# FAULT SLIP POTENTIAL NEAR THE DEADLY Mw6.8 AL HAOUZ, MOROCCO EARTHQUAKE

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# Abstract

Thousands were killed by the September 8, 2023, M<sub>w</sub>6.8 Al Haouz, Morocco earthquake in the Western High

Atlas. To identify the faults and fault orientations most likely to host aftershocks and future large earthquakes,

regional crustal stress is estimated from focal mechanism inversions, and the associated slip potential of known

and suspected active faults is modeled. North-south shortening is accommodated by a mix of reverse, obliquereverse, and strike-slip motion. As such, many fault orientations are well aligned for slip—steep NNE-, SSW-,

SE-, or NW-striking planes, gently (~15–50°) dipping east- and west-striking planes, and all orientations

between— and nearly all previously identified active faults have high slip potential. By contrast, steep E–W and

## Introduction

nearly all N-S faults may be relatively stable.

Following a major earthquake, quickly characterizing the regional crustal stress field can lend insight into the fault populations most likely to host aftershocks and future mainshocks. The 8 September 2023 M<sub>w</sub>6.8 Al Haouz, Morocco earthquake killed nearly 3,000 people in an area of the Western High Atlas (WHA) mountains (**Figure 1**) with sparse stress constraints. It is the deadliest in Morocco since the 1960 M5.9 in Agadir, 140 km southwest along the WHA. Here, the limited regional stress data—focal mechanisms from prior earthquakes in the WHA, central High Atlas (CHA) and High/Middle Atlas junction (HMAJ) area—are compiled and inverted to examine regional stress and associated fault slip potential.

Six moment tensors available for the Haouz mainshock (see Data and Resources) indicate reverse to reverse-oblique slip with median nodal plane strike/dip 255/70° and 125/30° (250–261/68–73° and 116–136/23–37°; dip directions are 90° clockwise of strike). Finite fault modeling finds better fit to InSAR and teleseismic

waveforms with the WSWstriking plane. Hypocentral depths range from 23 to 32 km across the seven models: the lower part of ≤40 km thick crust (e.g., Missenard et al., 2006).

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# **Setting**

Morocco lies at the western end of the Alpine-Himalayan orogen. The Rif Mountains in northern Morocco and Algeria absorb ~4.5 mm/yr of the NNW Africa-Eurasia oblique convergence, yet inherited faults in and lithospheric thinning beneath the Atlas system localize an additional 2 mm/yr of intraplate strain more than 500 km south of the plate boundary (Azzouzi

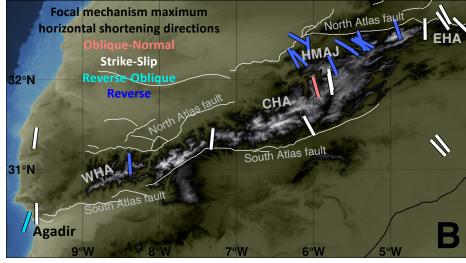


A) Overview of regional tectonics. White lines: Active faults (GEM database – Styron & Pagani, 2020; Sebrier et al., 2006). Green circles: Seismicity 1522-2005 (Peláez et al., 2007). White arrows: approximate Africa-Eurasia convergence direction. Orange box: area in Figure 1B. Focal mechanisms within the study region are shown as beachballs.

Figure 1:

horizontal shortening directions from 26 focal mechanisms, color-coded by faulting style (following Zoback, 1992). WHA: Western High Atlas. CHA: Central High Atlas. EHA: Eastern High Atlas. HMAJ: High/Middle Atlas Junction

B) Study area Maximum



et al., 2005; Serpelloni et al., 2022). Locally thinned to ~60 km, hot and low-viscosity lithospheric mantle beneath the High Atlas and Anti-Atlas (e.g., Miller and Becker, 2014) responds to far-field compression at a correspondingly high strain rate, focusing brittle shortening on pre-existing faults in the overlying crust (e.g., Missenard et al., 2006). Originally formed under Variscan compression or earlier and widely reactivated by Mesozoic rifting (e.g., as

reviewed by Fekkak et al., 2018), these faults control modern structure of the Atlas system as sets of double-vergent thrusts paralleling and bounding the ranges (e.g., Sebrier et al., 2006).

