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Frontispiece:

Boats of migrants floating on the sea, photo: shutterstock.com

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Europe's Bastion: The Role of Morocco in the Migration System of the Western Mediterranean region

Meszár Tárik – Klaudia Tóth

Abstract

The staff of the Migration Research Institute, Tárik Meszár and Klaudia Tóth, conducted field research in the Kingdom of Morocco in the spring of 2023, during which they examined the role of the North African country in the migration system of the Western Mediterranean region. Their findings indicate that Morocco plays a key role in the migration system of the Western Mediterranean region, since, in addition to being an issuing country, it is also a destination country for many sub-Saharan African migrants. Furthermore, we must not overlook the fact that over the last two decades Morocco has emerged as an important transit country, as from its territory it is possible to reach the territory of the European Union from several different points in a relatively short time. The purpose of this analysis is to present the migration routes from Morocco to Spain, as well as the challenges caused by illegal immigration. In addition, we also describe the migration framework and main immigration laws of Morocco and examine how they are implemented in practice.

Keywords: North Africa, Morocco, Western Mediterranean route, immigration law, European Union

The triple role of Morocco in the Euro-African migration system

Today, Morocco plays a triple role in the Euro-African migration system. Namely, it is simultaneously a country of origin, transit, and destination. The current political, economic, and social conditions in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan regions continue to motivate the flow of refugees and migrants to Morocco, which most of them consider to be one of the few safe and stable countries in the region. Behind these migratory waves are hidden reasons such as political uncertainty, armed conflicts in some West African countries, economic decline, the presence of ethnic violence, and the crisis in Libya, where many sub-Saharan immigrants

previously found work opportunities.¹ For migrants, the North African state is also attractive in that it offers more job opportunities and higher salaries, and borders Europe. In the case of immigrants who look to Morocco as a transit country, their ultimate destination is usually Spain, with the main motivations being the higher standard of living, better educational opportunities, and respect for human rights. Media reports mostly focus on migrants heading to Europe, but they tend to overlook the fact that these migrants are often stuck in Morocco.² It is also important to mention that the North African country is achieving success in the fight against illegal migration and is working hard to eradicate criminal human trafficking organizations. Since it stands in the way of the large numbers of immigrants coming from sub-Saharan Africa, we can say that it also functions as one of Europe's most important bastions.

In this analysis, we examine, among other things, Morocco's migration framework and its most important immigration laws, and highlight why it can be called a gatekeeper country. We analyze the routes most often used by irregular migrants, which lead from the Western Mediterranean and West African regions to Spain. We explain the methods and fees used by people smugglers to organize illegal crossings, as well as how the International Organization for Migration manages the voluntary repatriation program.

Morocco's migration framework and main immigration laws

The Moroccan migration framework has undergone significant changes in recent years. As already mentioned, the country has become an important transit point for immigrants wishing to enter Europe illegally. Morocco responded to this situation by developing a migration policy that aims to regulate the flow of migrants while also protecting their human rights. Morocco has previously ratified many international conventions and protocols related to human rights, but due to the significant challenges affecting the country, according to some civil society organizations,³ these rules are not always adhered to. The human rights organization *Association Marocaine Des Droits Humains* (AMDH) has repeatedly criticized the Moroccan authorities' handling of migration, especially in connection with the detention and deportation of migrants. The organization has drawn attention to cases in which migrants were held against their will in poor conditions, subjected

¹ TÁRIK 2021a; TÁRIK 2021b.

² TÁRIK 2021a; TÁRIK 2021b.

³ GADEM 2015; AMDH 2020.

to violence and abuse by the authorities, and forcibly transported to remote, rural areas without due process.⁴ AMDH and similar organizations advocate for the banning of these activities and respect for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. All of this shows that migration management in the Kingdom of Morocco cannot always be considered consistent. The country's current migration strategy is also extremely complex, so to understand it, it is essential to review the main changes and milestones it has undergone:

Morocco ratified the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention on the Status of Refugees in 1956,⁵ and its 1967 Protocol in 1968.

