

# Complexity and Tensions in the Maghreb

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Morocco is a country of the utmost importance for Spain, for obvious historical and geographical reasons. It is also important for strategic reasons, as the countries are located on either side of such a sensitive area as the Strait of Gibraltar, and because we have enormous political, economic and security interests in Morocco. I could go on.

Throughout history, the Strait has united us at times and separated us at others. It united us in the times of Carthage, Rome, the Goths and the Arabs. But it has also separated us since the last European Neanderthals, who, taking refuge in Gibraltar, could not cross it, any more than those young people today in Tangiers, who would give anything to be able to board a ferry bound for Algeciras, imagining Eldorado. Today the Strait of Gibraltar marks a different border from those we have with Portugal or France because it separates two cultures and two economies. The culture of the north is heir to Rome and Christianity, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, while that of the south has Muslim, Arab and Berber roots, with very different stances on issues as important then and now as religious and gender issues. Spain's per capita income is \$25,400 and Morocco's is \$2,718 (2020 data). Therefore, travelling from one country to the other is not only a change of geography, but also a real journey through time.

This means that we have different perceptions that give rise to many misunderstandings among us, and we need to be self-critical. Our view of Morocco is tinged with prejudice. We need only look at our textbooks, studied by García Morente, which present the Reconquest as an 800-year struggle against "the Other" when both parties were just as Spanish. This

image of the Maghrebis in Spain has been studied by Mohamed Chakor and Eloy García Corrales and is even reflected in comic books such as *El Guerrero del Antifaz* by Manuel Gago, or *El Capitán Trueno*, from a few years ago, full of racist comments.

These prejudices, a product of the past, are a consequence of and at the same time reinforce a centuries-old distrust of a diffuse but real danger from the south that can be explained by the Barbary pirates of the 16th and 17th centuries, the Spanish-Moroccan War, narrated with enormous success by Pedro Antonio de Alarcón, the Rif War, the Tragic Week in Barcelona, the participation of Moroccan troops in our Civil War (and the subsequent Moorish Guard), the Green March on the Sahara, the Perejil incident or, more recently, the same problems for us that were created through the massive storming of Ceuta in May 2021 or the frequent rushing of the border fences around Ceuta and Melilla, not to mention the sharp increase in the number of immigrant boats heading for the Canary Islands in the first months of 2022.

However, the same or more could be said of Morocco, which suffered the coastal raids of the Order of Malta's galleys, the conquest of strongholds on its coasts by the Castilians and Portuguese, the brutalities of the Rif War, the Protectorate regime, or our position on Ceuta and Melilla and Western Sahara, which in the Moroccans' opinion prevents the territorial integrity of their country from being achieved. Many mistakenly believe that it is in our interest to keep the Western Sahara issue alive in order to delay Morocco's claim to Ceuta and Melilla. Moreover, the Moroccans see many contradictions in our policy, because according to them, we claim to want a strong and stable Morocco but prevent them from attaining their territorial integrity; we claim to be their defenders in the EU but hinder the arrival of their fruit and vegetables; we want a privileged relationship

but do not let their youth cross the Strait; we claim to want their friendship but we publicly humiliated them in Perejil and until Pedro Sánchez's about-turn, we did not support their position on Western Sahara; we claim to be interested in them but our media pay them no attention, schoolchildren ignore everything about Al-Andalus or *The Ring of the Dove*, and Arabic is hardly taught at Spanish universities....

All this makes our bilateral relationship anything but easy. It is a passionate relationship, tinged with strong emotional and not very rational elements that give it a saw-toothed profile, so that one day things seem to be going very well and the next we face an unexpected crisis... often provoked by Moroccan domestic political issues to which we are quite oblivious. In the last twenty years of the 20th century, we achieved a certain stability thanks to the "Cushion of Interests" Doctrine fostered by the Santa Cruz Palace. With it, our Ministry of Foreign Affairs sought to escape the vicious cycle of conflicting pressures from Algeria and Morocco, to pursue a global policy based on a development of economic relations and cooperation that would mean that provoking a crisis would end up being "very costly." Thanks to this policy, we have become Morocco's leading trade partner and one of its main investors. And that worked quite well until the Perejil crisis, in a context of previous misunderstanding between a young and ill-advised Mohammed VI and a José María Aznar with little bargaining power. The left came down hard on him, but in my opinion Aznar did what he had to do on that occasion on an islet that was of no importance to us in order to avoid greater problems in the short/medium term that would have been much more difficult to solve in other, more sensitive places.