Spatial variations in inherited fault geometry may influence modern shortening directions and strain partitioning (Lanari et al., 2020). Range-bounding thrusts are nearly perpendicular to modern convergence in the HMAJ and oblique to convergence in the WHA (**Figure 1A**); deformation transitions from dominantly reverse faulting with a minor strike-slip component in the HMAJ (El Moudnib et al., 2023) to oblique faulting in the WHA (**Figure 1B**). An increasing contribution from sub-axial (ENE–WSW striking) strike-slip and oblique faults in the WHA accommodates this change: NW to NNW shortening is partitioned between dextral slip on these faults and reverse motion on the ~E–W striking range-bounding thrusts (Lanari et al., 2020).

The Al Haouz earthquake occurred ~20 km south of the south-dipping North Atlas fault and ~30 km north of the north-dipping South Atlas fault. Its nodal planes dip ~30° south and ~70° north. Projecting the trace of the North Atlas fault 20 km southward at 30° dip reaches only 12 km depth at the epicenter. Projecting the South Atlas fault 30 km northward at 70° dip exceeds 82 km depth at the epicenter. Thus, if the Al Haouz earthquake is attributable to either of the range-bounding thrusts, its dip must vary with depth; alternatively, slip may have occurred on a separate fault.

#### **Crustal Stress**

## Previous Work and Data

Medina (2008) compiled focal mechanisms for all of Morocco. Several earthquakes have moment tensors available from the global CMT project, GFZ-Geofon, USGS, and INGV. No in-situ data are available from the World Stress Map (Heidbach et al., 2016). Most recently, El Moudnib et al. (2023) derived 15 focal mechanisms near the HMAJ, which they combined with several others from the southern Middle Atlas, Eastern High Atlas (EHA), CHA, and areas to the southeast in a single stress inversion. The best-fit tensor favors nearly pure reverse faulting with N–S shortening (the  $A\phi$  parameter described below equals  $2.51\pm0.04$ , with  $S_{Hmax}$  N178E).

This study targets the WHA, some 300 km southwest of El Moudnib et al.'s focus, gathering all 26 focal mechanisms available from -12° to -4° longitude and 28° to 32.75° latitude (**Figure 1**)—no data were available

west of -10° or south of 30°. All 26 have NW- to N-trending maximum shortening directions (the P-axis for reverse to strike-slip events), broadly consistent with regional convergence.

Individual focal mechanisms are poor constraints on the local stress tensor (e.g., McKenzie, 1969), yet several coherent geographic patterns emerge:

- Strike-slip with north-trending P-axes (mean N6W, std 14°; n=9) in the WHA and CHA; the Al Haouz earthquake's reverse component is insignificantly greater than others' (mean rake 12°±30° above horizontal)
- 83 Reverse motions with NW-trending P-axes (mean N39W, std 21°; n=11) in the HMAJ area
- Six strike-slip in the EHA and areas south with mostly NW-trending P-axes.
- These patterns will be assessed more critically with formal stress inversions.

Stress Inversions - Approach

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Inversions of focal mechanisms for the normalized stress tensor are well established and stem from the axiom that coseismic slip parallels the shear traction on the fault plane (e.g., Angelier, 1979). The best-fit tensor minimizes angular misfits between shear and slip. The normalized stress tensor can be described by the directions of the principal stresses and ratio  $\phi$ :

$$\phi = (S_2 - S_3) / (S_1 - S_3) \tag{1}$$

where S<sub>1</sub>/S<sub>2</sub>/S<sub>3</sub> are the magnitudes of the maximum/intermediate/minimum stress. Simpson (1997) combined φ
 with the style of faulting—normal/strike-slip/reverse—defined by principal axis plunges (following Zoback,
 1992) to describe the style of deformation as a quantity AΦ:

