

Challenging State-Centered Geopolitics with Migrant Narratives: Reflections on a Moroccan Conversation

Nizar Messari

Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane (AUI)

ABSTRACT

This contribution is the outcome of several conversations I personally had with migrants and refugees in Morocco. More often than not, the current discourse around migration is one of exclusion, painting migrants as inherent threats to the security, stability, economy, and culture of their host countries. While the Westphalian state seeks to further strengthen its borders against these migrants in the hopes of fulfilling its security obligations, the narratives shared by the interviewed migrants reveal that such a traditional understanding of international politics provides only a partial picture of the currents that are shaping world politics. In recognizing the voice, agency, and experiences of migrants, I posit a different understanding of space which is dynamically altered by human decisions and movements, and by the stories of these human agents: stories of hope, stories of suffering and hardship, and stories of resilience. In other words, while individuals and non-state organizations may be hindered by states and borders, these states and borders do not stop them from acting or moving around. Instead they are able to redefine and narrate space according to their needs and priorities, even amidst legal and security obstacles. My analysis of these migrant stories, situated in North Africa and the Sahel, therefore concludes that space *does* matter, though perhaps in a manner distinct from that defined by the traditional state.

KEY WORDS

Space, Geopolitics, Voice, North Africa and the Sahel, Borders/Migration

INTRODUCTION

Space matters. That is as far as I can agree with traditional, state-centered geopolitics. My objective here is to explore how space matters for different players – other than the state – of the political and security games in North Africa and the Sahel region through the context and medium of conversations I have had with migrants and refugees in Moroccan spaces.

The field of International Relations was dominated, until very recently, by globalization and its interpretation as the reduction of space and time. Recent debates and publications have shown a return of the importance of space in general, and of geopolitics in particular.¹ My argument here is slightly different from what the literature has been bringing back, as I affirm that the traditional Westphalian political and security space, i.e., the state, which frames our understanding of international politics, provides us with only a partial picture of the currents that are shaping world politics.

The traditional Westphalian, state centered, framework speaks of “disorder” and “power vacuums” when states are weak and unable to fulfill their security obligations (Rotberg 2004). However, in fact we can argue that there is no such a thing as a “power vacuum,” since someone, some group, will hold power if states cannot do so. Aside from the state, other actors are playing a key role in the increasing relevance of space.

In order to make this argument, I explore how space and power interact for different non-state actors – individuals, and more specifically migrants and refugees, as well as non-state organizations – and I also address the impact on states and supra-state actors. As I do so, I want to argue that states are not the only shapers of world politics. Instead, they have been very often reacting to the moves of other actors. As they do so, they contribute to the shaping and framing of world politics, but they are far from being the defining and determinant players in that game.

I develop these ideas in what has been referred to as the Global South, more specifically in North Africa and the Sahel. Traditionally, North Africa has been considered part of the MENA region, i.e. the Middle East *and* North Africa, whereas the Sahel is considered part of a different regional security complex. However, over the last few years, it has been increasingly the case that if scholars or policy makers want to understand what is taking place in North Africa in terms of security challenges, they should expand that “regional security framework” and include in it the Sahel. Consequently, groups like Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQMI as it is known under its French acronym, have spread havoc in Bamako (Mali), Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) and Grand Bassam (Côte d’Ivoire). This was also until very recently the case with ISIS, this is also the case with Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria, with Shabab in parts of Somalia, and with other groups in several other regions of the world. Space and power go together, and states holding power is only one rendition – certainly a dominant one – of that relationship.

I begin with a general background before exploring how space matters for non-state actors, and discussing how states in the region have been reacting to this before I draw some conclusions on what I term migrants’ “redefinitions” of space.

BACKGROUND: MIGRANTS’ BORDER CROSSING IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL – CONTEXTS AND STATE RESPONSES

The stories I present and expound upon need to be put within a broader context. This is the context of the fall of the Gadhafi² regime in Libya and its consequences on the whole region. But this is also the context of a violent radicalization that has been taking place in the region for far

¹ For a critical perspective on the return of geopolitics, see for instance the edited volume published by Stefano Guzzini (2012).

² I employ standard US transliterations of Arabic names throughout.

longer. I will start with the latter, in other words with the violent radicalization of the youth in the region.

