HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS – NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

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# NORTH-WEST PASSAGE

## THE RESURGENCE OF MARITIME IRREGULAR MIGRATION TO THE CANARY ISLANDS

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## NOTE

This report was corrected on 18 May 2023. Irregular entries into the EU from more than one other route exceeded those on the North-West route in 2022.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last two years, the level of irregular migration from West and North Africa to Spain's Canary Islands has surged. Between January 2020 and late October 2022, 60 427 migrants disembarked in the Canary Islands, compared to 9 520 between January 2009 and December 2019.[1] An unknown, but probably significant, number of migrants attempting the journey have been intercepted over the period by Moroccan, Mauritanian or Senegalese authorities, or have disappeared at sea.[2] Available statistics for disappearances at sea demonstrate the north-west African route (also known as the Canary Islands or Atlantic route) is one of the deadliest in the world. 2021 saw estimated numbers of deaths at sea on the route double compared to those of the previous year.[3]

The increased use of the route, especially in 2020 and 2021, is particularly striking when compared with the less steep growth during this two year period on the three other major migration routes from North Africa to Europe: the central Mediterranean route (linking Libya, Tunisia and Algeria with Italy), the western Mediterranean route (linking Morocco and Algeria with the Spanish mainland, its Mediterranean Islands and its North African enclaves) and the eastern Mediterranean route (linking Turkey with Greece). Between January 2020 and late 2022, the north-west African route grew from a zone of minimal movement to one of the busiest irregular migration routes to Europe. While movement on this route decreased over the course of 2022, it remained materially higher than prior to 2020.

The spike in the popularity of the north-west African route is not unprecedented – it echoes the 2006 surge in movement across this route, where arrivals to the Canaries exceeded 30 000, before falling sharply once more. The reasons for the recent rising popularity of the route vary, based on migrant nationalities and departure locations. However, the key driver cited by many migrants travelling on this route is the search for economic opportunity against a backdrop of declining livelihoods at home, while barriers to licit travel to Europe necessitate accessing irregular methods of movement. In turn, choices of clandestine routes hinge on accessibility, affordability, surety of arrival and safety.

COVID-19 has had an impact on all of the above, though a rise in the level of migration along the route slightly pre-dates the advent of the pandemic in North and West Africa. Efforts by governments in these countries to combat the pandemic has impacted livelihoods, altering the feasibility of mobility – particularly through air and land routes – and increasing the demand for the Canary Islands route substantially. This is particularly the case in Morocco, as migration routes across the Mediterranean become more difficult to access due to heightened surveillance and movement restrictions linked to COVID-19, as explored further below. The situation compounded the already growing difficulties of using alternative irregular routes into Europe, which have become harder and more dangerous as Europe has sought to block them.[4]


April 2021: A group of migrants who were picked up by Spain's maritime rescue service south of the Canaries disembark in Tenerife on board a vessel of the Guardia Civil. *© Desiree Martin/AFP via Getty Images*

Since the north-west African route's resurgence in 2020, most irregular migrants and refugees have been Moroccan, departing from points in southern Morocco or Western Sahara.[5] Large numbers of West Africans have also moved along the route, some leaving from Morocco or Moroccan-administered Western Sahara, while others embarked from beaches in Senegal or Mauritania.[6]

This report investigates the dynamics underpinning the current use of the north-west African migration route. The first section looks at the historical context of how this route emerged, with a focus on a previous surge in migration along it in between 2005 and 2006. The following section examines current trends, embarkation zones and the operations of smuggling networks facilitating movement on this route. A brief assessment is made of economic and political drivers of irregular migration, followed by a discussion of Spanish government responses. The report ends with a conclusion and a set of recommendations.

## Methodology

This report is informed by 120 interviews with key informants, including migrants, refugees, government officials, civil society leaders, local journalists, activists and aid workers in the Canary Islands, Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal and Mali between January 2021 and July 2022. Primary research was supplemented by a short review of secondary sources in English, French and Spanish. These include media articles, government and NGO reports, and academic publications.

Researching issues of irregular migration and clandestine movement is invariably complex, with risks of over- and under-representation of different viewpoints. This is a particular challenge with gender. The vast majority of those migrating on the north-west African route are male. However, researchers sought to ensure women travelling on the route are also represented in this study. This led to the following challenges: typically, women are sheltered in separate facilities (to which no access is allowed) from the majority of male arrivals,[7] with many women seldom leaving these facilities; many women are highly vulnerable, fleeing violence in some instances, meaning that it was not deemed ethical to pursue certain interviews. Although researchers sought to address the ensuing research gaps by engaging with organizations that were well-positioned to provide insight, including those focusing on female migrants, women remain under-represented in this report. One goal of further research will be to enhance the understanding of the drivers, decision-making processes and experiences of women migrating from Africa to the Canary Islands.

# THE GROWTH IN USE OF THE NORTH-WEST AFRICAN ROUTE

The sharp increase in arrivals by the north-west African route since 2020 is the second time this has happened since the route's emergence in the mid-1990s. In both cases, increased pressure from Spanish authorities on other irregular routes into Spain played a significant role in displacing movement to the north-west African route. Since the 2006 surge, many stakeholders in the Canary Islands believed that movement on this route would continue to fluctuate, regardless of attempts to prevent it by Spanish authorities.

The 2020 resurgence in migrant transit on the route, despite ongoing investment by regional states in surveillance and border securitization, supports such beliefs, underscoring that, typically, securitized responses do not halt irregular movement, but merely displace it. The humanitarian consequences of the sustained popularity of the route since 2020 are significant, with some estimates indicating that, in 2021, one in five deaths on irregular migration routes globally occurred on the north-west African route.[8]

## The emergence of the route: 1994–2005

As with other irregular migration routes between North Africa and Europe, movement on the north-west African route began in mid-1990s.[9] Initially, most departures were from Western Sahara, with those making the journey almost exclusively drawn from that territory.[10] Throughout the decade, the boats used (known as *pateras*) were small and shallow-hulled, which restricted both the distance they could travel safely and the number of passengers that could be transported; groups often comprised 15 or fewer individuals.[11] Overall, through the turn of the millennium, the number of arrivals remained relatively low.[12]

This changed around the year 2000. In part, this was technological, with larger fishing boats (*cayucos*) adopted by human smuggling networks, which allowed larger numbers of migrants per trip.[13] The *cayucos* also had greater range, which extended the zone of departures from Western Sahara to points along the West African coastline from southern Morocco to northern Senegal.[14]

Simultaneously, the ability of migrants to move from northern Morocco into Spain, either overland to the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla or using maritime routes, began to be constrained. In particular, Spain's implementation of the first phase of an electronic surveillance system (Sistema Integrado de

Vigilancia Exterior, SIVE) along its southern coastline between 1999 and 2002 resulted in a sharp decline in irregular maritime movement across the Strait of Gibraltar.[15] Rather than halting migration, however, heightened controls on the Mediterranean resulted in a shift in routes as, increasingly, both sub-Saharan migrants and Moroccans sought access to Europe by the north-west African route.[16]

