

COMMENTARY**What Just Happened in Morocco, and Was It Weaponized Migration?****Rameez Abbas**, National Defense University, Ft. McNair, Washington, D.C., USA**ABSTRACT**

The July 2026 mass migration into Ceuta raised immediate questions about whether Morocco had once again weaponized migration against Spain. This commentary examines competing explanations for the crisis, including the organic spread of misinformation, decentralized social media coordination, and possible Moroccan facilitation. It argues that available evidence does not support the conclusion that Morocco deliberately orchestrated the flow for political purposes, despite the appearance of a coordinated campaign. The case highlights the challenges of attribution in irregular warfare, where indirect and asymmetric actions can exploit political and societal vulnerabilities while remaining below the threshold of armed conflict. It also demonstrates how decentralized networks can generate significant political effects without centralized direction and how other actors can subsequently exploit a migration crisis through information operations.

KEYWORDS

weaponized migration;
information
operations; strategic
coercion; Morocco

Introduction

Tens of thousands of migrants tried to swim into the Spanish enclave city of Ceuta on July 30 and July 31 this year. Ceuta is Spanish territory on Morocco's Mediterranean coastline,¹ and Moroccan security forces routinely cooperate with Spanish authorities to regulate movement and prevent asylum seekers from entering. The large number of people who traveled to the nearby Moroccan city of Fnideq and then attempted coordinated crossings into Ceuta from the sea overwhelmed both Moroccan and Spanish patrols. Spain estimated that approximately 72,000 people had entered Ceuta,² and approximately 90 migrants died,³ including those who drowned and those who were caught in a stampede.⁴

The sudden flow recalled an earlier incident in 2021, when approximately 12,000 people crossed into Ceuta over two days after Morocco relaxed its border controls in retaliation for Spain's decision to permit Brahim Ghali to seek medical care in the country. Ghali is the leader of the Algeria-based Polisario Front, the main opponent of Morocco's territorial claim in the Western Sahara.⁵ At that time, a Moroccan minister explicitly linked the decision to allow

CONTACT Rameez Abbas | Rameez.Abbas.civ@ndu.edu

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migrants to cross to Ghali's hospitalization in Spain, writing in a Facebook post, "What did Spain expect from Morocco, which sees its neighbor hosting the head of a group that took up arms against the kingdom?"⁶

That episode was a case of *weaponized migration*: the deliberate use of migration flows as instruments to coerce, punish, or otherwise harm a target.⁷ Other prominent recent episodes include Russia's 2023 mobilization of migrants toward the Finnish border;⁸ Belarus's 2021 mobilization of Middle Eastern and African migrants toward the Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian borders;⁹ and Turkey's February 2020 decision to stop enforcing its 2016 migration deal with the EU by busing thousands of migrants to the Greek border.¹⁰

More broadly, weaponization is the purposeful conversion of something that is not inherently designed for harm into an instrument of coercion, punishment, or other harm. Some attempts to weaponize migration aim to coerce a target government into a concession by creating or threatening a border crisis. The action aims to create political dilemmas for democratic governments whose legitimacy depends on both upholding human rights and being responsive to public demands to regulate or restrict migration. By threatening or sending a large group of migrants to a border, the weaponizer calculates that the target would rather offer a concession than face this dilemma.¹¹ In these ways, the weaponization of migration is a form of irregular warfare. It is indirect and asymmetric, allowing less-powerful actors to impose costs on their targets while staying below the threshold of a violent or punitive response.¹² It also exploits political and societal vulnerabilities in the target country to create strategic effects without the use of conventional military force. Beyond particular population movements, longer-term information campaigns seek to use migration-related narratives to erode the target government's legitimacy over time. This is most evident in Russia's dissemination of negative narratives about migration in EU countries, attempting to convince EU populations that the union cannot keep Europe safe from migration.

Given Morocco's recent history of weaponizing migration, observers have speculated about whether the Ceuta crossings were deliberately orchestrated. This article argues that, so far, neither the evidence nor the strategic logic strongly supports the idea that it was the policy of the Moroccan government to orchestrate or encourage the flows. Since the past decade has seen multiple recent and high-profile attempts to manufacture migration flows to punish or destabilize European countries, the tendency among policymakers and analysts to question the motivation behind mass migration events is warranted. Nevertheless, evidence must be assembled carefully for each alleged incident, and it is too early to make definitive claims about this episode.