Algeria

When, in January 1992, Algeria's military intervened and aborted the electoral process that was about to send the Islamic Salvation Front (or FIS according to its French acronym) into government, Algeria was thrown into a civil war that lasted a decade or so and during which it is estimated that between 300,000 to half a million people lost their lives (Willis 1999). These deaths were the result of the violent repression of Islamists by the regime as well as the violent reaction of these Islamists, such as the Armée Islamique du Salut or AIS, which became the military wing of the then outlawed FIS. The GIA, Groupe Islamique Armé, also born then, was one of the main and more violent Islamist groups of that period. After the end of the civil war and the defeat of the Islamists by the regime, the GIA was dissolved and some of its remnants and more radical former members created the GSPC, the French acronym of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat which, in its turn, declared allegiance to Ben Laden's Al Qaeda and renamed itself and was transformed into Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQMI according to its French acronym. It is this group and its associates and affiliates that took responsibility for the recent violent and bloody attacks against the Radisson Blue hotel in Bamako (Mali), Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) and Grand Bassam in Côte d'Ivoire, not to mention the multiple attacks in Algeria proper, such as the 2013 attack against the gas plant of Ain Amenas. In sum, a radical group, initially established in Algeria in order to tackle an Algerian situation, progressively adapted to new realities and adopted new targets and objectives. This means that radical groups are becoming not exclusively state based, but region based, and their aims are not state defined but regionally established. They are not restrained by the logic of the states and they deny this logic. These groups adapt to new situations and challenges, explore opportunities and establish new objectives.³

Libya and Mali

The fall of the Gadhafi regime had significant consequences not only in Libya, but also in many neighboring countries. The chaos that followed the fall of the regime resulted in a flow of weapons and money to many different groups. Some of these were criminal groups, while others had political objectives. Groups that existed before the end of the Gadhafi regime, but were relatively powerless, were fueled by the flow of money and weapons that came from Libya. AQMI, and later ISIS, even if in a far smaller proportion, took advantage of that new flow of money, weapons and manpower, as did other local groups in Mali such as Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés (Gatia) and Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad (MAA loyalists) among many others.

A caveat is important at this stage: Mali's internal situation was unstable before the fall of the Gadhafi regime and Tuareg groups were organized and rebelled also before the fall of the Gadhafi regime in Libya (Lounnas 2019). However, the fall of the Gadhafi regime provided a favorable environment for forces and causes that already existed in Mali to prosper, and allowed what were previously weak and powerless groups to act and cause heightened tensions in the country. In Mali, the beginning of the revolt against the central government, and the French military intervention that followed it, threw the country into a deeper level of instability, and although tensions and the instability have since diminished, Mali is still unstable and the central authorities still do not tightly control all of their territory. Moreover, this state is being challenged by a local group, Al Murabitun, which has recently joined forces with AQMI, signaling that the Jihadist groups of North Africa and the Sahel are far more integrated than the states where they act.

³ What applies in the North African context to AQMI applied until very recently – and may still apply – in the Middle Eastern context to ISIS. ISIS infiltrated Syria and Iraq, challenged both these states and other states, and also targeted states outside of the region in which it initially operated.

State Responses

In Mali as well as in Libya, Algeria and Morocco are fighting for influence. Instead of coordinating their efforts to fight what might be considered a common enemy, they compete with each other for who will hold more influence in both Mali and Libya. Although there are strong indications of close cooperation between Algerian and Moroccan intelligence agencies in fighting terrorist groups, at the same time – and this may sound contradictory – diplomats from both countries keep accusing each other of bad faith, and the land border between both is being reinforced by both countries with fences and trenches to make the crossing far more difficult, if not impossible. The dispute over the Western Sahara makes matters even more complex as both countries mistrust each other in this regard, and defend very different positions. As a matter of fact, Morocco, which controls the Western Sahara politically and militarily, claims its legitimate sovereignty on the territory based on historical reasons as well as on long existing tribal links (Cherkaoui 2008). Meanwhile, Algeria supports the independence movement in the Western Sahara, and provides it with refuge in the refugee camps in Tinduf, as well as with political support (Zoubir and Voman 1993). The dispute, which is considered as a fight between both countries for hegemony over the region, has hindered all attempts at establishing cooperation between both countries and in the wider region, and has mobilized the capabilities of both countries, and more acutely those of Morocco. The result of the dispute is that both countries mistrust each other, do not cooperate with each other, and ultimately, harm the potential of the region to establish a virtuous cycle of development, or to find positive outcomes for the stability of member states, such as in the case of Mali and Libya.