Regarding the right to asylum, Morocco adopted a royal decree on August 29, 1957, which addressed the means of implementing the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees. The decree established the Bureau of Refugees and Stateless Persons (*Bureau des Réfugiés et Apatrides*, hereinafter: BRA) and an asylum appeals department within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition, the decree stipulated that the BRA was responsible for recognizing the refugee status of persons under the mandate of the UNHCR or meeting the criteria of the 1951 Convention, and for issuing residence permits and other documents to applicants.⁶

In 2003, the country adopted Immigration Act No. 02-03. This sets out the conditions for granting a residence permit to asylum seekers or refugees (Article 17), the criteria for expulsion or a stay of deportation (Article 29), and the procedures for the treatment of asylum seekers in waiting areas.⁷

⁴ In recent years, the migration of people from sub-Saharan Africa to Morocco has frequently given rise to conflicts. These immigrants seek better economic opportunities, and many leave their own countries due to conflict and persecution. However, the influx of migrants had led to tensions in Moroccan society, which, according to AMDH, can partly be blamed on the actions of the government. It should be noted that the Moroccan authorities sometimes round up sub-Saharan migrants and transport them to the outskirts of cities or to the countryside. Here they often meet the poorer sections of Moroccan society, who also struggle with economic difficulties. The meeting of these two groups with different backgrounds and limited resources leads to tensions and occasional hostilities. Source: This information was given during a personal conversation between the staff of the Migration Research Institute and AMDH staff in Rabat on March 28, 2023.

⁵ The 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees and the 1967 protocol are legal documents created under the auspices of the United Nations, which define the international legal concept of a refugee, establish the rights of refugees, and set out the legal obligations of states towards them. See: MIGRATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (n.d.).

⁶ UNHCR (n.d.).

⁷ KHALIL 2022.

Morocco's Constitution,⁸ adopted in 2011, recognizes the primacy over national law of international conventions ratified by the country and states that non-citizens of Morocco enjoy the same fundamental freedoms as its citizens.⁹

In September 2013, King Mohammed VI of Morocco officially announced a plan for a “humanitarian approach” to migration and asylum. As part of this, the decision was made to develop a new, comprehensive, integrated, and humane immigration and asylum policy, in line with the country's international and regional human rights commitments, to address the complex and interrelated issues of irregular immigrants, refugees, and human trafficking, and to play a key role in promoting international and regional cooperation on migration. A fundamental goal was to align the country's refugee policy with international standards, especially the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol.¹⁰ In addition, on September 25, 2013, the Moroccan government reactivated the BRA (which had been inactive since 2003) and established a commission to legalize refugees registered with the UNHCR.¹¹

In 2014, Morocco adopted its first National Strategy on Immigration and Asylum (SNIA), which included important domestic legal reforms related to asylum and migration and facilitated recognition of the rights of foreigners in the country. However, it is important to note that many of the critical legal reforms proposed in the SNIA have to date not been ratified, and the implementation of the strategy can be seen as asymmetric across the country.¹²

In the summer of 2018, a crackdown on sub-Saharan migrants began, including police raids and human rights violations. The Moroccan government did not deny the raids. Government officials say the raids were aimed at people smugglers and illegal immigrants, but human rights groups such as the *Groupe Antiraciste d'Accompagnement et de Défense des Etrangers et Migrants* (Anti-Racist Group for the Support and Defense of Foreigners and Migrants) (GADEM) and AMDH argue that the raids amounted to arbitrary arrests, expulsions, and even the detention of minors. The country's leadership, on the other hand, claims that they have always respected all previously signed international agreements. To strengthen their position, in December 2018, Morocco also signed the UN Global Compact

⁸ Since Morocco won its independence in 1956, a total of six constitutions have been promulgated: in 1962, 1970, 1972, 1992, 1996, and 2011.

⁹ Morocco's Constitution of 2011.

¹⁰ JACOBS 2023.

¹¹ UNHCR (n.d.).

¹² MIXED MIGRATION CENTRE 2022.

for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which aims to create a framework for international cooperation concerning migration.¹³

In 2022, the European Commission and Morocco renewed their partnership in the fight against irregular migration and human trafficking networks. They highlighted the achievements of their cooperation based on shared responsibility for migration issues and agreed to renew their alliance to work together on eradicating people-trafficking networks, especially following the emergence of new criminal organizations that use extremely violent methods. In addition, the parties expressed their regret for the tragedy in Melilla that occurred on June 24, 2022.¹⁴

