

# Political turmoil in Morocco spills over into tensions with the Netherlands

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*Morocco recalled its Ambassador to the Netherlands following a row over the extradition of a former Moroccan MP who has been linked to protests in the country. [Luigi Lonardo](#) explains the background to the incident and assesses what it might mean for Morocco's relationship with the European Union.*



The rapid Arab expansion that started in the seventh century heavily depended on one means of transportation: the camel. As Islamic Historian Adam Silverstein has [explained](#), the Arab conquest, which spanned from India to Spain in just a few centuries, only grinded to a halt where camels could not proceed: sea and mountains.

The mountainous region of the Rif, in the north of the Kingdom of Morocco, where people have a Berber language as their mother tongue, has therefore been a hot-bed of resistance for millennia. First to the *makhzen*, the government of the Sultan of Morocco; later to European protectorates; most recently, since October 2016, the movement of HIRAK Al Chaabi has resulted in prolonged protests over the economic condition of the region of the Rif, and against the corruption of government officials. Accused of being a [separatist](#) movement that undermines the security of the state, HIRAK has sparked a strong reaction from the government in Rabat. At the end of May 2017, the government [arrested](#) the leader of the protest, Nasser Zefzafi, together with as many as a hundred protesters.



**A Moroccan landscape. Credits: [Chante17](#) (CC BY-SA 4.0)**

It is against the backdrop of this political turmoil that Morocco has requested extradition of a Moroccan citizen accused of financing the protests in the Rif from his country of residence, the Netherlands. Reuters [confirms](#) that the man, who was not named in the statement [issued](#) by the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation on Saturday 24 June 2017, is Said Chaou, a former MP from the Rif region. According to the statement of the Foreign

Ministry, the man is subject to two arrest warrants accusing him of criminal association and international drug trafficking, issued by a Moroccan court in 2010 and 2015 – and he would also be implicated in ‘the financing and logistical support to certain militants in the north of Morocco’.

Morocco signified to the Netherlands that urgent measures were necessary against *ce trafiquant et mercenaire de l’agitation* (‘this dealer and mercenary of unrest’). Since Mr Chaou has not been extradited, Morocco has decided to recall its ambassador to the Netherlands for ‘immediate consultation’. In a joint statement, the Netherlands Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Security and Justice [dismissed](#) Morocco’s decision to recall its Ambassador as ‘inexplicable and unnecessary’.

## Strained relationships

Moroccan officials have been keen to emphasise that the country acts jointly with European partners to counter drug trafficking and terrorism, and therefore now expects cooperation from its European allies on this issue. Contacts between Rabat and Amsterdam over Chaou have been ongoing since April, and the decision to recall the ambassador reflected mounting displeasure with the actions of the Netherlands – even though, it seems, this was only a temporary measure (expressed in the diplomatic jargon as ‘recalled for consultations’).

However, this disagreement is only the latest episode in a small saga. Despite Morocco being the [greatest](#) recipient of funds from the EU, the relationship between the Kingdom and European countries has experienced turbulence in the recent past. In 2004, a Dutch-Moroccan shocked the Netherlands by killing the film director Theo van Gogh – in apparent retaliation for his film *Submission*, which criticised the treatment of women in Islam. Last year, Morocco [briefly severed](#) its diplomatic relations with the European Union after an EU court ruling annulled the EU-Morocco agricultural agreement in so far as it extended to the disputed territory of Western Sahara: Rabat was outraged that an EU court had found that Morocco could not speak for the territory.

## Repression at home?

Dutch officials refuse to comment on individual cases, and have done so with regard to this incident, aside from reaffirming their country’s commitment to further cooperation with Morocco ‘based on international legal frameworks and respect for the rule of law’. Therefore, at this stage, it is not possible to know for sure what motivated the decision to refuse the extradition of Mr Chaou. A major Moroccan newspaper, *TelQuel*, [reports](#) that a Moroccan official described the Netherlands’ behaviour as having the tones of ‘protection or proximity’ for someone who is accused of financing a movement that vindicates the Rif’s right to self-determination, and who, on the day before Morocco recalled its Ambassador, [posted](#) on Facebook a long video criticising the Moroccan authorities.

Even in the absence of any comments from European diplomats to counter the official Moroccan narrative, this episode is still likely to draw more international attention over the political unrest in the area of the Rif, and over how the Moroccan government is dealing with it. Amnesty International has already [warned](#) that the arrest of Hirak activists at the end of May lends itself to strong suspicions of being a repression against protesters demonstrating by peaceful means. It has reported with concern that some of those arrested present wounds and signs of beatings, and might be put on trial for ‘attacks against the security of the state’ even though they were demonstrating peacefully. They have also highlighted that Morocco is under the obligation to respect the freedoms of expression, of association, and the right to due legal processes.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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