In the case of Morocco, migration and violent radical groups offer distinct and opposed alternatives. With migrants, Morocco finds itself playing the Gendarme (or Gatekeeper) of Europe, as it cooperates with the EU in general and Spain in particular in controlling the access of migrants to that country (Messari and Van der Klaauw 2010). Abuses of human rights, mistreatments, and other forms of violence form some of the tools used by Moroccan police forces to control migrants. The consequence is Morocco's poor reputation with the migrants and their families. In fighting violent radical groups, however, Morocco provides Mali, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire and others with police and intelligence support, as well as with training for their Imams (or religious leaders) in order to better train them and avoid youth radicalization through extremist discourse. In a way, this represents Morocco's use of soft power in West Africa. Moreover, Morocco is itself embroiled in a constant struggle to prevent a terrorist attack on its territory. Every few weeks, cells of would-be terrorists are dismantled, weapons are found and attacks are aborted (Messari & Van der Klaauw 2010). For how long this efficiency can be maintained is a pertinent question.

In this sense, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and the Sahel are reacting to developments and actions of migrants, violent extremist groups and other traffickers rather than establishing the agenda and leading the debate. The actions of individuals and groups of non-state actors in migration, terrorism and trafficking are shaping both debates and policies, and states are merely reacting the best way they can. When we talk to people and policy makers both in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, we hear the same reasoning: before the attacks against Ouagadougou and Grand Bassam, the question was not whether attacks would happen but where and when.⁴ This clearly illustrates how states are reacting more than shaping the framework within which actions are taken.

MIGRANTS CHALLENGING BORDER DIMENSIONS: MOROCCAN CASES

I begin this exploration of active migrant interaction with border spaces with two stories. These stories are not fictional. They are reports of what two individuals told me, real stories of real people.

⁴ See for example the interview of the President of Senegal, Macky Sall, in the French weekly magazine *L'Express*, in which he stated that no countries of the region were safe from an eventual terrorist attack (Sall, 2016).

Although one can legitimately question the authenticity of what these individuals told me, I choose these stories because they are similar to what many other migrants have told me and many others over the last few years. Methodologically, I take the lead from an approach David Campbell spelled out some years ago. In an analysis of the work of Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado, Campbell distinguished between the work of Salgado and that of other photographers on methodological grounds. Salgado approaches the subject of his photography on a personal basis, and humanizes him or her or them (Campbell 2003, p.74). The story and eventual tragedies of war and destruction that are reported by Salgado are told through narratives made by individuals and through individual stories. According to Campbell, subjects in Salgado's pictures are almost speaking to us because the photographer makes them speak and tell their stories (Campbell 2003, p.74). This is what pushed me to go and talk to migrants in the streets of Morocco, in their informal camps and in assistance centers in order to humanize them and listen to their stories.

The Minor

The first story is that of a young boy who presented himself as being 17 (i.e., a minor). He said that his village in Northern Nigeria was attacked by Boko Haram, and all of the members of his family had been killed. He joined one of the few older survivors from the village who told him that they should flee the region. The young man added that, later, the older man told him that they should seek refuge in Europe. They were undocumented but they went from one country to another, crossing all borders illegally of course, until they reached Morocco. When I talked to him in February 2016, he had been in Morocco for eight months, and in one of his attempts, with his protector from his village, to enter Melilla, a Spanish enclave in Northern Morocco, illegally, his protector managed to make it while he did not. He had since lost contact with his protector, and was on his own. He told me he was going to keep trying to cross the border and go to Europe until he would either succeed or die. Similar stories are told by different migrants in Morocco, although not all of them are from Nigeria, as some are from Mali, others from the Central African Republic, and others from Côte d'Ivoire, to give just a few examples of countries of origin.

