

Morocco Does EU Dirty Work to Cut Migration Into Spain

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Migration into Europe is far down from its height in 2015, but many migrants still risk everything to cross into Spain via Morocco, by crossing the Strait of Gibraltar. With EU aid, Morocco has made strides in stemming the flow.

Spain's elections might be over, but the topic of migration remains as hot as ever, both in Spain and across Europe. In the wake of the European Parliament elections, following big wins for right-wing anti-migration parties, in both Italy and France, migration remains an issue that could make or break entire party alliances.

Spain is one of the major entry points for migrants into the EU, and since last year, the primary point of entry for migrants. The key point of access into Spain is the Strait of Gibraltar, where the distance between Spain and Morocco is the narrowest – approximately 14 Km wide. Most migrants seek to make the crossing there, rather than risk the more lengthy and treacherous routes across the Mediterranean's interior.

It is also at this location that Moroccan authorities thwarted approximately 25,000 people from entering Spain between February and April. Speaking with the Associated Press, Moroccan Border Security chief, Khalid Zerouali, said that this represents 30 percent more failed bids to make it into Europe via Spain, compared to the same period last year. An additional 50 human trafficking networks were also dismantled in 2019, representing a 73 percent increase on this time last year as well.

So far in 2019, over 7,200 people have reached Spain from Morocco, which is around 2,000 more than in the same period last year. However, the majority of illegal crossings take place during the summer months, so this number may increase. Furthermore, more than half of the crossings made in 2019 took place in January, and numbers dropped sharply from February through April. "The measures taken by Morocco led to stemming the migration flow to Spain", said Zerouali.

In 2018, approximately 60,000 migrants arrived in Spain, outpacing migrant arrivals in Italy and Greece. During this time, Morocco stopped 89,000 people from making the journey. However, beginning in February, those numbers fell dramatically. Nearly all of the migrants came to Spain via the sea, and most of them are from West Africa, though some are from Asia as well. "As a matter of fact, we dismantled a network active between Bangladesh, India, and North Africa dealing with migrants", Zerouali said.

Overall, the flow of migration into Europe has fallen sharply since 2015, when as many as 1 million people entered the continent.

Zerouli praised the border security's efforts, saying "We have been very tough on criminal networks" by using a combination of additional manpower and surveillance technology, to target them at their most vulnerable stage of operations along the northern African coast, where they use secluded

coastal areas as smuggling stations to begin the crossing. However, Zerouali did not discuss or describe the specific technology used in these efforts. He did note that imposing controls on the import and sale of navigation equipment was part of the counter-smuggling efforts.

Dangerous Waters

Despite the crackdown, many migrants risk everything to make it into Europe, putting enormous pressure on Morocco as a transit country. Earlier in May, Moroccan authorities stopped three boats carrying 117 people from setting sail. On the same day, some assaulted razor-wire fences that separated Spain's Melilla enclave from Moroccan territory, attempting to cross the border. 40 were arrested, and 52 made it across. Video images published by local newspaper, El Faro de Melilla, showed sweaters and jackets stuck to the razor wire that tops the border fence, left behind by those attempted the crossing.

Spain has two enclaves in North Africa: Melilla, on the Mediterranean coast, and Ceuta, which is located on the straits of Gibraltar. It is near these two areas that tens of thousands of migrants, mostly from African countries, are waiting to enter through EU's only land borders with Africa. Some try to climb fences or swim along the coasts instead, and these areas have become a flashpoint for migrants in recent years.

And within Spain itself, police arrested eleven people just last week, all of whom are suspected of being part of a larger human trafficking ring transporting people across the Mediterranean, in boats too small for the open water. The traffickers shook down migrants for exorbitant sums, anywhere from 3,500 to 6,500 euro a head, to be packed onto small dinghies with no safety measures. Once in Spain, the migrants were taken to safe houses and forcibly held there until they paid up another 1,000 euros each.

