

Morocco's Diplomatic Leverage: Influencing Relations with Spain and the EU

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Introduction

The relationship between Morocco, Spain, and the European Union (EU) is deeply influenced by the complexities of irregular migration. This research paper examines the extent to which Morocco uses migration as a tool for diplomatic pressure and negotiation with Spain and the EU. This issue is especially relevant in today's international relations, as migration remains a pivotal topic in European and Spanish politics. Increasing migration flows challenge the EU's capacity to balance humanitarian commitments with effective border control, making this a critical area of study.

Ceuta and Melilla, Spain's two autonomous cities on the North African coast, serve as key entry points for irregular migration and often become focal points of tension between Morocco and Spain. These enclaves highlight the connection between migration pressures, border security, and diplomatic relations, offering valuable case studies for understanding broader geopolitical dynamics.

Background

The specific issue addressed is whether Morocco strategically managed migration flows as leverage in diplomatic negotiations to secure concessions or support from Spain and the EU. By exploring this question, this policy of the month seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how migration governance intersects with international diplomacy, shedding light on its implications for regional power dynamics, economic cooperation, and security policies in the Mediterranean.

Migration diplomacy is a well-accepted school of thought that provides a critical lens to understand how states like Morocco strategically utilize migration to exert influence in international relations. This approach emphasizes migration management as leverage in diplomatic negotiations, enabling states to secure political, economic, or strategic concessions from other countries.¹

In her research "Weapons of Mass Migration", Greenhill² explores the idea of the use of forced relocation as a tool of coercion in global politics. To accomplish political or strategic goals, it is maintained that governments can use the threat of mass migration as leverage to control migration flows. This intentional manipulation of migrant flows to compel policy changes is known as coercive engineered migration. Greenhill's framework is exceptionally pertinent to Morocco; the nation's ability to pressure

¹ Greenhill, K. M. (2010). *Weapons of mass migration: Forced displacement as an instrument of coercion*. Cornell University Press.

² Ibid.

Spain and the EU is demonstrated by its control over the migration routes to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the Moroccan coast. Morocco can influence talks with these organizations to obtain advantageous diplomatic and economic terms by controlling the migration influx. For instance, during periods of heightened migration pressure, Morocco has successfully negotiated increased financial aid and cooperation agreements from the EU in exchange for enhanced border controls.³ Greenhill's analysis underscores the potency of migration as a diplomatic tool, highlighting its dual role as both a humanitarian issue and a strategic instrument in international relations.

Border Security and Sovereignty

Border Security and Sovereignty is another relevant school of thought. This perspective explores how Morocco's role in EU and Spanish diplomacy is shaped by migration and territorial sovereignty. Particularly in Ceuta and Melilla, in this case, the strategic management of borders highlights the interplay between migration control, territorial sovereignty, and diplomatic relations.⁴

McGrath demonstrates how Morocco strategically uses irregular migration to assert sovereignty and influence EU diplomacy, capitalizing on the EU's profound fear of a mass influx of migrants.⁵ This dependency creates a significant power imbalance, allowing Morocco to leverage its role as a border gatekeeper to extract concessions.⁶ The 2021 Ceuta crisis exemplifies this dynamic: Morocco relaxed its border controls, enabling over 8,000 migrants to cross into Spain, as retaliation for Spain's support of Polisario leader Brahim Ghali. By orchestrating a border crisis, Morocco exploited EU anxieties, pressuring Spain while reinforcing its territorial claims over Western Sahara. McGrath effectively illustrates how Morocco undermines EU border security as a means to secure favorable diplomatic and political outcomes.⁷

Overall, the perspective of border security and sovereignty provides an understanding of how Morocco navigates its diplomatic relationships with Spain and the EU. The aforementioned sources highlight the complex interplay between territorial control, migration management, and international diplomacy, offering valuable insights into Morocco's strategic use of border security to achieve its foreign

³ Greenhill, K. M. (2010). *Weapons of mass migration: Forced displacement as an instrument of coercion*. Cornell University Press.

⁴ McGrath, M. (2024). *Role-playing and rentierism: Rethinking Morocco's approach to migration diplomacy with the EU*. SIT Digital Collections. https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/3795/

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

policy objectives; illustrating how the management of borders --especially in Ceuta and Melilla-- serves as a critical tool for Morocco to assert its sovereignty and influence diplomatic outcomes.

Economic Interdependence and Aid Diplomacy

Beyond border control, Morocco's influence extends to economic negotiations, where migration management is deeply intertwined with financial aid and trade agreements. By aligning migration management with broader economic goals, Morocco capitalizes on its geographic and political significance to secure financial aid and favorable trade terms. This perspective underscores the mutual dependencies between Morocco and its European partners, revealing how economic interdependence is pivotal to Morocco's foreign policy and regional influence.