“The Libyan”

Story number two is of an older man who looked to be in his forties, who was referred to as “the Libyan” by all of his companions, and whom I met in May 2014. The “Libyan” was originally from the Central African Republic, and he had been living as a guest worker in Gadhafi's Libya for a number of years. After the fall of the Gadhafi regime, he lost his job and his house, and he reached the conclusion that the best solution for him was to try to make it to Europe. I also want to note that he told me that before these incidents, he had had no desire to go to Europe, since he was able to support his family back home with his job in Libya. However, after the fall of the Gadhafi regime, which he supported, Europe became his only option. After trying and failing several times to cross to Lampedusa, he decided to try his chances from Morocco. I never saw him again. He may have made it to Europe, but he may equally be back in Libya or in another Moroccan town, or, worse, he may even be dead.

I could add many similar stories, from Senegal, Mali, or even more remote places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, not to mention, obviously, stories of refugees from Syria. What these stories tell us is that space matters to migrants, and, as Sarah C. Bishop writes, the stories that these migrants tell about space “hold the power to fashion the world around [them]” (2019, p.2). In other words, space matters for them *and* they have a significant impact on the space in which they find themselves.

Challenging Border Dimensions

I want to focus here on a particular dimension that these stories illustrate very well: the dimension of borders. In general, borders in North Africa and the Sahel are easy to cross, not only for migrants, but for many others. This is proven in the case of Morocco and Algeria, where the

Moroccan-Algerian land border is officially closed, and although visas are not required, Moroccans and Algerians need to fly from one country to the other. However, both Moroccan and Algerian authorities continuously accuse each other of not cracking down on smugglers. Algeria accuses Moroccans of smuggling out drugs in oil, which is heavily subsidized in Algeria, whereas Morocco accuses Algerians of smuggling goods to Morocco from Algeria.⁵ In sum, traffickers of all sorts – very likely including arms smugglers – manage to cross supposedly closed borders with ease.

In the case of migrants, borders do not protect individuals from external dangers and threats, and borders do not provide them with safe places in which they can construct their future as well as a family. The threat some of these individuals with whom I spoke were fleeing was an internal danger (be it in Northern Nigeria with Boko Haram, or in Côte d'Ivoire and in Mali with their respective civil wars, or even in the Central African Republic). The inside/outside dichotomy that is so central to the narrative of state sovereignty, with peace within and security without, does not hold for them.⁶

Moreover, borders are not a clear and stable division between us and them, safety and threat. Borders materialize under different shapes and forms, from the window at the EU consulate to the physical and impressive separation between Ceuta or Melilla on the one side and Morocco on the other. And borders keep moving: when the borders to Ceuta and Melilla and the Strait of Gibraltar and its surroundings became extremely difficult to cross, the Canary Islands became an option, and when crossing to the Canary Islands from Southern Morocco became difficult, Mauritania, Senegal and even Cape Verde became an alternative. More recently, Turkey and Libya became alternatives to enter Europe, although both options have been becoming increasingly less important, while Morocco's importance has been growing again as an important entry point to the EU (Frontex 2019). From the point of view of these migrants, it is in their own countries, on their side of the border, where the major threats reside, whereas on the other side resides the promise of opportunities for a better life. Crossing the ultimate border and reaching European territory is the final step towards reaching lasting safety.

Because of these reasons, borders do not stop migrants from moving. These individuals not only do not hold passports or even think about applying for a visa, they are also not intimidated by the existence of borders, visas and border patrols. They hitchhike, board buses when they can afford them (or are allowed to be in them, since in some countries, one needs an ID card to board a bus, which most of them do not have) or walk and keep walking, cross borders and follow their objectives.

Of course, there is a limit to this narrative of individuals not taking note of the existence of borders: all of those in Morocco I spoke with over the last couple of years feel “stuck” or even trapped in Morocco because the EU borders have eluded them. Nonetheless, they do not feel intimidated by these EU borders, and although several civil society organizations – and UN agencies – in Morocco offer the possibility to return home to those who want it, very few migrants resort to that alternative (for some, there is no “home” to return to; for others, would be a humiliating defeat; for others still, there is still the fear of letting their families down after so many sacrifices).⁷

This is despite the fact that these EU borders are where they get beaten up by the Moroccan police or the Spanish “Guardia Civil,” where they get badly hurt, where they lose their friends and protectors. Thus, for them, there are two kinds of borders: the regional borders that they cross fairly easily, and those that they fail to cross, for which the EU border is the major symbol.

⁵ See for example Lounnas and Messari (2018).

