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Sûreté Nationale (Morocco police) arrests government-critical journalist Hajar Raissouni in a gynaecological office in Rabat with her fiancé, as well as a gynaecologist, an anaesthetist and a nurse, over alleged illegal sexual relations resulting in pregnancy and illegal abortion. Interior minister Abdelouafi Laftit and his Spanish counterpart, Fernando Grande-Marlaska Gómez, pledge further cooperation to counter illegal migration networks, terrorism and organised crime. Banking rivals Attijariwafa Bank (ATW) and Banque Centrale Populaire (BCP) post impressive growth figures on 19 and 18 September respectively. Both banks have expanded their operations across the continent, and international ventures are soaring.

Government-critical journalist charged with illegal abortion

Sûreté Nationale (Morocco Police) arrested **Moroccan** journalist, **Hajar Raissouni**, on 31 August in a gynaecological office in **Rabat** with her fiancé, as well as a gynaecologist, an anaesthetist and a nurse over alleged illegal sexual relations resulting in pregnancy and illegal abortion.¹ The arrest and ensuing court case have sparked fierce criticism from a broad spectrum of Moroccan civil society and international human rights agencies, which accuse authorities of abusing the country's laws to target women and crack down on free speech. The **Court of First Instance in Rabat** on 23 September postponed Raissouni's trial to 30 September after several hours of hearings.

Raissouni was stopped outside a clinic in Rabat on 31 August by six plainclothes police officers who questioned her about whether she had undergone an abortion. She and her fiancé, professor **Rifaat al-Amin**, were detained along with the doctor accused of performing the procedure and two clinic staff members, who told investigators they had performed a routine medical procedure on Raissouni to remove a blood clot. She now faces two years in prison despite evidence reportedly showing that she has not undergone an abortion. The doctor accused of performing the abortion, **Mohammed Jamal Belkeziz**, faces up to a decade in prison.

Raissouni has been in custody since 31 August. The **Public Prosecutor** of the Rabat Court of First Instance on 5 September issued his first statement on the case, claiming that Raissouni was arrested for illegal abortion and that the arrest was not in connection with her journalism. On the same day, the court ruled against Raissouni's request for a temporary release pending trial.

Raissouni writes for one of the few independent media outlets in Morocco, the **Arabic**-speaking daily **Akhbar Al Yaoum**. In a statement written from prison, Raissouni said the charges were fabricated and motivated by her work supporting **Hirak Rif (The Rif Movement)**, a popular mass protest movement in the **Berber**-speaking Rif region in northern Morocco (see *ARC Briefing Morocco May & August 2019*). Raissouni recently conducted a set of interviews with the father of Hirak Rif activist **Nasser Zefzafi**, **Ahmed Zefzafi**. The newspaper's owner, **Taoufik Bouachrine**, was sentenced in November to 12 years in prison after being convicted of rape and other offences.

¹ Morocco World News, 9 Sep 2019

The case has divided public opinion in Morocco. While some expressed concerns about traditional **Fatiha** marriage², others expressed sympathy and denounced the campaign of defamation. Activists protested outside the tribunal in Rabat on 9 September in solidarity with Raissouni.³ Almost 500 Moroccan women signed a manifesto stating that they have broken their country's "unfair" laws punishing extramarital relations and abortions, which was published in Moroccan media outlets and appeared in **French** daily **Le Monde** on 24 September. Campaigners say the trial shows how far the country has to come in making progress on women's rights. They say that up to 800 abortions are performed daily in Morocco.

The penal code sanctions extramarital sex and abortion under **Articles 490-491** unless the life of the mother is in danger. Following **King Mohammed VI's** intervention, the government has adopted a law legalising abortion in cases of rape, incest or malformations and incurable diseases of the fetus, which is expected to be tabled in parliament for a vote in October.

