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The Use of Diplomatic Tension as Political Leverage in Morocco-EU Relations

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Introduction

Since the start of the 21st century, Morocco's relationship with Europe Union has been characterized by a desire to increase cooperation in the realms of politics, security, economics, and culture¹. As a state of "Advanced Status" under the European Neighborhood Policy, Morocco is afforded both economic and political privileges that seek to develop the state and improve relations between the two actors. Despite this commitment to cooperation, Morocco's diplomatic relations with Spain, the only EU member with whom it shares a border, have suffered from significant crises throughout the 21st century. These crises have subsequently threatened the neighborly relations established through international agreements between Morocco and the EU. As issues of sovereignty and the fortification of external borders remain integral to the foreign policy of the EU, these breaches of goodwill have challenged the organization's approach to foreign policy in regard to Morocco. Considering the relative power of Morocco in comparison to that of the European Union, the escalation of these crises has brought into question the intentions of the Moroccan government in threatening friendly relations with its most salient economic and political partner. In this article I determine the motivation behind the Moroccan government's foreign policy decisions regarding recent diplomacy with Spain.

The two cases used in this study span a 19 year period between 2002 and 2021, including one occurring in the pre-Arab Spring era and another in the post-Arab Spring era. The two cases I chose to explore in this analysis are the 2002 Perejil Island Crisis and the 2021 Ceuta border incident. One notable feature of these crises is that the origins of the tensions rise from

¹ (Casier Tom. "The European Neighborhood Policy: Assessing the EU's Policy towards the Region." In *The Foreign Policy of the European Union: Assessing Europe's Role in the World*, ed. Federiga Bindi (Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 100.

Morocco's territorial disputes with Spain that have remained consistent in the years since the Spanish government withdrew from Morocco as a colonial power. Despite the decolonization and subsequent withdrawal of Spanish governmental control, Spain has continued to maintain the validity over its claim of the six coastal territories of Ceuta, Melilla, Vélez de la Gomera, Alhucemas, the Chafarinas Islands, and Perejil Island, which Morocco has claimed since achieving independence in 1956². Despite Morocco's predominantly friendly relations with members of the European Union, the Spanish possession of these territories has historically ignited diplomatic crises between the two actors. Although the Spanish and Moroccan governments remain committed to strong partnership in combating terrorism, organized crime, human-trafficking, and drug smuggling, paltry disagreements regarding these territories remain persistent³. Seldom do these tensions escalate into serious crises due to the auspiciousness of this partnership. Despite this, the 2002 Perejil Island Crisis and the 2021 Ceuta border incident have served to hinder the neighborliness between the two states and call into question the intentions behind the Moroccan government's foreign policy decisions regarding its shared border with the European Union.

The comparability of these cases lie in their origins, as both crises stem from decisions by the Moroccan government to suspend diplomatic relations with Spain in response to what was viewed by Rabat as Spanish failures to respect Moroccan sovereignty and security. The two cases resulted in varying levels of diplomatic conflict and condemnation from the European Union. Both crises occurred during a period in which Morocco and the EU were politically and

² Trinidad, Jaime. "An Evaluation of Morocco's Claims to Spain's Remaining Territories in Africa." *International & Comparative Law Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2012): 961-964.

³ Ana María López Sala. 2012. *Donde El Sur Confluye Con El Norte: Movimientos Migratorios, Dinámica Económica Y Seguridad En Las Relaciones Bilaterales Entre España Y Marruecos* Fundación CIDOB: 3-4.

economically committed to peace, and for this reason, notably deviated from the expectations of both the European Union Association Agreement and the European Neighborhood Policy objectives outlined for Morocco. In my analysis I chose one case from the period prior to the Arab Spring and one case from the years following the Arab Spring due to the shifting political dynamics of the Moroccan state within the past two decades. Although the Moroccan government has “ensured its continuity as a stable executive monarchy” through the successful portrayal of the King “as a proponent of change” during the Arab Spring, there remains an overarching desire for reform among the Arab Spring organizers who were unsatisfied with extent of political reforms made by the government⁴. Therefore, the inclusion of both a pre-Arab Spring case and post-Arab spring case will address the political climate of Morocco during both periods and inform the analysis of potential explanations of the Moroccan government’s behavior during these different crises.

In analyzing these case studies I determine two potential explanations for the Moroccan government’s foreign policy decisions regarding diplomatic conflict in Spain. The first explanation I explore is the potential of securing concessions from the European Union and the international community regarding their position on the Western Sahara conflict. In this paper I hypothesize that Morocco uses its territorial disputes with Spain to foster support for its claim of sovereignty over the Western Sahara. Explanations from Rabat following decisions made during these diplomatic crises suggest that Spanish positions regarding the Western Sahara conflict heavily influence the escalation of these conflicts. Within the analysis I look at the lasting political and economic outcomes of these crises as they relate to the relationship between

⁴ Rivetti, Paola. 2015. "Continuity and Change before and After the Uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco: Regime Reconfiguration and Policymaking in North Africa." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42 (1): 8.