The discussion below explains what is known about how the crisis unfolded, then weighs the main plausible explanations for why it happened. I first assess (and dismiss) the idea that the migrant surge resulted from an organic snowballing of social media misinformation. I then examine the evidence from a detailed Spanish report that the surge was the result of purposeful disinformation and coordination campaigns designed to manufacture a mass crossing, albeit without a single central actor encouraging the effort for a strategic purpose. Lastly, I examine the possibility that Morocco facilitated the flow, explaining the possible strategic logic, reviewing counterarguments, and emphasizing the lack of evidence for such an assertion so far. To close, the article reflects on the effects of the Ceuta episode on EU politics and cohesion.

Explanation #1: An organic spread of misinformation on social media

The first explanation for the migration flow into Ceuta is that a legal ruling in Spain was misconstrued and amplified through social media over time, spreading a rumor that reached millions. This rumor either spread organically or was cultivated by organized criminal networks. The tens of thousands who ultimately attempted the crossing overwhelmed a migration system that was already under strain.

On June 29, 2026, the Spanish Supreme Court ruled that Spain's quick handover of migrants to Moroccan authorities without a formal process could not be applied to people intercepted at sea trying to reach Ceuta. It could only apply to those who crossed a physical barrier such as a border fence. The judgment became public on July 8, and experts characterized it as a technical and limited clarification of existing policy rather than a sweeping ruling about migrant rights.¹³ However, posts on social media soon suggested that Spain's border with Morocco was open.¹⁴ There was already increasing movement from Morocco to Ceuta, with arrivals significantly higher than 2025 levels. There were 2,582 recorded land crossings in the first half of 2026, compared with 978 for the same period in 2025,¹⁵ perhaps indicating increased demand for pathways into Spain and therefore making people more receptive to misinformation.

Social media posts also took advantage of an unrelated Spanish policy change. In February 2026, Spain's government had approved a royal decree opening a one-time path to legal residency for undocumented migrants already in the country, provided they could show five months' residence before the end of 2025. More than a million people applied before the program's June 30 deadline, and by the beginning of July, Spain had issued temporary work permits to more than 600,000 applicants whose cases were under review.¹⁶ This regularization program excluded anyone who entered after 2025, but its large scale helped advance rumors about new access for potential migrants.

After the Supreme Court ruling, initial Instagram posts claimed the border was opening, and Facebook posts and TikTok videos tracked coast guard patrols and showed people where to swim.¹⁷ One Moroccan teenager told Reuters that Instagram videos convinced him and his cousin to attempt the crossing. And a Moroccan human-rights activist told the AP that social media posts first falsely claimed the border was fully open, then circulated misleading information about the Supreme Court's ruling.¹⁸ An Al Jazeera analysis concluded that "For the most part, the channels do not appear to have specific, organized links to each other. Combined, however, they snowballed into a movement of people."¹⁹

Morocco's interior ministry spokesman, Rachid El Khalfi, attributed the surge to trafficking networks and a distorted view of Spanish legal and administrative developments. Spanish officials likewise said that organized criminal groups disseminated these narratives and organized the flows. However, the Associated Press (AP) interviewed returning Moroccan migrants who rejected that explanation by claiming they did not pay any smuggling operations for their attempted crossings.²⁰

Explanation #2: Purposeful coordination and disinformation, but no centralized control or central actor

A second explanation is that the mass movement into Ceuta was planned but was not a centralized effort by a single command structure. This idea is advanced in an intelligence report by analyst José María Gil Garre of Spain's International Security Observatory (OISCOT), which documents the details of the social media campaign.²¹ While several press accounts briefly reference the report, a more detailed understanding of its findings is still absent from

the public conversation and speculation about the Ceuta episode. The report argues that the analysis of social media activity finds no single clearly identifiable center of direction,²² and that there is no evidence that *any* actor—state, intelligence service, criminal network, or otherwise—was behind the information campaign as a whole.²³ Nevertheless, the report identifies a handful of accounts that led the coordination and execution of the mass migration event. Therefore, this section addresses a puzzle raised by this report: how do we interpret an information environment that appears coordinated enough to create a migration flow that looks “weaponized,” but without any single actor directing the movement of people?

