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School for International Training

Role-playing and Rentierism:

Rethinking Morocco's Approach to Migration Diplomacy with the EU

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Spring, 2024

In partial fulfillment of the requirements of SIT Morocco: Migration & Transnational Identity

Abstract

Morocco's unique situation as a Mediterranean "gateway" between Africa and Europe makes the country a key strategic partner to the European Union. When it comes to migration diplomacy, however, cooperation between the two actors is hardly a given. This paper studies Morocco-EU migration diplomacy between 2000 and 2020. It provides an overview of the events and agreements that have shaped the relationship, with a focus on Morocco's rationale. I argue that Morocco makes use of two tools to strengthen its negotiating position and narrow the gap in relative power – role-playing and rentierism. The former is an element of International Socialization Theory, which describes an actor's superficial adoption of 'norms' institutionalized in its international environment. The latter refers to a process by which a state solicits 'rent' – in this case financial aid and bargaining power – from 'external clients'. My analysis is primarily qualitative, and evidence is derived from various national and bilateral migration policies, high-level Moroccan and EU discourse, and a handful of semi-structured interviews with Moroccan academics.

Research Question: *What strategies does Morocco apply in its migration diplomacy to level the playing field with the European Union? Which approach is most successful in achieving a balanced partnership? How might this approach impact migrant lives?*

Key Words: Role-playing; Rentierism; Socialization; Game Theory

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Introduction

Morocco occupies a unique position. It sends its own national emigrants, acts as a transit point for third-country nationals en route to Europe, and has most recently become a place of final destination for other migrants. For this reason Morocco has attracted scholarly attention from nearly every corner of the humanities. This paper focuses on the slim portion of that scholarship that explores Morocco's migration policy on the system level, though domestic and individual level analyses offer equally important contributions (see Natter 2020, Zisenwine 2012). Migration studies demand historical, political, economic, and anthropological consideration, and this paper seeks to deliver a fitted meditation on each of these themes. It relies on a mixed-methods approach of literature review, policy analysis, and semi-structured interview with academics I became acquainted with in Rabat.

Migratory Trends

Morocco became one of the world's top emigration countries over the second half of the 20th century.¹ Since Moroccan independence from France in 1956, the government has encouraged emigration through bundles of incentive programs and initiatives aimed at supporting their diaspora abroad. By 2013 Morocco had the 3rd largest diaspora of the MENA countries which in 2023 totaled 5 million, representing 15% of the Moroccan population.² The first wave of emigration in the 1960s and 70s was comprised primarily of unaccompanied male guest workers seeking higher wages in Western Europe. The second wave in the 80s and 90s, however, exhibited higher rates of family migration, with many more second-generation

¹ Central Intelligence Agency, 'Morocco,' The World Factbook (Last Updated: 3/1/24), <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/morocco>.

² Uri Dubash, 'Diaspora, Development and Morocco', 2015 ; Aziz Boucetta, 'Morocco Needs to Start Taking Its Diaspora Seriously,' Morocco World News, 2023

migrants seeking to become naturalized citizens of their host countries.³ Though the Moroccans born in destination countries now outnumber those who actually migrated, these expatriate communities maintain exceptionally close ties with the crown. This is no accident – since the first major wave of emigration in the 60s, Morocco has promoted an advanced diaspora campaign that has seen the formation of the Ministry in Charge of Moroccans Residing Abroad, the Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans Living Abroad, and the Council for Moroccan Community Living Abroad.⁴ These organizations coordinate engagement projects like the ‘Summer Universities for young Moroccans Living Abroad’ program, which aims to “strengthen the cultural and spiritual ties between the Moroccan diaspora and the native country,” and the ‘Skills Mobilization’ program, which informs professionals abroad of opportunities in Morocco and facilitates partnerships with public and private actors.⁵

Morocco developed into a transit country for sub-Saharan asylum seekers and labor migrants in the mid-1990s, when regional conflicts like the Congolese and Liberian civil wars began to escalate. The country was an attractive option for migrants seeking to access Europe because of its proximity to Spain, which administers two enclaves on the North African coast and the Canary Islands off Morocco’s Western coast. Morocco also lacked any government policies addressing irregular migration – or migration at all for that matter – until 2003. The government exhibited little concern at the time, in part because it considered unauthorized migration more or less harmless, and expected the trend to be temporary.⁶ Spain fenced the borders of its two enclaves, Ceuta and Melilla, in 1993 and 1996, and on New Years Eve of

³ CIA, ‘Morocco,’ 3/1/24.

⁴ Rike Mahieu, ‘Feeding the Ties to “Home”’: *Diaspora Policies for the Next Generations*, International Migration (John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2014), 400.

⁵ Ibid.; Uri Dubash, ‘Diaspora, Development, and Morocco,’ OCP Policy Center, 2014, 21.

⁶ Mehdi Lahlou, ‘Morocco’s Experience of Migration as a Sending, Transit and Receiving Country,’ Istituto Affari Internazionali, 3.

1999-2000, five hundred unauthorized migrants stormed the Ceuta border for the first time.⁷

Since then, countless other mass crossings have unfolded, most recently this March, and most infamously in June 2022, during which at least 23 migrants (37 by UN estimate) died attempting to cross the Melilla border. Spanish and Moroccan law enforcement deny accountability for the deaths and the 77 other missing persons, though media and NGOs documented excessive force on either side, including launching tear gas, firing rubber bullets, and throwing rocks.⁸

If the 1960-80s marked Morocco's development into a sending country, and the 1990-2000s into a transit country, then a third period of migration beginning in late 2010 saw Morocco's full realization as a destination country. The Arab Spring transformed regional security in the south and east Mediterranean, resulting in an initially slow influx of migration that spiked in 2013 following escalation in the Syrian civil war.⁹ It was during this period, which some referred to as the "Arab Winter," that the international community grew increasingly concerned with the development of a "Western Mediterranean security complex."¹⁰ In the fall of 2013 King Mohammed VI launched the New Migration Policy (NMP), a major piece of legislation enacted just four months after Morocco signed a Migration and Mobility Partnership with the EU. The NMP was an unprecedented legal framework that embraced the "exceptional regularization" of almost 45,000 irregular migrants, while emphasizing a humanitarian imperative and the need to address human trafficking and migrant integration with new legislation. By the end of 2014 18,00 migrants had been regularized, and the implementation of a second program reiterated Morocco's commitment to granting equal access to work and state services to those in need – particularly migrants with serious illnesses, women and their children,

⁷ Elie Goldschmidt, 'Storming the Fences,' MERIP, 21 Oct. 2016.

⁸ 'Spain/Morocco: No Justice for Deaths at Melilla Border' Human Rights Watch, 6/22/23, www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/22/spain/morocco-no-justice-deaths-melilla-border.

⁹ Mehdi Lahlou, 'Morocco's Experience of Migration as a Sending, Transit and Receiving Country,' 3.

¹⁰ Ilyssa Yahmi, 'Not Our Burden': A Principal-Agent Analysis of Morocco's EU-Style Migratory Policies,' The Politics of Migration and Refugee Rentierism in the Middle East, Mar. 2024.

and unaccompanied children.¹¹ Thousands of regular and irregular migrants have chosen to stay in Morocco, either temporarily, to earn enough money for travel, or permanently, as a “next best option”. This brings us to the present, with Morocco triply classified as a sending, transit, and destination country, and distinguished as a key player in migration diplomacy.

The European Union

This study examines Morocco’s diplomacy with the European Union, a partnership that was formalized in 2000 with the EU-Morocco Association Agreement. The next few years would be a period of rapid migration policy development, both for the EU and Morocco. At the 2002 Seville summit the EU declared migration a high-priority issue, laying down a timetable for the conclusion of readmission agreements, undertaking of joint operations at external borders, and the introduction of common visa arrangements.¹² The next year the EU passed the European Security Strategy, which identified a “ring of well governed countries to the East of the EU and on the borders of the Mediterranean with whom we can enjoy close and cooperative relations” and combat “terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, state failure, and organized crime.”¹³ Morocco became an official member of this ‘ring’ in 2005 upon signing the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and joining the EU Southern Neighborhood. The ENP committed both signatories to ‘principles of the market economy, free trade, sustainable development, reduction of poverty, and the institution of social, political, and legal reforms,’ and put Morocco on the path to becoming a ‘privileged partner’ of the EU.¹⁴

¹¹ Lahlou, ‘*Morocco’s Experience of Migration as a Sending, Transit and Receiving Country*,’ 3; ‘Regularization Campaigns.’ *Regularization Campaigns*, Global Forum on Migration and Development, 16 Oct. 2019.