Morocco and the EU. In this article I determine the extent to which this hypothesis is accurate and indicate the specific results of Morocco's foreign policy decisions regarding the European Union during these periods.

The second motivation I examine is an attempt at strengthening domestic support for the Moroccan government. This hypothesis stems from an examination of both pre-Arab spring and post-Arab spring cases. Morocco's Arab Spring protests, otherwise known as the February 20th movement, saw the creation of a new constitution in 2011 to appease protests calling for reform of the king's regime. Despite the creation of this constitution aiming to address the concerns over the Morocco's widespread "marginalization, poverty, corruption, impunity, lack of accountability, and subservience of the judiciary to the executive branch", these reforms were largely ineffective and were passed more to appease protesters rather than to transform the political system in actuality⁵. The political stagnancy in Morocco following 2011 has served to reinforce the movement's motivation to enact change. In my analysis of the case studies, I examine the regime's support in both the pre-2011 and post-2011 eras, looking specifically at the extent of support for the Moroccan government's positions during the two crises by looking at the support or lack thereof of both opposition parties and civil society organizations. This examination determines the extent to which the Moroccan government is utilizing these conflicts as a strategy to garner domestic political support. Within this analysis I examine the role of nationalism in influencing Moroccan public opinion on the Western Sahara conflict and these territorial disputes. In comparing these cases I determine whether the ignition of tensions

⁵ Radi, Abdelaziz. 2017. "Protest Movements and Social Media; Morocco's February 20 Movement." *Africa Development / Afrique Et Développement* 42 (2): 33.

between Morocco and Spain are motivated more by foreign policy objectives or domestic political considerations.

Case Study Rationale: Diplomatic Tensions in the 21st Century

Due to the extent of escalation and the widespread publicity of both the Perejil Crisis and the Ceuta border incident, I have chosen these cases to analyze the Moroccan government's motivations behind the decision to breach international agreements of neighborliness as outlined by the European Union. Both cases relate to questions of sovereignty and border security, therefore constituting significant interests in the realms of both Moroccan international relations & foreign policy as well as Moroccan national security. These crises also occurred months prior to the Moroccan general elections of their respective years, therefore playing a role in the outcomes of said elections. In the examination of these cases I present an explanation of the international relations and political climates of Morocco prior to the crisis, an explanation of the escalation of diplomatic tensions, and the outcomes of the crisis. In doing so I highlight the conditions of the diplomatic relations between Morocco and Spain and potentially elucidate the motivations behind these political decisions. In determining the period in which to look at diplomatic tensions between Morocco and the EU, I elected to analyze relations in the 21st century due to the stability of King Mohammed VI's regime in particular. The rationale behind this decision lies in the fact that Moroccan relations with the EU changed significantly following King Mohammed VI's ascension to the throne in 1999. Prior diplomatic relations with the EU were mostly focused on increasing economic cooperation but remained interdependently distant

due to King Hassan II's regime being characterized by significant human rights abuses and a lack of sufficient democratization⁶.

Considering the significant changes to the Moroccan political atmosphere following the death King Hassan II and the ascension of his son King Mohammed VI, analyzing cases prior to the 21st century would not be conducive to understanding the current relations between Morocco and the European Union. The analysis of these cases includes two potential explanations for the Moroccan government's behavior during the respective crises. One explanation focuses on the consolidation of support for the Moroccan government's position on Western Sahara's sovereignty by the international community. The second hypothesis suggests that the escalation of these conflicts served to consolidate of domestic political support for the king's regime in an attempt to divert from domestic failures by capitalizing on nationalistic sentiment regarding Morocco's sovereignty.

Case I: The Perejil Island Crisis (2002)

Parsley Island, otherwise known as Isla Perejil in Spanish or Leila/Tura in Arabic/Amazigh, is an islet off the coast of Morocco whose sovereignty remains a point of contention between Spain and Morocco. Although only 0.25 square miles and uninhabited, the island was the focus of a diplomatic crisis that endured 9 days and involved military action on both sides of the conflict. Prior to the conflict, the claim of ownership of Parsley Island was never consistently or explicitly established and therefore remained unoccupied by either state. While Parsley Island constitutes a territory that is of little economic interest, the Island has been noted as an strategic geopolitical component due to its proximity to Europe and its perceived

⁶ Campbell, Patricia J. "Morocco in transition: Overcoming the democratic and human rights legacy of King Hassan II." *African Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (2003): 42.

importance in the realms of drug trafficking, migration, and counterterrorism⁷. Although the tiny islet was relatively unknown to the populations of both states prior to the crisis, the escalation of military tensions between Morocco and Spain served to highlight the lingering effects of European colonialism of Northern Africa. Therefore, the crisis has transformed Parsley Island into a territory that “has acquired a symbolic value far exceeding its objective importance”, which may enlighten the importance of the Moroccan government’s decision to provoke tensions on such a site⁸.