Between 2001 and 2002, the number of migrants reaching the Canary Islands doubled, from 4 105 to 9 875.[17] In 2002, some 59% of migrants intercepted by Spain were travelling on the north-west African route, a sharp reversal from 2000, when 84% of apprehensions occurred in the Mediterranean and areas in and around the Strait of Gibraltar.[18]

## Surge and decline: 2006–2018

This initial surge proved a prelude, with Spanish apprehensions of migrants on the Canary Islands route rising to 31 678 in 2006.[19] Many migrants lost their lives on the crossing, with one Spanish NGO estimating up to 7 000 deaths during that year.[20] In contrast to the 1990s and early in the first decade of the 2000s, arrivals in 2006 were predominately Senegalese (accounting for roughly 51% of those intercepted), along with Gambians (11%) and Moroccans (11%).[21] Smaller numbers came from Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire and Mauritania.[22]

As migration levels along the route rose, Spain embarked upon a programme of bilateral cooperation with the governments of Senegal and Mauritania, two countries from which the majority of boats were departing. These bilateral arrangements were an extension of the Spanish government's approach to managing irregular migration from the African continent, which had been in place since 1992. That year, Spain signed a readmissions agreement with the Moroccan government in which Morocco accepted third-country nationals who enter the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla within 24 hours of their arrival.[23]

In the case of Mauritania, Spain had already signed a controversial readmission agreement in 2003 that allowed for the return of third-country nationals likely to have transited through Mauritanian territory.[24] The 2006 surge – dubbed a crisis by Spanish authorities – provided, however, the impetus for more direct cooperation. The two governments issued a Joint Communiqué of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Spain and Mauritania on Strengthening Joint Migration Control, opened a detention centre in the northern city of Nouadhibou for migrants apprehended in transit to Europe or returned from Spain, and launched joint patrols between the Spanish Guardia Civil and the Mauritanian authorities.[25]

Similarly, 2006 saw Spain heighten its security cooperation with Senegal. In March of that year, both governments signed a Bilateral Memorandum of Collaboration on Irregular Immigration, which provided a framework for cooperation between Spanish and Senegalese security forces in combating irregular migration from Senegal. This framework led to a permanent presence of Spanish security personnel as well as maritime and aerial assets deployed to Senegal.[26]

Functionally, these engagements, as well as other actions by Spain, reinforced border controls, increasing monitoring activity in the waters between the Canary Islands and the African continent (including increasing Frontex activity) and enhanced information-gathering on groups involved in smuggling and the routes used.[27] In the wake of these initiatives, arrivals to the Canary Islands dropped by almost two-thirds in 2007 and continued to decline drastically, dropping to 196 by 2010 and staying very low for most of that decade.[28] Because of this apparent success in addressing the 2006 migration surge to the Canary Islands, Spain's approach to stemming irregular migration, using a combination of border securitization and externalization, surveillance, deportations, and economic and development aid,

reinforced how European countries engaged on issues of cross-Mediterranean migration – primarily from Turkey and Libya – as these routes increased in importance in the mid-part of the decade.[29]

Even as European efforts to decrease irregular migration faced challenges along other migration routes, arrivals to the Canary Islands remained low for much of the 2010s. Statistics collected by Frontex, for example, indicate that irregular arrivals to the Canary Islands between 2010 to 2017 fluctuated within a range of roughly 174 to 874 migrant arrivals per year.[30] During this period, the number of arrivals in any given year could be explained by a number of factors that did not necessarily question the underlying efficacy of Spain's approach to limiting irregular arrivals to the Canary Islands.[31]

## New travellers in larger numbers: 2018–present

Beginning in the late 2010s, the number of irregular arrivals started to rise again, though initially this was relatively modest. In 2018 and 2019, for example, 1 323 and 2 718 migrants were intercepted by Spanish authorities in the Canary Islands, compared to 421 in 2017. As in the first years of the early 2000s, this modest increase proved a prelude to a rapid acceleration in movement across the north-west African route. In 2020, 23 029 irregular migrants reached the Canary Islands, followed by 22 504 in 2021, and another 8 508 between January and June of 2022.[32]

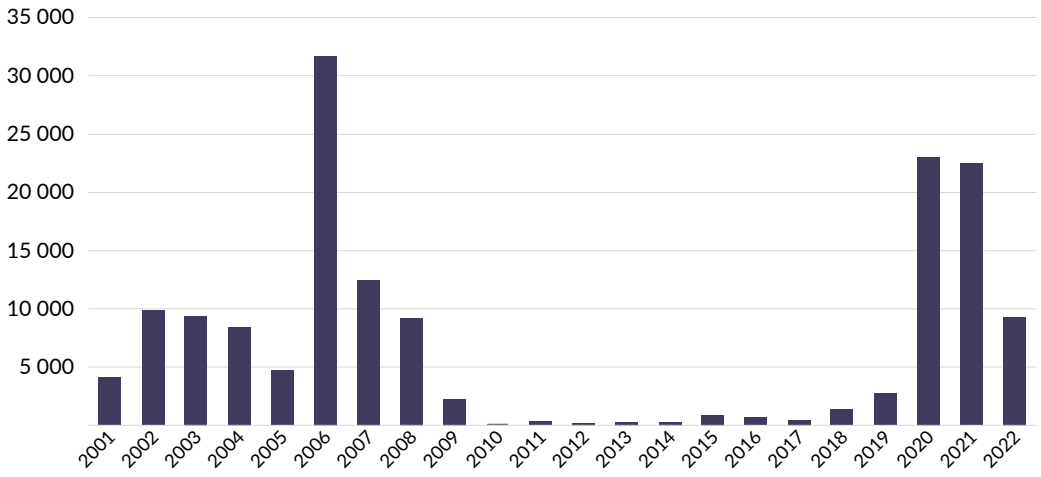


**FIGURE 1** Irregular migration interceptions by Spain on the Canary Islands route.

NOTE: 2022 includes January to June only.
SOURCE: Frontex and the Spanish Interior Ministry

In contrast to early in the first decade of the 2000s, however, the rise in irregular migration has, to a significant extent, been centred on Morocco and Moroccan-administered Western Sahara. Between January 2020 and June 2022, 42% of the 55 067 migrants intercepted by Spanish authorities were Moroccan nationals, with most embarking from points in southern Morocco or northern and central areas of the Moroccan-administered Western Sahara.[33] Many non-Moroccans also embarked from these areas, including nationals of sub-Saharan African states and, to a lesser extent, individuals from further afield, including Bangladesh.[34]

For those departing from Morocco, rising use of the north-west African route was reportedly linked to issues of mobility and surveillance. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, mobility within Morocco, and in its northern areas, was reportedly very limited. Concurrently, in 2020, surveillance of areas along the northern coast, which had provided popular launch points for migrants in the late 2010s, was heightened, leading smugglers based in the north to increasingly focus their activities in the south, where enforcement was perceived to be laxer.[35]


**Migrants board a bus after being rescued by the Spanish coastguard, Gran Canaria, 23 November 2020. The number of irregular maritime arrivals on the Canary Islands route spiked in 2020 and has remained high since.** *© Desiree Martin / AFP*

Along with the increase in departures from Morocco and Western Sahara, rising migration was also driven by departures from Mauritania and Senegal and, to a lesser degree, Gambia. These included not just nationals of those states but also a number of other West Africans – notably Malians. While migration from these areas to the Canary Islands was climbing before the COVID-19 pandemic began in March/April 2020, responses by regional governments to the disease – mainly the closure of the Mali–Algeria border – in all likelihood heightened the appeal of the Canary Islands route even more.