By early 2022 the relationship had again soured. The blame lay with the Abraham Accords that US diplomacy concocted to help Israel break the Palestinians' de facto veto right over their relations with Arab countries, and which led to the Hebrew State's regional isolation. By virtue of this, Washington offered some Arab countries what they wanted or needed in exchange for establishing diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. And the gift it gave Morocco was to recognize its sovereignty over the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara, a territory that Morocco occupied after the Green March and the subsequent defeat of the Polisario Front, though it had not gotten the international community to rec-

ognize the legality of its presence there, protected by a well-armed defensive wall. UN doctrine affirms that Western Sahara is a non-self-governing territory and as such is should be undergoing decolonization, and although there is less and less talk of a referendum (due to the difficulties involved and Morocco's opposition), the UN continues to demand an agreement between the parties that would put an end to the dispute. Rabat offered an autonomy regime in 2007, while the Polisario Front (backed by Algeria) continues to demand a referendum on self-determination leading to the territory's independence. The disagreements are many and centre not only on the question of the referendum and its possible voters, but also on who "the parties" are, as Morocco considers the Polisario Front to be a puppet of Algeria and demands to deal with the latter on the issue.

## The fact is that US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara has emboldened Morocco, which wants Spain to follow in its footsteps

Donald Trump's gift has stirred up a hornet's nest that had always been there but which had calmed down over time and especially since the impotence of the Polisario Front (PF) led it to declare a unilateral ceasefire in 1991. The PF broke this truce in late 2020 after accusing Morocco of violating it beforehand, and throughout 2021 there has been a string of incidents that have resulted in a number of deaths. The fact is that US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, contravening international law and United Nations doctrine, which Joe Biden has not rectified nor seems likely to, has emboldened Morocco, which wants Spain to follow in its footsteps and was irritated that we did not. And we did not do so, apart from compelling legal reasons, because we should not: because the Sahara issue is a matter of principle for us, true, but also of foreign and domestic policy at the same time. Spain's withdrawal from the Sahara left a deep mark on the right because they believe that the honour of our armed forces was at stake, and on the left because they believe that we aban-

done the Sahrawis to Morocco. And this is even further complicated by the influence that the Polisario Front maintains, albeit waning, in sectors of Spanish public opinion, and by divisions within the PSOE-Podemos coalition government, which do not see the problem in exactly the same light.

The fact is that Morocco's frustration at not being able to change our position has translated since the beginning of 2021 into a series of clearly unfriendly gestures: it began trying to economically asphyxiate Ceuta and Melilla some time before, then it suspended the High Level Meeting (HLM) that was to be held in February 2021 and which has not yet taken place; and Rabat, irritated because Spain had taken Brahim Ghali, leader of the Polisario Front, in for medical treatment at a clinic in Logroño (with the naivety on the part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of thinking that if he came under another name Morocco would not find out), raised the bar of retaliation by pushing 10,000 human beings, Moroccans, including many women and minors (some of whom died) towards Ceuta, in an unacceptable show of pressure that has backfired, as it projected a terrible image of the country to the world. Talleyrand would say that it was worse than a crime; it was a mistake that also lent Spain the solidarity of the European Union as a whole. And Rabat adopted other measures as well, such as closing the Strait of Gibraltar to Moroccan immigrants in Europe wishing to visit their country of origin, who have been forced to travel from France or Portugal; cancelling flights because it claimed that the measures against Covid in Spain were not effective; building a fish farm in the waters of the Chafarinas; granting an Israeli company permission to explore for oil in undelimited waters between the Sahara and the Canary Islands; and letting a growing number of migrant boats depart for the archipelago, mostly from Dakhla ... Very unfriendly gestures, to which Spain initially responded with ineffectual meekness. First, it offered Morocco the head of Foreign Minister Arantxa González Laya, who was responsible for the Brahim Ghali mess, and then went so far as to involve King Felipe VI, who sent affectionate messages encouraging the two countries to "walk together," along the lines of what Mohammed VI said in August 2021, which has not been followed up. None of this was of any use.