The precursor to the Perejil Island Crisis between Morocco and Spain lay in a series of disagreements in both economic and political spheres following the ascension of Mohammed VI to the Moroccan throne in 1999. While disagreements regarding claims to Spanish territories in North Africa have remained consistent since the 16th century, the independence of Morocco from the French in 1956 reignited serious claims to the territories by the Moroccan government. One integral antecedent to the crisis was the withdrawal of the Moroccan ambassador to Spain on October 27, 2001 that was the culmination of a series of disagreements between Morocco and the EU, most notably in regard to:

“1) Problems in negotiating the renewal of the Fisheries Agreement between the European Union and Morocco so that European fishing vessels (mostly Spanish) could fish in Moroccan waters; 2) Management of migratory flows and fight against drug trafficking from Morocco into Europe through Spain; 3) Support of the Spanish media and civil society actors to

⁷ Frutos, Moira García de. "Perejil, un Conflicto Simbólico por la Información." *Revista Aequitas: Estudios sobre historia, derecho e instituciones* 1 (2011): 86.

⁸ Tams, Christian J. "A Sprig of Parsley That Leaves a Bitter Taste-The Spanish-Moroccan Dispute about Perejil/Leila." *German YB Int'l L.* 45 (2002): 270.

the Sahrawi independence in Western Sahara; 4) and opposition of Spain to the Baker I Plan”⁹.

This decline in relations, especially in regard to the 2001 Fisheries agreement, solidified the political tensions necessary to catalyze the escalation of the Perejil Crisis. During the negotiations for these fishing agreements, the Spanish government blamed Morocco for acting inflexibly and stated “that there would be ‘consequences’ for Morocco as a result of its ‘refusal’ to sign a new agreement”¹⁰. The use of this language by the Spanish representatives was perceived as a threat by the Moroccan government and only served to further heighten the tensions between the two actors. This tension only increased following Spanish military maneuvers in the territory of Alhucemas on July 6th 2002¹¹. Morocco’s response to the perceived threat to its territorial unity emerged on the July 11th, 2002 when twelve members of the Moroccan Gendarmerie seized the island and began flying two Moroccan flags on the rocky islet.

The occupation of Parsley island by Moroccan forces was discovered by the Spanish Civil Guard hours later on route to Ceuta, who then approached the islet and were subsequently challenged by armed members of the Moroccan Gendarmerie and forced to retreat. Following the occupation of Parsley Island by Moroccan forces, the Spanish government as well as the European Union condemned the behavior and called on the Moroccan government to withdraw from the islet on July 11th. Despite this request, the Moroccan government failed to acknowledge these requests until July 15th. In response, the Moroccan government commented

⁹ Jordán, Javier. “The Confrontation between Spain and Morocco over the islet of Perejil. A Reinterpretation from the Countering Hybrid Threats Perspective” *Global Strategy – Universidad de Granada* (2018): 2.

¹⁰ Gillespie, Richard. “‘This Stupid Little island’: a Neighbourhood Confrontation in the Western Mediterranean.” *International Politics* 43, no. 1 (2006): 113.

¹¹ Frutos, Moira García de. “Perejil: Un Conflicto Simbólico por la Información.”: 86.

that “the deployment of men on the island was part of a fight against illegal immigration, drug trafficking, and other illegal activities (a reference to terrorism)” while Moroccan Foreign Minister Mohamed Benaissa described the occupation as “a simple surveillance operation” that would benefit both actors in its surveillance of alleged clandestine activities¹². Despite this response, the Spanish government deemed the occupation an act of military aggression and subsequently decided that military action would indeed be necessary. This perception of the occupation of Parsley Island as an act of military aggression heightened following the replacement of the Gendarmerie with six Moroccan marines who erected a “large, solid tent on the island” and the establishment of “the presence of about a hundred troops in support” on the mainland of Morocco¹³.

Following the escalation of Moroccan military presence and the subsequent breakdown in communication between Moroccan and Spanish diplomats, the Spanish military developed Operation Romeo-Sierra in order to end the dispute militarily. This counter-operation was launched on the morning of July 17th by a Special Operations Group within the Spanish military. The group of twenty-eight Spanish marines landed on the islet with Spanish air and naval support backing their arrival and the six Moroccan marines “were captured, taken to Ceuta, and handed back to the Moroccan authorities” once across the border¹⁴. After the successful completion of the operation, Spanish troops remained on Parsley Island in the immediate aftermath of the conflict. Integral to the end of the crisis was the mediation of the conflict by the United States. In a statement developed by the state department, the U.S. brokered an agreement

¹² Gold, Peter. “Parsley Island and the Intervention of the United States.” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies (Springer Nature)* 8, no. 2 (2010): 91.