¹² Speech by Romano Prodi, “*The Seville Summit: Enlargement, Immigration and Reform*,” European Parliament, *Speech*, 2002, 3.

¹³ Anashua Dutta, ‘*Human Rights at the Border: European- Union—Moroccan Relations in the Wake of the 2013 Migratory Policy*,’ SIT Graduate Institute/SIT Study Abroad, 2015, Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection, 5.

¹⁴ Ibid. ; “Morocco,” *European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations*, accessed 5/3/2024.

In 2008 the EU awarded Morocco ‘Advanced Status’ – a title somewhat lacking in definition, as Morocco is the only country to ever be granted it. Advanced Status was an idea proposed by Morocco, that meant generally to ‘strengthen political cooperation, [...] thereby allowing each of the partners to focus more closely on their respective strategic priorities, and facilitate the gradual integration of the Moroccan economy into the EU interior market through the provision of adequate financial support.’¹⁵ It is clear why Morocco would desire economic integration and privileged relations with the EU, but the real value of Advanced Status has been called into question by some (see Jaidi 2009). Though Advanced Status dealt little with migration, we will see in the next section that its designation had everything to do with Morocco’s strategic migration diplomacy.

The last and arguably most critical development discussed in this paper was Morocco’s signing of a Migration and Mobility Partnership (MMP) with the EU in 2013. The EU has signed nine MMPs with partner states in the Southern and Eastern Neighborhoods. These agreements create a framework for cooperation and dialogue, with each one being tailored to the partner state’s specific migratory context. Though every MMP is different, they all promise close cooperation, simplified procedures for granting visas, education and training opportunities in the EU, and support in the field of asylum and border management.¹⁶ Morocco’s MMP focused on four main themes – improved organization of legal migration, effective control of irregular migration, maximizing the positive effect of migration on development, and the promotion of and respect for refugees’ rights.¹⁷

¹⁵ Larbi Jaidi, ‘*The Morocco/EU Advanced Status: What Value Does It Add to the European Neighborhood Policy?*’ 2009.

¹⁶ European Commission, ‘*Southern Mediterranean,*’ Migration and Home Affairs.

¹⁷ ‘*EU-Morocco Mobility Partnership: Border Control at the Expense of Human Lives?*’ EuroMed Rights, 4/25/2015.

The year Morocco signed its MMP, the European Commission composed an ENP strategy paper for Morocco pledging to accomplish two aims: emerge from the “spiral of weak growth, unemployment, poverty and migration” and externally, make a success of implementing the Association Agreement and Neighborhood Policy.¹⁸ In order to make good on these aims, the EU provided a bundle of grants and loans from the European Commission, the European Investment Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Morocco was also invited to participate in around 20 EU programs, but not before negotiating a formal protocol through the original EU-Morocco Association Agreement. A key instrument developed through the ENP was a ‘more-for-more’ approach, wherein the more reforms member states implemented, the more they would be rewarded with additional financial and other support.¹⁹ Morocco benefited from around €1.5 billion from the EU in the nine years that followed, though as we will learn, the country would be anything but a pawn to EU aims.

The Association Agreement (2000), European Neighborhood Policy (2005), Advanced Status (2008), and Migration and Mobility Partnership (2013) tell a story of increasing EU interest in Morocco and a growing understanding of its critical role as a transit and sending country. And while the international community is turning its attention to the “security complex” in the Mediterranean, Europe’s internal discourse focuses more and more on migration-related issues. The European Union is keen to manage migration outside its borders, and Morocco is poised to negotiate. In the next section I will review scholarly literature on Morocco’s strategic migration diplomacy. It will reveal two critical approaches by which Morocco makes use of its

¹⁸ Macaulay Miller, Miranda. *Conditionality, Rationale, and Implications of EU Aid for Migration: The Case of Morocco*, spring 2019.

¹⁹ Ibid.

situational leverage and operationalizes its agreements with the EU to protect state interests and balance itself against the hegemon.

Literature Review

This literature review discusses two prominent International Relations theories in their application to Morocco-EU migration diplomacy. It focuses on two recent papers that articulate each perspective exceptionally well. The first argues that Morocco gains leverage and negotiating power by ‘role-playing’ – an element of international socialization that involves projecting ‘norms’ accepted in a dominant international environment. The second conceives of Morocco as a rentier state, using its border management to extract ‘rent’ from the EU in the form of financing and political leverage. I will review the evidence presented, and incorporate contributions from others who advance the same perspectives. The theories and analysis that follow will lay the groundwork for the argument of this paper.

Role-playing

‘Migration Diplomacy in a de Facto Destination Country: Morocco’s New Intermestic Migration Policy and International Socialization by/with the EU,’ by Dr. Irene Fernandez-Molina and Dr. Miguel Hernando de Larramendi, examines the 2013 New Migration Policy as evidence for Morocco-EU socialization. International socialization is a relatively new concept derived from the classical sociological understanding as ‘a process of inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community.’²⁰ The concept of socialization was introduced to International Relations to clarify a certain type of international political change: ‘that induced by the presumed influence of structures (such as the international system), and over the units or actors that make them up (states and their institutions).’²¹ International socialization therefore refers to ‘the process [by an actor] that is directed toward a state’s internalization of the

²⁰ Jeffrey Checkel, ‘*International institutions and socialization in Europe,*’ *International Institutions and Socialization in Europe*, 19 Feb. 2007, 5.

²¹ Irene Fernandez-Molina & Miguel Hernando de Larramendi, “*Migration Diplomacy in a de Facto Destination Country*” *Mediterranean Politics*, 4/16/2020, 6-7.

constitutive beliefs and practices (norms) institutionalized in its international environment.²²

Most definitions also describe a switch in the socialized actor from ‘a logic of consequences to a logic of appropriateness,’ meaning decision-making follows from an assessment of institutional norms, rather than pure rational choice.²³ The first section of the paper is dedicated to contextualizing Morocco and the EU within this dynamic. International socialization is most conducive in structurally asymmetric power structures, wherein the socializer acts as a core member of the relevant community, while the socializee tends to be a relative ‘novice’ within this sphere of influence.²⁴ Fernandez-Molina and Hernando de Larramendi argue that Morocco-EU relations are embedded in a context of historical hegemony and a highly institutionalized international environment, making international socialization a fitting concept to understand the dynamics driving migration governance.

The paper also tackles potential misconceptions about socialization; first, the western-centric understanding of socialization as a one-way process that attributes all agency to the socializer of a passive recipient. The authors instead conceive of it as a two-way street, by which a state’s role as an active agent in their own socialization is emphasized. The supposed false dichotomy between rational choice and norm dynamics is also addressed. On the contrary, prominent scholarship establishes an ‘intimate relationship between norms and rationality’, as ‘processes of social construction and strategic bargaining are deeply intertwined.’²⁵ In other words, a middle ground exists between decision making that follows exclusively from the logic

²² Frank Schimmelfennig, ‘*International socialization in the New Europe*,’ *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 6, no. 1, Mar. 2000, 111–112.

²³ Checkel, ‘*International institutions and socialization in Europe*,’ 5.

²⁴ Cameron Thies, ‘*International socialization processes vs. Israeli national role conceptions*’ *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 8, no. 1, 6 Dec. 2011, 28.

²⁵ Fernandez-Molina & Hernando de Larramendi, ‘*Migration Diplomacy in a de Facto Destination Country*,’ 9.

of consequences, and that which follows from a complete transformation of norms to assimilate to the international environment. This middle ground looks like ‘adoption of the standard at a superficial level,’ or when a state acts according to norms that are socially expected within the given context, but stops short of actually internalizing those norms.²⁶ This is what constructivists call ‘role-playing’.