Furthermore, the gender composition of those using the north-west African route has changed over time. Although the vast majority of migrants departing from Senegal have been men, as with other departure points, stakeholders in the Canary Islands reported a significant proportion of sub-Saharan migrants being women. Red Cross representatives noted that September 2019 marked a pivotal change in the demographics of arrivals from West Africa: before that, the profile of arrivals was almost entirely male, with the majority over 30 years old.[36] Since then, however, women have constituted a far larger proportion of arrivals, and many of the men have been younger than previous cohorts.[37] In early 2021, it was reported that as many as 30% of women arriving from West African departure points were pregnant. This is a trend unseen prior to 2019. NGOs, including the Red Cross, have identified among arrivals a small number of women escaping contexts of trafficking,[38] although screening procedures for victims of trafficking upon arrival in the Canary Islands have been criticized as inadequate.[39]

Irregular maritime arrival figures on the Canary Islands route rose year-on-year since 2020 and into the first half of 2022. According to official figures published by the Ministry of Interior, the first quarter of 2022 saw a 70.9% increase compared with the same period in 2021.[40] Across the first half

of 2022, arrivals in the Canary Islands remained 27% higher than during the same period in 2021, with Moroccan nationals behind the majority of the overall increase.[41]

The increase in irregular migration to the Canary Islands – emanating from Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia – has transformed the north-west African route from being sparsely transited to the second most active route between Africa and Europe in 2021, eclipsed only by the route linking Libya to Italy and Malta.

The rise in the use of the north-west African route has also substantially increased the risks facing irregular migrants. The proportion of journeys ending in fatalities is relatively high on the open ocean route linking West and North African states with the Canary Islands. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 1 173 people died along this route in 2021; however, civil society organizations believe that the actual death toll is likely to be much higher, as vessels which sink either on the route or which go off course and drift often go undetected and unreported.[42] The Spanish NGO Caminando Fronteras, for example, estimates the number of dead to be 4 044 for 2021.[43]

Long-standing structural drivers of irregular migration from North and West Africa to Spain have interacted with more recent phenomena, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and renewed tensions over the Moroccan-administered Western Sahara, to drive a sustained resurgence of movement on the north-west African route. Not only does this have far-reaching humanitarian consequences, it also calls into question the extent to which the purported successes of the Spanish model – replicated across the EU – can be attributed to design and implementation. Instead, a confluence of time-specific geopolitical factors appeared to shape the route's temporary decline between 2008 and 2018.

It remains unclear whether a shift in diplomatic relations between Spain and Morocco will yield a sustained decrease in movement on the north-west African route. Spanish government opposition figures have already cast doubt on the efficacy of diplomatic attempts to engage with Morocco over migration, given the stubbornly high rates of arrivals from Morocco following a temporarily sharp lull in March 2022. However, it is premature to draw conclusions regarding their long-term effectiveness.[44]

# MIGRANT SMUGGLING AND MOBILITY TO THE CANARY ISLANDS

Broadly, migration routes via the north-west African route to the Canary Islands can be divided into three main categories: those from Morocco and Moroccan-administered Western Sahara; those from Mauritania; and those from Senegal and, to a lesser extent, Gambia. As with most irregular maritime migration, the majority of movement is facilitated by smugglers. The nature of the smuggling networks operating across each of these routes falls at different points on a spectrum from the most highly organized networks operating under the greatest degree of protection in Morocco, to the most loosely affiliated groups coordinating movement in Senegal, where some trips are even self-organized. Law enforcement investigations in the Canary Islands have confirmed that a number of smuggling networks, predominantly Moroccan, have elements based on the archipelago, facilitating onward movement towards mainland Europe, underscoring the degree of sophistication of some networks operating on this route.[45]

## Migrant smuggling from Morocco and Western Sahara to the Canary Islands

Most migrants arriving in the Canary Islands between 2020 and 2022 arrived from either Morocco or Moroccan-administered Western Sahara. According to multiple interviews with Moroccan migrants who made the journey to the Canary Islands in 2021 and 2022, as well as interviews with individuals with direct knowledge of smuggling activities in Morocco, beaches near Dakhla serve as the main points of departure. Secondary departure points include Tarfaya, Sidi Ifni, Safi, Tan Tan, Agadir and Laayoune.[46]

Although the vast majority of departures from Morocco are by nationals, to a degree, departure locations differ by nationality, with migrants from sub-Saharan Africa more likely to depart from Dakhla and Laayoune, whereas more northern departure points, such as Safi and Agadir, are predominantly used by Moroccan migrants. Boats departing Dakhla and Laayoune, however, are sometimes mixed, carrying both Moroccans and foreign migrants.

