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From Border Management to Geopolitical Leverage: The Limits of Europe's Migration Partnerships

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On July 30th, 2026, the border between Morocco and the Spain-administered, North African city of Ceuta experienced a complete collapse. Over 50,000 people crossed within 24 hours, swimming roughly a 5km stretch from the Moroccan town of Fnideq hoping to reach Ceuta. The death toll exceeded [100](#) people, and more than 48,000 people were sent back to Morocco within 48 hours. Spain declared state of emergency and deployed the army to back the Guardia Civil, installing a 500m floating [barrier](#) off the coast within days.

Ceuta does not signify a failure of the Spanish border; instead, it highlights a structural issue: the EU's management of its external migration relationships through selective and inadequately compensated partnerships is leading to internal discord regarding responses. Moreover, the unresolved dynamics of migration as leverage will influence decisions that extend beyond this crisis — including, unexpectedly, its negotiations with the Gulf.

EU Institutional Story: Every State for Itself

Spain's migration narrative in 2026 has two intersecting chronologies. Madrid issued a mass [regularization decree](#) in January, with the intention of benefiting approximately 500,000 undocumented migrants. By mid-year, [applications](#) had surpassed a million, prompting sharp criticism from Brussels and other EU capitals even before the summer crisis began. The new migration wave's fallout moved fast, exposing pertinent EU internal vulnerabilities and fractured tendencies. [Italy](#) suspended Schengen travel with Spain for one month, and Italy's Minister of Foreign Affairs, [Antonio Tajani](#), wrote that Madrid's regularization decree was “profoundly wrong and encourages human trafficking.” [Manfred Weber](#), leader of the European Parliament's largest bloc, the European People's Party (EPP), described the Ceuta situation as the “direct consequence of the pull factor of massive regularisation.” [France](#), on the other hand, ordered extra checks along the French-Spanish border, deploying rapid border force to conduct deeper inspections.

The Spanish government of Pedro Sanchez, on the other hand, rejects the accusations that blame its mass regularization program, openly criticizing the “[selfish, polarising and unlawful](#)” reactions of EU member states. Sanchez noted that irregular migration into [Spain has been lower](#) than in Italy or Greece over the previous five years. According to the bloc's own border agency, the EU-wide irregular crossings were reportedly down by 37% in the first half of 2026 compared with the same period the year before.

Brussels, for its part, continued to struggle with occupying any clear ground between the existing positions. Twenty-two EU member states signed a joint letter demanding [coordinated action](#) on external border protection, while the Commission's own internal affairs intervention offered little beyond calls for calm. As such, the Ceuta episode revealed one of the bloc's core crisis management approaches: member states default to unilateral actions and public recriminations the moment a crisis arises, exposing how little consensus the bloc actually has on core issues like migration.



A [failed] instrument in place? The EU-Morocco migration partnership

Read against the backdrop of the bloc's broader migration policy system, the current episode sheds light on and raises concerns about the decade-old EU-Morocco migration partnership. Formalized through a [Joint Declaration on a Mobility Partnership](#) in June 2013, the partnership was framed around the [principle](#) of "Joint and responsible management of migration in the interests of the Union, its partners and migrants themselves." Since then, the Union has contributed significant resources, including over [€234 million](#) between 2015 and 2021, a further [€150 million](#) package in 2022, and around [€1.4 billion](#) in broader bilateral funds under the European Neighborhood Instrument between 2014 and 2020.

The partnership's structural rationale is straightforward: the EU offers financial support and diplomatic recognition, while Morocco agrees to manage its side of the border. Morocco has consistently argued that this exchange is insufficient on its own terms, with Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita stating in early August that Morocco is "[neither Europe's policeman nor its janitor](#)," arguing that EU funding covers only a fraction of the actual cost of sustained border enforcement and advocating for truly shared responsibility rather than a fee-for-service arrangement. This is a fundamental, long-standing concern, not a novel issue spawned by the Ceuta incident, as Rabat has advanced variations of this argument since at least the ratification of the 2013 framework.

Independent of the intent, the Ceuta episode illustrates a structural feature in the current migration partnership framework: an arrangement in which burden-sharing is unevenly distributed will always be susceptible to strain, regardless of which side is held accountable when that strain arises.

Instrumentalized Migration: A Chronic Pattern Facing the EU

Migration flows have previously been used as geopolitical leverage to undermine the bloc and its allies. For example, in 2021, [Belarus](#)'s Alexander Lukashenko openly stated his intentions to "flood the EU with migrants and drugs," in retaliation for the sanctions imposed after the country's disputed 2020 elections. Earlier in 2020, [Turkish](#) President Erdogan declared his country's borders with the bloc open, sending people toward the Greek border after accusing Brussels of violating the 2016 EU-Turkey migration agreement and demanding assistance for Turkey's military operations in Idlib. President Erdogan made the threat explicitly in [2016](#) as well, stating that "if you go any further, then the frontiers will be opened, bear that in mind," after the European Parliament backed freezing Turkey's accession talks.

Whether the July 2026 Ceuta collapse is a motif of the same pattern remains unresolved, but what is becoming harder to dispute is the wider pattern of migration as a recognized point of coercive leverage between the EU and states on its peripheries. This reality will now shape how every subsequent border crisis is read in Brussels, regardless of what actually caused it.

The GCC Question

The Ceuta episode holds various implications for the GCC. Only the UAE is currently visa-exempt, and the Commission in 2022 proposed adding [Kuwait and Qatar](#), with the Former Vice-President of the European Commission Josep Borrell setting the final objective as visa-free



access for all GCC states. As the EU-GCC continues to negotiate a Schengen visa waiver for GCC citizens, the current developments present a formal test of the Commission's own assessment criteria: migration risk, economic security, public policy and security, and the state of EU-GCC relations.

The unilateral suspension of agreements among Schengen system member states creates a troubling environment for the proposed expansion of visa-free access to six new countries, even if the Gulf's migration profile is distinctly different from that of the Mediterranean. The assessment of these two issues will not be based solely on their respective merits; Brussels, embroiled in internal EU conflicts over Ceuta, is unlikely to regard the GCC matter as separate from the political dynamics of the summer.

This dynamic is unlikely to improve anytime soon. In September 2026, Germany will hold state elections, with the AfD likely to consolidate on its victories in the Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate elections in March 2026. In France, the country is gradually moving toward the 2027 presidential contest, with the municipal elections held in March being a first indicator of the strength of the National Rally. In both cases, border security is emerging as a domestic contest. For the Gulf, the practical meaning is that European bandwidth and political appetite for external engagement, including with the GCC, will continue to decline rather than stabilize over the next 18 months.

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