The first effort of the EU to socialize Morocco as a transit country began a year before the EU-Morocco Association Agreement. In 1999, the Council’s newly established High-Level Working Group on Asylum and Migration drafted an Action Plan for Morocco, laying out its security concerns and goals for migration management. Then, when Morocco developed its first immigration policy in 2003, the law was criticized as being ‘unnecessarily restrictive’ and ‘security-focused’ for purely domestic needs.²⁷ Moroccan authorities deflected this criticism by emphasizing its ‘commitment towards its partners,’ presumably the newly associated EU.²⁸ The authors understand the Action Plan as an early effort by the EU to prime Morocco to a new set of migration norms. The choice by Moroccan authorities to justify themselves by reference to the EU is also a good example of Morocco acting as an agent of its own socialization – rather than merely deflecting EU socialization efforts, they responded to and validated them.

The authors also find early indications of normative socialization in the 2002 resurrection of the Ministry in Charge of Moroccans Residing Abroad, noted above in the Introduction.

Although the name remained tailored to that of a sending country, the activities of the department

²⁶ Schimmelfennig, ‘*International socialization in the New Europe*,’ 118.

²⁷ Myriam Cherti and Michael Collyer, ‘*Immigration and pensée d’etat: Moroccan migration policy changes as transformation of ‘geopolitical culture*,’ *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4, 7/21/2015, 590–591.

²⁸ Katharina Natter, ‘*The formation of Morocco’s policy towards irregular migration (2000–2007): Political rationale and policy processes*,’ *International Migration*, 2014.

shifted towards communicating growing migratory pressure and Morocco's transformation into a transit country. A few of these activities include Program 10, aimed at fighting networks that profit from migrant smuggling, and Action 11.10, which called for the carrying out of 'analytical and prospective studies on migration in Morocco' to inform political decision making.²⁹

Fernandez-Molina and Hernando de Larramendi describe this shift as 'recognition seeking behavior,' arguing that Morocco repeatedly signaled to the EU that it was a 'credible partner that could not be ignored.'³⁰ Indeed, an official slogan established by King Mohammed VI in 2001, "shared responsibility" and a "global approach" to migration, echoed those same motifs prevalent in EU discourse.³¹

Morocco's role-playing helped the country establish itself on the international stage, and earn prestige as an Advanced Status partner of the EU. The paper points to several occasions in which Morocco was able to sidestep criticism and consolidate its position by embracing EU norms. The most critical of these instances was in 2005 following particularly grave human rights violations by Morocco security forces during a storming of the Melilla and Ceuta borders. Hundreds of migrants had attempted to cross the fences but were confronted with Moroccan gunfire. Between 13 and 18 individuals were killed, which attracted international condemnation and became the subject of a documentary film, *Victimes de Nos Richesses*.³² Through role-playing Morocco turned this crisis into an opportunity, and took the lead on the first Euro-African Ministerial Conference on Migration and Development the next year. The

²⁹ 'Ministre délégué Auprès du Ministre des Affaires Etrangères et de la Coopération Internationale,' 2017, Politique Nationale d'Immigration et d'Asile, accessed 1 May 2024, 110 & 136.

³⁰ Fernandez-Molina & Hernando de Larramendi, 'Migration Diplomacy in a de Facto Destination Country,' 12.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Riccardo Valsecchi, 'Ceuta, the Border-Fence of Europe,' WorldPress, 6/29/2009, www.worldpress.org/Europe/3371.cfm.

framework of this conference was institutionalized as formal dialogue known as the Rabat Process, to facilitate migration initiatives between African and European countries.³³ At the time, Moroccan representatives ‘boasted that the conference enshrined the normative ‘global approach’ that Mohammad VI had been advocating for for years.’³⁴

By embracing these norms and playing into the role of mediator between Europe and Africa, Morocco was able to realign itself with the EU. The authors draw a direct link between Morocco’s efforts with the Euro-African Ministerial Conference to the awarding of the EU-Morocco Advanced Status. And sure enough, the EU Declaration accompanying the new designation cited Morocco’s ‘leading role’ in the Rabat Process and its ‘active role’ in the implementation of wider ‘EU-Africa joint strategy.’³⁵ Other indicators of role-playing discussed by the paper include the token normative terms ubiquitous throughout Morocco’s 2013 New Migration Policy, and the formal enactment of Morocco’s 2015 National Strategy and stalled development of its legal and policy framework (norm adoption with deferred implementation).

Other scholars have also observed instances of socialization and role-playing. German political theorist Dr. Kristina Kausch identifies the EU’s ‘gradual reform approach’ as a method of socialization, though she argues it was more or less unsuccessful.³⁶ She examines a 2004 assessment by the European Commission of Morocco’s political, social and economic situation. The Assessment includes a fundamental criticism of the government’s lack of respect for the principle of separation of powers, the limited powers of parliament and government, and civil

³³ International Centre for Migration Policy Development. *The Rabat Process: Balanced Dialogue, Concrete Action*, Rabat Process Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development, Brussels, Belgium, 2023.

³⁴ Fernandez-Molina & Hernando de Larramendi, ‘*Migration Diplomacy in a de Facto Destination Country*,’ 13.

³⁵ Ibid 14.

³⁶ Kristina Kausch, ‘*The European Union and Political Reform in Morocco*,’ *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 14, no. 2, July 2009, 170–171.

society's limited ability to affect major political decisions.³⁷ In criticizing Morocco and pointing out its "defective" norms, the EU, she argues, was trying to reinforce "correct" norms and socialize Morocco into conformity. Dr. Damiano de Felice's paper on the role of domestic politics and international socialization in French and British aid is also a worthwhile read. De Felice examines the context of socialization of two EU member states, and explains how this process might influence the conditionality of their support of third-party countries like Morocco.³⁸

In sum, role-playing is a function of international socialization, by which a country outwardly assumes the norms of a dominant international environment. Morocco does this in its migration diplomacy because it knows it stands to gain from at least conveying its alignment with EU norms. Whether or not Morocco actually internalizes these norms is a topic for the Findings section of this paper. For now, all that is necessary is to observe how Morocco has practiced role-playing and has stood to gain from it, finessing a more critical role as a leader in migration diplomacy, as a liaison between Africa and Europe, and as a privileged and Advanced Status partner to the EU.

Rentierism

Rentierism and socialization share some characteristics. Both theories approach actors as rational and sophisticated decision makers, and both are most commonly observable in unequal power structures. Rentierism is a concept borrowed from political economy that describes a state "which derives all or a substantial portion of its national revenues from the rent of indigenous

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Damiano De Felice, 'Diverging visions on political conditionality: The role of Domestic Politics and international socialization in French and British aid,' *World Development*, vol. 75, Nov. 2015, 26–45.

resources to external clients.”³⁹ The theory is most commonly applied to oil-rich countries in the MENA region who rely on oil revenue, rather than the productivity of their domestic economies. Other examples of rentierism include Egypt and Jordan’s strategic rent of important military bases to the US, and visa granting in the Gulf states. ‘Rent’ is a “reward of the ownership of a resource”, which can be anything – including the presence of between 50,000-100,000 irregular migrants in a ‘high priority’ transit country.⁴⁰

In “*Not Out Burden*”: *A Principal-Agent analysis of Morocco’s EU-style Migratory Policies*, Ilyssa Yahmi explores how Morocco has operationalized its Migration and Mobility Partnership with the EU to increase its leverage and extract rent at the expense of refugees. In order to appreciate her rationale one must first have a basic understanding of Principal-Agent analysis. The framework is rather simple: there’s a principal and an agent, and the principal delegates certain powers to the agent, a separate executive or judicial actor. Delegation entails “a conditional grant of authority from a principal to an agent that empowers the latter to act on behalf of the former”.⁴¹ Principals will contract out ‘tasks’, like border management, to lower the transaction cost of policymaking. A good example of delegation is the United Nations Security Council; UN states that are not members of the Council delegate authority to the council to make decisions and take actions, and in return they receive protection.

³⁹ ‘*Rentier Populism*,’ ECPS, 28 Dec. 2020.

⁴⁰ David Ricardo, ‘*Extract from on the principles of Political Economy and Taxation*,’ Romanticism and Politics 1789–1832, 6 Mar. 2020; Khalil, Mourad. *Irregular Migration in Morocco: A Case for Constructionism*, 2022, p. 5.

⁴¹ Darren Hawkins, ‘*Delegation under anarchy: States, International Organizations, and Principal-Agent theory*,’ *Delegation and Agency in International Organizations*, 14 Sept. 2006, 3–38.