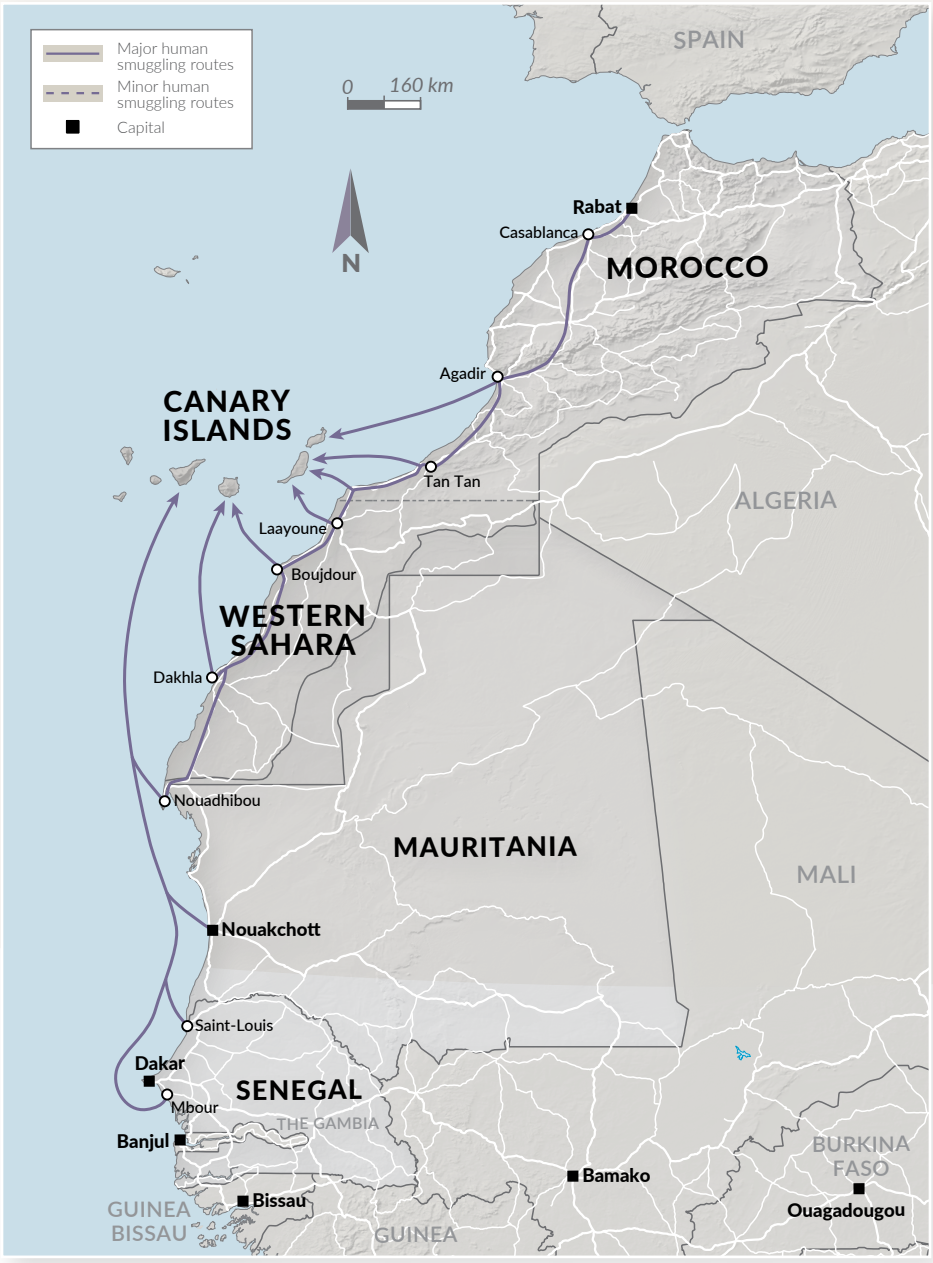


**FIGURE 2** Embarkation points, north-west African route, September 2022.

In turn, this has an impact on where migrants from different countries arrive in the Canary Islands. Boats leaving from Dakhla and its environs are most likely to arrive on the island of Gran Canaria, with Lanzarote and Fuerteventura more common points of arrival for boats departing from locations north of Laayoune. Disembarkation points are also shaped by seasonality, with changing currents and weather conditions typically meaning that more arrivals land on Tenerife, El Hierro and La Gomera in the second half of the year.

## Human smuggling networks

The overwhelming majority of migrants departing from Morocco and Western Sahara employ human smugglers. Human smuggling from the region towards the Canary Islands has been a mainstay of the migration process since the first use of the route in the 1990s.[47] Networks remain organized and at

least semi-hierarchical. At the top of these networks are Moroccan nationals who have experience smuggling multiple types of commodities, including various forms of contraband such as tobacco, alcohol and narcotics. They are reportedly well-connected to state authorities but are not part of state apparatus.[48]

Multiple Moroccan migrants in the Canary Islands refer to high-level smugglers by the moniker of *Hajj* (a broad term of respect in Arabic), and told the GI-TOC that *Hajj* handle engagements with authorities, in order to ensure safe departures.[49] In an interview with the Spanish newspaper *La Vanguardia*, one smuggler confirmed this, noting that he earned between €60 000 and €70 000 in October and November of 2020 (the average monthly salary in Morocco is €219) and paid a high-ranking police officer €10 000 per boat to make sure that maritime surveillance 'looks the other way' the night of departures.[50] Some *Hajj* may co-ordinate the departure of multiple boats in one night – one migrant reported that the smuggler he engaged organized the departure of four boats on the night he left. Migrants themselves, however, do not interact with these high-level actors and do not actually know the names of the *Hajj* at the top of a given network. One migrant explained: 'Have you heard of the Joker? He's like the Joker, you know he's there, but you never see him.'[51]

The actors operating as smugglers in Dakhla and its environs are almost all local Sahrawi, but several interviewees indicated that organized criminal groups, which operate along Morocco's north coast facilitating boat departures to the Spanish mainland, are also directly involved in the recruitment of prospective migrants to the Canary Islands via embarkation points in Western Sahara.[52] Recruitment and prepayment in source communities across Morocco, for example, can be interpreted as evidence that criminal networks from northern Morocco are implicated, as those in Dakhla would not have sufficient recruiters in other parts of Morocco.[53]

One researcher, for example, suggested that networks operating in northern Morocco had sent members south to Dakhla, partly because those groups based there did not have the capacity to coordinate smuggling on the scale seen since late 2020. A contact who interviewed migrants in Dakhla in early 2021 explained that some migrants who sought smuggling services to cross directly to the Spanish mainland from Morocco's north coast were instructed to go to Dakhla instead.[54] The emergence of locations as far north as Safi, as an embarkation point on the north-west African route, may be a further indication that criminal networks based in northern Morocco are more directly involved in organizing boat departures to the Canary Islands, given that the city is located considerably farther north than other points of departure.

**Aerial view of Dakhla, an embarkation point in Moroccan-administered Western Sahara.** © *Henryk Sadura / Alamy Stock Photo*

The other key actors in networks moving migrants from Morocco and Western Sahara are the individuals captaining the vessels, with each vessel typically manned by two such people. Those piloting migrant vessels tend to be a mix of members of smuggling networks, whose main interest is financial, and migrants themselves. It is unclear how frequently migrants captain the vessels, versus 'professional' smugglers, with migrants often instructed to promote a narrative that a given vessel was captained by migrants, so as to enable its captain to blend in and avoid detection from law enforcement authorities.[55]

However, it is clear that, for members of smuggling networks, captaining migrant vessels is highly lucrative, with the individuals paid as much as €6 000 for their services (more than double the average annual salary in Morocco).[56] Reportedly, this profitability has led to substantial recidivism, with judicial officials in the Canary Islands noting cases of captains being arrested, spending years in prison and then going back to smuggling after their release.[57]

For captains working as part of smuggling networks, returning from a smuggling voyage to the Canary Islands is often done legally. In some cases, smugglers deliberately recruit captains who have paperwork that will enable them to fly back to Morocco from the Canary Islands so as to make repeat trips. Law enforcement and judicial officials interviewed in the Canary Islands report that Moroccans who arrive in the Canary Islands irregularly have minimal difficulty boarding planes to leave the Canary Islands to return to Morocco, which makes it particularly easy for captains to return to Morocco without legal repercussions.[58] Migrants report that some captains go to the Red Cross upon arrival, express a willingness to return home and seek deportation as a free mode of return transport to Morocco.