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$$A\Phi = (n+0.5) + (-1)^n(\phi - 0.5)$$
 (2)

- with n=0/1/2 for normal/strike-slip/reverse faulting. Consequently, AΦ defines a continuum from radial extension
  (AΦ=0) to radial contraction (AΦ=3), passing through: normal faulting (AΦ=0.5); oblique extension (AΦ=1.0);
  strike-slip (AΦ=1.5); oblique shortening (AΦ=2.0), and reverse faulting (AΦ=2.5).
  - Here, inversions (following Levandowski et al., 2018a) assess uncertainty with 1001 Monte Carlo realizations. Each realization jackknife-resamples (discarding  $n_{\text{mechanisms}}^{0.5}$ ), randomly perturbs the individual slip vectors by  $\pm 15^{\circ}$ , and chooses a random coefficient of friction 0.3–0.9. The retained mechanisms are then

iteratively inverted (following Vavryčuk, 2014), selecting the less stable of the two nodal planes for each event with respect to the current estimate of the stress tensor, inverting these mechanisms for an updated stress estimate, and recomputing the stability of each plane, for 5 iterations for each of the 1001 realizations. Values given are the median  $\pm$  one standard deviation.

#### Stress Inversions - Results

The best-fit tensor for the 20 focal mechanisms from the WHA, CHA, and HMAJ area is characterized by oblique compression ( $A\Phi$ =2.12±0.11) oriented N3W±5° (**Figure 2A**). The ~20° difference between this trend and the NNW convergence direction may reflect the strain partitioning suggested by Lanari et al. (2020). Fit to the mechanisms is acceptable, with 24° average angular misfit between the shear traction on each respective focal plane and the slip vector on the iteratively selected focal plane. A value of 40–45° is often taken as a threshold for homogenous stress (Michael et al., 1990; Michael, 1991).

Including the additional six focal mechanisms from farther east changes results insignificantly (2.18±0.11, N10W±4°). To balance the need for sufficient focal mechanisms with sensitivity to stress local to the Houaz mainshock, these inversions weight the individual mechanisms by inverse distance. Furthermore, 7/15 of Moudnib et al.'s (2023) HMAJ mechanisms have rakes of exactly 90°, suggesting they are incompletely constrained (no uncertainties were given), and inverse-distance weighting reduces the influence of these comparatively distal events. Regardless, non-weighted inversions of the 20 WHA, CHA, and HMAJ mechanisms differ insignificantly (2.15±0.03, N15W±3°), while those including EHA data show a minor vertical axis rotation (2.12±0.04, N22W±2°).

# **Fault Slip Potential Modeling**

FSP modeling quantifies how well faults are oriented for frictional slip in the local stress field. From the 1001 normalized stress tensors, the relative stability of faults can be quantified as functions of orientation—in fact, the inversion algorithm uses normalized instability as the criterion for choosing between the focal and auxiliary planes (Vavryčuk, 2014). To estimate magnitudes of expected destabilizing perturbations, however,

1001 full stress tensors are calculated (following Walsh and Zoback, 2016; Levandowski et al., 2018b) at a nominal depth of 25 km, using each of the 1001 inversion outputs and its attendant friction, and sampling average overburden density and pore fluid pressure from uniform distributions 2650 to 2850 kg/m³ and -5 to +5 MPa from hydrostatic, respectively. Then, the shear and normal tractions are computed as functions of fault orientation (strike and dip). Finally, FSP is quantified from the distance from Coulomb failure (dCFS), or difference between shear traction and frictional resistance:

 $dCFS = friction \times |effective normal traction| - |shear traction|$  (3)

Because FSP under a given stress depends on fault strike and dip, it complements stress inversions, which treat strike and dip as fixed and minimize misfit to slip vectors (rake). This combination can help to determine focal and auxiliary planes or choose from multiple mechanisms for a single event (Levandowski et al., 2023).