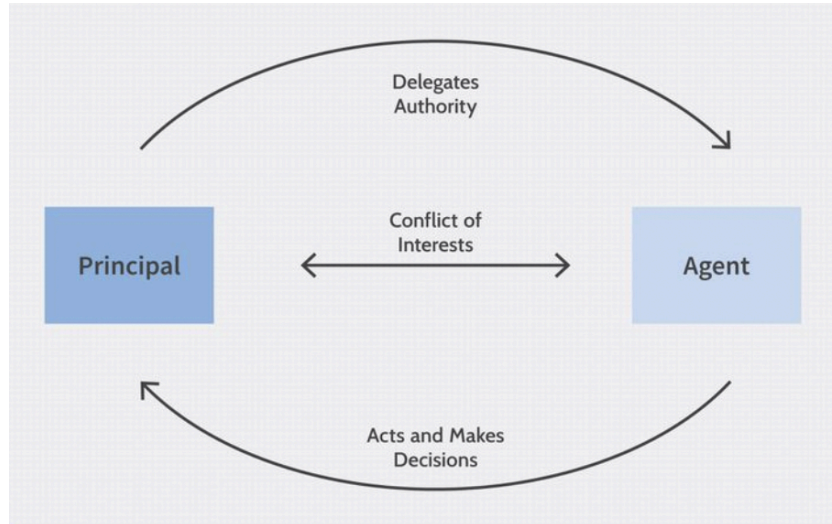


Photo by Sabrina Jiang, Investopedia.

Yahmi uses the Principal-Agent framework to explain Morocco-EU migration diplomacy, with the EU contracting out mobility control and border management to its southern neighbor. Rentier theory helps us understand the conflict of interest between Morocco and the EU. Literature on the “rent-seeking behavior” of states tells us that transit and sending countries like Morocco solicit two kinds of rent. The first is remittance, a major source of revenue for the country. As we know, Morocco is actively developing its diaspora policy in order to maximize this rent. The second form occurs when transit states partner with the EU and “employ their position as host states of forcibly displaced populations to extract revenue, or “refugee rent,” [...] in order to maintain these populations within their borders.”⁴² In the context of the Migration and Mobility Partnership, this rent takes the form of budget allocation and more broadly, strategic leverage. The conditions necessary to ensure either type of rent can conflict; the simultaneous regulation and encouragement of migration is a hard line to walk. This explains Morocco’s tendency to cooperate as an agent in some instances, and in others not.

⁴² G. Tsourapas, ‘*The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Foreign Policy Decision-Making in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey*,’ *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4, 464–81.

‘Madison’s dilemma,’ is when an agent uses powers granted by the delegation of authority against the principal.⁴³ In this case, the mere act of delegation signals that Morocco has the opportunity to exert influence over its principal. Yahmini provides evidence of instances in which Morocco sent credible threats, essentially ‘blackmailing’ the EU to ‘smuggle in’ divergent interests and consolidate its position. In 2016, the European Court of Justice sought to include the Western Sahara, a disputed territory over which Morocco claims sovereignty, in a series of new free trade agreements. Morocco considered this a betrayal, and in February 2017 contributed to an unprecedented influx of migrants entering through the Ceuta border.⁴⁴ A week and a half before the mass border crossings, Morocco had announced the following to the EU:

“Any obstacle to the application of this agreement is a direct attack on thousands of jobs on both sides in extremely sensitive sectors, as well as a real risk of resumption of the migratory flows that Morocco, through sustained effort, has managed to manage and contain.” (Aziz Akhannouch, Moroccan Ministry of Agriculture).

Morocco’s threat was credible, the trade agreements were never negotiated, and Morocco repeated the proven tactic. In 2021 Brahim Ghali, the General Secretary of the Polisario Front – the Algerian-backed independence movement in the Western Sahara – contracted COVID-19 and was flown to Spain for treatment. Spain and Algeria conspired to hide this information from Morocco, providing Ghali with a false identity and an Algerian passport.⁴⁵ When Moroccan intelligence detected the separatist leader’s presence in Spain, authorities condemned the country’s “incomprehensible” and “deplorable” actions, while Spain claimed they accepted him

⁴³ Daniel Nielson and Michael Tierney, ‘*Delegation to international organizations: Agency theory and World Bank Environmental Reform*,’ International Organization, vol. 57, no. 2, 2003, 241–276.

⁴⁴ Yahmi, ‘*Not Our Burden*,’ 2024.

⁴⁵ Safaa Kasraoui, ‘*El Pais: Morocco’s Intelligence Detected Brahim Ghali’s Presence in Spain*,’ Morocco World News, 4/27/2021.

“for strictly humanitarian reasons.”⁴⁶ Morocco's response came a few weeks later, when over 10,000 migrants surged into Ceuta as Moroccan border forces looked the other way. In less than a year Spain put an end to 15 years of neutrality towards the Western Sahara in a letter to Rabat that expressed support for Morocco’s 2007 Autonomy Plan for the region.⁴⁷

Morocco uses its migratory context and conditional border control to exert leverage over the European Union. Principal–Agent analysis assumes that principals will screen their agents to ensure compatible interests and capability before contracting them. It's clear why the EU would choose to partner with Morocco on the issue of migration; an increase in migrants crossing the Western Mediterranean, and the regional weakening of states following the Arab Spring and conflict in the Sahel region was complemented by Morocco’s apparent desire to strengthen its diplomatic and economic ties with the West. But the fatal flaw in the EU’s contract is the extent of its dependence on Morocco’s securing of the border, another topic of the Findings section. This dependency has allowed Morocco to apply conditions to the delegated task and impose its own geopolitical interests. As the EU’s national security is at play in the MMP, Morocco is of course expected to bargain. However, the EU’s ‘deeply rooted fear’ of being flooded by migrants allows Morocco to exert that much more influence. How the language of the MMP itself facilitated Morocco’s blackmail strategy will also be discussed later in the paper.

This literature review used two IR functions—role-playing and rentierism – to examine the ways in which Morocco uses its migration diplomacy to balance itself against the EU. Role-playing, a behavior described by International Socialization Theory, is the adoption of norms expected in a dominant international environment. In this case, Morocco responds to

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ José Ramón Bauzá Díaz, ‘*Parliamentary Question: Spanish Recognition of the Moroccan Plan for Autonomy for Western Sahara*,’: E-001162/2022: European Parliament, 3/21/2022.

socialization by the EU, that is, the promotion of EU norms and the criticizing of “defective” ones, by embracing the standard, at least outwardly. And Morocco has tangibly benefitted from this practice. After infamous human rights abuses at the Melilla and Ceuta borders in 2005, it was through role-playing that Morocco re-established itself as a privileged mediator between the EU and Africa, all while advertising a ‘global’ and ‘humanitarian’ approach. And it was this ‘active role’ and ‘effective cooperation’ that the EU cited in its rationale for granting Advanced Status to Morocco. Just as the strategic alignment with EU standards earned the country prestige and a privileged relationship with the EU, rentierism was used to extract ‘rent’ in the form of funding and political leverage. The grounding of Ilyssa Yahmi’s study in Principal-Agent analysis highlights Morocco’s strategic manipulation of its role as a defecting agent to the EU to extract concessions and support. Morocco has shown on multiple occasions that it can and will stop securing the European border when the EU or its members challenge other Moroccan interests, such as its autonomy over the Western Sahara. After examining the first element of my research question, *what strategies Morocco uses in its migration diplomacy to level the playing field with the EU*, this paper will now address the second two: *Which approach is most successful in achieving a balanced partnership*, and *how might this approach impact migrant lives?*

Methods and Methodology

In seeking to understand Morocco's approach to migration diplomacy with the EU, I conducted primarily content-based and qualitative research. The articles from my preliminary research tended to analyze high level-discourse (mostly speeches and official statements) and the progression of policy development and negotiations. My content-based research adopted this same approach, reviewing agreements, speeches, and government reports by Moroccan and EU

officials, and paying special attention to the rhetoric and timeline of these events. I also tracked more minor developments in the Morocco-EU partnership, like Action Plans and reports by the European Commission. My qualitative research comprised a series of semi-structured interviews with Moroccan academics and experts who I met either through the School of International Training, through a well-connected friend in Rabat, or through the referral of an earlier interviewee.