In the past, there was some indication that 'professional' captains were also involved in the smuggling of cannabis resin to the Canary Islands, though not on the same journeys as migrants.[59] As the profitability of migrant smuggling has soared, migrants report that most captains have shifted their focus away from cannabis trafficking towards people smuggling.

### Prices and process of transit

In early 2022, sea crossings from southern Morocco and Western Sahara to the Canary Islands cost between €1 900 and €2 830, with sub-Saharan and foreign migrants often paying fees at the higher end of this range.[60] Prices have oscillated substantially over the previous years, however, with the cost in late-2020 and early 2021, for example, averaging around €2 000 (and reaching up to €3 000) while, in December 2021, prices stood between €1 300 and €2 000.[61] Price fluctuations are said to be the result of varying factors, including smugglers' ability to supply the growing demand for their services, points of departure, types of boat used, climatic conditions (typically, worse conditions engender lower prices) and the shifting levels of surveillance of Moroccan security services along the coast.[62] Prices also fluctuate significantly between seasons – with higher prices typically linked to the period between spring and early autumn, when the crossing is perceived to be easier due to calmer weather.

For migrants departing from southern Morocco and Western Sahara, the nature and complexity of smuggling journeys can differ substantially based on where an individual is coming from. For Moroccan nationals – the majority departing from the area – first contact with smuggling networks either occurs in their hometowns or upon arrival at departure areas.

As noted previously, smuggling networks in northern Morocco are increasingly active in recruiting migrants in the north and centre of the country for departures from the south. Interviewed migrants from Casablanca, Beni Mellal and villages in the Atlas Mountain range report being recruited in their hometowns by people connected to smuggling networks operating out of Western Sahara and, to a

**Women wait to buy fish off incoming boats at the port in Mbour, Senegal, 16 November 2020. Mbour has become a popular departure site for illegal migrants wanting to reach Europe.** *© John Wessels/AFP via Getty Images*

lesser extent, northern Morocco.[63] Once contact is made, and in some cases a payment sent, migrants travel either via overland public transportation or by aircraft to cities near departure locations. A contact who travelled to Dakhla by plane noted that the plane was full of young men from rural areas, who did not speak French, and were travelling with just a single backpack. It was clear, according to this contact, that they were intending to migrate. The contact further noted that Dakhla was full of groups of '20, 30, 40 guys with the same profile just passing the time until they were told it was time to go'.[64]

Some migrants report travelling to departure locations independently and contacting smuggling networks once there, often using social media or through local enquiries.[65] In 2022, some migrants reported that smuggling networks in Dakhla were operating more clandestinely, with contact details shared more carefully, as a result of heightened pressure from authorities.[66]

Some smugglers include food and pre-departure lodging in their prices, with migrants staying in hotels in departure cities, such as Dakhla, or makeshift camps on the outskirts of the city. Migrants with greater disposable income may opt to pay for their own hotels prior to departure, with some staying in Dakhla only a few days, others waiting until weather conditions become amenable to boat departures, and still others waiting while they find the right smugglers. The inclusion of pre-departure meals and short-term lodging, however, does not appear to be a salient factor in overall pricing.[67]

Migrants explained that, prior to departure, they assembled in large groups of around 40 in 'waiting houses' close to a beach. Vessels were brought to the departure areas by cars at night, where they are hidden among fishing boats on the beach.[68] The most common vessels used by smugglers on the north-west African route include traditional fishing boats and wooden vessels – constructed locally by craftsmen working directly for smugglers – as well as inflatables. Reportedly, after being constructed or procured, some boats are then buried in remote areas by smugglers, in order to avoid law enforcement interdiction. The smugglers then use GPS coordinates to locate and unearth the vessels prior to departure.[69] Starting in late 2020, the use of inflatable dinghies began to increase. As these are more fragile than wooden boats, it is more common for them to fail to complete the journey.[70]

At a departure location, lower-level actors within smuggling networks collect money from migrants who owe funds, and arrange logistics on the beach front. Many migrants report only paying at the beach, just before departure.[71] Migrants are often given false information regarding the number of motors, captains and people travelling on the boat. Some migrants report being transported on small boats or rubber tyres to reach a larger vessel stationed further out to sea, reportedly to reduce the risk of interception.

Migrants interviewed indicate that boats may depart from several different beaches on a given night, with some migrants reporting that departures were enabled by bribes paid by smugglers to security personnel.[72] Some migrants who had made the crossing from Dakhla in 2022 reported that, recently, it had become more difficult to embark without being intercepted by authorities.[73] Smugglers along this route do not offer deals that include multiple attempts or refunds should boats be intercepted at sea by Moroccan authorities.[74]

## Migrant smuggling from Mauritania to the Canary Islands

Migrant vessel launches from Mauritania date back to the first years of the early 2000s, with the northern port city of Nouadhibou historically serving as an important point of departure.[75] Launches from the country dropped substantially in the wake of the 2006 migrant crisis, in part due to joint-policing measures by the Mauritanian and Spanish governments.

Departures have increased over the last several years, propelled in large part by an increase in transit migration through the country by West Africans, with many, in particular, coming from the western Malian region of Kayes. The majority of migrants using this itinerary are ethnic Soninke or Bambara, who rely on contacts within their communities to share information, develop a system of trust between migrants and smugglers, and mitigate risk. Mauritanians from the Guidimaka region, who are also ethnic Soninke, also tap into these networks in the capital city, Nouakchott.

Mauritania is also preferred as an embarkation point by some Senegalese migrants because it reduces the time at sea by several days, compared with departures from Senegal.[76] From Mauritanian launch points, it can take up to a week or 10 days to reach the Canary Islands.

The beaches around Nouadhibou remain an important departure zone for migrants seeking to reach the Canary Islands. Departing from the area significantly shortens the amount of time at sea but requires networks to operate in areas that are heavily secured as part of the ongoing Mauritanian and Spanish policing measures. Over the last three years, for example, there have been several cases of Mauritanian authorities arresting and repatriating migrants travelling to or residing in Nouadhibou, who were reportedly preparing to board boats for the Canary Islands.[77]

Because of this securitization, areas around Nouakchott have risen in popularity as embarkation zones, despite the longer time at sea – and hence increased danger of accidents and death – in comparison to Nouadhibou.[78]

### Human smuggling networks

Most migrants departing from Mauritania engage with human smuggling networks, in some cases employing several of these for different legs of their journey. As with human smugglers in southern Morocco and Western Sahara, networks in Mauritania have been a mainstay of the migration process since early in the first decade of the 2000s.[79] These combine a cross-section of actors, including

The north-west African route is considered the most dangerous route to Europe, with an estimated ratio of one death for 20 every arrivals in 2021. © *NAHUM/AFP via Getty Images*

organizers, those tasked with recruiting migrants, vessel captains and individuals who engage with Mauritanian authorities.[80]

This basic model remains the norm in Mauritania, though in contrast to early in the initial years of the 2000s, networks at present are multi-national in composition. Most comprise Mauritanian and Malian nationals, with some Senegalese also involved in key roles.[81] Malian nationals, based in Nouakchott, play a key role in organizing trips and liaising directly with prospective Malian migrants.