¹³ Gold, Peter. “Parsley Island and the Intervention of the United States.”: 92.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 92-93

that “involved the withdrawal and absence of all personnel and symbols of sovereignty, a return to the *status quo ante*, and plans to discuss improving bilateral relations” between Spain and Morocco¹⁵. Following the adoption of this agreement, Spain withdrew troops from Parsley Island on July 20th.

Despite the adoption of the agreement officially ending the conflict, the months following the crisis proved tenuous for the international relationship between the two actors. Formal diplomatic relations were not restored until January 2003 and the following months proved precarious for Moroccan-Spanish diplomacy due to the evidently discordant political relationship fostered by the crisis¹⁶. Despite reestablishing diplomatic ties, the following months proved precarious for Moroccan-Spanish diplomacy as Morocco accused the Spanish government of “lacking neutrality on the Sahara issue when it chaired the Security Council” in July 2003 and the Spanish government suspending arms sales to Morocco later that year citing the Perejil Crisis as their rationale¹⁷. Regardless of the tensions between the two states, the de-escalation of the conflict and subsequent reestablishment of friendly behavior has served to ensure that Spain and Morocco remained important economic and political partners. Despite the occasional outbreak of minor diplomatic disputes regarding the Spanish enclaves in North Africa and disagreements regarding their relative positions in the Mediterranean, a crisis as escalated as that of Parsley Island has yet to erupt between Spain and Morocco since 2002.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁶ Arieff, Alexis. “Morocco: Current Issues” *Congressional Research Service*. (2011): 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

Foreign Policy Objectives

In examining the extent to which foreign policy objectives played a role in motivating the Moroccan government's escalation of the Perejil Island Crisis, an understanding of Morocco's position within the international political system of the time is integral. Occurring in 2002, only three years into King Mohammed VI's reign, Perejil constituted the King's first major diplomatic rift with Europe since his ascension. Considering the EU's position as both Morocco's largest foreign investor and most influential partner, the decision to invade the islet appeared counterproductive to the aims of the new monarch. Where the importance of the Perejil Island Crisis is evident is in its relative unimportance as a significant territory. The choice to approve the invasion of the obscure, uninhabited rock instead of electing any of the other territories disputed with the Spanish government served to elucidate the fact that the King was potentially more interested in utilizing the crisis as a platform through which the regime could seek to resolve issues related to territorial disputes, fishing agreements, and migration.

Where this attempt to win concessions from the European Union appears most evidently is in the analysis of the Moroccan government's attitude towards Spanish following the resolution of the diplomatic crisis. The use of Perejil as an attempt to sway international sentiments regarding its claim to Western Sahara is reflected in the language used by Moroccan government officials during the period following crisis in the context of the proposal of the Baker I plan to the United Nations. The Baker I plan constituted a framework agreement that proposed the autonomy of the Western Sahara as a territory of the state of Morocco¹⁸. The proposal was approved by the Moroccan government in 2001 and was subsequently presented by

¹⁸ Miguel, Carlos Ruiz. "El largo camino jurídico y político hacia el Plan Baker II. ¿ Estación de término?." *Anuario Mexicano de Derecho Internacional* (2005): 461.

France, a Moroccan ally, to the EU Foreign Affairs Council, but failed to pass due to Spain's objection to its lack of support by the Polisario Front¹⁹. This rejection of the proposal frustrated the Moroccan government, which is reflected in the comments following the Perejil crisis about Spain's lack of neutrality on the Western Sahara conflict. The connection the initiation of the crisis to the Spain's position on the Western Sahara suggests the motivation of the crisis lie in Morocco's concern about Spain's inevitable position as a "non-permanent member of the UN Security Council between 2003 and 2004" which in turn would make "it even more difficult for the UN to approve the Baker I plan" for which Morocco had been advocating²⁰. The concern over the rejection of this plan proved reasonable following the rejection of the plan and its subsequent demise.

The Perejil Crisis occurred mere days before the King Mohammed VI's highly publicized wedding which served as a platform to showcase the Moroccan position on the status of Ceuta and Melilla. In the context of such an important Moroccan cultural event, the ignition of the Perejil crisis under the approval of the King suggests that the conflict was an attempt to reconfigure the diplomatic spat into a commentary on the Morocco's sovereignty over its territories that would inevitably lead towards an understanding of Morocco's claim to the Western Sahara. Albeit the outcome of the crisis did little to aid the regime in its cause, it did reignite nationalist sentiment domestically regarding the legitimacy of Morocco's claims to Ceuta and Melilla. The media attention both domestically and internationally also served to reinvigorate the narrative that pinned Morocco as a state struggling with its territorial unity due to a persistent presence of the colonial power of Spain. In constructing this narrative, the

¹⁹ Jordán, Javier. "The Confrontation between Spain and Morocco over the islet of Perejil. A Reinterpretation from the Countering Hybrid Threats Perspective": 3.

²⁰ Ibid.,

Moroccan media apparatus sought to consolidate international recognition of its grievances and potentially present the Western Sahara as an integral part of Moroccan territory.