I was initially unsure whether to conduct interviews for my project. None of the articles I read in preparation for my paper included an interview element. This made enough sense; theoretical and epistemological studies often rely more on secondary data like official documents, policy papers, and historical records which can be more comprehensive than interviews, which also risk being overly narrow or biased. I also anticipated difficulty accessing the specific type of experts I thought would best serve the aim of my project – high-level Moroccan decision-makers. Ideally I would like to have spoken with representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry for Moroccans Residing Abroad & Emigration, the European Union Delegation, and the Ministry of Migration. But before beginning my project I read papers by alumni of my program that dealt with similar topics – most of those students reported that getting in touch with Moroccan and EU officials was practically impossible. In any case, my research project examined strategic diplomacy, ulterior state motives, and the use of migrant lives to extract political leverage. I thought that even if I could get in touch with representatives from the organizations above, their responses might be filtered through heavy bureaucracy, making my findings far less probative. I ultimately decided to conduct interviews with a handful of academics and experts in Rabat, because I wanted to take advantage of the unique opportunity to study and gather local perspectives in Morocco for a project that dealt

directly with the country's migration context. After all, I had made the decision to stay in Rabat for my program's one-month independent study period because most of the major universities and international organizations are in the Kingdom's capital.

I conducted my research primarily out of Rabat from mid-April to early May of 2024. I preferred to do our interviews in-person, with those who met with me consenting to the recording of our interview so I could engage more fully with the discussion. Two interviews were conducted via Zoom, in which case my interviewees allowed me to record the meeting. Unfortunately, one of the interviewees who had previously agreed to meet me in-person asked to have the interview conducted over email, with me sending him my questions that way. This was of course not ideal because without a live discussion it was more difficult to ask follow-up questions. The depth of his response also would surely have been greater through spontaneous dialogue. Some interviews were conducted jointly with my colleague, Alexa Carvallo from Kenyon College, who was also researching migration and the EU. We didn't want to overburden our common interviewees with two meetings on similar topics. Alexa and I conducted our interviews one at a time, with a few shared questions at the end pertaining to both of our studies. I spoke with five individuals:

- ❖ A professor at Mohammed V University in Rabat who specializes in international law
- ❖ A professor at Ibn Tofail University in Kenitra who had lectured out our institution
- ❖ A professor of migration studies from the School for International Training
- ❖ A migration economist who I was introduced to by a friend in Rabat
- ❖ A professor at Mohammed V University in Rabat (referred to me by the first) who could only respond to my questions via email

I opted to conduct semi-structured interviews to allow for open-ended, flexible discussions that could adapt to the flow of conversation and the interviewees' expertise. This format allowed me to collect comprehensive data, giving me freedom to explore emergent topics and follow up on interesting leads. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and included a mix of predetermined and improvised questions. The following is a sample from my core questions:

- ❖ How does Morocco establish itself on the international stage?
- ❖ What domestic factors do you believe influence Morocco's migration policy?
- ❖ What international factors might influence Morocco's migration policy?
- ❖ How do you conceive of Moroccan / EU relations? (conducive? / bilateral? / future trajectory?)
- ❖ What are some potential advantages and disadvantages to full partnership and cooperation with the EU?

One anticipated limitation was the language barrier between myself and my interviewees. Ideally I would have conducted my interviews in Arabic, but I didn't feel confident I could understand the whole of their responses, even with meeting recordings available for review. All interviews were therefore conducted in English, and though some spoke the language more fluently, no one spoke it natively. I imagine that for some, had they had the opportunity to respond in French or Darija, their responses would have been more nuanced and revealing.

Sample size was another major limitation affecting the scope and depth of my research. My original goal was to speak to around ten individuals of varying perspectives and backgrounds, but I ended up interviewing only half that number. I spent the first week of the independent study period reaching out to the ministries and organizations listed above, and to

professors that my program advisor had referred me to. Unfortunately I received responses from only a handful of individuals, with some of those eventually canceling our scheduled meetings. This shortfall was partly due to time constraints, as the interviews had to be conducted over a short two-week period. But the primary issue seemed to be the lack of responsiveness from those I reached out to, despite follow-up efforts on my part. Another limitation to my interview process was the type of interviewees I was able to secure. I aimed for a diverse range of expertise, hoping to include a mix of officials and decision-makers, academics, and experts. The majority of my interviewees however ended up being academics. I would have liked to speak with those involved in the affairs I wrote about, because while academics might have a better grasp of relevant theoretical frameworks, those with hands-on experience would provide better insights into rationale and the pragmatic aspects of policy-making, helping me bridge the gap between theory and practice. I selected my interviewees because of their expertise in migration studies, though not all of them specialized in international diplomacy or the European Union. Limits in the number and diversity of my interviewees narrowed the scope of my findings and rendered my research less holistic.

Despite these limitations, the interviews proved very valuable – mostly in the sense that each one gave my research a new direction, introducing a new concept or event to consider. The COVID incident involving Brahim Ghali’s hospitalization in Spain, for example, was first relayed to me by one of my interviewees. Though my pool of interviewees was not as diverse as I had hoped, their insights provided a valuable understanding of how leading Moroccans perceive their country’s role in the international environment and in relation to the European Union. I am glad that I ultimately opted to conduct interviews, because without it my findings would have relied solely on analysis of reports and policies. Besides that, I enjoyed the interview

process, and left each meeting uplifted by the enthusiasm and insights of my interviewees. I'm happy for the chance to share their contributions through this project.

Findings

I. Morocco's pivot towards Africa

In evaluating the utility of role-playing and rentierism, I encountered arguments that the venue of role-playing has shifted in the past ten years. Evidence suggests that the focus of Morocco's norm-driven role-playing has pivoted from the European Union to Africa and the wider international community. My findings confirm that role-playing has indeed helped Morocco balance itself against the EU, especially as it serves to strengthen the country's ties with the rest of Africa.

Morocco's relationship with sub-Saharan Africa is layered. Moroccans see themselves as culturally distinct from the rest of Africa, and in some sense they are. Their national identity reflects a medley of Arab, Mediterranean, Muslim, French, Jewish, Andalusian, and Berber influence. This can contribute, however, to a sense of exceptionalism towards the rest of Africa. In terms of diplomacy, Morocco has seen times of both closeness and turbulence. Tensions peaked in 1984 when Morocco withdrew from the Organization of African Unity – what is now the African Union (AU) – over the admittance of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the partially recognized state contesting Morocco in its claim over the Western Sahara. After 30 years Morocco decided to seek readmission to the AU in order to 'pragmatically neutralize the SADR in one of the Western Sahara conflict's main diplomatic battlefields' and 'boost its newfound aspirations to become a regional/continental power.'⁴⁸ Morocco's renewed interest in joining the AU fits into a larger trend of diplomatic focus on relationship building with sub-Saharan Africa in the 2010s. Chloe Teevan, a leading researcher at the European Centre for

⁴⁸ Fernandez-Molina & Hernando de Larramendi, *Migration Diplomacy in a de Facto Destination Country*, 17.

Development Policy Management, associates this trend with a shift away from Morocco's diplomatic attention to the EU. She argues that, in combination with Europe's economic crisis, apparent limitations in the EU's partnership with its Southern neighbors led Morocco to direct its energy elsewhere. Teevan believes these limitations were self-evident in the extremely slow pace of visa liberalization for Southern neighbors compared with Eastern neighbors like Belarus and Azerbaijan, and the disparity in funding between the two regions.⁴⁹

Whatever the motivation, Morocco's migration policy took a sharp turn from its outward-oriented, security-focused migration policy as a sending and transit country, to a more internal, rights-based approach as a recent destination country. The conditions for this shift in strategy have to do with the aforementioned third wave of migration to Morocco that inspired the 2013 New Migration Policy.⁵⁰ With a rising number of sub-Saharan migrants arriving in Morocco and finding it impossible to pass on to Europe, more and more migrants found themselves in a situation of 'forced immobility'.⁵¹ Morocco used the New Migration Policy to set the stage for its new role as a destination country. It included two new immigrant regularization processes, the adoption of a National Strategy on Immigration and Asylum, and an overhaul of the overly-restrictive and security-focused 2003 migration policy (see Lit. Review 12) – all of which were aimed at the positive reception by its 'brother sub-Saharan countries'.⁵² While Morocco's New Migration Policy gives special attention to Africa, it makes no mention of the

⁴⁹ Chloe Teevan, 'EU-Morocco: A Win-win Partnership?' Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, June 2019, 6-8.