The social media environment leading up to the surge of people trying to enter Ceuta included several accounts that led the effort to advertise that the border was opening, and others that coordinated the movement. The online activity unfolded very quickly. Gil Garre contends that an initial phase began after the Supreme Court ruling became public on July 8, characterized by the purposefully simplified claim that anyone who entered by sea could no longer be sent back. Other common narratives included the physical ease of crossing the border and a sense of urgency about a closing window. Such narratives were then amplified through an increased volume of posts and the involvement of profiles with wide reach. In particular, Gil Garre identifies a Moroccan TikTok account @haragaa_ceuta1 as one of the primary disseminators and argues that this account was part of an ecosystem of hundreds of ephemeral profiles that were created in order to redistribute content and mitigate the impact of digital policing and account closures. Likewise, another profile called Haraga El Ghorba (@haragama00) shared videos that received nearly seven million views, incorporating messages aimed at potential migrants and making the account a key reference for those considering the journey.²⁴

After this initial phase, the report argues, information coordinating the logistics of movement began to appear, such as schedules, meeting points, and route information. Next, a mobilization phase was characterized by the movement of people toward the main staging area in Fnideq, prior to the attempt to enter Ceuta.²⁵ Gil Garre documents two public WhatsApp groups administered from Algerian phone numbers, both appearing in the final week before the main surge of migrants. The first, “Hijma Kriyaj Sebta,”²⁶ appeared on July 28 with about 2,300 members and had logistical content like assembly times, meeting points, and encouragement not to turn back. The second, “Hijma,” appeared on July 31 with about 1,480 members and pivoted coordination toward the second Spanish enclave of Melilla once Ceuta's border tightened. Both groups had members from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.

Even while identifying major accounts and offering screenshots and quotes from their posts, the report caveats:

The investigation has not identified the administrator's identity, has been unable to determine whether the number was used by a single person or multiple operators, lacks evidence linking the group to a specific organization, and—based on available evidence—does not substantiate the existence of state involvement or a higher-level hierarchical structure. These questions remain open and require investigative actions beyond the scope of open-source intelligence.²⁷

The explanation the report does offer is that social media activists became more sophisticated over time, learning lessons from a September 2024 attempted migration into Ceuta. In 2024, Moroccan authorities successfully disrupted the crowds that were gathering and bused them out of Fnideq.²⁸ They also announced the arrest of at least sixty people on suspicion

of inciting the movement through social media.²⁹ Accordingly, some analysts note that Morocco has a proven capacity to prevent the mobilization of migrants. However, Gil Garre argues that a major difference between the September 2024 incident and the July 2026 one was the sophisticated evolution of the social media-based tactics among the main accounts that coordinated and organized the flows. The 2026 mobilization phase relied on WhatsApp groups rather than searchable platforms such as Facebook, as had been the case in 2024. WhatsApp groups, even public ones, are not discoverable in the way that hashtags on Instagram, TikTok or Facebook groups can be found. They require an invitation to be forwarded. They also have the capability of using disappearing messages. In September 2024, hashtags like “15-9 Fnideq-Ceuta”³⁰ had advertised the intention to gather in Fnideq in advance, and were easily searchable, but in July 2026, the mobilization phase initiated later and through means of advertising that were less easily discoverable by journalists or security forces. This reduced ability to prepare for a gathering of migrants ahead of time may have contributed to the different nature of the state response.

The evidence presented in the Spanish intelligence report shows that certain social media campaigns had an outsized influence in disseminating narratives and coordinating movement, raising the question: what was their goal? If this were an instance of weaponized migration, we would expect to find an actor aiming to use migration for a political purpose. Such a purpose could be generating a crisis to try to undermine European unity as Russia has done in the past, or using migration to punish European countries for specific policies. But no evidence of a particular actor or motivation has surfaced, raising the alternative possibility that activist accounts that aim to facilitate migration—rather than a third party aiming to coerce or punish a target through migration—were central nodes in a social media network that purposefully facilitated the flows. Several of the most active social media accounts, including Haraga El Ghorba, predate the 2026 campaign and were already popular during a significant migrant mobilization in September 2024. In the Maghreb, *harraga* or “burners” is a term for people who try to leave the country in an irregular manner, nodding to the practice of burning or destroying identity documentation to avoid deportation if they manage to make it to Europe.³¹ *El ghorba* is an Arabic word evoking the experience of alienation and homesickness. The accounts cater to young people willing or forced to try leaving their home for a chance to make a living abroad. These two terms appear in account names and hashtags with migration content across the Maghreb and are markers of an online social movement of people who seek exit and exile as a path toward better livelihoods.