For any set of parameters, only two or four fault orientations are optimal (dCFS=0): Examining the median FSP value for each fault orientation across the 1001 calculations, none might appear near failure.

Therefore, dCFS is given (**Figure 2B**) as the 90% confidence lower bound: in 10% of Monte Carlo trials, such an increase (or less) would trigger instability on the fault plane in question.

In cases of induced seismicity, similar calculations retrospectively find that most events have occurred on faults within ~2 MPa of failure at a nominal depth of 5 km (e.g., Walsh & Zoback, 2016), or ~0.4 MPa/km depth (FSP calculations are primarily sensitive to vertical stress gradients — e.g., Levandowski et al., 2018b). The 90% lower confidence bounds calculated here for the iteratively determined focal planes (black dots in **Figure 2B**) average 11.0 MPa at 25 km nominal depth: 0.44 MPa/km. By contrast, the auxiliary planes (gray dots) average 50.6 MPa, or 2.0 MPa/km.

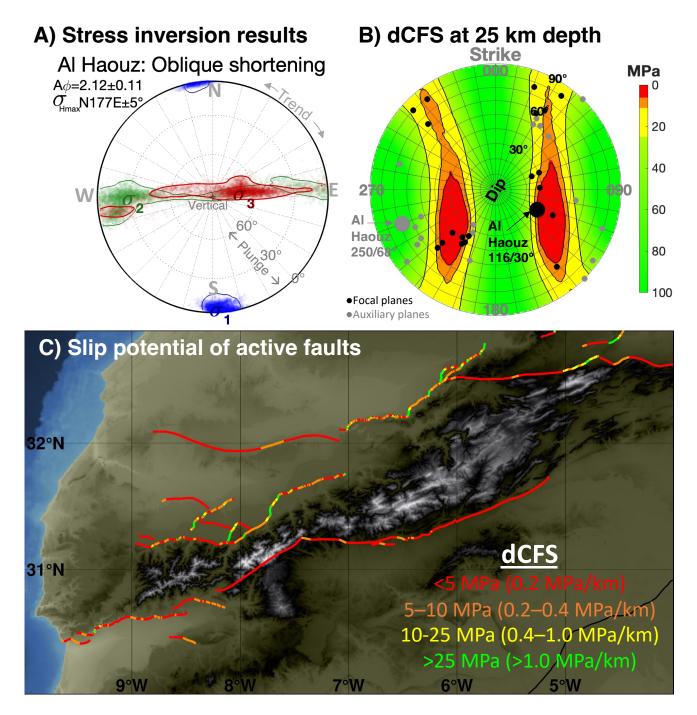


Figure 2: Stress and fault slip potential

**A)** Stress inversion results Lower hemisphere projection of principal stress axes from 1001 inversions of western High Atlas, central High Atlas, and High/Middle Atlas junction focal mechanisms. The maximum compressive stress (blue) trends

north/south and is sub-horizontal; the minimum (red) and intermediate (green) stresses are of comparable magnitude.

Azimuthal coordinate indicates axis trend; radial coordinate indicates axis plunge.

B) Fault slip potential as a function of fault orientation. Azimuthal coordinate indicates fault strike (as on a compass); radial coordinate indicates fault dip (analogous to axis plunge in lower hemisphere projections such as panel A). Values shown are the 90% confidence lower bound of dCFS. Orange and red contours encapsulate the orientations with dCFS≤10 MPa (0.4 MPa/km), which is a reference threshold for highly susceptible faults taken from induced seismicity (e.g., Walsh and Zoback, 2016). Steep NNE- or SSW-striking faults through gently dipping (~15–45°) E- or W-striking faults, back to steep SE- or NW-striking faults are all near optimal for slip. Black dots: Iteratively selected focal planes of western High Atlas, central High Atlas, and High/Middle Atlas junction mechanisms. Gray dots: Auxiliary planes. Large dots indicate Al Haouz nodal planes; the ESE-striking plane is well oriented for slip (dCFS=5.3 MPa) while the WSW-striking plane is not (dCFS=113 MPa).