⁶ See Waltz (1979) for the articulation of the argument and Walker (1992) for its critique.

⁷ See the following section, “Giving voice to migrants is giving voice to the silenced”, for some of these voices.

GIVING VOICE TO MIGRANTS IS GIVING VOICE TO THE SILENCED

In the West, but also elsewhere, one aspect of the current debate about migration emphasizes the threat migrants represent to the security, stability, economy and culture of host countries (See for instance Buzan et. Al., 1998 and Bigo 2002). Threats are emphasized, and the necessity of protecting Europe or the US from being invaded by migrants – and sometimes, even refugees – is the priority. Discourses such as those of US and European leaders about the necessity of cracking down on migration, as well as maps, such as that of Frontex, the main European Union agency for border management, control and protection, which shows a Europe under siege by migrants and employs threatening multi-colored arrows showing the routes migrants take to reach European territory (Frontex 2019), are a good illustration of this turn of the debate. The voice heard in the debate is that of potential host countries, where those authorized to speak in the public sphere are “the governments and media that frame immigration for their audiences, rather than the [migrants] themselves” (Bishop 2019, p.5). The feeling of being invaded permeates the debate, and the necessity to protect those host countries from potential invasions provides the rationale behind the actions of the EU or US authorities.⁸

However, another narrative that allows us to look at our present in a more comprehensive way *is* possible. This is why I attempt here to give voice to the migrants and listen to them to try to understand why they engage in such dangerous journeys. In the conversations I have held with migrants over the years, I observe three types of narratives: stories of hope, stories of suffering and hardship, and stories of resilience. One single migrant can, in one conversation, present all these types of stories, but it is more often the case that different individuals present one or two types of these stories only.

Stories of Hope

Hope is one of the main incentives behind the decision to leave home and start a long journey to Europe. Migrants, who leave their families due to economic hardship, hope to reach Europe, find employment, earn a living, and be able to take care of their families back home. The example of boys being lured by human traffickers for the chance of gaining entry into prestigious European teams provides an interesting case here.⁹ These traffickers ask the families for money, which the families manage to assemble. Very often, families select the fittest among them, sell what they have and make other sacrifices in order to send their boys abroad. Moreover, on the way to Europe, these migrants sometimes receive more assistance from their families. Unsurprisingly, the boys are abandoned very early onto the journey, and often as soon as they have crossed the first or second border, in order to ensure that the boys will not be able to return home.

⁸ Although not framed in terms of migration, the Nineteenth Century case in both Africa and Asia, when European colonialism was translated, among other things, into wide population movements from Europe to the colonies, and to a far lesser extent, from the colonies to the lands of the colonizers, should be mentioned here. Although this type of migration was a privileged one, as European colonizers were met with very favorable conditions of integration, the individuals and their families created roots, brought habits and traditions, and learned other habits during their stay in the colonies. In a similar irony, in the case of the US, Bishop laments “[b]y what means do immigrant activists confront foundational notions that predispose many US citizens to believe that the United States is simultaneously a result of the labors and dreams of an ideal class of immigrants and the victim of a new class of unworthy and illegal job stealers who refuse to ‘get in line’ for citizenship?” (Bishop, 2019, p.5).

⁹ This is the group of teenage boys who were lured – jointly with their families – by human traffickers who told them that they were extremely talented football players, and offered to take them to prestigious European teams to train them and help them reach their full potential and eventually become professional football players. The narratives of these teenagers are all very similar and troubling, and it is difficult to be certain that they are not made up by the boys.

In all cases, however, and not just in this specific example of these boys, families are present in migrant narratives of hope, since very often, they have supported them – both financially and emotionally – in their migration. But it is not just financial hardship that appears as a push factor in narrative of hope, there are also migrants who have fled their countries of origin fearing violent political or social repression and who simply hope to reach a safe place in which they would no longer be the target of organized violence. This group includes individuals who have fled political instability, individuals who have fled civil wars, and individuals who have fled violence perpetrated by non-state groups.