⁵⁰ Fernandez-Molina & Hernando de Larramendi, 'Migration Diplomacy in a de Facto Destination Country,' 15.

⁵¹ Inka Stock, 'Time, Migration and Forced Immobility,' Bristol: Bristol University Press, 1 June 2019, 19.

⁵² Fernandez-Molina & Hernando de Larramendi, 'Migration Diplomacy in a de Facto Destination Country,' 16 & 19.

EU or European migration policies, except in passing reference to a migrant shipwreck off the Italian island of Lampedusa.⁵³

When the target of Morocco's role-playing shifted from the EU to AU, so did its rhetoric. Just as officials used to boast of a "global approach" to migration, King Mohammed VI now advertised a 'unique, authentic, and tangible model of "South-South" cooperation.'⁵⁴ In the same speech given at the 27th African Union summit in Kigali, the King flipped the "shared responsibility" theme and instead stressed Morocco's leadership in the region. He emphasized Morocco's foreign investment projects, its contributions to peacekeeping operations and post-conflict reconstruction throughout Africa, and its initiation of the Ministerial Conference of African States Bordering the Atlantic.⁵⁵ Even the "human rights approach", articulated in every joint agreement with the EU, became less about border control and more about migrant regularization and integration. Playing into these new set of norms allowed Morocco to construct its role as a destination country. After all, as Fernandez-Molina and Hernando de Larramendi note, 'by contrast with the awkwardness around the transit country role, this one [would be] eagerly celebrated, leaving aside the extent to which it might be a 'de facto' or 'default' situation.'⁵⁶

⁵³ Ibid 19.

⁵⁴ King Mohammed VI. "Royaume Du Maroc: The King's Speeches." *Maroc.Ma*, 17 July 2016, www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-royaux/message-de-sm-le-roi-au-27-eme-sommet-de-lunion-africaine-kigali.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Fernandez-Molina & Hernando de Larramendi, 'Migration Diplomacy in a de Facto Destination Country,' 15.

Role-playing is a mechanism by which a country reflects the norms of a dominant international environment to achieve desired ends, like international prestige, higher cooperation in its partnerships, and other rewards. With respect to both the EU and AU, Morocco performs its role as a sending/transit/destination country in a particular way to garner the most approval from the regional power, incorporating different political agendas as it deems fit. Morocco aspired to authority in Africa, and this meant leading from inside the African Union. After Morocco's membership bid in 2016, King Mohammed VI doubled down on his commitment supporting his fellow Africans:⁵⁷

“Africa, for us, is not an objective; rather, it is a vocation in the service of the African citizen, wherever he is. [...] Morocco is among the first countries in the South to have adopted a genuine solidary policy to welcome sub-Saharan migrants.” (Mohammed VI, 2016)

Just as strategic role-playing enabled Morocco to gain recognition as an Advanced Partner to the EU, its careful cultivation as an Africa-oriented destination country helped Morocco earn readmission to the AU. The membership bid was accepted the following year. Efforts like the regularization programs have been cited by scholars as primary considerations for the states that voted in favor of Morocco's bid (Ennaji, 2017; Tambwari & Kurebwa, 2018).

I set out to evaluate the utility of Morocco's role-playing with the European Union, and discovered a strategic pivot in re-purposing EU norms and political agendas to advance its own

⁵⁷ King Mohammed VI, *Discours de Sm Le Roi à La Nation à l'occasion Du 63ème Anniversaire de La Révolution Du Roi et Du Peuple*, Royaume Du Maroc: The King's Speeches, 2016, www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-royaux/discours-de-sm-le-roi-la-nation-loccasion-du-63eme-anniversaire-de-la-revolution-du.

priorities in Africa. Recognizing limitations in its partnership with the EU, Morocco wisely chose to cultivate a stronger relationship with its African allies, applying its role-playing approach to do so. This shift does not subtract from Morocco's overall strategy with the EU however. If anything, it reaffirms the efficiency of role-playing as a tactic Morocco can use to achieve what it wants out of these relationships. Morocco's dual alignment is an asset – one of the first professors I interviewed quoted the late King Hassan II, who likened Morocco to a “tree with its roots buried in Africa, and branches in Europe.”⁵⁸ Morocco's ability to flexibly play into African and European norms and agendas enables its strategic positioning among regional powers. However, when it comes to maximizing leverage with the EU, the next finding suggests that rentierism might prove even more profitable.

II. Why Rentierism Works

Rentierism has proven especially useful to Morocco as it seeks to balance its relationship with the European Union. The reader will recall that rentier states receive ‘rent’ from external actors through the effective management of ‘indigenous resources.’ Refugee rentier states extract financial support and political leverage from interested actors by maintaining migrant populations within their borders. The Literature Review discussed instances in which Morocco, acting as an agent, used its migrant populations to pressure the European Union to support its geopolitical agenda, particularly with regard to the Western Sahara. In seeking to gauge the effectiveness of this strategy, I came across compelling evidence explaining *why* Morocco is able to exploit its partnership. The answer is essentially that the EU is in a poor position to sanction Morocco. This is in part due to the structure of its MMP with Morocco – which uses vague

⁵⁸ Mkinnsi, Interview.

language and lack of any formal sanction mechanisms.⁵⁹ The MMP laid out broad, nonexhaustive expectations making it difficult to assess compliance and success within the agreement.⁶⁰ For example, the first of the four main objectives stated by the MMP is to “manage the movement of persons for short periods and legal labour migration more effectively, taking into account, with regard to the latter, the labour market of the signatories.”⁶¹ The EU might have positioned itself better with the inclusion of specific objectives, more clearly defined terms, and measurable outcomes. The joint declaration establishing the partnership also did not impose any binding legal obligations, leaving its implementation to the goodwill and effort of either party.⁶² Morocco thus had all the autonomy necessary to instrumentalize its migrant populations and force the EU to take its priorities into account.

The European Union’s over-reliance on external border control also tips the scale in Morocco’s favor. A major survey by EuroMed of EU countries, Maghreb countries, Mashreq countries, policymakers, experts and “civil society,” illuminates the EU’s border control issue. The survey asked respondents to evaluate the ‘hotspots’ approach to migration management. ‘Hotspots’ are the points at which the majority of migrants enter the Schengen area – the grouping of 27 European countries that have abolished controls at their shared borders.⁶³ The hotspots approach involves the deployment of EU officials to identify, register, and fingerprint individuals. Those migrants admitted as refugees are then sent to regional hubs and irregular migrants are deported.⁶⁴ Opinions on the hotspots approach were mixed, because of the

⁵⁹ Yahmi, “‘Not Our Burden’: A Principal–Agent Analysis of Morocco’s EU-Style Migratory Policies,” 2024.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ General Secretariat of the Council, ‘Addendum to ‘I/A’ Item Note: Joint declaration establishing a Mobility Partnership between the Kingdom of Morocco and the European Union and its Member States,’ State Watch, June 2013.

⁶² Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, ‘Analysis of the Mobility Partnership Signed between the Kingdom of Morocco, the European Union and Nine Member States on 7 June 2013,’ EuroMed Rights, Feb. 2014, euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/PM-Morocco_Final-Version-EN.pdf.

⁶³ Elzbieta Kaca, ‘EU Border Management,’ IEMed, accessed 4/18/2024.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

‘numerous practical constraints to their functioning, which hamper the quick prosecution of asylum claims’.⁶⁵ European Commission estimates affirm that the EU’s reception capacity is insufficient and faces problems with efficient allocation of support personnel to problem areas.⁶⁶ The survey also asks what measures should be promoted as a matter of priority to secure the borders of the Schengen area.’ The measure involving outsourcing border control to third countries received the least support, with just 6 percent of respondents favoring it.⁶⁷ Despite recognizing the risk of outsourcing border control to third countries, the EU is acutely aware that its current preventative infrastructure is fraught with inefficiencies and challenges, greatly limiting its ability to react when Morocco takes advantage of its agent role to introduce new conditions.