**C) Slip potential of active faults** from GEM global database (Styron & Pagani, 2020) and Sebrier et al. (2006). Indicated as red and orange traces, most identified fault segments are within 10 MPa of failure at 25 km depth (0.4 MPa/km, which is a typical value for reactivated faults in induced seismicity settings – Walsh & Zoback, 2016).

170 Active Faults

In regions of mixed modes of faulting, many fault orientations may be suited for frictional slip (Levandowski et al., 2018b). In the WHA, ~N–S oblique shortening can be accomplished not only by strike slip on steep NE-, SW-, NNE- or SSW-striking fault or by reverse motion on ~15–45° dipping faults striking east/west but also by variably oblique slip on any orientation between (**Figure 2B**). Thus, high FSP (low dCFS) faults form two continua rather than two (reverse and normal) or four (strike-slip) isolated optimal orientations. This diversity notwithstanding, N–S faults of any dip and E–W faults steeper than ~55° appear unfavorable.

FSP is next mapped onto known and suspected active faults in the region (**Figure 2C**). The GEM global database (Styron & Pagani, 2020) specifies dip direction and a range of possible dip angles, and additional traces from Sebrier et al. (2006) are digitized and appended. Given the azimuth of each digitized segment, the allowable dip with the highest FSP (lowest dCFS) is selected, and the corresponding dCFS is assigned to that segment. Perhaps not surprisingly, nearly all of the active faults in the region are favorably oriented. Selection of the most favorable dip is justified not only by ignorance of structure at depth but also by the fact that the Atlas faults have been active in two, three, or more events with differing styles, vergences, and degrees of obliquity. In

intracontinental oblique deformation belts such repeated deformation generally creates bands of sub-parallel faults with varying dips, as individual fault blocks are progressively rotated, and sub-parallel strands coalesce at depth in flower structures (Cunningham, 2013). Indeed, such a mega-flower model is invoked in the WHA (e.g., Ellero et al., 2012). Thus, any given strike at the surface may correspond to a variety of dip angles in the subsurface. Empirically, the selected dips only change by an average 2.3° between adjacent segments of the same fault, suggesting that this treatment does not invoke unrealistic along-strike variations.

Haouz moment tensors feature gently south-dipping ESE-striking and steeper north-dipping WSW-striking nodal planes. Finite-fault modeling favors the latter because of superior fit to surface waves (Yeck, written communication 2023– see Acknowledgements), yet stress favors the former in two ways. First, the steeper plane is highly oblique to maximum stress and appears mechanically locked, ~375 MPa from frictional failure (**Figure 3**). High fluid pressures alone cannot allow slip on the steep plane because it lies beyond the hydrofracture gradient: Critical pore pressure exceeds the minimum stress, so the rock would fracture before fault slip. Second, and independent of fault instability, the slip vector misfit on the gently south-dipping plane (6°) is lower than that on the steeper plane (24°).

Three possible explanations for the different focal plane preferences of the finite fault and stress models include low friction in the hot lower crust, locally anomalous WHA stress, and complex Haouz rupture. Slip on the steep north-dipping plane is mechanically possible if high temperatures (e.g., Missenard et al., 2006) at the lower crustal hypocenter are associated with low fault friction, such as due to partial melt. The Mohr circle in **Figure 3** is constructed for a typical mid/upper crustal friction of 0.6 the focal mechanisms center near 10 km depth except for Al Haouz and three others in the WHA and CHA (23, 25, and 33 km depth)—while the computed shear / normal tractions on the north-dipping Al Haouz nodal plane (325 MPa / 1159 MPa) could destabilize with friction  $\leq 0.28$  (dashed gray line in **Figure 3**). Low friction does not make this plane less stable than its gently south dipping complement or result in a superior fit between shear traction and slip but does make frictional slip mechanically possible. The same is true for the iteratively determined auxiliary planes for the other three deep WHA/CHA events, all of which are comparatively steep—231/80°, 285/68°, and 110/79°—and cluster in the same part of the Mohr circle (**Figure 3**). If low friction is pervasive in the WHA/CHA lower crust, slip on