Domestic Political Considerations

Essential in determining the extent of the primacy of domestic politics the Moroccan regime's decisions during the Perejil Crisis is an understanding of the political climate of the period and the challenges facing King Mohammed in the years immediately following his ascension to the throne. The relative juvenility of King Mohammed VI's regime in 2002 not only solidified a need to prove his capabilities on the international stage, but also a need to consolidate support during a period in which he was being "indirectly challenged by the increasing strength of the country's Islamist movement" that questioned the complete authority of the monarchy²¹. King Mohammed VI's agenda upon ascending to the throne was characterized by his desire to enact social reforms and liberalize the authoritarian government inherited from his father. This agenda was largely criticized by Islamist opposition parties who sought to "resist any modern alternative to the existing authoritarian system", especially in regard to the King's commitment to social reforms²².

The lack of experience of the King in comparison with his predecessor fostered a political climate in which "the monarchy was being questioned (albeit quietly) by sectors of the Islamist movement", therefore establishing placing "pressure on the new king to strike popular, nationalist poses and produce an international 'success'" that would serve to characterize his

²¹ Gillespie, Richard. "This Stupid Little island': a Neighbourhood Confrontation in the Western Mediterranean": 129.

²² Maghraoui, Abdeslam. "Political authority in crisis: Mohammed VI's Morocco." *Middle East Report* 218 (2001): 12.

regime as one that would project the national interest of Morocco more broadly²³. Having had little opportunity to act on the international stage, King Mohammed VI's decision to approve the invasion of Perejil demonstrated a successful method through which to consolidate support from the Islamist parties that questioned his legitimacy. The fact that "opposition politicians in the Moroccan capital Rabat backed the official government explanation that [Parsley Island] has been Moroccan territory" since achieving independence in 1956 suggests that there was an overarching consensus on the decision of King Mohammed to invade the islet²⁴. This demonstration of support can potentially be contributed to a consolidation of Moroccan nationalism not unlike the "rally 'round the flag" effect attributed to the United States in times of international crisis. Although there exists little evidence of Moroccan opposition to the invasion of Parsley island, this may be attributed to the Moroccan political system which favors parties and organizations that reflect ideologies and agendas that align with the political interests of the king.

One potential explanation for the use of the invasion of Parsley Island to consolidate domestic political support is the occurrence of the crisis mere months before the September 2002 legislative elections in Morocco. This proximity suggests that the Perejil Crisis was "taking place at a crucial moment of the Moroccan political transition and could become an important factor in its outcome", considering its characterization as the first election to occur under King Mohammed VI's regime, which had committed itself to free and fair elections following the poor

²³ Gillespie, Richard. "This Stupid Little island': a Neighbourhood Confrontation in the Western Mediterranean": 124.

²⁴ Tremlett, Giles. 2002. "Moroccans seize Parsley Island and leave a bitter taste in Spanish mouths" *The Guardian*. July 13.

reputation of his father's regime²⁵. Despite this commitment, King Mohammed VI sought to establish a government in which political parties' relative power was dependent on its amiability with the monarch rather than its political agenda. This system ensured that "the distinction between opposition and loyalist parties became harder to discern, as all parties, by choice or necessity, inched closer to the monarchy to ensure their political survival" which led to a discordant relationship between the Moroccan political elite and their electorates. This in turn caused discontent among the Moroccan population with its government, which "was reflected by citizens' general apathy toward the political process, low voter turnout in elections, and mistrust of politicians"²⁶. Despite the significance of this election and the success of opposition parties in winning the majority of seats in the legislature, the fact that political system of Morocco perpetuates the demise of any political party that displays significant opposition to the King Mohammed VI's political agenda suggests that the primacy of domestic politics was entirely secondary to the acquisition of concessions from the European Union regarding the Western Sahara conflict amongst other territorial pursuits.

Case II: Ceuta Border Incident (2021)

As one of the two Spanish enclaves on the border of Morocco North along with Melilla, Ceuta and the claim over its territory have consistently served as a point of contention between Spain and Morocco. Despite being under the jurisdiction of Spain since 1580, the Moroccan government has continuously "maintained that Ceuta is a 'usurped city' under Spanish occupation" and considered one of "the last colonies in Africa" along with Melilla and the other

²⁵ Vasconcelos, Álvaro de. "Perejil/Leila: Lessons for Europe. Why Have All Failed?." *Boletín Elcano* 3 (2002): 3.

²⁶ Fakir, Intissar. "Morocco's Islamist Party: Redefining politics under pressure." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2017): 5.

Spanish territories in the region²⁷. These claims to Ceuta have continuously been a source of contention between Spain and Morocco despite little international support for Morocco's position on the disputed territory considering the self-identification of its residents as Spanish citizens.