Morocco asks Spain for "more clarity," as if it were not enough that in recent public statements, we no longer

spoke of demanding a referendum on self-determination and insisted on a fair, lasting and mutually acceptable solution for the parties, within the framework of the United Nations. The new Moroccan Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch used the 46th anniversary of the Green March to say that "there is no room for vague, ambivalent positions" on Western Sahara.

And the same hardening could be observed in relation to Ceuta and Melilla. Rabat had already closed the customs offices of Ceuta (in 2018) and Melilla (in 2019) in an obvious attempt to suffocate them economically, to make them cost a lot of money and be a problem for Spain. Then, in December 2020, the then Prime Minister Othmani stated that "there will come a day when we will address the issue of Ceuta and Melilla, Moroccan territories like Western Sahara," and more recently, Morocco has changed the "Border" sign that still stood next to the Melilla border crossing and replaced it with "Bab" (gate). It is quite a statement of intent. It is clear that they have their minds made up and things are going to get worse.

In theory, Spain should not expect Morocco to change its mind on Western Sahara and Ceuta and Melilla, because it will not succeed, but neither should Rabat expect us to change our minds on both issues. The smart thing to do would be to learn to live with the differences, which Morocco apparently does not wish to do. And until that happens, Spain will be wrong to continue placating Morocco with small gestures because it will perceive them as weakness (which it already thinks of the coalition government led by Pedro Sánchez) and will encourage it to up the ante. Morocco must be treated with all the respect it deserves as a neighbour and a country in which we have multiple interests. But also with a great deal of firmness, and that is what I believe we are lacking. I will later return to this matter, which has changed radically with the sudden, surprising turn that President Sánchez has taken on the Western Sahara dispute.

To complicate matters further, the Abraham Accords have been a bombshell that has also contributed to further destabilizing an already complicated region, because in the Maghreb there is a struggle for hegemony between Morocco and Algeria in which Western Sahara is an essential piece of the puzzle. It is not so much the cause of this conflict as its consequence. Relations between Algeria and Morocco were only good before Algeria's independence, when Morocco, which had just achieved its own in-

dependence in 1956, helped it in its anti-colonial struggle. Rabat hoped that after expelling the French, the Algerians would return the piece of desert that Paris had snatched from them with a line on the map when it thought Algeria would forever be a French department. When Algiers refused to give it back, the Sand War (1963) began, which Morocco lost but never forgot. The distance between them grew as Morocco opted for the West (Hassan II went so far as to express a utopian desire for NATO membership) and Algeria for Soviet Russia and Third World causes. In 1994 there was a terrorist attack on the Atlas Hasni Hotel in Marrakech (in which Spanish tourists were killed) and when Rabat blamed the Algerian secret services, Algiers reacted by closing the border between the two countries, preventing the vaunted Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) from being anything more than a mere entelechy on paper. And the border has remained closed until now, when Donald Trump has stirred up the hornet's nest.

Morocco's recognition of the State of Israel came as a shock in Algiers. Even more so when a visit to Rabat by the Hebrew Defence Minister led to the signing of security agreements that Algiers interpreted as a direct threat, leading it to break off diplomatic relations with Morocco and ban its planes from flying overhead, citing confusing accusations of promoting independence in Kabylia, spying with sophisticated Israeli surveillance equipment and even setting fire to its forests. The Algerian regime is weak, President Tebboune does not have the prestige that Bouteflika once had, and demonstrations continue against a system incapable of carrying out the political and economic reforms the country needs. Morocco knows this and is pressuring it to abandon the Western Sahara cause while both rearm, Algeria through Russia (as always) and now also Iran, and Morocco via the US, Israel and Turkey, while the Polisario Front, the big loser along with the Palestinians of the Abraham Accords, has broken the unilateral truce it had declared in 1991 without major consequences. The difference in forces is too great, and Tindouf is well aware of it.