United Kingdom-based **Amnesty International** issued a statement on 6 September condemning the arrest of Raissouni and called on Moroccan authorities to immediately release her.⁴ Amnesty International regional director for the **Middle East and North Africa Heba Morayefsaid** said,

*"The arrest of Hajar Raissouni and four others is completely unjust and these allegations are an outrageous invasion of her privacy...[it is a] stark reminder of the urgent need to repeal Morocco's laws criminalising sex outside marriage and abortion."*⁵

Building fences and bridges

Interior minister **Abdelouafi Laftit** and his **Spanish** counterpart **Fernando Grande-Marlaska Gómez** on 4 September pledged cooperation to counter illegal migration networks, terrorism and organised crime.⁶ Morocco's willingness to cooperate with the **European Union (EU)** in tackling the migrant crisis will help build important diplomatic relations with its continental neighbours, which, in turn, will lead to closer economic relations. Many EU members will condemn the laws and subsequent arrest and treatment of Hajar Raissouni (see above), making it even more important that Moroccan authorities deal aptly with the illegal migration issue.

Hundreds of thousands of migrants have attempted to cross the **Mediterranean Sea to Europe** from **North Africa** in recent years, but the flow is declining. Gómez said there has been a 45% drop in migrant arrivals in mainland Spain so far this year. The **Switzerland**-based intergovernmental **International Organisation for Migration** estimates that almost 15,000 people arrived in Spain by sea from January to August this year, compared to almost 30,000 in the same period last year. Moroccan government spokesman **Mustapha El Khalfi** said authorities have stopped 57,000 migrants from illegally crossing to Spain so far in 2019. Morocco's border control chief **Khalid Zerouali** said in May that the reduced number of illegal migrants to Spain this year was due to the government's crackdown on smuggling networks. Zerouali said Morocco has dismantled 50 migrant trafficking networks operating at the local and international levels so far this year, up 63% compared with a year earlier, and that authorities had also helped combat traffickers by imposing controls on the import and sale of navigation equipment. Zerouali denied reports that an agreement has been signed with Spain for Morocco to readmit migrants rescued at sea.

The route between Morocco and Spain has become one of the main illegal entry routes into Europe for migrants as pressure has been applied to close other routes from **Turkey to Greece**, and **Libya to**

² Fatiha marriage, a religious marriage ceremony conducted without a written contract, is still common in Morocco, especially in rural areas. This type of marriage does not guarantee any rights to the bride and is often used to circumvent the law and violate the provisions of Article 16 of the Family Code. See Morocco World News, 6 Sep 2019 for further information.

³ Morocco World News, 9 Sep 2019

⁴ Amnesty International, 6 Sep 2019

⁵ Amnesty International, 6 Sep 2019

⁶ Aljazeera, 4 Sep 2019

Italy. Zerouali said the authorities had prevented 25,000 illegal crossings so far this year, up 30% compared to the same period last year. Gómez said Spain would also cooperate with **West African** states such as **Senegal** and **Mauritania** to curb migrant flows.

The Spanish government in August approved €32.2m (\$35.45m) in aid to Morocco to counter illegal migration and the EU promised €140m (\$154.11m) in border management aid to help Morocco curb migration flows. Some €30m (\$33.02m) was disbursed earlier this year. Zerouali said half of that aid would come in the form of budget support and half in donated equipment. **United Nations** data shows irregular sea arrivals from the **Middle East** and North Africa to EU dropped from over 1 million in 2015 to some 141,500 people in 2018 while nearly 15,000 people are estimated to have died or gone missing crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

The Spanish national police corps, **Cuerpo Nacional de Policía (CNP)**, said on 30 August that over 150 migrants jumped over the border fence at Spain's North African enclave of **Ceuta** (Morocco) and briefly clashed with police.⁷ It was the largest breach of the fence since August 2018, in which 600 migrants attempted to jump the fence and 118 made it onto Spanish soil. Most were later returned to Morocco. The previous month, more than 400 crossed. The Spanish coastguard said on 28 August that 208 migrants were rescued as they attempted to make the crossing from North Africa to Spain.⁸