these planes may be permissible. Second, stress could differ in the data-poor WHA from areas to the east with better constraints. Nevertheless, slip on the ESE-striking plane comports very well with regional stress, both in its low angular misfit (6°) and low dCFS (~0.2 MPa/km: 5.3 MPa at 25 km depth), but additional WHA data will be needed to determine if this good fit with regional stress is purely coincidental. Finally, a complex rupture—multiple faults or a non-planar slip surface—could defy assignment of a single focal plane, rendering the parameterization of the finite-fault model insufficient (Goldberg, written communication 2023–see Acknowledgements).

Regardless, the primary goal of this study is to provide timely information on likely active fault orientations near Al Haouz, and the result does not hinge on discrimination between the mainshock focal and auxiliary planes. Slip is favored on orientations from steep NNE-striking through gentle E–striking to steep SE-striking, and on diametric orientations. Given this unfortunate diversity of susceptible fault orientations, most mapped active fault segments in the area appear well aligned in the regional stress field.

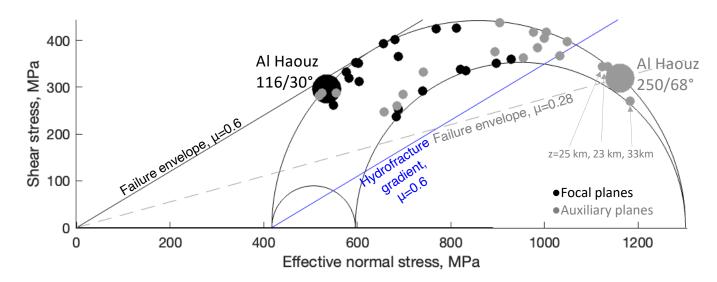


Figure 3: Mohr Circle for the single best-fit stress tensor for western High Atlas, central High Atlas, and High/Middle Atlas junction focal mechanisms and friction,  $\mu$ , 0.6. Black line: failure envelope for  $\mu$ =0.6. Blue line: Hydrofracture gradient at  $\mu$ =0.6. The WSW-striking Al Haouz nodal plane is beyond the hydrofracture gradient. However, this plane may be compatible with slip if it has anomalously low friction  $\leq$ 0.28; the dashed gray line shows the associated failure envelope.

229	Conclusions

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Crustal stress in the intraplate High Atlas region—determined by focal mechanism inversions—promotes north-south shortening accomplished a mix of reverse, reverse-oblique, and strike-slip motion. This mixed-mode deformation may reactivate a broad range of fault orientations from steep NNE–SSW-striking to gentle E–W-striking to steep SE–NW-striking planes. This range subsumes most of the known and suspected active faults in the region, suggesting that aftershocks of the deadly  $M_w6.8$  Al Haouz earthquake and future mainshocks could occur broadly across the inherited fault network.

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## Acknowledgments

The author thanks Dara Goldberg and Will Yeck (USGS) for helpful discussion of the finite fault model.

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#### **Data and Resources**

- Focal mechanisms are provided in Table S1. Haouz moment tensors are compiled at https://emsc-
- csem.org/Special\_reports/?id=316 (last accessed 25 October 2023). Several of the secondary nodal planes listed
- 243 there are erroneous; these are corrected—see Table S1—before use in stress inversions. Finite fault model from
- 244 (https://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/eventpage/us7000kufc/finite-fault, last accessed September 14, 2023).
- Stress inversion and FSP codes are available at github.com/WillLevandowski/

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## **Declaration of competing interests**

The author declares no competing interests.