Mauritanian nationals, in contrast, manage relationships with local authorities, ensuring that the government forces allow boats to go through. '[Smugglers] who end up with a boat with about 100 migrants, they can pay up to 500 000 ouguiyas (€11 550) or more to the [officials] to buy their silence,' explained a Malian contact in Nouakchott familiar with how smugglers there operate. While boats leaving from areas just north of Nouakchott may depart without complicity from Mauritanian security services, contacts in Mauritania indicate that boats cannot depart from Nouadhibou without making such arrangements. Several migrants report failed embarkation attempts from the areas around Nouakchott, where boats had been intercepted by authorities, the boat seized and those aboard jailed.[82] Such reports indicate breaches in protection structures, and that some smugglers seek to operate without state complicity.

Finally, Senegalese nationals play a role in maritime transport. Reportedly, Senegalese living and working in Mauritania, often as fisherman or in the fishing industry, shuttle migrants out to sea in small boats, before transferring them to larger vessels – which can carry up to 100 people – for the journey north. According to key informants in Senegal and Mauritania, these larger vessels are captained by migrants, who are offered free passage in exchange for their services. The majority of the captains are Senegalese nationals, who have prior experience as fishermen.[83]

### Prices and process of transit

According to two key informants with direct knowledge of how the networks operate in Nouakchott and Kayes, as well as a migrant interviewed by the GI-TOC in the Canary Islands, who travelled by boat via Nouakchott, migrants pay between €1 300 and €1 525 for a place on a boat. Similar networks are said to operate out of the northern Mauritanian city of Nouadhibou.[84]

For migrants from western Mali, contact is often made with smugglers before leaving home. Contacts in Kayes and in Nouakchott explained that Malian migrants are instructed by smugglers to take public transport from Kayes or Bamako to Nouakchott.[85] Migrants may cross directly into Mauritania using the border crossing at Gogui, or go via Senegal, crossing into Mauritania near Saint-Louis.

While Mauritania is not a member of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), Malians do not require a visa to enter the country, easing movement. Nonetheless, reportedly, Mauritanian security forces have kept a close watch on the border, leading some migrants to engage with local smugglers for transit from western Mali to Nouakchott or Nouadhibou, paying FCFA200 000, with the migrants moved in small buses.

Once in Nouakchott or Nouadhibou, migrants contact smugglers using phone numbers which are circulated on WhatsApp groups. Once in the city, 'they wait until they reach a large number … to be transported in boats to Europe,' explained a contact in Nouakchott who works directly with Malian migrants.[86]

A somewhat similar dynamic exists for the smaller number of Senegalese migrants transiting through Mauritania. There, members of the Senegalese diaspora who live and work in the country, many as seasonal fishermen, act as liaisons linking Senegalese migrants to smugglers in Nouakchott.[87]

## Migrant smuggling from Senegal

While the number of Senegalese migrants reaching the Canary Islands has dipped in comparison to other nationalities, mainly Moroccans and Malians, the country remains an important origination zone for migrant maritime journeys north. The two most prominent points of departure according to interviews with migrants and local contacts in Senegal as well as in the Canary Islands are Mbour, located approximately 70 kilometres south of the capital, Dakar, and Saint-Louis, located in northern Senegal on the border with Mauritania.[88]

Senegalese migrants interviewed in the Canary Islands, as well as journalists and local contacts in Senegal, indicate that beaches near Mbour were the more popular launching points in 2020 and into 2021.[89] Although Saint-Louis is in northern Senegal, and therefore requires fewer days at sea to reach the Canary Islands, Mbour is a more prominent hub for boat departures due its larger population and its ease of access for migrants from throughout the broader region. Mbour also has a history as a source community for prospective migrants, many of whom have family who have migrated to Europe, both regularly and irregularly, over the last two decades.[90]

Boats departing from Senegal can take between five to 11 days to reach the Canary Islands, depending on a range of factors, including the course taken by boat captains, an encounter with or need to evade authorities at sea, weather conditions and point of embarkation. The vast majority of those departing from Senegal are Senegalese nationals, although contacts in Senegal as well as in the Canary Islands did report that some migrants from Guinea, Gambia, Mali and, to a lesser extent, Guinea-Bissau, are also present.[91] Migrants in the Canary Islands and key informants in Senegal report that most boats carry between 130 and 250 people and are powered by two engines.[92]

**Senegalese nationals from fishing communities regularly cite the problem of overfishing by Chinese and European vessels as a key driver behind migration.** *© John Wessels/AFP via Getty Images*

## Migrant transport networks

Whereas irregular maritime departures from Morocco and, less so, Mauritania, are facilitated by organized networks of smugglers, local contacts and migrants in Senegal and the Canary Islands indicate that the actors facilitating migrant departures in Senegal are much less organized. Several people interviewed, for example, pushed back against the description of 'organized' migrant smuggling 'networks'.

'I don't think we should even talk about networks. It's not even a network. These are individual people who have their own canoe. There are those who are in the milieu – that is to say former fishermen who have their canoes – who do it because they know the route,' explained a local government official in Mbour. This official said that, while there are actors who arrange departures and may even provide financing to make them happen, they are individuals operating 'in their own corner' rather than as part of networks that span different locations throughout the country or coastline.[93] Civil society stakeholders working with Senegalese migrants in the Canary Islands corroborate this view of a broadly unstructured dynamic.[94]

While some migrants and key informants suggest that departures are not organized and carried out by groups of people from fishing communities, there is some evidence that certain actors are implicated in organizing and arranging multiple trips.[95]

Those arranging boat departures are very discrete, aiming to avoid detection by Senegalese authorities as well as local community leaders, who are actively discouraging young men from their communities from risking their lives at sea. As a result, those organizing boat departures tell trusted sources just prior to departure to put out the word that a boat may be leaving and pay their contacts as much as €30–€40 per client that they recruit.

Functionally, migrant smuggling from Senegal to the Canary Islands is a social process in which individual actors collaborate to facilitate boat departures. Although there may be roles and responsibilities that are carried out by various actors as trips are arranged, these relationships are generally ad hoc and take place within the context of organic community structures, rather than as part of existing, clearly discernible smuggling networks.