Explanation #3: Evidence for a possible Moroccan role

In the aftermath of the migration surge, political leaders and analysts alike have argued that Morocco either orchestrated the migration flow or allowed it to proceed in order to punish Spain for its diplomatic opening to Algeria. The background is that in 2022, Spain reversed its longstanding neutral stance on the territorial dispute between Algeria and Morocco over Western Sahara and backed Morocco's autonomy plan for the territory, thereby severely degrading diplomatic relations with Algeria. Normalization began when a new Algerian ambassador to Spain was appointed in late 2023 and continued when Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares' visit to Algiers reactivated the two countries' friendship treaty. Then, on July 20, 2026, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez traveled to Algiers and met President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, agreeing to increase gas imports from Algeria, as well as deepen other non-energy trade and investment.³² Spain's position on the disputed territory itself did not

change, but the timing of Sánchez's visit to Algeria, ten days before the migration event, raised speculation about a Moroccan motive.

Additionally, European leaders quickly embraced a weaponization narrative. Ceuta's president, Juan Jesús Vivas, accused Morocco of encouraging and permitting the flow of migrants. Twenty-two EU heads of state and government signed a letter to EU leaders saying "We cannot allow uncontrolled mass crossings, the instrumentalization of migration or other hybrid threats to create the perception that illegal entry into the European Union is possible."³³ And Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez called the event "a violation of Spain's territorial integrity,"³⁴ raising the question, perhaps inadvertently, of the actor at fault. However, later Spanish statements expressed confidence in Morocco as a security partner.

Media sources and analysts have likewise speculated on a Moroccan role. Gemma Pinyol-Jiménez, a migration policy researcher at Pompeu Fabra University, argued that movements of this scale do not happen without at least passive collaboration from Moroccan authorities. International Crisis Group's Riccardo Fabbiani's assessment was cautious about implicating the Moroccan government but noted the presence of "videos circulating online showing trucks full of people unloading them in front of, you know, complicit Moroccan police forces."³⁵ Indeed, multiple news sources have shared videos or eyewitness testimony of Moroccan police allowing migrants to pass. For example, the New York Times reported accounts from several young Moroccan men who said police officers directed them toward the crossing point rather than stopping them, and one said that officers told his group to keep going.

The main alternative explanation for the behavior of security forces is that, for the reasons explained in the previous section, Morocco was unable to detect the planned gatherings in time or could not act fast enough once the crowd swelled to a certain size. Indeed, Gil Garre writes that in the days leading up to the mobilization, Moroccan authorities had increased surveillance and disruption efforts of the digital spaces used during the campaign.³⁶ Despite this, the sophistication of the coordination and the considerable evolution in tactics from lessons learned during the 2024 attempt frustrated efforts to prevent thousands from gathering. Additionally, since the numbers were so different, with hundreds of people gathering in the 2024 campaign in contrast to tens of thousands in 2026, another possible explanation for the behavior of some Moroccan security forces is that dispersing such a crowd would require a level of force against Morocco's own citizens that officials were not willing to undertake. Still, press reports indicate that Morocco did deploy both troops and water cannons to push back on the crowds that approached the border, and that security forces were soon overwhelmed by the numbers.³⁷

