

BUYING MOROCCO'S COLLABORATION IN MIGRATION CONTAINMENT? COMPLICATING THE USE OF AID IN BORDER CONTROL COOPERATION

ARTICLE

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At every migration 'crisis' declared at Europe's shores, proposals to use aid to curb irregular immigration reappear in the European political landscape. The assumption behind this proposal is that the promise of additional aid (or the threat of cutting it) can effectively draw reluctant countries of 'origin' and 'transit' into closer cooperation with the European Union (EU) and its member states in containing irregular border crossing attempts. A closer look at the implementation of aid-funded projects revolving around migration, however, shows a much more complex story. In this brief, I will take the case of Morocco to show that countries of 'origin' and 'transit' do not always welcome aid in the field of migration with open hands (El Qadim, 2018). Local and national authorities respond differently to aid budgets depending on how they fit their national and domestic political priorities, showcasing responses ranging from collaboration to outright hostility.

The South as Subject in Border Control Cooperation

Scholars have traditionally depicted non-Western countries as passive 'objects' in international relations, which exist only in relation or in reaction to the foreign policy and political economy strategy advanced by Western countries. Inspired by post- and de-colonial literature, more recent international relations scholarship has started analyzing the foreign policy adopted by non-Western countries in its own right, taking the latter as autonomous geopolitical actors (Sabaratnam, 2011). Casting the South as a subject broadens our understanding of foreign policy actors and strategies – the North being just one amongst the many interlocutors that countries in the South can engage with (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Daley, 2019). Most importantly, such a perspective broadens our understanding of foreign policy beyond the resistance/domination binary (Kutz, 2021). Being in a position of structural dependency conditions but does not bar subaltern countries from developing an autonomous diplomatic strategy (Fernández-Molina, Feliu, and de Larramendi, 2019).

Border scholarship has followed a similar pattern. Early analysis understood countries of 'origin' and 'transit' as passive recipients of border externalization politics. More recent literature acknowledges that countries like Morocco, Turkey or Senegal might resist EU pressures if the adoption of restrictive border control measures come at unsustainable financial and political costs. A country can alternate cooperation with non-cooperation to try and maintain diplomatic alliances while accommodating domestic pressures. Cooperating with the EU on migration containment is thus not necessarily a marker of cooptation into border externalization. It can be a strategy to accrue international legitimacy, or to accumulate other financial or diplomatic resources (Tsourapas, 2019).

Aid as Border Control in the Western Mediterranean

The border between the EU and Morocco has become increasingly securitized since the 1970s, when European countries progressively decided to impose visas on non-European nationals. The lifting of internal border controls in the EU coincided with an increased anxiety to secure the external borders of Europe. Informally, Spain started seeking Morocco's border control cooperation in the early 1990s. After the European Council of Tampere in 1999, seeking the cooperation of third countries in border control became established EU policy. For its part, in 2003 Morocco adopted law 02-03, which criminalized irregular entry into and exit from the country as well as its facilitation. In September 2013, Morocco reformed its approach to migration governance by announcing the adoption of a new, 'human right-based' migration policy. The new migration policy included two regularization campaigns in 2014 and 2017; the adoption of a National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum (NSIA) in 2014; and the launch of three law projects on migration, asylum and human trafficking. The new migration policy garnered the support of the EU and its member states. However, the implementation of the policy has not lived up to its aspirations: law 02-03 has not been reformed, and the law on asylum has not been approved. Even though violence against migrants initially came to a halt in the main urban centers, it always remained widespread in border areas, before resuming even in large cities since the summer of 2018.

Development funding has always been essential to the EU border externalization strategy. In the 1990s, the EU already counted on a long history of economic and technical cooperation with Morocco and North African countries in general. After the Tampere Council in 1999, the EU started creating specific funding lines to fund projects in the field of migration and border control. These included pilot line B7-667 in 2001, replaced by the AENEAS program in 2004 and then the Thematic Program on Migration and Asylum in 2007. Between 2001 and 2018, Morocco had received €215 million from the EU to implement projects in the field of border security, and a further €61.6 million for the implementation of its migration policy (Statewatch, 2019).