| Year | Events |
|------|---|
| 1956 | Morocco ratifies the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. |
| 1957 | Regarding the right to asylum, Morocco adopted a royal decree in which it addressed the methods of implementing the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees, and the Office of Refugees and Stateless Persons (BRA) was established. |
| 1967 | In 1968, Morocco ratified the 1967 Protocol to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. |
| 2003 | In 2003, the country adopted Immigration Act No. 02-03. Among other things, this defines the conditions for granting a residence permit to asylum seekers, as well as the criteria for refusing expulsion or deportation. |
| 2011 | Morocco's constitution, adopted in 2011, recognizes the primacy of international conventions over national law. |
| 2013 | In September 2013, King Mohammed VI of Morocco officially announced a plan for a "humanitarian approach" to migration and asylum. |
| 2014 | In 2014, Morocco adopted its first National Strategy on Immigration and Asylum (SNIA), which included important domestic legal reforms related to asylum and migration. |
| 2018 | In December 2018, Morocco also signed the UN's Global Migration Pact on safe, orderly and regular migration, which aims to create a framework for international cooperation related to migration. |
| 2022 | In 2022, the European Commission and Morocco launched a renewed partnership in the fight against irregular migration and human smuggling networks. |

Table 1 Milestones related to Moroccan migration policy (own composition)

¹³ AFRICA NEWS 2018, JACOBS 2023.

¹⁴ EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2022.

West African and Western Mediterranean migration routes

Morocco as gatekeeper

Because of its key geostrategic location, Morocco is often called the “Gatekeeper of Europe”.¹⁵ The North African country is located directly across the Straits of Gibraltar from Spain, making it a key transit point for migration routes from Africa to Europe. Those who use the name highlight its proximity to Europe, as well as its efforts to control and manage migration flows. The precedent for this is that the Arab country took steps to strengthen the security of its border and to increase cooperation with European countries. To help deal with illegal migration, it has implemented various border-protection measures, such as increased patrols, improved surveillance technologies, and border control operations.¹⁶

For the European Union, and within it, Spain, the value of cooperation with the Moroccan authorities has increased in recent years. As a result, the EU and Spain have sent more aid to Morocco, and the two sides have agreed to fight human trafficking, reduce arrivals, and help migrants return home.¹⁷ Despite this, Morocco occasionally raises its voice due to the scarcity of its resources, and the country’s officials have repeatedly stated that the country cannot be Europe’s “migration police”. They want their northern neighbors to provide more generous resources to deal with the migration crisis in their country. In this regard, leading Spanish politicians have already admitted several times that: “Morocco helps us”.¹⁸ Nevertheless, several serious diplomatic conflicts have broken out between the two parties in recent years. One source of dispute is that Brahim Ghali, the leader of the Polisario Front fighting for the independence of Western Sahara, was treated for his COVID-19 infection in a Spanish hospital. In response, Morocco allowed many immigrants into Spanish territory without inspection.¹⁹ This last event also demonstrates that Morocco’s role in dealing with illegal migration cannot be overlooked and ultimately contributes greatly to Europe’s security.

As can be seen from the above, Morocco is both an issuing, transit, and destination country for migrants, who are usually – but not exclusively – African. In the following, we will try to answer the questions that arise in connection

¹⁵ FERRER-GALLARDO – GABRIELLI 2022.

¹⁶ HILPERT 2022.

¹⁷ EL MASAITI 2019.

¹⁸ EL MASAITI 2019.

¹⁹ PARRA – ELSHAMY 2021.

with the irregular and illegal migration flows affecting Morocco. There are two main routes from Morocco to the land and sea borders of Spain. According to the methodological approach of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (hereinafter: Frontex), those choosing the West African route tend to head by boat for Spain's southernmost autonomous region, the Canary Islands. Those traveling along the Western Mediterranean corridor either reach the Spanish coast by crossing the Western Basin of the Mediterranean Sea or enter the territory of the European Union while remaining on the African continent. In this regard, it is important to highlight the geostrategic importance of two areas in a unique situation: Melilla and Ceuta have been on the front pages of the international media several times in recent years due to attacks on the walls and fences surrounding them, as well as because of mass illegal crossings. The hope of getting into the Spanish exclaves along the North African coast is much more appealing to migrants because it means they do not have to make a desperate voyage over the open ocean for several days while traveling around the border defenses of the exclaves by sea or scaling the wall appears a much easier prospect. In addition, it is also a vital point that in the Mediterranean region, people traffickers typically demand exorbitant amounts of money to take people to Europe, while at the border walls of Ceuta and Melilla, it is possible to try to get in individually or in groups. Interviews conducted during field research in March 2023 revealed that many sub-Saharan citizens have run out of money by the time they reach Morocco, and so are no longer able to pay the smuggling fees, which often amount to several thousand euros.

