

KNOTS WITH MOROCCO (courtesy translation from

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The essence of a neighborhood, in particular the geographical vicinity of Spain and Morocco, is the fabric that forms in space and time. Fruitful personal, commercial, investment, cultural interlocking; exchange in its broadest and most fertile sense. Also geopolitical tensions. Ties and knots. What we see these days from both sides of the strait is a dangerous spiral of invective, threats and disqualifications that tighten the knots and weaken the ties.

The anchorage of Spain at the entry of the Mediterranean (like its mirror, Morocco) is not optional. Therefore, patriotic realism dictates clearing weeds and noise and even venturing ways to recover speed and cruising altitude for our relations. Thus, in the first place, it is necessary to do away with secondary considerations, some fundamental such as the Human Rights implications of the Tarajal images; others of political depth, such as the involvement and role of Algeria in the appearance of the leader of the Polisario Front (PF) in the European Union (EU). Ultimately, it emerges that the core of the crisis, and therefore its analysis, consists of two events: the presence of Brahim Ghali in Spain and the irruption, with acquiescence by the Moroccan authorities, of eight thousand undocumented immigrants in Ceuta. With three touchstones, three classic areas for analysis: bilateral, European and international or contextual.

Brahim Ghali's stay in a hospital in Spain since the end of April is presented by Madrid as a pure humanitarian act: welcoming a person with a serious medical condition. Pure moral reason claimed as determining factor. On the contrary, from Rabat, the political dimension of the act itself, the absence of communication as well as the "concealment" that surrounded the entire operation is emphasized: Brahim Ghali, head of the PF, arrived in an Algerian air force plane, carrying a diplomatic passport issued by that country. Let us retain that it was precisely Ghali who broke the ceasefire with Morocco backed by the UN since 1991 and resumed hostilities last November (see "Let's talk about the Sahara" published in El Mundo on 6/3/2021). At this point, it is worth underscoring that while all worthy politics must be morally grounded, encapsulating a political act in pure moral terms is a dead end.

The second moment of this crisis occurred on the night of Monday May 17 and throughout the 18, triggered by the avalanche of adults and children - mostly Moroccans - breaking through the Ceuta border, with the complicity of the Alawite authorities. Rabat claims the symbolic value of a response aimed at Madrid, a purely bilateral rejoinder to the reception of Ghali, and what the Kingdom considers to be an absence of a satisfactory response for a month on the part of the Government of Spain. Meanwhile, Madrid insists that it was the assault on an external border of the European Union; that therefore the act of hostility is not limited to Spain, that it affects the EU as a whole. In addition, Madrid stresses that the field of immigration has a marked European nature. Here it is necessary to emphasize that in international relations the intention proclaimed by Morocco to limit the action to Spain does not nullify the effects of the EU legislation, both primary (Treaty) and secondary (specific normative corpus). Objectively, it pertains to the scope of immigration, a matter that falls within the complex network of EU

policies. Unlike the previous major crisis - "Perejil" - in 2002 that occurred under a very different regulatory framework and the absence of community competencies.

Now the context: the question of Western Sahara (WS) as background of what happened. First, the positioning of the US. Much had been wagered, especially in European corridors, on the reversal by the 46th president (Joe Biden) of the recognition of the Moroccan sovereignty of the WS by his predecessor Donald Trump in December 2020. I did not nor do share this position (Ibid.). Explicitly, the White House has not spoken - neither has its Administration - but significantly, coinciding with this crisis there have been relevant signals. There is the "de-archiving" of the "Multilateral Joint Declaration between the United States, Morocco and Israel" (dated 12/22/2020, now accessible on the web). And the privileged relationship that Washington currently exhibits with Rabat: an example of this is the conversation between Secretary of State of the United States and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Morocco, tweeted by Blinken himself ... on May 18 ("I spoke with Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita about the importance of restoring calm in Israel, and the West Bank and Gaza to prevent further loss of life. Morocco is a strategic partner, and we will work together to end this conflict"). Another testimony is the map attached to the "country-sheet" corresponding to the Kingdom of Morocco, published by the CIA World Factbook. It is possible that when it pronounces itself in this regard, the Biden Administration introduces nuances. Yet, it seems unrealistic to expect something radically different.

The US foreign policy is currently focused on geographies far removed from the Mediterranean in general (see how Washington drags its feet in the Middle East) and the Maghreb in particular. And it addresses priorities around the Indo-Pacific. On the contrary, the EU has a vital and inevitable interest in the area, with the forcefulness provided by its geographical anchorage. A region whose extremes occupy, in the Straits of Gibraltar and the Dardanelles, two key neighbors with whom the bloc is experiencing moments of unprecedented tensions. Fundamentally, Turkey and Morocco are both the key to immigration, as well as being involved in sovereignty disputes entrenched in the UN - Cyprus and WS.

The EU, in the quest to define its "strategic autonomy," should recover the facilitation prototype led by the so-called EU3 (Germany, France and the United Kingdom, plus the structure of the EEAS) that was instrumental in unraveling another thorny issue stranded in the shallows of the Security Council: Iran, with the complexity of nuclear proliferation and multiple sanctions regimes. Isn't such an approach applicable here? With respect to WS, a reformulated EU3 (Germany, France and Spain) or EU4 (adding one of the Nordic members states) supported by the European institutions makes sense. What would surely fail is to hide and take refuge in the formal approach that this is a problem for the UN to tackle, pretending to contribute by investing in the futile quest of yet another "Special Envoy".

Spain has a qualified historical and moral responsibility. It cannot stand idly by but should instead throw its weight behind such an initiative that will contribute to its projection and heft, strengthening ties and undoing knots with Morocco. The EU cannot limit itself to being a passive observer while the issue of the WS continues to rot internally and begins to take its toll, deepening divisions and distances. It will gain in leadership and respect, as a multilateral actor and in its relations with Africa.