The strategic importance of Ceuta lies in its characterization as an integral territory in both the mitigation of smuggling and irregular migration into the European Union. One of the most important aspects of its classification as a territory of Spain is its inclusion in the Schengen Agreement, under which "30,000 Moroccan day laborers can enter Ceuta each day" therefore establishing an "informal economy with the movement of contraband across borders", a fact that has influenced the EU to fund the construction of an 8.2km double fence around the enclave²⁸. Further protection of Ceuta's border by the EU is reliant on "EU funding to both Spain and Morocco on migration management and border controls/surveillance" in the interest of the European External Action Service²⁹. Funding this protection typically ensures that the Moroccan government remains vigilant in managing irregular migration and fulfills its agreement to halt migrants *en route* to Europe.

Despite the investment of the European Union in ensuring that Morocco has the capacity to curb irregular migration to Ceuta, this investment proved futile in a border incident beginning on May 17, 2021. Although the decade prior to this incident lacked significant diplomatic

²⁷ Trinidad, Jaime. "An Evaluation of Morocco's Claims to Spain's Remaining Territories in Africa.": 965.

²⁸ White, Gregory W. "Sovereignty and International Labor Migration: The 'Security Mentality' in Spanish-Moroccan Relations as an Assertion of Sovereignty." *Review of International Political Economy* 14, no. 4 (2007): 705.

²⁹ Carrera, Sergio, Jean-Pierre Cassarino, Nora El Qadim, Mehdi Lahlou, and Leonhard Den Hertog. "EU-Morocco Cooperation on Readmission, Borders and Protection: A model to follow?." *CEPS Papers in Liberty and Security in Europe* (2016): 4.

tensions between Spain and Morocco, U.S. recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara signaled a deterioration of this period of relative amity. Perceiving the "persuasive influence of the USA recognizing Moroccan sovereignty" over the Western Sahara as influential enough to "hold sway with other countries", the Moroccan regime began to push for similar recognition from U.S. allies within the European Union³⁰. The refusal of states like Germany and Spain to immediately align with the U.S. government's position on the conflict resulted in strained diplomatic relations between Morocco and the EU.

The Moroccan government's disillusionment with the lack of consensus from Spain regarding the conflict then led Morocco to reignite tensions regarding the territorial holdings of Spain in North Africa. These tensions escalated following the admission of Brahim Ghali, the president of the Saharawi Polisario Front, to a hospital in Spain in April 2021 for COVID-19 treatment. Perceiving this admission to the Spanish hospital as a provocation due to Morocco's consistent "criticism of an alleged friendly Spanish attitude vis-à-vis Saharawi independentists", the already tense diplomatic attitudes heightened³¹. These series of political variances culminated in "the relaxation of the control mechanisms by the Moroccan security forces located on the border in Ceuta" on May 17 in which 8,000 people illegally entered the enclave, including 1,500 minors³². The influx of migrants overwhelmed Spanish border control and resulted in the deployment of the Spanish military to mitigate the influx of migrants.

³⁰ Zamakda Allison, Safwaan. "A Paradigm Shift in the Recognition of Moroccan Sovereignty Over Western Sahara." *The Journal of Middle East and North Africa Sciences* 7, no. 5 (2021): 21.

³¹ Ferrer-Gallardo, Xavier and Lorenzo Gabrielli. "The Ceuta Border Peripeteia: Tasting the Externalities of EU Border Externalization." *Journal of Borderlands Studies*: 3.

³² Terrón-Caro, Teresa, Rocío Cárdenas-Rodríguez, and Fabiola Ortega-de-Mora. "Discourse, Immigration and the Spanish Press: Critical Analysis of the Discourse on the Ceuta and Melilla Border Incident." *Societies* 12, no. 2 (2022): 4.

Following the incident, diplomatic tensions between the two states remained tumultuous, with both the EU and the Spanish government condemning Morocco for their perceived weaponized utilization of irregular migration as a form of political coercion. In the month following the conflict, Morocco withdrew its ambassador to Spain, Karima Benyaich, who, in response to the crisis, stated that “there are acts that have consequences in relations between countries”, purportedly in reference to Brahim Ghali’s admission to Spain the month prior³³. Albeit this statement by Benyaich suggested the relaxation of border control was due to the Ghali incident, the Moroccan government did not confirm that the migratory crisis was a direct response to the perceived wrongdoing by the Spanish government. Instead, the Moroccan foreign minister, Naser Burita stated the influx of refugees could be attributed to “fatigue of the Moroccan police apparatus after the festivities of the end of Ramadan” as well as “the total inaction of Spanish police” at the time of the breach³⁴.

The Moroccan ambassador to Spain only officially returned to Madrid in March 2022 following an agreement between the Spanish government and Morocco to support Rabat’s proposal Morocco’s autonomy proposal for the Western Sahara. In a letter to King Mohammed VI, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez praised the proposal as “the most serious, credible, and realistic basis for the resolution” of the conflict³⁵. The establishment of friendly relations between the two nations and the agreement in regard to a stance on the Western Sahara conflict was attributed to the Spanish desire to “guarantee the integrity and sovereignty of Spain” through

³³ Ferrer-Gallardo and Gabrielli. "The Ceuta Border Peripeteia: Tasting the Externalities of EU Border Externalization.": 3.

