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EUROPE'S SOUTHERN BORDER



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1. PURPOSE

After the avalanche of migrants that took place in Ceuta on 30 July, several issues became clear. A combined diplomatic, intelligence, and migration analysis reveals weaknesses in both Morocco and Spain.

This analysis is not a historical treatise about the Spanish identity of Ceuta, nor a political statement in favour of any country. It focuses on facts and their implications.

2. MOROCCO

The regime of Mohammed VI has always claimed the cities of Ceuta and Melilla are Moroccan; in the same way Spain has always claimed Gibraltar. Of course, there are historical differences because Ceuta and Melilla have never belonged to Morocco and Gibraltar has been segregated from Spain after the Treaty of Utrecht.

But both cases share commonalities. In both cases the claimed locations are placed within the territory of the claiming nation.

The UK has a foothold overseeing one of the main waterways of the world and it gives them the Keys that keep open for them the access to North Africa, the Middle East and Southern Europe, as well as the access to the Red Sea which connects the cold island to the Indian Ocean. That is a valuable possession.

Morocco has always played internationally between France and Spain, both former colonial powers. Rabat has consistently approached and favoured one when relations were difficult with the other.

M5 obtained the independence from France, while his son, Hassan II, changed the status of the so-called Spanish Sahara. Mohammed VI has been able to go another step further by obtaining from the Spanish authorities the recognition of the Sahara as Moroccan. This is a huge change in the political stance of Spain regarding this topic.

Despite the support given by Spain to Mohammed VI regarding the Sahara, Mohammed VI seems not to be fully satisfied.

The Makhzen¹ has always used both Spanish cities in northern Morocco as a way to incite Moroccan nationalism and as a tool to exert pressure on the Spanish government.

¹ It is a sort of individuals who control the military, security forces, the economy and politics of the kingdom. In Russia would be a mixture of siloviki and oligarchs.

3. CEUTA AND MELILLA

Both cities have mixed populations. Citizens of Moroccan origin account for more than half of the population in both cities.



Both cities lie at the Eastern and Western part of the region known as Rif. The population in Melilla is mainly made up of Imazighen. Berbers (Imazighen) are against the regime in Rabat. They feel they have been ostracized by the monarchy.

Imazighen have their own language and culture and have always aspired to a certain degree of self-government. They have a presence in Northern Morocco, in Algeria (Kabylia) and in some areas of Libya. They are a bellicose people and were highly respected and feared as fighters by the Spaniards.

They despise the Alaouite monarch in general. However, Rabat counts on sympathisers within the city.

Ceuta is more prone to Rabat's influence, by which is meant the population of Moroccan origin. That is why Ceuta is more likely to suffer avalanches and other actions from Morocco. Ceuta remains an important economic hub for the whole surrounding area. Informal trade is vital for the economy of Ceuta's hinterland. Many Moroccans work irregularly in Ceuta, where the underground economy is huge.

Both cities have a multicultural tradition, where Christian, Muslim, Indian, and Jewish communities have coexisted.

However, the only growing community in both locations is the Muslim one.

It is to be noted that Jews have always played a role in Morocco where distinguished Jewish citizens have been appointed ministers or counsellors to the king, being the most outstanding André Azoulay. And in Israel there are heavy weights who are of Jewish Moroccan origin.

This particularity, together with the fact that Morocco was the first country to recognise the United States of America, may help explain its position in the world and in the Middle East.

So, both cities are different due to the composition of their local population. This shapes each city's relationship with Rabat.

4. SPAIN

Both cities enjoy a special status within the Kingdom of Spain. They are considered autonomous, like other regions such as Galicia or Catalonia. But, given their peculiarities, they are more reliant on the central government than other regions.

They are highly subsidised because everything has to be transported from the mainland. Civil servants (medical services, education, etc.), military, law enforcement, border control or social services are run by Madrid. In addition to that, the salaries paid to those officials are higher than those in the mainland. It works as an incentive to get the necessary people to provide those services in the cities.