I also found that the same reasons for the successful negotiation of Morocco’s MMP ensure its success in rentierism. Maarten Vink and Natasja Reslow’s use of game theory to explain MMP negotiations in West Africa in *‘Three-Level Games in EU External Migration Policy: Negotiating Mobility Partnerships in West Africa’* is a helpful resource. The scholars analyze the EU’s external migration policy as a “three-level game” that determines the conditions under which member states and third countries participate in EU migration policy initiatives. The three-level game differs from the two-level game that Robert Putnam designed in 1988 to characterize international negotiations. In the two-level game, national executives try to find an agreement that can be accepted at both the international and domestic level.⁶⁸ The three-level game, however, is concerned with the international level (I) where the EU and third

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ “Reception Conditions Across the EU.” *European Parliament*, Nov. 2023, [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/755908/IPOL_STU\(2023\)755908_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/755908/IPOL_STU(2023)755908_EN.pdf).

⁶⁷ Kaca, ‘*EU Border Management*,’ IEMed.

⁶⁸ Natasja Reslow and Maarten Vink, ‘*Three-Level Games in EU External Migration Policy: Negotiating Mobility Partnerships in West Africa*,’ *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 53, no. 4, 21 Dec. 2014, pp. 857–874, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12233>.

countries negotiate migration issues, the EU level (II) where decisions are made within the EU, and the member state level (III) concerned with each state's domestic preferences.⁶⁹

Vink and Reslow's model for the successful negotiation of an MMP focuses on two main determinants: the cost of no agreement, and the autonomy of the central decision makers to make a decision.⁷⁰ The former is straightforward – if the cost of non-negotiation is high, then settlement is likely. Morocco was the first Mediterranean country to be offered an MMP, and a failed negotiation would mean embarrassment for Morocco, and an implication of a flawed EU migration approach in the Mediterranean. On the other hand, a successful MMP negotiation would mean more support with migration management for the EU, and funding, prestige, and political leverage for Morocco. The autonomy of central decision-makers is determined by their ability to act freely without the need for extensive approvals. The EU's autonomy is variable, with the necessity of Member State approval and the veto system complicating decision-making. In Morocco's constitutional monarchy, however, ultimate authority rests with King Mohammed VI who reserves the power to issue royal decrees, *Dahirs*, which have the force of law.⁷¹

The successful negotiation of MMPs is measured in terms of “win-sets” which describe an MMP's capability of gaining the necessary support – the larger the win set, the higher the chance of settlement. The largest win-set occurs when ‘cost of no agreement’ and ‘autonomy of central decision-makers’ are high. When they are low, the win-set is minimal. The table below is my own design based on the information in ‘*Three-Level Games in EU External Migration Policy: Negotiating Mobility Partnerships in West Africa*’:

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ US Department of State. “Morocco.” *Morocco - State.Gov*, 2009-2017. state.gov/documents/organization/160470.pdf.

‘Win Sets’ of EU MMPs with Third Countries in North Africa

		Cost of No Agreement	
		Low	High
Autonomy of Central Decision Makers	Low	Minimal	Moderate
	High	Moderate	Largest

I introduce this application of game theory, because the conditions that facilitated the negotiation of the MMP between Morocco and the EU also shape its current dynamics. In 2013, the 'Cost of No Agreement' for the EU was high, because it would symbolize a failure of its new Mediterranean migration strategy. This concern has only intensified since, particularly after the 2015 migration crisis during which hundreds of thousands of refugees fled across the Mediterranean Sea to escape conflict in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq.⁷² The crisis forced several Schengen countries to temporarily reinstate border controls, a highly public failure the EU is not keen to revisit.⁷³ The stakes were also high for Morocco, because failure to negotiate would mean national humiliation. Since then, however, Morocco has become an Advanced Status partner of the EU – the only one, for that matter – and the initial pressure to comply has dissipated. Morocco has maneuvered effectively, evidenced by its three-year halt in negotiations with the EU from 2014 to 2017 over disagreements regarding the Western Sahara. In sum, the EU still has reason to seek cooperative agreements given the high stakes and public scrutiny over

⁷² William Spindler, '2015: The Year of Europe's Refugee Crisis,' UNHCR UK, 8 Dec. 2015, www.unhcr.org/uk/news/stories/2015-year-europes-refugee-crisis.

⁷³ Kaca, 'EU Border Management,' IEMed.

its migration policies. Morocco, on the other hand, is more strategically positioned than it was 11 years ago, and now has more freedom to leverage the MMP to its advantage.

Constraints on the EU's decision-making autonomy also make it difficult to sanction Morocco or deviate in any way from its MMP commitments. Responsibility to member states, and those member states' veto powers, restrict the EU's mobility within the MMP. EU member states hold diverse interests and varying economic, security, and diplomatic concerns, that can complicate consensus on migration policies. On matters 'which the member states consider to be sensitive' – including common, foreign, and security policy – the Council must vote unanimously, a feat that has been hindered on numerous occasions by disparate interests.⁷⁴ Internal pressures, such as partnerships between member states and Morocco, weigh heavily on the EU's options to retaliate if Morocco were to apply its leverage in an unfavorable way. Spain, for example, would likely oppose any strong measures against Morocco, being the country that bears the brunt of Morocco's disfavor. One must only look to the repercussions it faced when Morocco uncovered Spain and Algeria's conspiracy to hide Brahim Ghali's treatment in a Spanish hospital. Without the threat of EU sanctions, Morocco enjoys significant freedom to determine when and how it wants to conform to the MMP. Its constitutional monarchy, led by the King and Prime Ministers, enables swift decision-making and policy implementation, without the constraint of democratic checks and balances. This operational flexibility allows Morocco to adjust migration controls as needed, exerting pressure on the EU and member states, and coercing support for its own political agenda.

⁷⁴ Council of the European Union, European Council, '*Unanimity - Consilium*,' Consilium.Europa.Eu, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/voting-system/unanimity/.

Rentierism has proven instrumental to Morocco in maximizing its leverage against the EU. In summary, Morocco's opportunistic behavior is facilitated by the EU's inability to sanction it. The EU's dilemma is due in part to the structure of the MMP, characterized by vague language and an absence of mechanisms for enforcement. Its over-reliance on external border control further tilts the balance in Morocco's favor. Game theory, as applied by Vink and Reslow, offers insights into the dynamics of MMP negotiations, and further elucidated dynamics that aid rentierism. High stakes and autonomy of decision-makers play key roles. While the EU remains constrained by member state interests and veto powers, Morocco enjoys considerable autonomy in wielding its leverage within the MMP framework. Ultimately, Morocco's strategic position and operational flexibility afford it significant freedom to shape the MMP to its advantage. For these reasons Morocco's rentierism, specifically its tactical management of migrants at the EU's borders, makes for a highly effective international strategy.

III. Effect on Migrants

When setting out to write this paper I thought of framing it as if I were advising the King. I wanted to answer the following questions: *Given what we know about the tools available to Morocco in its migration diplomacy, how should Morocco proceed? Which strategies are most useful in Morocco's balancing against the EU?* But upon conducting my research, I came to the conclusion that I could not whole-heartedly recommend either of these two approaches – because the cost to migrants is simply too high. Of course any given policy has its winners and losers, but in either case, the overwhelming losers were migrant populations.

The primary concern with role-playing is that it doesn't necessarily entail the internalization of expressed norms. Returning to our original definition, role-playing is a 'middle

ground' that exists between full socialization, or the complete transformation of norms to assimilate to a dominant international environment, and no socialization, in which an actor's decision-making follows purely from the logic of consequences. Role-playing only requires that a state *play* into a set of norms superficially. So is this the case with Morocco? It is hard to say. There are certainly some instances in which Morocco seems to make a genuine effort to act on its "cooperative" and "global" approach to migration – after all, most of the policies described in this paper were created through bilateral and multilateral collaboration with other international actors. The "humanitarian approach" articulated time and time again is more debatable. Though migrant deaths at the Melilla and Ceuta border are less and less common, new information about Morocco's treatment of migrants serves as an ugly reminder of the country's persistently brutal migrant treatment. A year-long investigation by the Washington Post recently revealed clandestine operations by three North African governments, including Morocco, to detain tens and thousands of migrants each year and dump them in remote stretches of barren desert.⁷⁵ The vast majority of these migrants are from sub-Saharan Africa, calling into question Morocco's "service of the African citizen" as much as its proclaimed "human rights based approach." At its worst, role-playing is a manipulative practice of empty virtue-signaling that endangers its most vulnerable populations.