Use of routes

Before reviewing smuggling fees and methods, it is worth highlighting the specific figures (see Figure 1). Based on national data collected by Frontex, but coming from the member states, it is clear how many people use each corridor each year. From the perspective of Morocco, three main routes are decisive: those to the Canary Islands, to the European mainland, and the exclaves, but Frontex combines illegal entry on the coast of continental Spain and at the borders of the exclaves in one category. Thus, anyone who commits a border violation by sailing to the Canary Islands is counted among those using the West African route, while anyone who sails across the Mediterranean and reaches the southern coastline of Spain or reaches the exclaves by land or water routes, is registered as using the Western Mediterranean corridor. Between 2009 and 2015, around 5,000 to 8,500 people arrived in Spain via the much shorter and less dangerous Western Mediterranean route. After that, between 2016 and 2018, the number of people using this corridor

increased significantly, and in 2018 reached a peak of 56,245 people. Since 2019, traffic on the Western Mediterranean route has shown a marked downward trend.²⁰ Figure 1 shows the number of illegal border crossings detected annually by the Spanish authorities on the West African and West Mediterranean corridors during the period between January 1, 2015, and April 30, 2023. The number of cases shown in the chart will always be higher than the number of actual arrivals, but the major migration trends for the region can also be discerned from the data. Due to the exceptionally high number of arrivals by the Western Mediterranean route in 2018, over 56,000, the EU launched several new initiatives with partner countries in West Africa, including strengthening the EU-Morocco partnership. Within the framework of cooperation with Morocco, an even stronger emphasis was placed on the issue of border management; promoting socio-economic integration; institutional support and capacity building; protecting migrants and respecting their rights.²¹



Figure 1 Number of illegal border crossings by people arriving via the West African and Western Mediterranean routes between January 1, 2015 and April 30, 2023 (FRONTEX 2016–2022.)

While the number of people using the Western Mediterranean route decreased significantly after 2018 – as a result of which illegal border violations also fell – an increasing number of people reached the Canary Islands: in 2020, for example, 23,271 people survived the sea crossing and reached the archipelago. Most arrived in the last quarter of 2020 (17,147 people). In the fall of 2020, when more and more people reached the Canary Islands illegally, measures were introduced in

²⁰ UNODC 2022, 2.

²¹ COUNCIL OF THE EU AND THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL 2023.

many European and North African countries to curb the spread of COVID-19. Figure 1 also shows that compared to 2018, many fewer illegal border crossings were registered on the Western Mediterranean route in later years, and in 2020 the dominance of this route ceased: since 2020, many more people have been using the West African than the Western Mediterranean route. One of the main reasons for the “shift” is that during 2019, the Moroccan authorities implemented much stricter water and land border control measures, including both interceptions at sea and search and rescue operations. In 2019, Moroccan authorities investigated more than 60 migrant smuggling groups and seized around 3,000 forged documents. In the same year, approximately 27,000 illegal immigrants were arrested. According to data from the Moroccan Ministry of the Interior, 10,316 people were caught and rescued on the country’s northern coast in 2020.²²

The lockdowns imposed in the wake of the pandemic have had an extremely negative impact on economic activities, trade, mobility, and energy prices. The consequences for small entrepreneurs and wage workers, especially those working in the informal sector, were particularly severe. According to data from April 2020, 57 percent of Moroccan businesses temporarily or permanently suspended their activities. The contraction also had a negative impact on the income-generating capacity of low-income segments of the population, including domestic and foreign residents.²³ The decrease in personal income, the lack of prospects, the armed conflicts raging in the Sahel region, and political instability increasingly stimulated the already existing migration processes.

Trafficking prices and methods

According to 2021 data, migrants paid an average of €1,300 to €1,500 to reach the Canary Islands if they departed from one of the many ports on the coast of Morocco and Moroccan-administered Western Sahara. Prices charged for travel to continental Europe ranged on average from €1,800 to €2,500 along the coast between Nador and Al Hoceima and between €400 and €1,400 in the zone between Tangier and Salé. Land crossings from Morocco to Algeria – usually involving Moroccan citizens – usually cost between 100 and 120 euros, while the price of traveling in the opposite direction was on average 350 euros.²⁴ In contrast, the 2022 data already showed a significant increase in tariffs: at the beginning of 2022, a sea crossing from southern Morocco and Western Sahara to the Canary

²² UNODC 2021, 19.

²³ UNODC 2022, 2–4.