There is an intense feeling both in the cities and the mainland about the Spanish identity of the places. Locals are highly proud of their history full of battles against the rifeños (population of the Rif region). Fnideq (Castillejos in Spanish) and Nador, respectively Moroccan cities close to both Spanish locations, have a strong Spanish influence, too. That Spanish influence reaches Tetouan in the West and Al Hoceima in the East.

Madrid has always held ownership of both cities, as they were never part of the agreements between France and Spain when those countries split their areas of influence in the sultanate in 1912, which led to the French and Spanish protectorates. They were not even mentioned in the agreements because it was clear to the French that both cities were undoubtedly Spanish.

The Moroccan intelligence services are very active in both cities, mainly the DGST, the Moroccan security service. They treat both cities as an internal affair, just like the FSB deals with the so-called near abroad (former USSR republics).

Jihadism is another problem that is suffered by Spain and Morocco on both sides of their shared border. Jihadists may easily alternate their presence on both sides of the borders. It has prompted cooperation that is highly valued by Spanish CNI and law enforcement agencies.

Another dangerous situation that triggered cooperation was the foreign-fighter phenomenon in Syria and Iraq. Foreign fighters of Moroccan origin, regardless of whether they lived in Morocco or Spain, gathered in Syria and Iraq and fought together. Their return constituted a nightmare for Spain because many of them returned to Spain through Morocco. It was vital for Spanish security forces to count on their Moroccan counterparts to control the flow.

Both countries cooperated to dismantle the movement Justice and Charity which in Morocco was against the monarchy and quite radical, related to religion. The leader Abdessalam Yassin (died in 2012) questioned and contested openly the religious leadership of the King of Morocco (he lived under Hassan II and Mohammed VI), who carries the title of Commander of the Faithful. The ruling King (currently King Mohammed VI) holds the constitutional title of *Amir al-Mu'minin*, establishing his role as the supreme religious authority in the country.

In this particular case, Justice and Charity maintains a presence in Spain, too. The movement is known as ONDA² and it intended to create a political party in Spain and still does, mainly in Madrid, Catalonia and Andalusia. Neither Morocco nor Spain is interested in allowing any of those ideas to blossom.

High-profile figures within ONDA (such as spokesperson Houssien El Ouariachi) actively publish commentary on Islamic ethics, social justice, and diaspora integration that mirror the intellectual and spiritual philosophy of Abdessalam Yassine.

² In Spain, ONDA stands for the **Organización Nacional para el Diálogo y la Participación** (*National Organization for Dialogue and Participation*). While ONDA operates in Spain as a legally registered socio-cultural non-profit focused on civic dialogue, integration, and social justice, it has been linked by researchers, security analysts, and Spanish media to **Justicia y Caridad** (*Al Adl Wal Ihssane*), the Moroccan Islamist organization founded by Abdessalam Yassine.

The Nador region, the closest Moroccan area to Melilla, and the wider Rif area in northern Morocco have historically had a high concentration of sympathizers and local cells for this movement, Justice and Charity (*Al Adl Wal Ihssane*). The current leader who succeeded Yassine as Secretary General after his death, Mohamed Abbadi, originates from Oujda in eastern Morocco near the Rif region.

5. CONFLICTS

Morocco has a vested interest in Ceuta and Melilla as they are regarded as Spanish bridgeheads in Morocco. At the same time, Spain uses Ceuta and Melilla as penetration vectors in Morocco.

Both cities provide Spain with the possibility of approaching Moroccan officials and members of the military and the intelligence services. Many of those officials enjoy the European lifestyle which can be experienced in the Spanish cities.

Morocco also tampers with the local population of Moroccan origin in the Spanish cities. They have relatives, possessions such as land or properties, and business interests which are likely to be jeopardized if they do not cooperate with Morocco.

Both countries and their respective intelligence organizations operate under different rules. Although the DGST is an intelligence agency, it is also a law enforcement agency. It does not need the backing of a judge to investigate individuals or corporations. Prospective investigations are not only allowed but expected, and they are the norm. Morocco is just another autocracy like Russia, Venezuela, Iran, Cuba, DPRK or China³.