Rentierism relies on the commodification of migrants to extract funding and political leverage, reducing migrants to mere pawns in a diplomatic struggle. When Morocco wants to demonstrate cooperation, it tightens its borders. If Morocco seeks to punish the EU or Spain, it

⁷⁵ Faiola, Anthony, et al. "With Europe's Support, North African Nations Push Migrants to the Desert." *The Washington Post*, 20 May 2024, www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2024/eu-migrant-north-africa-mediterranean/?tid=usw_paywall.

temporarily loosens border controls, allowing migrants to slip by. One might argue that migrants are safest when Morocco ceases its border enforcement, as heightened border control often coincides with the most severe human rights abuses. In the summer of 2018, for example, Moroccan security forces' efforts to curb irregular entries into Spain involved violent raids, forced transfers to remote areas, arbitrary detentions, and the accidental killing of a young Moroccan woman when the Royal Navy opened fire on a boat full of migrants attempting to cross illegally to Spain.⁷⁶ But even if the loosening of controls provides migrants with a brief respite from violence, once Morocco achieves its diplomatic aims, it will quickly revert to stringent border enforcement. This cyclical manipulation dehumanizes migrants, subjecting them to inconsistent and often brutal treatment based on Morocco's shifting political objectives.

In combination role-playing and rentierism create the most dangerous situation for migrants, with Morocco demonstrating its commitments to human rights through rhetoric or symbolic gestures, while using its migrant populations to buy the EU's complicity. This behavior has resulted in lasting toleration of Morocco's human rights abuses. While the EU might hold parliamentary exchanges, host bilateral technical consultations on human rights, or support Morocco's NGO sector, it remains publicly silent on the worst government abuses. The EU's willing blindness was most evident during and after the government's repression of the Hirak movement in 2018. Moroccans protested economic injustice and corruption after Mouhcine Fikri, a fishmonger, was crushed to death in a garbage truck compactor while trying to retrieve his confiscated merchandise, allegedly by police order. Morocco handed down harsh sentences to the Hirak leaders, and upheld the sentence the next year in an appeals court, despite a deeply

⁷⁶ Aida Alami, 'Morocco Unleashes a Harsh Crackdown on Sub-Saharan Migrants,' The New York Times, 22 Oct. 2018.

flawed trial that included allegations of torture.⁷⁷ Role-playing and rentierism create conditions that effectively silence the EU on human rights violations, allowing Morocco to continue its abuses unchecked.

Migration policy should begin with the question of migrant treatment. But if this paper demonstrates anything, it is that Morocco exhibits the utmost concern with finding the best ways to consolidate regional power through its diplomatic efforts. Role-playing and rentierism illustrate how Morocco leverages its relationship with the EU for its own benefit, which not only detracts from but often directly conflicts with the proper care and protection of migrants. Morocco's actions reflect a troubling trend where the pursuit of political and economic advantage takes precedence over the fundamental humanitarian needs of vulnerable migrant populations. Political strategies like role-playing and rentierism yield undeniable benefits to the Moroccan government, but they come at the expense of a gross neglect for the rights and well-being of migrants.

⁷⁷ 'Morocco: Prison Sentences Upheld Against Hirak El-Rif Protesters in Flawed Appeal Trial in Casablanca,' Amnesty International, 1 June 2021, www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde29/0267/2019/en/.

Conclusion

Morocco uses role-playing to earn privileged partnerships with key international players, and rentierism to instrumentalize migrants and leverage these partnerships. While the venue for Morocco's role-playing has shifted from the EU to Africa, Morocco's approach stays the same – reflecting regional norms and embracing themes that will win the approval of important regional partners. Where role-playing drives relation-building, rentierism enables the maximization of these relationships, making the strategy doubly useful to Morocco's balancing with the EU. Acting as an agent to the EU as it contracts out border control, Morocco weaponizes its migrant population by loosening border controls and flooding Spanish enclaves in order to force EU consideration of its other geo-political interests. The EU is in a poor position to sanction Morocco, because their MMP is vague and non-binding, and because its dependence on external border control diminishes its leverage. Role-playing and rentierism can come at significant humanitarian cost. In combination they bring about a dynamic in which Morocco appeases the EU with superficial norm adoption, while using its migrant populations to buy silence in the face of glaring human rights violations. In light of these findings, there is a clear imperative to prioritize the protection and rights of migrants, despite objective economic and political advantages to the application of these strategies. As Morocco continues to navigate its diplomatic relationship with the EU, it must adapt its approach – it's possible to achieve its aims without mistreating migrants.

Limitations of the Study

A major limitation of this study is that it is fundamentally speculative in nature. I identified what I thought to be key considerations shaping Morocco's migration policy, but ultimately I had no real access to the internal deliberations and thoughts of decision-makers. This paper's heavy reliance on official statements by relevant institutions presents another weakness, as those can also be strategic, or polished in the way diplomatic or public-facing discourse often is, and may not fully reflect the true motivations behind policy decisions. As discussed in the Methods and Methodology section, interviewing a handful of academics was also limiting because they could themselves only speculate as to what domestic and international factors were most determining.

In addition to conducting interviews and reviewing high-level government discourse, I closely analyzed the timeline of developments in Morocco-EU relations. I used temporal correlations between different events, such as Morocco's allowance of mass crossings at the Ceuta border in 2021, and Spain's subsequent letter of support for Morocco's Western Sahara Autonomy Plan, or Morocco's New Migration Plan and its acceptance to the AU, to draw conclusions about the efficiency of rentierism and role-playing. And while some of these connections were made explicit – like EU recognition of Morocco's leading role in the Rabat Process as rationale for granting Advanced Status – others were not. Some of the correlations observed by myself and other scholars bordered on inferring causation. This was a major weakness that could potentially lead to the overinterpretation of data, but one that was somewhat unavoidable given our limited access to more probative information (i.e., interviews with decision-makers).

Like any theory-based research, mine was limited in the sense that it viewed evidence through specific and potentially narrow theoretical frameworks. In analyzing real-world events this way we run the risk of missing important aspects contributing to the complexity of those events. In focusing on only two theoretical concepts to describe Morocco's migration strategy, I restricted my research to an undoubtedly oversimplified understanding of it. Even my approach of using theory to explain real situations carried risk of misinterpretation. Theoretical models are abstract and never account for every variable or context that may influence a process or event. Reading another scholar's theory onto a set of events, as I do in this paper, can very well have led me to the wrong conclusions.

Recommendations for Further Study

Given more time to elaborate on my research, I would like to compare Morocco's migration diplomacy to that of other sending, transit, and destination countries. Some of the most probative scholarship I encountered compared Morocco's MMP to that of other countries – we can develop a better understanding of strategic diplomacy and its impacts on migrant populations by contextualizing Morocco's strategies and identifying common patterns and deviations.

To better understand Morocco's role-playing with Africa, we should pay close attention to the implications of its reorientation from the EU. Studies could analyze how this shift affects bilateral and multilateral relationships within Africa, and how it influences migration patterns, regional stability, and political cooperation. The responses of African nations to Morocco's strategies will provide a more comprehensive picture of Morocco's approach to new regional dynamics.

Strong evidence suggests that rentierism enables authoritarianism by providing regimes with substantial revenue and reducing their reliance on taxation and accountability to citizens, allowing them to maintain power through patronage and coercion. It would be interesting to investigate how this dynamic plays out in Morocco, and how this economic structure shapes Morocco's approach to both international cooperation *and* domestic governance.

This paper did not discuss Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency tasked with 'managing the EU's external borders and fighting cross-border crime.'⁷⁸ However, analyzing Frontex's involvement can shed light on the operational challenges and ethical

⁷⁸ Frontex. "Who We Are." *Tasks & Mission*, www.frontex.europa.eu/about-frontex/who-we-are/tasks-mission/#:~:text=Frontex%2C%20the%20European%20Bo%20rder%20and,fight%20against%20cross%2Dborder%20crime.

concerns related to human rights and migrant protection. This research could offer valuable perspectives on the effectiveness and consequences of EU-Morocco cooperation in migration management.

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