²⁴ GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME 2022, 2.

Islands cost between €1,900 and €2,830 – with sub-Saharan and non-Moroccan nationals often paying even higher rates. Price fluctuations are believed to depend on various factors, including increased demand for the services of people smugglers, the location of the departure point, the type of vessels used, changes in climatic conditions – prices typically decrease in worse weather conditions – and the level of surveillance by Moroccan security services along the coast. Prices also fluctuate significantly depending on the season: higher prices are typically associated with the period between spring and early autumn when the crossing is usually easier due to calmer weather.²⁵

Information about the Western Mediterranean differs somewhat from that regarding the West African route: according to some sources, crossing the Western Mediterranean is the most expensive sea route, with fees averaging around \$2,800 per person. The Spanish authorities have also confirmed that migrants who are entrusted with the navigation or positioning of the ship during the crossing may receive a discount as compensation for their more active participation. In addition, the migrant's gender, nationality, age, and socio-economic background also play a role in determining the fee. Since Morocco has increased border surveillance since 2019, the cost of traveling to Spain has increased, and generally speaking, smuggling fees have increased in both West and North Africa since the start of the pandemic. It is reasonable to ask how those setting off from difficult circumstances can afford to pay such high smuggling fees, but the answer is either that the people involved save for up to ten years for the trip, or else they ask for help from family, friends, and the local community in the form of a loan, which is then paid off through remittances. The savings are mostly used to cover the initial costs of the trip, i.e. the first stages. If they cannot pay, people are forced to work along the route in the construction, domestic service, agricultural sectors, or as prostitutes.²⁶

Human traffickers rarely approach clients directly. Instead, those who intend on seeking asylum or otherwise traveling to Europe seek out their services. In West Africa, information on smuggling is best gathered in public spaces such as bus stations, taxi stands, coffee shops, and hair salons. Traffickers operating on land routes in North and West Africa typically have no connection to traffickers operating across open water. The smugglers active in West Africa typically do not coalesce into one large group but are organized into many small networks. Their membership often changes, with drivers, steersmen, and other intermediaries entering ad hoc collaborations to serve specific clients. Smugglers rarely have

²⁵ RUIZ – DE LUGO 2022, 13.

²⁶ UNODC 2021, 15–16.

transnational coverage or international connections, as most of them specialize in facilitating movement in a specific area or at a specific border crossing.

After contacting the trafficker, clients are instructed to travel independently to the point of departure for the sea crossing. Moroccans stay in cheap hotels in small towns along the southern Moroccan and Western Saharan coasts, often sharing rooms with other clients of the traffickers to keep costs down. Some spend up to a month in these hotels, waiting for the smugglers to gather enough clients, prepare the boat for the crossing, and find a period of good weather and low risk of capture at sea. The organizers of the trip typically do not travel aboard. Typically, one of the clients is “hired” as the ship’s helmsman and entrusted with making the sea crossing. Ad hoc agreements are made with shipmasters for free or discounted crossings in exchange for navigating the ship to the Canary Islands. The chosen captains are usually men with sailing or fishing experience. They usually take turns at the helm to keep the ship moving day and night. The risk in such arrangements is that law enforcement agencies consider behavior on board the ship as the main element of the charge, so people who steer during the sea crossing, provide food to passengers, use GPS, or give instructions to other passengers are often suspected of having committed human trafficking.²⁷

Refugees and migrants who land in the Canary Islands are held in administrative detention for 72 hours after their arrival, in detention centers in Gran Canaria and Tenerife, and in Lanzarote on a ship anchored offshore. Many migrants complain that administrative detention facilities frequently fail to meet minimum requirements, such as providing access to water, sanitation, and health care. Under bilateral agreements currently in force between Spain and North and West African countries, men handed deportation orders are then transported to repatriation centers. According to the bilateral agreement between Spain and Mauritania, all persons who depart from Mauritania and arrive in Spain illegally by sea can be returned to Mauritania, regardless of their nationality, unless they apply for asylum in the Canary Islands. Spanish law prohibits the deportation of children, while deporting women is logistically challenging, and so rarely happens.²⁸

Advantages and disadvantages of particular routes

If individuals decide to emigrate from their home country and help those who stay at home through remittances, they must carefully consider how they will reach

²⁷ UNODC 2022, 23–26.