In these stories, hope is actualized when these migrants manage to settle in a place they never thought of as a country of residence, and I mean here Morocco. Morocco, which is still a significant migrant-sending country, has become over the years a transit country, and more recently, has also become a country of residence for some of these migrants. The securitization of migration was the main motivation behind the Moroccan law of 2003, which¹⁰ was the first explicit Moroccan legal text to deal directly with migrants and migration in the country. That law considered migrants as an eminent security threat and equipped Moroccan authorities with the necessary legal tools to expulse migrants from Morocco. However, progressive changes have taken place in Morocco since then, and the year 2011 can be considered a turning point to this extent.¹¹ The new Moroccan constitution allowed migrants legally resident in Morocco to vote in local elections, and in 2013, the Ministry of Moroccans Abroad had added to its duties the file of migration in Morocco (*MarocainsduMonde*). Policies have been put in place to smoothen the integration of migrants in Morocco, mainly in terms of access to education and health, and since 2014, there have been two campaigns of regularization of foreign migrants in Morocco (*MarocainsduMonde*). Yet there is still a lack of a systematic integration policy for migrants in Morocco, since Moroccan authorities situate their different initiatives within the prism of humanitarian obligations and solidarity rather than in terms of rights. On issues such as housing and job access, almost no progress has been made. Moreover, and despite all this evolution, the securitization approach remains strong: makeshift migration camps are periodically surrounded by police forces and migrants are isolated and their freedom of movement hindered. Very often, these police operations result in having the belongings of migrants – such as tents, blankets and clothes – burned (Bishop 2019).

Stories of Suffering and Hardship

The second category of stories brought up by migrants who leave their families and their countries of origin speaks of fleeing difficult conditions back home. Some of these conditions are related to economic hardship, whereas others are related to political instability and lack of security in the migrants' countries of origin. A few individual migrants give both types of stories as explanation and justification for their choice to migrate.

As for economic reasons, many different reasons push individuals to leave home. On the one hand, there is poverty and economic hardship and the resulting lack of job opportunities. On the other hand, droughts which are the result not only of natural environmental cycles, as shown by the UNDP report of 2009 (UNDP 2009), but also of man-made developments – including climate change – impact poor rural communities by changing their survival economies. Migrants are selected by their families in order to go to Europe, be employed, start to make a living, and then support their families back home. In stories told by migrants, this means that many sacrifices are made by the whole family to support them in this journey. According to them, their families mobilize all their savings in order to make the trip happen, and sometimes, these families seek loans in order to support the member who is leaving for Europe. Migrants insist that these are not

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of this law, refer to Messari and Van der Klaauw (2010).

¹¹ For more details about the evolution of Morocco's policies and challenges in dealing with migrants, refer to (Mouna et. al., 2017).

irrational moves since families estimate that they will be compensated for their sacrifices once the member of the family reaches Europe and starts working. This support is not limited to the initial moment of departure, as it is extended throughout the journey. Indeed, cellphones allow contact through text messages and banking allows relatively easy and fast money transfers from one country to the other. In other words, poor families become even poorer in the hope of allowing one of their members to reach a place where they would be able to find a job and start supporting – and paying back – their families.

It is important to note here that hardship is not limited to migrants' living conditions back home. During their journey, these migrants suffer from many different kinds of violence (from both the police and other migrants), from rape,¹² as well as from verbal and moral, rights-based abuse. Indeed, they lose any reference to a place they can call home, and live in makeshift shelters, vulnerable to weather conditions, without proper food or care. Racial discrimination, both by Moroccan police and by the people around them, adds to their hardship during their journey.¹³

Stories of Resilience

Because of all of this, these migrants usually show strong resilience and keep trying to cross to Europe and to not stay in Morocco or go back home. Morocco is not an option, not only because of racism and other forms of discrimination, but also because there are no jobs in Morocco, and because they often meet Moroccans who are also trying to cross to Europe. As for going back home, and despite the best attempts of international and local organizations to provide individuals with support to go back home, very few of them come to accept that as an option. After the sacrifices they and their families made, they feel that going back home empty handed is not an option. They feel that they would be humiliated because they have disappointed the hopes their families put in them. In their narratives, death would be preferable to giving up and that is what motivates them to keep hoping and keep trying.

Indeed, following Bishop and her recent work on undocumented storytellers, it is precisely in listening to these burgeoning voices of the silenced that their “disjointed, partial” stories are able to “open up a discursive space” that forces us, and other actors to think about how the on-the-ground realities of these migrants are “constituted, reified, and remembered” (Bishop 2019, p.2).