Similarly, Statewatch (2019) delves into the economic dimensions of Morocco's migration diplomacy, highlighting its ability to secure significant financial support from the EU. Since 2001, the EU has provided Morocco with approximately €215 million for border security, with funding increasing sharply post-2018, including €140 million from the EU Trust Fund for Africa.⁸ This financial aid is directly linked to Morocco's commitment to curbing irregular migration flows into Europe. Statewatch's analysis illustrates how Morocco instrumentalized migration management to reinforce its economic and diplomatic standing, showcasing the EU's reliance on Morocco for externalizing migration control. This reliance, in turn, grants Morocco substantial bargaining power, enabling it to secure economic benefits through aid diplomacy.

Moreover, Zaragoza-Cristiani⁹ offers a nuanced exploration of how Morocco employs irregular migration as a negotiation tool to enhance its bargaining power. By employing a tactic of conditional cooperation, Morocco adjusts its efforts in migration control, at times permitting irregular migration to escalate, to pressure Spain and the EU into providing financial aid and favorable trade agreements. Zaragoza-Cristiani situates this tactic within the principles of aid diplomacy, emphasizing how economic incentives are exchanged for compliance with migration management demands. This strategic use of irregular migration creates a context of complex interdependence, particularly in Morocco-Spain relations. Spain's reliance on Morocco for migration control and regional security renders it vulnerable to Morocco's

⁸ Statewatch. (2019). Aid, border security, and EU-Morocco cooperation on migration control. Statewatch Reports. Retrieved from <https://www.statewatch.org/analyses/2019/>

⁹ Zaragoza-Cristiani, J. (2016). Empowerment through migration control cooperation: The Spanish-Moroccan case. European University Institute Working Papers. https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/41686/Zaragoza_Cristiani_2016.pdf

diplomatic maneuvers, enabling Morocco to renegotiate economic and political terms effectively. Zaragoza-Cristiani's analysis highlights how irregular migration emerges as a pivotal instrument in Morocco's diplomacy, reinforcing its economic ties with the EU while securing significant concessions.¹⁰

Policy Recommendations

The strategic use of migration as a diplomatic tool has introduced complex challenges in the relationships between Morocco, Spain, and the EU. To address this, it is crucial for the EU and Spain to adopt clear conditionality in their agreements with Morocco, linking financial aid and border security support to measurable reforms in migration management. Such an approach would help minimize Morocco's ability to leverage irregular migration flows as a bargaining chip, ensuring that any support provided is contingent upon verifiable progress in migration governance.

Strengthening border crisis response mechanisms is equally essential. Enhanced coordination with agencies like Frontex can ensure rapid and effective responses to sudden surges in migration, while diversifying partnerships with other North African and Sub-Saharan countries can reduce the overreliance on Morocco as a sole gatekeeper. Additionally, investing in Morocco's socioeconomic development, through initiatives aimed at job creation and education, can address the root causes of irregular migration, ultimately decreasing the pressures that fuel such diplomatic maneuvers.

Finally, ensuring that migration policies remain human rights-centered and transparent is key to fostering stable and predictable diplomatic relations. The EU and Spain should establish independent monitoring frameworks to oversee Morocco's treatment of migrants, safeguarding against potential human rights abuses. Moreover, formalizing migration cooperation frameworks with clearly defined expectations and timelines will promote a more balanced and accountable diplomatic dialogue, thereby reducing the potential for crisis-driven negotiations and enhancing long-term regional stability.

Conclusion

Morocco's use of migration diplomacy has proven to be a powerful tool in shaping its relations with Spain and the EU. By strategically managing irregular migration flows, Morocco has successfully leveraged border security concerns to secure economic aid, favorable trade agreements, and political concessions. This

¹⁰ Zaragoza-Cristiani, J. (2016). Empowerment through migration control cooperation: The Spanish-Moroccan case. European University Institute Working Papers. https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/41686/Zaragoza_Cristiani_2016.pdf

policy review, drawing on key academic analyses, highlights the intricate power dynamics at play. Additionally, an evaluation of EU funding reports and migration agreements reveals a pattern of dependency, reinforcing Morocco's pivotal role in regional stability.

As migration remains a contentious issue in European politics, the interplay between diplomacy, border security, and economic cooperation will continue to shape future negotiations.

To ensure a more balanced and sustainable partnership, the EU and Spain must adopt a strategic approach that reduces overreliance on Morocco while reinforcing transparent and accountable migration governance. Strengthening border crisis response mechanisms, establishing clearer conditionality in financial aid agreements, and promoting long-term socioeconomic investments in Morocco can help mitigate the risks of migration being used as a diplomatic bargaining tool. Moving forward, a cooperative yet firm stance will be crucial in fostering regional stability while upholding humanitarian and security interests.

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