Nonetheless, the absence of highly organized networks does not entail a lack of rigour and preparation on the part of the ad hoc networks operating from Senegal. Trip organizers also recruit mechanics to make sure that boat engines are in good condition. 'There are some captains when they come, they hide. They don't say why they bring their engines here. They don't want people to know that they are in preparation for a trip to Spain,' explained one mechanic in Mbour. 'Others say directly, "I'm getting ready to go to Spain. You have to check the engine very well because it is a distance which is quite long."'[96]

Further evidence of preparation can be seen prior to boat departures, with those involved in smuggling reportedly studying the times at which the Senegalese navy patrols certain areas, in order to mitigate the risk of being caught. In contrast with other routes to the Canary Islands, there were few reports of direct bribery or complicity with security or defence forces in Senegal.[97]

As with other routes to the Canary Islands, captains play a key role in departures from Senegal. This role is often fulfilled by migrants who have a fishing background and can navigate the sea. Unlike departures from Morocco/Western Sahara, captains of boats from Senegal are reported to always stay in the Canary Islands or move on to Europe, and do not carry out their activities with the intention of facilitating multiple trips.[98]

According to one Senegalese migrant interviewed in the Canary Islands, his cohort had a meeting before boarding the boat, in which they all agreed not to tell the Spanish authorities who captained the boat, and to say that they had not used a smuggler but, rather, had pooled money together to fund the trip, and that the captain had 'fallen overboard' during the journey.[99] Similarly, a group of four Senegalese migrants in Tenerife told the GI-TOC that 'there is no captain', and that 'we are all captains'.[100]

### Prices and process of transport

Interviews with migrants in the Canary Islands and local contacts in Senegal indicate that migrants departing from Senegal generally pay between €450 and €760, although interviewees did report prices as high as €1 500.[101] Migrants from Mbour, for example, who may have personal or even familial relationships with various actors arranging boat departures, are likely to pay prices at the lower end of this scale. Senegalese nationals who travel to Mbour, as well as non-Senegalese nationals, can expect to pay more.[102] Those who captain the boats are typically allowed to travel for free, and may also be compensated by free passage for a family member.

'We prepared the canoe and we asked those who wanted to leave in secret, and we told them the amount to pay,' explained one fisherman in Mbour who organized a trip to the Canary Islands that was ultimately unsuccessful after engine failure. 'You tell them the amount you have. If you are a fisherman, they will help you on the price of transport, but if you are not a fisherman, you pay more.'[103]

Migrants departing from Senegal pay the entire amount up front, in cash, often a few days in advance of departure. Smugglers contact them by telephone shortly before the boat is prepared, providing them with the beach location as close to departure as possible to avoid information leaking to the authorities. To finance trips, migrants report selling land or professional wares (as was the case of a tailor who gave his sewing machine as collateral), as well as using family savings.[104]

'We combined our savings plus the savings of our loved ones and we organized the trip,' explained one fisherman in Mbour who tried to reach the Canary Islands. 'We did this because we live in a big family and we have to help our parents who are counting on us. We did not take the canoe to commit suicide or die, but we are leaving to help our parents.' According to this fisherman, ultimately, his cohort decided to turn the boat around after six days at sea when an engine failed and their GPS device no longer worked.[105]

Typically, journeys for migrants start with finding out that plans exist for the departure of a vessel from their area. Due to the general discretion of Senegalese transporters, such news tends to circulate through word of mouth, and with instructions or directions usually only provided through peer-to-peer messaging apps like WhatsApp relatively close to the date of departure.[106]

One local government official in Mbour described the process as follows:

> My friend was working at the fishing quay when a fisherman approached him and said to him, 'Are you interested in leaving? There is a boat leaving next week.' The fisherman then gave my friend the smuggler's phone number. My friend called the smuggler and the smuggler said he needed to meet him in person to give the details of the boat, because he couldn't trust him just over the phone.[107]

Nonetheless, there is opportunity for migrants to be proactive in seeking out smugglers. One community leader in Mbour explained, 'You go to the beach and you ask, and it is word of mouth.'[108] This was echoed by three Senegalese migrants interviewed by the GI-TOC in the Canary Islands, who

**Disused fishing nets are seen along the coastline in Mbour, November 2020. Lack of work for youth and dwindling fish stocks are driving young Senegalese fishermen to seek opportunities elsewhere.** *©John Wessels/AFP via Getty Images*

said that they had informed a smuggler that they wanted to leave only days before their departure, and received notice of the location for embarkation by WhatsApp just hours before it took place.[109]

Migrants often leave without telling their family members, which is both a means of avoiding family pressure not to go, but also to avoid news of a departure from being reported by family members and community leaders to the authorities. This practice of mutual discretion, by both smugglers and migrants themselves, allows for boat departures to continue despite concerted efforts by Senegalese authorities to intercept boats at sea, as well as efforts by community organizations to deter and dissuade prospective migrants.[110]

'We hide it. No one wants even their neighbour to know what they are doing,' explained one fisherman who had previously attempted to reach the Canary Islands.[111] Another fisherman, who also tried to reach the Canary Islands, echoed these sentiments. 'It is not information that we say out loud, but between friends and brothers we pass the information easily because we have the same associates.'[112]

## Embarkations from further south

Embarkations from as far south as Gambia have been reported.[113] Importantly, the trend of departures from the Gambian capital of Banjul, and the port town of Barra further north, existed prior to the onset of COVID-19. Two noteworthy instances of Gambian migrants either dying or being rescued off the coast of Mauritania, having departed from Gambian shores, occurred in 2019.[114] The nature of smuggling networks involved – or even whether these networks exist – is unclear.

The IOM also outlines that, in some cases, embarkations occur as far south as Guinea-Bissau and Guinea.[115] That Guineans were the fifth most common nationality identified as migrating to the Canary Islands irregularly in 2020 lends weight to this.[116] These could be migrants who travelled overland prior to embarking by sea from further north, as Guineans and even Ivorians have been identified as leaving from as far north as Dakhla. Some sources mention embarkations directly from Guinea, but they do not provide detailed description.[117] None of the migrants interviewed by the GI-TOC in the Canary Islands had embarked from Guinea or Guinea-Bissau.

A man is pictured in a 'boat cemetery' in Arinaga, Gran Canaria, 18 November 2020.
*© Lluis Gene/AFP via Getty Images*

## Smuggling from the Canary Islands

While most attention has been given to the processes of migrant arrivals in the Canary Islands, another form of movement – that from the Canary Islands to the Spanish and European mainland – is also important here.

Once in the Canary Islands, migrants may seek to travel to mainland Spain by purchasing flight or ferry tickets independently.[118] Despite these regular, legal routes to the Spanish mainland, police harassment and blockages at ports of exit (explored further below) have provided a natural market for actors who offer 'services' that can guarantee exit off the island. In Gran Canaria, migrants also reported using clandestine routes independently – predominantly seeking to stowaway on trucks being shipped to the mainland – to leave the archipelago.

According to migrants interviewed in the Canary Islands, there are several individuals who come to migrant camps and offer opportunities to travel to the Spanish mainland, claiming that they can acquire travel documents and a plane ticket, for €1 000. Moroccan migrants in Gran Canaria told the GI-TOC that these individuals are Maghrebi and leave their number at camps in case migrants want to contact them.[119] 'Some are honest, some are not so honest and will steal the money. People have had good and bad experiences,' one migrant explained.[120] Stakeholders in Tenerife reported that there are also West African nationals offering services to facilitate the journey to mainland Spain. While some of these individuals operate autonomously, law enforcement investigations in the Canary Islands have also identified a number of networks operating on the islands, predominantly as part of larger organizations with elements also in source countries, most commonly Morocco.