¹² A special category of migrants is women with babies, and in particular, babies who were born during the journey, very often as a result of unwanted sexual relations. These women very often find themselves in vulnerable positions in which sexual relations are forced upon them, both by fellow migrants and by locals, including those vested with legal authority, who are supposed to be protecting them. When these women realize they are pregnant and decide to keep the child, they find themselves in precarious conditions of pregnancy and eventually of motherhood. Because a pregnant woman is easily visible, human rights organizations very often manage to provide them with some support, but once the babies are born, these women find themselves left on their own. In their narratives, they usually mix sadness with hope. They remember the episodes of sexual violence with anxiety but they do not transfer those feelings to their babies. In their case, their hope is to be able to protect their babies and to provide them with a decent life. Although some of them have benefited from the two regularization campaigns organized by Moroccan authorities, many have not and are left on their own, begging for help in Moroccan streets. In interviews and meetings with illegal migrants in Morocco, it is constantly reported, and indeed equally possible to observe that the number of women migrants who have been giving birth during their journey to children conceived violently has been on the rise (as reported in a testimony by two of these mothers on March 2017, at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco).

¹³ The site of the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (or AMDH according to its French initials), the most independent and active human rights organization in Morocco, dedicates a special cover to human rights abuses against migrants in Morocco. See <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/country/Maroc/>

DIAGNOSING WITHOUT SILENCING THE OTHER (THE MIGRANT'S VOICE)

The voice of the state from the North is still the dominant one in the debate about migration. The securitization of migration and migrants results from actions and policies followed by the states from the North. However, states from the South are, in some aspects, not very different from those from the North: states from the South cooperate closely with states from the North to stop migration by accepting several coercive measures against migration, and by playing several roles in blocking migration (both national and international). States from the South also often consider migrants as a threat to their national security, although this aspect has evolved over the last few years. In sum, not all states act in the same way, but there are far more similarities between the states from the North and those from the South than there are differences.

To diagnose the present without giving voice to the silenced would be at best an incomplete diagnosis, and most likely an incorrect one. Migrants are among the many who are silenced, or at least, whose voices are not heard. As long as our sorrow when we learn about yet another capsized boat full of illegal migrants trying to desperately make it to Europe and the many resulting deaths does not result in the acceptance of another narrative about migration and migrating, the silencing of the voices of migrants will keep resonating as an unheard but very loud cry.

TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

I begin my concluding remarks with a paradox: migrants in makeshift camps in the outskirts of Moroccan cities very often regroup based on their national origin. According to them, this is due to a shared language, similar references, and compatible cultural and religious practices. Football, which is one of their main distractions, also reinforces their national belonging, as they cheer for their respective national teams in different football competitions. The more the state seems to be weak and un-representative of its people, the more it bounces back and affirms its importance on the small scale, the “mask of the border” as van Houtum (2011) terms it. But again, my purpose here was not to affirm that the state is disappearing, but rather to state that it is not necessarily in the driver's seat when it comes to issues of terrorism and migration in North Africa and the Sahel.

In this paper, I have shown that while individuals and non-state organizations may be hindered by states and borders, these very states and borders do not stop them from acting or moving around within their (narrated) parameters. They are able to redefine space according to their needs and to their priorities, “fashioning the world around them” in their stories, despite the fact that they sometimes stumble on some hard-to-overcome obstacles. Yet, even then, they do not stop, as the constant tragedies of border crossing in the Mediterranean show us, and the multiple terrorist attacks throughout the region re-affirm. In sum, space matters, but not necessarily in the way traditional geopolitics defines it.

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BIOGRAPHY

Nizar Messari is Vice President for Academic Affairs at Al Akhawayn University in Morocco. His areas of expertise and research are in International Relations Theory and Critical Security Studies. More recently, he has focused on the issue of migration, and has criticized the securitization of the topic. Nizar Messari has published in several journals, among which are *Security Dialogue*, *Cultures & Conflicts*, *Contexto Internacional* and *Refugee Survey Quarterly*. He is a member of the editorial board of several journals, which include *International Political Sociology* (IPS) and *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* (PARISS). He is also the co-author with João Pontes Nogueira of *Teoria das Relações Internacionais - Correntes e Debates* (Campus, Rio de Janeiro, 2005).