As Moroccan authorities ramp up efforts to curb flows of illegal migrants to Europe, they are also building bridges with some European states. Spanish interior minister Grande-Marlaska Gomez in July commended Morocco's efforts to combat illegal immigration and trafficking in human beings.⁹ He said he was "*particularly satisfied*" with the "*intense work developed with Morocco*". The EU is Morocco's largest trading partner, accounting for 59.4% of its trade in 2017. In the same year, 64.6% of Morocco's exports went to the EU and 56.5% of its imports came from the EU. Total trade in goods between the EU and Morocco in 2017 amounted to €37.4 billion (\$41.16 billion). It is imperative that Morocco maintains good relations with its primary trade partner.

Moroccan banks enjoy rewards of expansion in Africa

Banking rivals **Attijariwafa Bank (ATW)** and **Banque Centrale Populaire (BCP)** posted impressive growth figures on 19 and 18 September respectively.¹⁰ Both banks have expanded their operations across the continent and revenues from international ventures are soaring – indicating that investments are more than worth the risk.¹¹ Their success is helped by having one of the most highly developed banking sectors in Africa and because of the kingdom's ambition to expand its business links throughout the continent.

ATW reported on 19 September a 4.9% rise in first half net profit attributable to shareholders to 2.9 billion Moroccan dirhams (MAD) (\$303m), citing improved activity in its domestic and European branches.¹² The bank's net banking income rose 4.3% to MAD 11.8 billion (\$1.22 billion), while net operating income grew 6.7% to MAD 5.4 billion (\$557m). Loans rose 8.9% to MAD 317.6 billion (\$32.78 billion) with total deposits jumping to MAD 462.9 billion (\$47.78 billion) in the first six months from MAD 449 billion (\$46.35 billion) in the same period a year earlier. The bank is majority owned by the **Alaouite dynasty**, the Moroccan royal family, holding company **Al Mada**.

ATW has almost 10 million clients, employs over 20,000 people and operates in 25 countries in Africa, Europe and the **Gulf**. Between 2009 and 2017 the bank lifted its proportion of international sales from 15% to 33%. ATW made its largest acquisition in 2017 with the \$500m takeover of **United Kingdom**-headquartered **Barclays' Egyptian** unit, **Attijari Bank Egypt**. It is also considering purchases in **Rwanda**, **Kenya** and **Ethiopia**, among other countries.

⁷ Reuters, 30 Aug 2019

⁸ Reuters, 28 Aug 2019

⁹ The North Africa Post, 2 July 2019

¹⁰ Reuters, 19 Sep 2019 and Reuters, 18 Sep 2019

¹¹ FT, Jan 24 2019

¹² Reuters, 19 Sep 2019

BCP reported on 18 September a 5.5% increase in its first half net profit attributable to shareholders to MAD 1.64 billion (\$170m), citing improved margins.¹³ Net banking income rose 4.8% to MAD 8.78 billion (\$906m) over the same period. Total deposits rose to MAD 286 billion (\$29.52 billion) by June 2019 including an additional MAD 4 billion (\$413m) collected from individuals in Morocco and Moroccans living abroad. The bank's loans increased 1.2% to MAD 247 billion (\$25.49 billion). US-based **S&P Global Ratings** gives BCP a BB/B rating with a stable outlook.

BCP has 6.2 million clients in Morocco and branches in Africa, Europe and the Gulf. International revenues at BCP grew 800% between 2009 and 2017, from less than 3.6% of group sales to almost 20%. BCP sealed an acquisition of **Mauritius-based Banque des Mascareignes**, a subsidiary of France-based **Groupe BPCE**, in October 2018. The acquisition meant BCP become the first Moroccan bank to operate in Mauritius after receiving regulatory approvals. It is also in the process of buying another four businesses in **Cameroon, Madagascar, Tunisia** and the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**.