Finally, the strategic logic for a possible weaponization-of-migration attempt by Morocco is uncertain. The Morocco-Spain relationship is complex, but one of the main points of tension in recent years was largely resolved in 2022 when Spain endorsed Morocco's autonomy plan for Western Sahara. The Sánchez government did not reverse course on this decision during the prime minister's July 2026 visit to Algiers.³⁸ Additionally, the normalization of Spain-Algeria relations has been proceeding for nearly three years, during which Morocco has disrupted multiple migration events and policed Spanish borders. One caveat, though, is that perhaps a prime-ministerial-level visit or the expanded energy trade signaled a different level of threat to Morocco than the prior initiatives between Spain and Algeria. Still, I did not find evidence of an official protest by Morocco that expressed displeasure at Sánchez's visit to Algiers or new trade deals. The 2021 weaponization attempt, by contrast, included public rebukes designed to advertise that Spain should not take Morocco for granted as a strategic partner. Another point of tension in the Morocco-Spain relationship is what Morocco considers the Spanish colonial occupation of Ceuta and Melilla, but this dispute has long existed while

the two countries maintain an extensive trade relationship and cooperate closely on migration and security. Finally, July 30 was Throne Day in Morocco, which commemorates King Mohammed VI's ascension to the throne. Analysts have noted that this public holiday would be a puzzling time for the kingdom to highlight internationally the disaffection and lack of opportunity that drives Moroccan youth to attempt dangerous ways into Europe. In sum, the balance of evidence does not support the theory of a single actor conspiring to create a mass migration, nor of the Moroccan government's intention to allow it to proceed.

Implications for Europe: Weaponization After All

The mass movement into Ceuta produced alarm among European countries and threatened one of the key pillars of EU unity, free movement. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen of Denmark called for the EU to consider a suspension of Schengen cooperation, and the Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš called for the temporary suspension of Spain's Schengen membership.³⁹ Italy went further, imposing Schengen border controls with Spain for one month, while Finland's Interior Minister said Italy's measures should be supported and that Finland was also considering adopting the same approach. Prime Minister Sánchez said that such moves were informed by "prejudice, fake news, ignorance, and political interest."⁴⁰ On August 7, Spain threatened to impose reciprocal restrictions on Italy unless the border controls were lifted.⁴¹ These statements and policies were particularly significant since free movement, as institutionalized in the Schengen Zone, is one of the cornerstones of European integration.

On August 1, twenty-two of the EU's governments sent a letter demanding an emergency meeting of interior ministers. Some tensions had lowered by the time the interior ministers met. At a press conference after the meeting, Migration Commissioner Magnus Brunner said: "There was full solidarity with Spain around the table."⁴² The council statement noted that during the meeting, "There was a common understanding of the need to continue relentlessly fighting migrant smuggling networks, to reinforce returns, to strengthen EU borders, to build deep partnerships with third countries, and to improve foresight."⁴³ Brunner also criticized Spain's earlier decision to regularize migrants. Brunner said about the policy: "It's not a good signal, definitely not a good signal for the rest of Europe."⁴⁴ Overall though, Spain's interior minister, Fernando Grande-Marlaska, called the meeting constructive.⁴⁵

Regardless of who was behind the migration attempt into Ceuta and their goal, one lasting effect is the opportunity it created for the weaponization of migration narratives. The Guardian reported that accounts with links to the Russian military reached more than 500,000 people after the Ceuta events.⁴⁶ And Ukraine's foreign minister said that a pro-Russian media network led by *Pravda* and *RT* produced more than 1,500 publications about the events, including 300 published by the Spanish-language version of *Pravda*.⁴⁷ Russia routinely disseminates migration narratives in European media that target the cohesion of the European Union. This is different from deliberately creating or facilitating a migration flow, but it shows how an existing crisis can still be used for political purposes. It takes advantage of a migration flow for a political goal, namely undermining European publics' confidence in the ability of the EU to manage migration. It is also one sign that conditions are getting worse in receiving countries for migrants and refugees around the world.

Endnotes

¹ Morocco does not recognize Spanish sovereignty in Ceuta or Melilla, the other Spanish enclave, and calls both territories occupied, but cooperates with Spain in preventing asylum seekers from reaching these areas.

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²² Gil Garre, “Campaña Digital de Movilización,” sec. 10.

²³ Gil Garre, sec. 11.3.

²⁴ Gil Garre, 12.

²⁵ Gil Garre, 16–17.

²⁶ سبنة كرياج هجمة in the Moroccan dialect of Arabic. Sebta is Ceuta, kriyay means fence or barrier, and hijma is a rush or assault, so the meaning is roughly “a mass rush at the Ceuta border fence.” Interpreted by author using ChatGPT.

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