²⁸ UNODC 2022, 25–26.

the desired destination country. After examining the figures, it is worth also looking at the characteristics of the routes themselves, since thousands of human destinies make their way along these trails. The starting points of the West African route are located along the North-West African coast, stretching from Gambia to Morocco (a distance of about 2,500 km). The length of the sea crossing to the Canary Islands is approximately 100 km from Morocco and Western Sahara, while it can be up to 1,700 km from the coasts of Senegal and Gambia. The duration of the crossing varies greatly: ships from southern Morocco and Western Sahara heading to Lanzarote or Fuerteventura make the journey in about 24 hours, while ships from Senegal to El Hierro can take more than ten days. The journey time depends on the weather, the quality of the vessel, and the number of passengers it carries. Most ships are equipped with a GPS and/or compass but typically do not have a phone with satellite access. Therefore, when they reach a coastal strip with mobile network coverage, either the Spanish authorities or relatives are notified to rescue them.

Often, non-governmental organizations organize information campaigns at the main points of departure along the coast of North-West Africa, where they give Spain's or their helpline numbers to migrants. This means that when an NGO receives a call about a capsizing ship or hears about a dangerous situation from a concerned relative, the organization immediately contacts the Spanish authorities and provides the GPS coordinates of the ship in distress. Many of those arriving via the West African route do not want to settle in the Canary Islands. There are few job opportunities for either foreign or domestic citizens on the archipelago. To avoid overcrowding, in 2021 the Spanish authorities transferred adult refugees and migrants arriving in the Canary Islands who did not apply for asylum there from emergency facilities to long-term reception centers on the Spanish mainland. Refugees and migrants with valid passports can move independently within the territory of Spain, so if they have enough money, they can also buy a plane or ferry ticket to the mainland.²⁹

After reviewing the characteristics of the West African route, it is worth turning our gaze a little to the east, or more precisely to the Strait of Gibraltar and the Alboran Sea, since here, at its narrowest, the distance between the two continents is only 13 km. In this region too, those who choose to make a seaborne crossing from Morocco to Spain are usually assisted by people traffickers – especially when the crossing requires greater organizational capacity, such as in the case of longer sea voyages or heavily guarded maritime areas. Between 2015 and 2019, an increasing number of people attempted to cross both the land and sea borders between Morocco and Ceuta and Melilla. The numbers decreased again in 2020–2021,

²⁹ UNODC 2022, 15–22.

largely due to the closure of border crossings (62,166 people arrived irregularly in 2019, while only 1,769 people arrived in 2020).

The port city of Tangier, located on the northern coast of Morocco, is one of the main starting points of the Western Mediterranean route. Migrant trafficking in this city is based on an uneasy alliance between the Moroccan taxi mafia, migrant and refugee communities, and shipping companies. The peculiarity of the Western Mediterranean corridor is that trafficking is not typically organized and carried out by large international criminal organizations, but mostly by individuals or smaller groups based on loose connections. They are usually only active at certain border crossings and simultaneously fulfil the roles of passenger transporter, accommodation provider, labor broker, and employer. The business activities of these traffickers and brokers are based on their social capital, which can be traced back to the connections formed by ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties. It is interesting that a relatively higher proportion of women rely on the help of international cross-border groups. Many Cameroonian women, for example, find a transnational criminal organization in the states of northern Nigeria, which organizes their journey as far as northern Morocco. In their case, the biggest problem is that they often become victims of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

Based on the investigations carried out by the Spanish and Moroccan police, the international organized criminal groups involved in migrant trafficking from Morocco to Spain, based on loose connections, in many cases also “employ” Moroccan and Spanish citizens – they are mainly responsible for coordination, logistics, surveillance, information-gathering, and shipping. Both the land- and sea-based alternatives on the Western Mediterranean route carry many dangers. In the first half of 2021, an estimated 40 people died while trying to cross by land from Morocco to Ceuta and Melilla. These numbers are much higher than the one person reportedly killed in 2020 and the seven in 2019. Five of those who died in 2021 were identified as Moroccans who tried to swim to Ceuta.³⁰

Morocco is the only African country that shares a land border with the EU, thanks to these two Spanish exclaves. Melilla and Ceuta, wedged into the north Moroccan coast, are the number one destination for sub-Saharan migrants. To prevent illegal crossings, between 1993 and 1996, Spain built fences, installed surveillance cameras, and deployed armed police to protect facilities. Melilla’s land border is protected by a double border fence approximately 13 kilometers long, divided into three sectors. The height of the outer fence is 3,5 meters, while the

³⁰ UNODC 2021, 9–16.