Between Cooperation and Obstruction

Over the past twenty-five years, Morocco has adopted a number of different strategies in relation to the disbursement of development aid for migration-related projects. In some instances, the country has proven cooperative in project implementation. This was the case, for example, of the Voluntary Return program, an initiative run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). It economically supports migrant people who want to return to their countries of origin, essentially by purchasing flight tickets and, funding permitting, providing reintegration assistance. The very first IOM Voluntary Return mission in the country was organized at the request of Moroccan and Malian authorities in 2005. In 2013, Moroccan authorities agreed to subsidize the return of 5,500 people between 2014 and 2016 for a total contribution of €3.5 million, providing the IOM with a stable source of funding for an otherwise very fluctuating program budget (Maâ, 2019). From a more mundane point of view, Moroccan authorities facilitate the delivery of necessary administrative documents to allow undocumented migrant people to fly home as part of the program. The cooperative attitude of Moroccan authorities can be traced back to the strategic function that Voluntary Return plays in Morocco's domestic and foreign policy. First, it allows the country to reduce the cost of border control by involving international donors in funding one type of return. Second, Voluntary Returns allow Moroccan authorities to protect their international image by

showcasing their engagement in forms of 'humane' removals of irregular aliens. Third, the program allows Morocco to position themselves closer to European donors as a rare case of a 'transit country' that financially commits to the implementation of the Voluntary Return program (Gazzotti, 2021).

In other cases, however, Moroccan authorities prove much less cooperative, to the point of obstructing the implementation of aid-funded projects. This is the case, for example, of a humanitarian project funded by Switzerland in 2013, aiming at providing emergency assistance to migrants stranded in the north-east of the country. The project replaced an initiative previously run by Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which had decided to close its mission in the country in 2012. In a report published in 2013, MSF pointed to the violence perpetrated by Moroccan and Spanish authorities as a key cause for migrants' vulnerability at the border, which made the NGO's mission unsuitable to field conditions (Tyszler, 2019). When MSF left, its humanitarian activities were channeled into a project led by the IOM, and by a religious organization in Nador and by Doctors of the World in Oujda. After 2015, the project continued without the involvement of the IOM. From the very beginning, the Swiss-funded humanitarian project underwent a series of setbacks due to a complex relation between implementing partners and Moroccan authorities. A first major disruption happened when Moroccan authorities forcibly closed the office of Doctors of the World in the fall of 2014 (OIM Maroc, 2014). A second major disruption occurred a year later, in January 2016, when the Jesuit priest coordinating the project in Nador was barred from re-entering Morocco after a brief visit to the Spanish enclave of Melilla (Público, 2016). In the field, various sources explained this series of obstructions as a strategy undertaken by Moroccan authorities to limit publicity around border violence. The report published by MSF in 2013, in fact, had caused substantial reputational damage. Reports about violence against migrants at the border clashed with the image of a reformist, human-rights respectful country that Morocco has been trying to build since the early 1990s (Gazzotti, 2019). The obstruction of aid-funded humanitarian projects is therefore symptomatic of Morocco's domestic and foreign policy priorities, where the protection of the national image at home and abroad ranks higher than the implementation of initiatives providing emergency assistance to migrants stuck at the border.

Pluralizing our Understanding of Aid in Border Relations

The attitude of countries of 'origin' and 'transit' vis-à-vis migration-related aid varies according to the broader political moment and to situated contingencies. As we have seen in the case of Morocco, aid has been a long-standing instrument utilized by the EU and its member states to foster multilateral and bilateral border control cooperation. However, Moroccan authorities adapt their attitude depending on how the project fitted into their broader domestic and foreign policy strategy. The same state can facilitate the disbursement of aid, while obstructing another project, because each initiative raises different political concerns, and opens varied possibilities. We therefore need to pluralize our understanding of aid in border control cooperation beyond the incentive/rent binary. A focus on project implementation can help us unpack what we mean by 'aid' – and thus build a more realistic and nuanced account of border control cooperation between the North and the South.

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