This confrontation affects us not only because of the instability it could bring to the Maghreb region, with potential refugee flows if things get really bad, but also because it could threaten our imports of Algerian gas, which we need to produce 17% of the electricity we consume at a time of record prices in Europe as a result of the invasion of Ukraine and the

decline in Russian exports. Russian gas accounts for only 3% of our consumption, but we import almost 50% from Algeria, which reaches us via two pipelines: the Medgaz (40%), also known as Duran-Farrell, which runs from Haasi R'Mel to Almería via the Alboran Sea, and 60% via the Maghreb Europe Gas Pipeline (MEG), which ends in Algeciras after 450 km of transit through Moroccan territory. Between the two pipelines, they have a capacity to transport 16.7 billion m<sup>3</sup> per year, although in 2020 we bought only 9 billion m<sup>3</sup> because we have diversified purchases with other countries such as Nigeria and the US. And now Algeria has decided to stop exporting gas to us through the MEG, which was the result of an agreement between Spain, Algeria and Morocco. With this measure, Algiers wishes to prevent its neighbour from obtaining, at below-market prices, the gas that meets 45% of its domestic needs in the north of the country and supplies the generation of 12% of its electricity today thanks to its Tahaddart and Ain Beni Mathar power stations. It also wants to deprive it of the money it receives from the rights for gas transit through its territory, which range from 50 to 200 million dollars, depending on the year.

In order not to harm us in its dispute with Morocco, Algeria offered to increase its Medgaz transport capacity from 8 to 10 billion m<sup>3</sup> in January 2022. But with the MEG out of service, Algeria would find it difficult to increase its exports beyond the 10 billion m<sup>3</sup> per year in case of an emergency, and, moreover, its export capacity has almost reached its limit. There is no need for alarm because we have alternative sources for the gas we need, as we have the best European infrastructure of stations that regasify the liquefied gas arriving by ship, but with the current price of the electricity bill, the last thing we need are surprises and overpricing, since maritime transport and the regasification process increase the final price. Spain's concern was evident in the hasty visit to Algeria by our Minister of Foreign Affairs, accompanied by the presidents of Enagás and Naturgy, as soon as it learned of the Algerian decision.

In another gesture by Spain towards Rabat in an attempt to improve the strained bilateral atmosphere and in view of Algeria's understandable refusal to allow us, hypothetically at least, to re-export part of the gas we import from Algeria to Morocco, Madrid has offered to reverse the flow of the inactive MEG pipeline to send Morocco the gas the latter country buys

on the international market and which arrives by ship at our liquefied natural gas terminals to be regasified in our country before being put into the MEG. In this way, it is helping to resolve the serious damage caused by the Algerian decision while it hastily buys a floating regasification plant that it wants to locate in Casablanca. The agreement currently being negotiated between Madrid and Rabat will last for five years, according to Leila Benali, Minister of Energy Transition and Sustainable Development. Algeria is aware of the project and has not commented on it. This news coincided with President Sánchez's visit to the United Arab Emirates, where he welcomed the agreement, saying that "we have always considered Morocco a strategic ally in many fields, such as immigration, economic development and security. We look forward to strengthening this bilateral collaboration." Another nicety to try (unsuccessfully) to bring back the Moroccan ambassador, Karima Benyaich, who left Madrid in the midst of the crisis after the irregular entry of 10,000 people into Ceuta in May 2021. Rabat remained angry.

And as all bad situations can grow even worse, Morocco is watching closely to see what Spain does in relation to the recent decision of the European General Court to annul the EU-Morocco Fisheries and Trade Agreements because they cover products from Western Sahara, over which the international community does not recognize Moroccan sovereignty. This ruling is politically charged and constitutes an undoubted victory for the Polisario Front. It can be appealed before the EU Court of Justice, which already ruled in this regard when, after annulling in 2015 a trade agreement signed in 2012, it rectified it in 2016 to allow its application, but made it clear that Morocco could not export products of Sahrawi origin as its own. Given the importance of trade relations between the EU and Morocco (35 billion euros with a surplus of 5 billion for Europe), it is foreseeable that the Council will appeal, which Spain encourages it to do, and that when the appeal is admitted for processing, the CJEU itself will suspend the application of this ruling as a precautionary measure until it issues a definitive ruling... which could take the couple of years that remain of both agreements' period of validity. The truth is that many things will undoubtedly happen between Morocco and Spain – both countries could even end up disappearing, just as they did not exist two thousand