inner fence can be as high as six meters in some places. Both fences are equipped with barbed wire to prevent illegal immigrants from climbing over. The installed surveillance system consists of 106 fixed cameras. There is a 7,8-kilometer-long double border fence around Ceuta, divided into three sectors. Except for the 37 mobile cameras installed along the fence, the technical equipment used for border control is the same as in Melilla.³¹

The issue of the two fences made headlines in the international media when, on June 24, 2022, nearly 2,000 migrants – mostly Sudanese and South Sudanese – stormed the fence and tried to cross into Spanish territory. Moroccan security forces tried to hold them back with tear gas and rubber batons. According to a government report, 23 migrants died during the incident. According to local human rights groups, the real number of victims could be as high as 37, and dozens more were injured. However, it is important to be aware that this was not the first such action: on April 17 and 18, 2021, an estimated 8,000 people, including 2,000 minors, tried to cross into Spain at Ceuta by swimming or climbing over the border fence. The Spanish soldiers and border guards tried to keep everyone back and the majority of those who crossed were rounded up and deported back to Morocco.

A bilateral agreement signed between the two countries in 1992 allows Spain to request the readmission of people who entered Morocco illegally. However, in April 2021, diplomatic tensions arose when Spain allowed Brahim Ghali – the leader of the Western Sahara independence movement – to enter the country and receive treatment for COVID-19. A month later, Morocco relaxed its border controls, allowing 8,000 migrants to cross into Ceuta, Spain.³² Relations between the two states were somewhat helped by the reopening of the land border between Morocco and the two exclaves - which had been closed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic – on May 17, 2022.³³ The situation also eased when, in March 2022, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez announced his support for the 2007 Moroccan plan according to which Western Sahara would receive autonomous status under Moroccan authority.³⁴

³¹ SADDIKI 2017.

³² SMITH 2022.

³³ AIDA 2023.

³⁴ MOHAMED 2022.

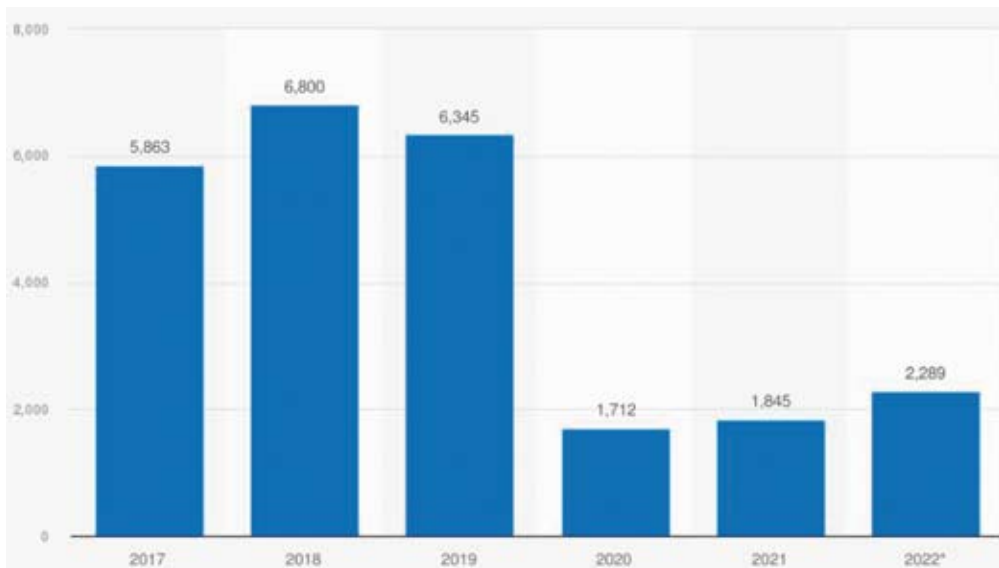


Figure 2 The number of foreigners entering Spanish territory via Ceuta and Melilla – by land and without a permit – between 2017 and 2022 (STATISTA 2023.)