³⁴ Otazu, Javier. 2021. “La embajadora de Marruecos no volverá mientras dure la crisis con España” *El País*. May 21.

³⁵ González, Miguel. 2022. “La carta de Pedro Sánchez a Mohamed VI: “Debemos construir una nueva relación que evite futuras crisis” *El País*. March 23.

the avoidance of escalated territorial disputes over Spanish territory in North Africa as well as migration³⁶.

Foreign Policy Objectives

In determining the motivations behind the Moroccan government's diplomatic behavior, it is evident that there exists a large extent to which the regime has utilized the Ceuta Border incident as a method through which to gain international concessions. Despite Morocco's "advanced status" under the European Neighbourhood Policy affording the country large amounts of aid from the EU for border management, the Moroccan government has utilized Europe's anxiety over migration following the 2015 refugee crisis as a tool of political leverage. A large source of this anxiety stems from the lack of consensus on an EU readmission agreement between the two actors. Integral to the European Union's security strategy are these readmission agreements, which solidify the commitment of non-EU states to taking back irregular migrants who have been designated by the EU as residing without proper authorization³⁷.

This intentional utilization of migration anxiety as political leverage can be seen in a 2019 speech given by King Mohammed VI at the EU-Arab League summit. In this speech, the King comments on the responsibility of the EU in aiding development to the Arab world. This call for assistance in development stems from a Moroccan understanding of its ability to garner aid due to "the EU's increased tendency to link development aid and trade with migration cooperation"³⁸. The strategic use of language in this speech suggests that the Moroccan

³⁶ Hedgecoe, Guy. 2022. "Spain's Western Sahara pivot raises Energy Supply fears" *Politico*. March 23.

³⁷ Kaiser, Kevin "EU-Morocco Negotiations on a Readmission Agreement: Obstacles to a Successful Conclusion". *College of Europe*. (2019)

³⁸ Teevan, Chloe. "EU-Morocco: a win-win partnership." *Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis* (2019):10.

government is entirely aware of its ability to use the topic of migration as leverage due to the dependency of the EU on Morocco's border control assistance. The limits of the European Neighborhood Policy in regard to Morocco has also solidified the Moroccan regime's confidence in using "its growing leverage on security and migration to demand greater economic cooperation and knowledge sharing while adopting an increasingly defiant tone towards anything it sees as political meddling", most importantly regarding its territorial claims to the Western Sahara³⁹.

The reversal of opinion by the Spanish government in its opinion on the Western Sahara conflict suggests that the intention to win concessions on the Sahara conflict is the main motivation behind the escalation of Ceuta border. Although the escalation of this conflict in the hope of winning concessions for their position on the Western Sahara reflects heavily the sentiment that the state is punching above its weight in terms of the relative size and power of its institutions in comparison to the European Union, the success of the Ceuta Border incident in solidifying Spanish support for Morocco's autonomy proposal demonstrates an understanding of the political leverage that Morocco yields in terms of migration. Since the Moroccan government has become increasingly aware that the European Union's concern regarding the influx of migration in the Western Mediterranean places it in a position to "become increasingly demanding on the economic front and less willing to concede on the political front", the regime has proved that the use of migration as political leverage is entirely advantageous⁴⁰.

³⁹ Ibid., 6

⁴⁰ Ibid., 9

Domestic Political Considerations

The decade preceding the Ceuta Border Incident in Morocco was characterized by the domestic political stagnancy following the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring proved challenging to the King's regime as nationwide protests broke out across Morocco on February 20th, 2011. The protests were inspired by other movements in the MENA region, with the "youth voicing requirements for regaining a sense of social and national dignity through slogans expressed in a universal language: dignity, freedom, justice"⁴¹. This political movement, commonly referred to as the F20 movement, solidified the creation of a reformed Moroccan constitution that intended to address the calls for overarching reform from the King's regime. In reforming the constitution, King Mohammed VI circumvented revolutions like those which occurred in Tunisia and Egypt. In the years following this movement, disillusionment with the Moroccan government remained consistent due to the largely cosmetic reforms to the constitution.

Much like the Perejil Crisis, the Ceuta border incident occurred only months before an important Moroccan election. The general discontent with the lack of tangible change in Morocco following the F20 movement led to a radical change within the makeup of the government. While the Islamist Justice and Development Party constituted the majority of representation within the Moroccan government following the 2011 protests, the 2021 election proved unsuccessful for the party, with the loss of 90% of the PJD's seats in the Moroccan election being attributed to the lack of political change promised following the February 20th movement⁴². The results of the election suggest that the Moroccan public's disillusionment with the country's political parties suggests the importance of consolidating domestic support through

⁴¹ Radi, Abdelaziz. "Protest Movements and Social Media; Morocco's February 20 Movement."