years ago. But barring a seismic disaster of unimaginable proportions, the Strait of Gibraltar will remain where it has always been for a long time, and those who then inhabit its northern and southern shores will undoubtedly fare better if the other also does well. King Hassan II had his issues, but no one can deny that he was a very intelligent man, and I once heard him say that, just as one should not spit upwards, for obvious reasons, it is not wise to insult the future. Because we will share it. And I couldn't agree more. That is why those who claim that a troubled Morocco is in Spain's interest irritate me. This is false. What Spain wants is an economically developed, politically democratic and socially stable Morocco and it wants to contribute to these objectives... as long as they do not make it impossible for us by asking us for what they should know we cannot give... unless the President of the government decides to give it to them on his own, which is precisely what has happened.

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Countries do not have friends but interests, and those interests can change over time, and it is also clear that it is in Spain's interest to get along with Morocco. The question is whether at any price. On Friday 18 March 2022, we Spaniards learned from a communiqué from the Moroccan Royal Palace that Spain has changed the position it has held on Western Sahara for the past 47 years. It has done so to support the Moroccan Autonomy Plan, which we now qualify as "the most serious, realistic and credible" with a superlative that takes us even further than Germany. I do not know the reason for these adjectives because the referendum or the agreement between the parties called for by the UN is also serious, and for autonomy to be "credible," it would have to be accepted by the Polisario Front, which is not the case. I can, however, accept the "realistic"

part, because a referendum on self-determination involves technical difficulties that are not easily surmountable and, moreover, Morocco will never allow it; and, on the other hand, the parties have been at each other's throats for 47 years without a glimmer of an agreement in sight. The other alternative is outright annexation, as Israel has done in East Jerusalem or Russia in Crimea.

## Foreign policy must be based on consensus, otherwise it is weakened, lacks stability and contradicts the existence of permanent state interests

The “Moroccanness” of Western Sahara is something that no one in Morocco disputes; it is a national cause, and they think that offering a referendum is already too much. It goes without saying that supporting the autonomy offered by King Mohammed VI in 2007 seems to me to be a legitimate political option if our interests so advise. But by doing things the right way and being aware that we are departing from international legality and from our own position on Western Sahara, which we have maintained since we left it to its own devices in 1975. And this must be explained very well, because Spain has responsibilities in Western Sahara that France and the United States do not, with whose position the government tries to justify its own. I repeat that the government must have good reasons for acting as it has, and there are the last fifteen months of tension with Morocco. I do not dispute that. But now Spain is, in fact, aligning itself with Donald Trump's position without considering that Trump did not care about Western Sahara and international legality because what he wanted was for Morocco to diplomatically recognize the State of Israel. It will be said that we will now normalize our relations with Morocco, and that is true, but our relations with Algeria will also become very complicated. It will be difficult not to lose out. The government has published a prim and proper statement that makes no mention of Western Sahara and says that the normalization of relations with Morocco, which is always desirable, will guarantee the “stability, sovereignty and territorial in-

tegrity of our two countries.” It seems somewhat naïve, just as it was naïve to believe that the Moroccans would not find out about Brahim Ghali's visit to Spain, and it was also naïve just now to think that there would be no reaction from Algeria.

Morocco and Algeria are engaged in a struggle for supremacy in the Maghreb, and getting in the middle of it is tricky because no one believes that Algiers would let a change that breaks our neutrality and places us on Morocco's side go unchallenged. It should not be forgotten that Algeria is an important gas supplier in a very complicated context of war in Europe. Here we have two versions, the Spanish one, which says without further details that Algiers was warned, and the Algerian one, which denies it. The entire Algerian press published a very harsh commentary attributed to “a diplomatic source” which states that “at no time and at no level were the Algerian authorities informed of this vile agreement concluded with the Moroccan occupying power at the expense of the Saharawi people. This second historic betrayal of the Saharawi cause seriously undermines Spain's reputation and credibility as a member of the international community” and highlights its “outright submission to Morocco” by abandoning its obligations as an “administering power” and as a “member of the Group of Friends of Western Sahara in the United Nations.” It is very strong, but it makes two things clear: if Algeria was warned, as Madrid claims, it must be concluded that it did not like the Spanish decision at all; and if it was not warned, it is a serious diplomatic mistake. Algeria's displeasure has been made clear by calling its ambassador in Madrid for consultations, not allowing Iberia to increase the frequency of its flights with Algeria and informing that it will raise the price it charges for the gas it sends us, with the CEO of Sonatrach stressing that this price rise will not be applied to other countries, as Mario Draghi well knows, given that he rushed to Algiers to increase his gas purchases in the serious context created by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Polisario Front has also expressed its anger, stating that Spain “defends international law in Europe and denies it in Western Sahara” and announcing that it is cutting off all dialogue with the Spanish government. At the same time, Rabat applauds and has returned its ambassador to Madrid. Foreign policy should not be a matter of party but of state, and a political change of this magnitude is a particularly delicate matter, because – I repeat – it