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# **Supporting Information**

Longitude	Latitude	Depth	Date	Magnitude	Strike	Dip	Rake	Aux Strike	Aux Dip	Aux Rake	Reference
-5.97	31.92	10	2009-07-06	3.6	200	50	-35	314	64	-134	El Moudnib et al., 2023 Event 1
-5.75	32.16	11	2010-08-05	4.3	87	29	119	235	65	75	El Moudnib et al., 2023 Event 2
-6.07	32.36	11	2010-08-05	4.3	114	41	131	245	60	60	El Moudnib et al., 2023 Event 3 duplicate or doublet of Event 2? Martin et al.
											(2015) 53 36 82 243 54 96
-4.91	32.56	12	2011-05-01	3.3	225	50	50	98	54	127	El Moudnib et al., 2023 Event 4
-5.78	31.95	12	2011-02-14	4.4	35	80	-5	126	85	-170	El Moudnib et al., 2023 Event 5 Martin et al. (2015) 38 84 -4 129 85 -174
-7.32	31.34	13	2011-12-26	3.4	225	55	0	135	90	145	El Moudnib et al., 2023 Event 7 04:33:54; El Moudnib Event 6 (2011-12-16,
											04:33:56, Lon -7.29, Lat 31.33, depth 16 km) is clearly a duplicate of this event.
-5.53	32.34	8.4	2013-04-27	4.6	215	38	90	35	52	90	El Moudnib et al., 2023 Event 8
-6.26	32.24	9.1	2013-05-27	4.5	69	31	100	237	60	84	El Moudnib et al., 2023 Event 9
-5.39	32.39	7.6	2013-05-31	5.2	212	27	90	32	63	90	El Moudnib et al., 2023 Event 10 08:46:26
-5.38	32.43	5.9	2013-05-31	4.9	70	25	90	250	65	90	El Moudnib et al., 2023 Event 11 14:46:03
-5.34	32.41	13.7	2013-06-25	4.5	208	S	90	28	58	90	El Moudnib et al., 2023 Event 12
-6.2	32.45	5.2	2014-03-12	4.1	210	40	90	30	50	90	El Moudnib et al., 2023 Event 13
-6.18	32.24	5.5	2014-05-12	5.0	225	40	90	45	50	90	El Moudnib et al., 2023 Event 14
-5.6	32.38	6.4	2014-05-19	4.3	210	35	90	30	55	90	El Moudnib et al., 2023 Event 15
-6.06	31.49	33	1967-08-28	4.7	21	76	23	285	68	165	Medina (2008) - hybrid solution using Medina & Cherakaoui 1992 and Moreira 1986
-9.62	31.35	25	1988-12-16	NaN	323	79	-170	231	80	-11	Medina (2008) after El Alami et al. (1989)
-9.73	30.41	0.2	1992-04-05	4.7	142	67	139	250	53	29	Medina (2008) after El Alami et al. (1992)
-5.78	32	15	1986-01-28	4.9	212	42	16	110	79	131	gCMT
-8.391	31.064	26	2023-09-08	6.8	116	30	132	250	68	69	USGS, gCMT, GFZ, INGV, IPGP, CPPT
-9.6	30.5	3	1960-02-29	5.9	314	80	180	44	90	10	Agadir event from Hatzfeld et al. (1977), compiled by Medina (2008). Other
											solutions for this event in Medina's (2008) catalog have aberrant E–W shortening
-4.32	31.29	5.4	1992-10-23	5.2	187	69	12	93	79	159	gCMT / Medina (2008)
-4.38	31.24	8	1992-10-30	5.1	181	87	18	90	72	177	gCMT / Medina (2008)
-4.08	32.6	23	2019-11-17	5.08	182	71	7	90	83	161	gCMT 08:39:11
-4.55	32.56	10	2018-06-04	4.0	317	72	-161	221	72	-19	INGV
-4.32	32.65	10	2019-11-17	4.54	185	87	-32	277	58	-176	INGV 14:39:08
-4.29	32.72	10	2020-02-16	4.47	19	72	17	284	74	161	INGV

Table S1: Focal mechanisms