Migrants often suffer enormously on their journeys. According to a study by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which surveyed 1,341 migrants and refugees, 48 percent suffered one or more of the indicators the IOM considers exploitative, abusive, or linked to human trafficking. Almost half of the migrants who arrived in Spain in 2017 and 2018 reported physical abuse, forced labour, withheld wages, and arranged marriage offers, or some combination thereof. Almost half reported that they suffered the most violence in Morocco.

Physical violence was the most common, mentioned by 41 percent of those interviewed. It is often related to kidnappings, beatings during robbery, and assaults by human traffickers in boarding areas in northern Morocco and Algeria. 8 percent witnessed threats of sexual violence.

"The abuses are a big source of concern for the IOM" regardless of where it happens. The IOM has also noted in other studies that "a higher frequency of abuse often occurs in the last countries before reaching Europe".

Nor is it necessarily safer elsewhere: at least 65 migrants died off the coast of Tunisia attempting to make the crossing to Italy, when their boat capsized in rough seas. Near Cyprus, a fishing boat carrying eight Syrian refugees also capsized. Lebanon's navy detained three when they returned to the coast; the other five are still missing. In fact, Lebanon has the highest number of refugees per capita in the world, hosting about 1 million Syrians.

Spain and the EU have pledged aid and cooperation to Morocco, to the tune of 140 million euros, to be divvied out in stages, of which 30 million has already been disbursed. Half of the aid is to be in budget support, and the other half is to be in donated equipment. However, Zerouali says that this isn't enough: "We spend more than that in a year." Moroccan authorities hope to work out a deal

with the EU, “on how to sustain such assistance in a continuous way (...) It should not be only one shot”.

Some human rights organisations are concerned that such crackdowns worsen already bad situations for these vulnerable populations, as outsourcing border control creates a greater risk for human rights violations. This includes turning a blind eye to criminal violations on land, or concern that the Moroccan Royal Navy failed to reach people at risk of drowning at sea, in flimsily constructed boats – a concern Zerouali firmly rejected.

Activists are concerned that leaving sea rescues in the hands of North African states will put lives in danger, as these countries have fewer resources and less experience with sea rescue. Last year, 45 people died making the crossing to Spain, according to Spanish rights activist Helena Maleno, who runs the group, Walking Borders. But Zerouali said that last year Morocco rescued 30,000 migrants and “today, our operations in the maritime domain are more than excellent”.

There is also a greater risk of abuse: last year, Amnesty International denounced a Moroccan crackdown on sub-Saharan migrants, including alleged mass roundups and expulsions, without due process. The number of dead is difficult to ascertain, as Morocco does not make statistics on migrant deaths public.

Partner with Spain

Spain and Morocco cooperate on more than just migration. Spain was Morocco’s top trading partner during the first quarter of 2019, worth almost 4 billion euros in goods. Last year, in 2018, Spain was Morocco’s top trading partner for the seventh year running, a trend that looks set to continue. Moroccan exports are also widely sought in Spain, with forecasts set on them increasing to nearly 8 percent, to total 1.84 billion euros. Moroccan imports of Spanish goods decreased during this time, however, by 1.28 percent, or a little over 2 billion euros.

Morocco is a major trading partner for the EU. Between January and March of 2019, over 41 percent of these goods went to Spain, 29 percent to France, and 6 percent to Italy. During this same period, Spain’s exports accounted for over 33 percent of Morocco’s EU imports.

In an interview last month, Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sanchez, said that Spanish ties with Morocco are strong and strategic, calling Morocco a “special ally” of Spain.

“The economic and human dimensions of the Morocco-Spain relations” mean that, besides being “good neighbours,” the two countries “enjoy friendly and very close ties in many fields”.

“Progress and prosperity in Morocco are determining for stability in the Mediterranean and in Spain”, Sanchez said. He also promised that Spain will throw its weight behind Morocco to ensure that they get the European support they were promised, as Morocco’s “important efforts on migration need to be supported”.

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