ATW and BCP provide Sharia-compliant finance, which made its debut in Morocco in 2017 when the government approved Islamic products and services in the banking sector (see *ARC Briefing Morocco July 2019*). The banks' ability to access the growing Sharia-compliant financial sector in Morocco and across the continent will improve attractiveness and increase revenue. Morocco is the most advanced country in North Africa in developing Islamic finance. The country currently allows five Islamic banks and three shop fronts to offer Sharia-compliant banking services in the country. While the sector is still growing, it now provides sharia-compliant financing for real estate, automobile and equipment purchases.

¹³ Reuters, 18 Sep 2019

Planner

Oct 2019 **(Morocco)** National congress of **Parti Authenticité et Modernité (PAM)**;

2019 **(Morocco)** Scheduled election of the president of the **Chambre des Représentants** (house of representatives, lower house of parliament);

2019 **(Morocco)** Energy and mining minister will introduce a roadmap for the energy sector;

2021 **Marrakech (Morocco) International Monetary Fund and World Bank** annual meetings to take place in Morocco;

2021 **(Morocco)** Scheduled legislative, regional and local elections;

Chronology

23 Sep 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Morocco World News*. The **Court of First Instance in Rabat** postpones an illegal abortion case against **Hajar Raissouni** to 30 September after several hours of hearings;

21 Sep 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Morocco World News*. **Sûreté Nationale** (Moroccan Police) announce they arrested two suspects in **Meknes** for financing terrorism and transferring funds to Moroccan fighters in **Syria** and **Iraq**;

20 Sep 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Brecorder*. The high commission for planning says that the consumer price index rose 0.8% year-on-year in August;

20 Sep 2019 **Johannesburg (South Africa)** *Ecofin Agency*. Morocco increased one rank to 2nd in **South Africa**-based **Rand Merchant Bank's Where to Invest in Africa 2020** annual report;

19 Sep 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Reuters*. **Attijariwafa Bank** reported a 4.9% rise in first-half net profit attributable to shareholders to MAD 2.9 billion (\$303m), citing improved activity in its domestic and **European** branches;

18 Sep 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Reuters*. **Banque Centrale Populaire** reported a 5.5% increase in its first-half net profit attributable to shareholders to MAD 1.64 billion (\$170m), citing improved margins;

18 Sep 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Xinhua*. The **Moroccan Tourism Observatory** says that 7.54m tourists visited the country between January and July this year, an 8.2% year-on-year increase;

18 Sep 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Logistics Update Africa*. **Switzerland**-based **Swissport International** wins a licence to provide ground services at 15 airports in **Morocco** for seven years;

11 Sep 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *DefenceWeb*. **United States' Defence Security Cooperation Agency** notifies congress of Morocco's request for the sale of ammunition and weapons worth nearly \$1 billion, including anti-tank missiles and armament for its **F-16 fighter**;

10 Sep 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Global Construction Review*. The government plans to build a new port in **Dakhla** with a budget of \$1 billion;

9 Sep 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Morocco World News*. Activists protest outside a **Rabat** tribunal in solidarity with journalist **Hajar Raissouni**, who faces trial on charges of abortion and sex outside marriage;

4 Sep 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Aljazeera*. Interior minister **Abdelouafi Laftit** and his **Spanish** counterpart **Fernando Grande-Marlaska Gómez** pledge cooperation to counter illegal migration networks, terrorism and organised crime;

31 Aug 2019 **Rabat (Morocco)** *Morocco World News*. **Sûreté nationale** (Morocco Police)

arrests journalist **Hajar Raissouni** in a gynaecological office in **Rabat** with her fiancée, as well as a gynaecologist, an anesthetist and a nurse over alleged illegal sexual relations resulting in pregnancy and illegal abortion;

30 Aug 2019 **San Roque (Spain)** *Reuters*. **Spanish** police say over 150 migrants crossed the border fence at Spain's **North African** enclave of **Ceuta** (Morocco) and briefly clashed with police;

28 Aug 2019 **Madrid (Spain)** *Reuters*. The Spanish coastguard says over 200 migrants were rescued as they attempted to make the crossing from **Africa to Spain**;

About Africa Risk Consulting:

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