Voluntary repatriation to and from Morocco

After examining the processes of irregular migration, it is worth also considering some examples of legal emigration and immigration. Many international organizations are present in Morocco, and they primarily focus on migrants and refugees. One of these groups is the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which, embedded in the UN system, plays an important role in settlement and repatriation operations. The IOM has been present in Morocco since 2001, and the scope of its activities can be divided into three parts. Firstly, it supports the government in understanding how migration affects individual government areas, and to what extent sectoral policies help or hinder the social role and integration of migrants. Secondly, it provides direct assistance to immigrants: the organization aims to protect vulnerable migrants and those in need, such as unaccompanied minors or victims of human trafficking. In this sense, it also provides health and humanitarian services and has a prominent role in the management of voluntary return and reintegration programs. Thirdly, through formal, non-formal, and informal education, capacity building, vocational training, sports, and community-based activities, the International Organization for Migration tries to reach and engage young, marginalized Moroccans. The local IOM mission works closely with

the Moroccan authorities, international government partners, UN agencies, civil society actors, and local associations to address these issues and develop effective and successful projects.

Among the tasks listed above, it is important to highlight the voluntary repatriation and reintegration program operated by the organization. The project provides humanitarian, administrative, logistical, and financial support to migrants in difficult situations so that they can return to their country of origin and helps Moroccans who would like to move back to Morocco to reintegrate. In 2022, 3,552 migrants (2,097 men, 916 women, 277 boys, and 262 girls) requested assistance for voluntary return home. IOM and its partners were able to organize a safe return home for 2,457 people (1,443 men, 616 women, 207 boys, and 191 girls) to 26 different countries of origin. Compared to 2020, the number of migrants participating in the program had tripled by 2021 and 2022 (see Figure 3). This increase is primarily due to the fact that in 2022 there was a significant increase in the financial resources earmarked for fulfilling requests so that the accumulated delays due to mobility restrictions introduced to curb the spread of the pandemic were able to be compensated during the last two years. 1% of migrants returned to South America, 2% to Asia, and 97% to African countries. Most of the beneficiaries were citizens of Cote d'Ivoire (657), Guinea (598), and Senegal (367).



Figure 3 Evolution of the number of migrants voluntarily returning from Morocco to their countries of origin between 2005 and 2022 (IOM 2023, 6.)

Regarding the other part of the program, it is worth mentioning that since the start of the reintegration program in 2005, the local IOM office and its partners

have assisted more than 2,100 Moroccan returnees. The beneficiaries came from more than 25 countries. In 2022, 639 Moroccans returned home voluntarily to the West African country. The number of returnees increased significantly in 2022 due to the socio-economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the lifting of pandemic-related mobility restrictions in Morocco.



Figure 4 Change of the number of Moroccans returning to Morocco between 2017 and 2022 (IOM 2023, 12.)

Conclusion

Morocco's migration policy is controversial, as it reflects both foreign policy priorities and the nature of Moroccan domestic politics. At the domestic level, it is a fundamental problem that political reforms in Morocco are often short-term, centralized, and dictated by the monarchy. Their primary goal is to alleviate criticism in the short term, not to make long-term and substantive changes in migration policy. The weakest point of the National Immigration and Asylum Strategy adopted in 2014 is the lack of implementation. Even the intensified debate about the treatment of migrants and refugees that subsequently developed

did not lead to the widespread application and acceptance of the strategy, which sometimes leaves migrants and refugees in a vulnerable situation. Concerning the latter, various human rights organizations often raise their voices and demand that the rights of refugees and asylum seekers be respected.

As for Morocco's role in the migration system of the Western Mediterranean region, several migration routes from the North African Arab country lead to Spain, which is why many see it as a transit country. Tangier, Tetouan, Nador or Al Hoceima should be highlighted as starting points because these settlements are located close to the Spanish mainland, so it is hardly surprising that this area sees larger-scale irregular migration movements. In addition to these cities, the role of the Straits of Gibraltar and the Alboran Sea is also worth mentioning, since in this area, at its narrowest, the distance between Europe and Africa is only 13 km, which makes it an important hub for both irregular migrants and people traffickers. In addition, the role of the two Spanish exclaves, Ceuta, and Melilla, is also central in the region's migration system, as in recent years they have become significant migration hotspots and transit points for migrants trying to reach European territory. These two cities are geographically located on the African continent but are part of the European Union, so migrants see these areas as potential gateways to Europe.

In addition to all of this, the role of human traffickers cannot be neglected, as criminal organizations often take advantage of migrants seeking better economic opportunities or fleeing conflicts and persecution. In addition to demanding large sums of money for their illegal activities, overcrowded ships, insufficient security measures, and dangerous sea conditions often put the lives of those intending to cross to Europe at risk. However, it is important to note that migration routes from Morocco to Spain have become increasingly intensively surveilled in recent years, as both Morocco and Spain have introduced stricter border control measures to curb illegal migration.

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