⁴² Eljehtimi, Ahmed. 2021. "Liberals win most seats in Morocco's parliamentary election, routing Islamists" *Reuters*. September 9.

escalating tensions with Spain is insignificant. Much like the Perejil crisis, domestic political considerations prove subordinate to foreign policy objectives due to the stagnancy of Morocco's political atmosphere.

Conclusion

In determining a pattern between the outcomes of the Perejil Crisis and the Ceuta Border Crisis in the context of the proposed hypotheses, it is evident that the Moroccan government has ignited diplomatic tensions in order to garner international support for their position on the Western Sahara. While both cases of diplomatic tension have garnered domestic political support due to the projection of Moroccan popular nationalism against the perceived colonial holdings of North African territory by the Spanish government, this nationalism is not essential in ensuring the Moroccan regime's survival or approval due to the mostly authoritarian character of its government. With this in mind I have determined that the Moroccan government has been using political tension with Spain to pressure the European Union and its members states to reach a consensus with the United States' on its recognition of the Western Sahara as Moroccan territory.

My analysis of the two cases suggest that the motivations behind the escalation of diplomatic tensions during both the 2002 and 2021 crises vary slightly due to the different political climates in which the different crises occurred. Whereas the Perejil Island Crisis occurred in the pre-Arab Spring era and worked to solidify the identity of King Mohammed VI within the international community, the political atmosphere of the 2021 Ceuta Border Crisis made the escalation of tensions heavily related to the United States' recognition of the Western Sahara in combination with the increased anxiety of Europe over irregular migration. The Perejil Crisis seemed to be motivated by the new monarch's desire to prove himself both domestically

and internationally. Despite dissatisfaction following the stagnancy in the post-Arab Spring era, there still remains strong support for the monarchy, with the 2021 elections only solidifying the pro-monarchical stance of the general public. While the Perejil Island Crisis was fruitless in its attempts to win international concessions regarding its territorial claims over Ceuta and Melilla, the Ceuta border incident was more successful in its acquisition of concessions regarding the Western Sahara.

The foreign policy decisions of Morocco as they relate to territorial disputes and the Western Sahara conflict are inherently linked to the support of the Moroccan monarchy due to the efficacy of employing nationalism in establishing domestic support for the regime's decisions during disputes. The strength of nationalism in Morocco heavily depends on the contentious historical relationship between Spain and Morocco. Most notably,

“The successive expulsions of ‘Moors’, the occupation of Ceuta and Melilla in the 15th century, the battle of the Three Kings (1578), the Tetuan War (1860), the Rif War (1923-1926), the Spanish civil war (1936), the occupation of the North and sub-Saharan Africa (1912), the independence of Morocco (1956), the Green March (1975), and the incident of the islet of Leila-Perejil (2003) are all crucial moments which have mobilized and led to collective passions for both nations”⁴³.

The cultivation of nationalism through the reminiscence on the Moroccan peoples' historical relationship with the European power has relied on these incessant issues between Morocco and Spain. The underlying postcolonial narratives of both the Perejil Crisis and the Ceuta Border Incident have been successful in fostering nationalist sentiment. While the nationalistic sentiment serves to further solidify the legitimacy of the King's regime in the eyes of the Moroccan public,

⁴³ Shahu, Khalid S. 2018. "Cultural Diplomacy in a Global era: Spanish Cultural Action in Post-Independent Morocco as a model." *Coneferencia de Glotopolitica*: 3.

the domestic political considerations do not constitute a significant concern of the government or the monarchy in igniting diplomatic tensions with Spain.

The hypothesis suggesting the primacy of domestic politics is largely inaccurate due to the stability of the Moroccan regime as a semi-authoritarian government. Having already circumvented a potentially significant challenge to the monarchy in the February 20th movement, there is little to suggest that the Moroccan regime is intentionally employing a strategy not unlike the “rally ‘round the flag” effect of the U.S. to consolidate power. Having successfully curbed actual democratization in lieu of cosmetic changes to the Moroccan constitution, there is little advantage in employing tactics like the escalations of Perejil and Ceuta to consolidate domestic support for the regime.

The success of the Moroccan regime in achieving its political agenda regarding Spanish opinion on the Western Sahara can be directly attributed to its provocations of diplomatic tensions with Spain. In determining which of the two motivations is more likely in the escalation of diplomatic tensions between Morocco and Spain, it is evident that the desire for concessions regarding the Western Sahara conflict constitutes the stimulus for these provocations. The most significant and tangible of these concessions is the Spanish commitment to support for the autonomy proposal of the Western Sahara. This reversal of Spanish opinion following the Ceuta Border incident signifies a potential new approach towards Morocco’s relationship with the EU: an approach in which the protection of EU borders remains dependent on the organization’s commitment to aiding the development of the Moroccan state.

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