is both a matter of domestic and international policy, and it requires the support of the whole government and not just part of it, and of the opposition as well, if possible, in order to avoid radical policy shifts in future. It also requires explaining to public opinion the reasons for the decision to abandon international legality, which continues to maintain that Western Sahara is a non-self-governing territory that should be undergoing a process of decolonization through a referendum under international control or, at the very least, an agreement between the parties. And of which Spain is formally still the administering power. Here there has been none of this, neither respect for international legality, nor domestic consensus. And this is serious because foreign policy must be based on consensus, otherwise it is weakened, lacks stability and contradicts the existence of permanent state interests. It can be changed when these interests do so – and perhaps the Western Sahara dispute makes it advisable to do so – but following the established guidelines. And here there has been no consensus, but rather resounding disagreements that have been highlighted in the non-legislative proposal adopted in Congress, which has made the PSOE's distressing solitude on this issue clear, as it has been criticized by its governmental partners in United We Can (UP) and also by the parties that supported the investiture, not to mention the Popular Party (PP).

This weakens us as a country and leaves Pedro Sánchez's trip to Rabat in tatters because it inspires mistrust when he goes without the backing of Congress. What might happen if one day Vice-President Yolanda Díaz or Mr. Núñez Feijoo governs? Will they maintain this change or return to the position we have held for the last 47 years? I prefer not to speculate. Serious countries do not do these things. Moreover, President Sánchez has exceeded his powers because, according to article 69 of the Constitution, setting foreign policy is the responsibility of the government and not its president, whose functions are those of a prime minister, since Spain is not a presidential republic but a parliamentary monarchy. And neither the government nor the coalition partner nor the opposition were informed. None of them. Neither were the parties that supported Sánchez's investiture with a PSOE programme that spoke of self-determination. They feel deceived, which is why the political class has reacted with indignation and the citizenry with surprise and unease.

They neither understand nor agree. And not because the idea of autonomy proposed by Morocco is bad; on the contrary. It could be a good idea for resolving the dispute because it is halfway between the independence sought by the Polisario Front and the annexation of Crimea that many Moroccans want. Because I am convinced that Morocco will never hold a referendum and, moreover, no one will impose one on it. And because I also believe that there will never be an independent Western Sahara opposite the Canary Islands in a particularly unstable part of the world, the Sahel, where problems increase with each passing day. The only drawback of the autonomy proposal lies in the small detail that one of the parties does not accept it and it therefore falls outside UN legality, which, let us not forget, requires a referendum or, at least, an agreement between the parties, which have always been Morocco and the Polisario Front.

### The only drawback of the autonomy proposal lies in the small detail that one of the parties does not accept it and it therefore falls outside UN legality

The atmosphere with Morocco will now improve (while it is seriously worsening with Algeria) and it is likely that at least for some time Rabat will better control the many small boats leaving Dakhla for the Canaries, or the storming of the border fences of Ceuta and Melilla, and that it will loosen the economic siege on our cities. All of this is positive, as will be refraining from unilateral actions in the waters of Chafarinas or in the undelimited maritime zone between Morocco and the Canary Islands, and the restoration of normal communications between the two countries. All of this will be very good. What I find hard to accept is that we reward Morocco for not doing what it shouldn't do in the first place. Because the impression given by Mr Sánchez's change of position is that he has yielded to pressure from Morocco, and giving an image of weakness (or being weak outright) is a sure-fire recipe for future problems. I would like to be wrong.