at addressing the humanitarian, human rights-related and developmental aspects of international migration and to find a global agreement on how to best protect the safety and dignity of all migrants, regardless of their documental status.²⁹ These events were meant to sensitize countries most prone to immigration towards accepting and welcoming migrants. For Morocco, this was also

²⁷ Eliason, M. (2019, June 27). Morocco Inaugurates Ivory Coast Honorary Consulate in Laayoune. Retrieved from <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2019/06/276872/ivory-coast-honorary-consulate-laayoune/>

²⁸ Norman, K. P. (2016). Between Europe and Africa: Morocco as a country of immigration. *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 7(4), 421-439. DOI: 10.1080/21520844.2016.1237258 & Anonymous interview with Ivorian migrants who live and study in Rabat. September, 2019.

²⁹ Kasraoui, S. (2017, December 25). Morocco to Host UN's 2018 International Migration Conference. Retrieved from <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2017/12/237170/morocco-international-migration-conference-un-general-assembly/>

an opportunity to showcase its commitment towards migration, and change its international reputation as “Gendarme of the EU.” Indeed, while historically Morocco was predominantly a country of emigration and transit, it is now becoming a final destination for many and, through such events, it is showing the world that it is ready to embrace this new responsibility and role.

Unlike Morocco, many European states have either abstained from attending the events, albeit agreeing to the Global Compact; or, like Italy, vocalized their total disapproval of such initiatives. Indeed, Italy insisted that the United Nations should not be involved in talks about immigration and the treatment of migrants and that such matters are to be left to the discretion of national governments only.³⁰ It is also worth mentioning that while states such as Morocco discussed matters pertaining to the well-being of migrants and how to best cater to their needs as human-beings above all else, the European Commission was most adamant on issues of border safety and control, pledging to dedicate a staggering €35 billion of its 2021-2027 budget towards border management.³¹ Indeed, in the aforementioned new five-year strategic agenda, the EU truly “coalesced around a project straight out of the hard right’s playbook –of protecting borders, not people.”³² This focus on border security above all else is in line with the aforementioned EU narrative of “threat” and border securitization, and is prompting the EU to deploy more than 10,000 armed border guards by 2020, as announced by European Commission head Jean-Claude Juncker.³³ Most worrying of all is the fact that these guards will be allowed to use force outside EU external borders, and there have been no clear limits on

³⁰ Ghani, F. (2018, December 9). Can a two-day conference solve the world's migration issues? Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/day-conference-solve-worlds-migration-issues-181206181118436.html>

³¹ Risse, N. (2018, October 2). High-Level Event Builds Momentum Ahead of Migration Conference. Retrieved from <http://sdg.iisd.org/news/high-level-event-builds-momentum-ahead-of-migration-conference/>

³² Andersson, R., and Keen D. (2019, November 16). The West's Obsession with Border Security Is Breeding Instability. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/16/border-security-european-union-instability-illegal-immigration/> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/16/border-security-european-union-instability-illegal-immigration/>.

³³ Perrigo, B. (2018, September 11). Why the E.U. Is Planning a 10,000-Strong Armed Border Force. Retrieved from <https://time.com/5392444/eu-border-force-migration/>

what this “force” should look like, when it is “permissible,” and on what grounds.³⁴ Finally, underpinning the EU’s narrative on putting a premium on border controls, 72% of EU citizens say that better policing of the EU’s borders is a major concern that they expect their leadership to address urgently.³⁵

Consequently, it seems that on the issue of migration and migrant rights, Morocco and the EU are diverging in terms of their priorities and what to tackle first. While the EU is working to securitize its borders, Morocco is more concerned with integrating, supporting, and managing the flow of people in and out of its borders.

Conclusion: What can we say about future relations between Morocco and the EU?

Although not in line with the EU’s migration policies, by holding its ground and establishing itself as a regional leader, Morocco is maintaining and strengthening its privileged relationship with the EU. Furthermore, on the question of migration, Morocco was able to reach an agreement with the EU that respects its own domestic policy towards migration. This is seen in the joint declaration by the EU and Morocco during the 14th meeting of the Association Council in 2019, where one of the clauses states that consultation between the two parties will be based on Morocco’s 2013 reformed migration policy “in compliance with national powers and the full implementation of Morocco’s national strategy on migration and asylum.”³⁶

To conclude, Morocco’s position and status are best summed up in the words of its minister of foreign affairs, Nasser Bourita, who told the European Commission that “people have to realize that migration is here to stay. Migration is a natural human movement but must

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Scally, D. (2019, April 1). EU citizens most concerned about outer borders and migration. Retrieved from <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/eu-citizens-most-concerned-about-outer-borders-and-migration-1.3845833>

³⁶ Council of the EU. (2019, June 27). Joint declaration by the European Union and Morocco for the fourteenth meeting of the Association Council. Retrieved from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/27/joint-declaration-by-the-european-union-and-the-kingdom-of-morocco-for-the-fourteenth-meeting-of-the-association-council/>

be respected. We must promote legal migration but do all we can to combat illegal migration and human trafficking.” Adding that Morocco has no desire to be the “gendarmerie for Europe” because it has its “own borders to protect.” Alas, “Morocco is now also a country of destination for migrants and asylum seekers as well as a country of transit” and is adopting an ever-friendlier and more relaxed position on migration.³⁷

³⁷ Fox, B. (2019, July 1). Morocco moves closer to 'privileged' partnership with EU. Retrieved from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/morocco-moves-closer-to-privileged-partnership-with-eu/>