Another difference regarding the means and procedures of intelligence organizations on both sides boils down to budget. In Morocco, the budget is unlimited as national security issues overlap with the survival of the regime. That is not the case in Spain, where the budget is constrained by transparency laws and national expenditure. There is parliamentary control over the activity of the intelligence organization, and spies have to abide by the law that rules their activities.

Taking into account the tremendous power of the Moroccan intelligence services it is obvious that this power is used to create problems in the Spanish cities whenever Morocco deems it appropriate, according to the requests or

³ The list can be increased with KSA, Bahrein, UAE or Qatar.

demands made by Morocco that are not satisfactorily addressed by the Spanish authorities.

Ceuta and Melilla are truly beneficial tools for Morocco. It can use both cities in different domains: migration, diplomacy, national claims, military threats, and domestic politics. All of them can be used to pressure the Spanish government.

Morocco has been able to weaken the European Union by using migration avalanches. On 30 July 2026, Morocco incited and favoured an avalanche of migrants, including Moroccan and Sub-Saharan citizens, in Ceuta. Due to the weak response of the Spanish authorities in containing and repelling the flow of people, the Spanish government was targeted by several heads of European governments, causing Italy to interrupt the Schengen agreement with Spain temporarily. Spain responded in the same terms. Nationals of both countries were subject to border controls.

Morocco again weakened the Spanish government's standing among its European peers, and its international image was damaged.

6. CONCLUSIONS

What is repeatedly revealed and confirmed is that autocracies only respect strength.

Diplomacy, high ranking meetings or summits are irrelevant for autocrats. **Leadership (executed through strength) defines them, and they respect those who are regarded as one of their kind.** That leadership is understood in terms of domestic as well as international politics. Ruthlessness must be executed against foreign adversaries, as well as domestic dissidents. Show neither mercy, nor regret.

The language of international organizations means nothing to them and international law is a volatile contraption which is not written for them. Words are just words. Scribbles on a paper. They are doers and the rest is nonsense. Deeds count.

But they are pragmatic because the only reason they fight for is their own subsistence. And whatever action which might harm their domestic support will be seriously taken and its consequences seriously gauge.

Autocrats know that democracies don't stand well the winds of war. Instability, riots, demonstrations are badly taken by any ruling party in a democracy. There will always be factions within democracies which will talk against the government if it takes any action which might lead to a

conflict, even remotely. And they take advantage of it because all of that is not in their local equations.

The King of Morocco, Mohammed VI, is sick. Crown Prince has been launched to the forefront of the regime rapidly and decisively. He has been accompanying his father in cabinet meetings for months. He has promoted his relationship with the military, as well. He will be the head of the armed forces. **He is readied to replace his father, swiftly, as it might happen anytime soon.**

His manners are dictatorial and harsh. He shows no respect for older members of the government or the Royal Household. **He has understood his role; how precarious his position might become if he doesn't show his steadfastness.** It is humiliating for the involved when he rejects his hand to be kissed. Both gestures are humiliating when you have to kiss his hand bowing before him and when you are rejected. You are humiliated twice.

Spain cannot expect any change in its relationship with Morocco when Mohammed VI be replaced. Prince Moulay Hassan, who is likely to become Hassan III, is not very much in touch with the Spanish Royal Family, although he can speak Spanish. Hassan II and Juan Carlos I did enjoy a special relationship, but their respective successors don't.

Morocco might keep on claiming Spanish locations in Northern Morocco, but it is beneficial for it to keep the current status.

To wrap it up, Morocco will keep on using its tools in the foreseeable future against Spain. In addition to that, Morocco can use it to shape its relationship with the European Union (fishing, agriculture, etc.). **Spain must involve the European Union in its relationship with Morocco in order to have leverage in bilateral issues such as the sovereignty on Ceuta and Melilla, the exploitation rights of oilfields in the area between Morocco and the Canary Islands or migration control.**