# OLD DRIVERS, NEW URGENCY

Economic concerns are at the forefront of reasons for migration on the north-west African route. This was amplified, although not initiated, by the COVID-19 pandemic. Irregular migration on this route increased markedly in the preceding years of 2018 and 2019, before sharply spiking in 2020.[121] Interviews with migrants, community leaders and local researchers indicate that, although a perceived lack of economic opportunities is the main motivating factor behind decisions to migrate, this long-standing, structural driver has been multiplied in numerous ways by the pandemic. The existing trend of increased border controls across alternative irregular routes into Europe was accelerated further by the pandemic, displacing movement onto the north-west African route.

While COVID-19 was not cited as a driver of migration in its own right, many interviewed by the GI-TOC report that the economic impact of the pandemic had pushed them from situations of economic precariousness to desperation. Economic hardships brought on by lockdowns, and the subsequent decline in industries such as hospitality and tourism, are a major factor. More importantly, the informal economies in West and North Africa are major employers but are also ones that received the least in terms of government support in the wake of the pandemic. Many who choose migration work in the informal sector.[122] A different take indicated by interviewees is that less time working means more time to think about one's prospects and to plan one's departure.[123]

Important in the context of the pandemic was a belief that a labour shortage existed in Europe due to the great number of COVID-19-related deaths on the continent. Although an erroneous assumption, given that most of these deaths were of retirees (i.e. people who were not economically active), the belief motivated many to migrate.[124]

The second-order effects of COVID-19 on source communities are many and hard to overstate. One migrant from Senegal who tried unsuccessfully to cross to the Canary Islands, for example, told the GI-TOC that he is a tailor but could no longer make a living because public gatherings had been banned due to COVID-19 measures. His clients were mostly fishermen who would use the money they made fishing to commission new outfits for celebrations such as weddings, baptisms and religious festivals. He was so desperate that he sold his sewing machines as collateral to help finance his journey.[125]

Similarly, interviews with both prospective migrants and those who tried unsuccessfully to reach the Canary Islands reported a general frustration with the political trajectory of Senegal, citing harassment by security forces who were imposing curfews (and asking for bribes in the process) as a factor in their decision to migrate.[126] Several Senegalese nationals said that these quotidian frustrations, combined with increasingly authoritarian measures being used to stifle political dissent in Senegal, were factors

in their decisions to migrate.[127] Similar critiques of political trajectories, corruption and repression of dissenting voices were also identified by Moroccan and Mauritanian migrants in the Canary Islands as drivers of migration.

## Decline in local industry driving increased movement

Many key informants interviewed in Senegal, Morocco and the Canary Islands, for example, report that the collapse of the tourism and hospitality industries due to restrictions on international travel was a key driver behind their decision to migrate.[128] Those in Morocco said that restrictions on mobility have disproportionately affected those who work in the informal economy, a labour demographic that is least likely to have savings or access to government support.[129] Multiple Moroccan migrants interviewed say that they were searching for higher-paying opportunities in Europe because they are no longer able to cobble together a living in the agricultural sector, working in construction, stocking shelves at supermarkets or working as fruit vendors.[130]

'The rich get richer, the poor get poorer,' explained one Moroccan migrant interviewed in the Canary Islands, who said that, despite his background as a soldier and having spent a year studying at a university, he was not able to get a job because of entrenched nepotism.[131] Many Moroccan migrants interviewed echo these sentiments, citing lack of employment opportunities as their motivation for migrating to Europe.[132]

This has been compounded by drought in the country. Reportedly, many migrants in Dakhla waiting to make the voyage come from drought-stricken areas such as the towns of Beni-Mellal, El Kalaa des Sraghna and Fquih Ben Salah.[133]

Senegalese nationals from fishing communities regularly cite the problem of overfishing by Chinese and European vessels as a key driver behind migration. These sentiments have been expressed previously by Dr Aliou Ba, a political advisor for the environmental organization Greenpeace in Senegal, in a December 2020 interview with *The New Humanitarian*. 'Especially in the last two or three years, there are a lot of [foreign] boats that have been authorized to fish in Senegalese waters.'[134] An October 2020 report from Greenpeace set out that an already unsustainable situation was exacerbated by the pandemic. Unfair competition between artisanal fishermen and fishmongers on one side, and large foreign corporations on the other, contributes to the rapidly declining local fish stocks.[135]

'We only relied on the sea and the government sold the sea,' said one Senegalese national who survived a boat wreck off the coast of Mauritania trying to reach the Canary Islands. 'Financially, I am the one who manages the house and what I could do before I no longer can. I relied on the sea for my needs but now there are no more fish,' he told the GI-TOC. 'The boats prevent us from doing our work. We can no longer find fish because of their nets.'[136] 'At night they [foreign vessels] don't limit themselves to the area where they have to limit themselves,' explained another Senegalese national, who purchased a place on a boat leaving for the Canary Islands but ultimately decided not to migrate. 'In the morning, with our small canoes, we do not find fish because the big boats have taken everything.'[137]

In Mali, interviewees indicated that growing migration is being driven by economic hardship in Kayes and Sikasso, combined with food insecurity amid rising food prices.

Taken as a whole, the structural issues of economic inequality and lack of opportunity, which are further exacerbated throughout much of North and West Africa by the impact of COVID-19, will continue to serve as a driver for migration to Europe.

## Cultural stigma and societal pressures

These drivers are reinforced further by the fact that many migrants have seen, first-hand, the economic benefits of irregular migration to Europe. 'If I still see a canoe leaving for Spain today, I am leaving,' explained one Senegalese migrant who took a boat to the Canary Islands in 2006 but was later deported. 'In our locality, almost everyone's gone and when he comes back, he builds houses and buys two or three cars. You who stay here can't even buy one brick.'[138]

Cultural stigma is an often-overlooked factor too. The shame associated with not being able to provide for one's family, sometimes at the behest of family members themselves, prompts many to risk death in pursuit of a better life.[139] Further motivation is the presence of those who, after successfully making the journey to Europe, return, able to buy luxury goods, presenting an image of affluence to prospective migrants.[140]

Nonetheless, there is some recognition that perceptions of luxury and opportunity in Europe offer a selective narrative of the opportunities and challenges facing migrants. Migrants interviewed in the Canary Islands in 2021 emphasized the poor conditions of housing, the lack of employment opportunities on the Canary Islands and the difficulties in moving on to the Spanish mainland as unexpected obstacles in their journey. One interviewee did report that his brother in Spain is actively advising people not to come due to lack of employment opportunities. He also indicated that videos made by migrants during their trip or after they have recently arrived are generally positive and encouraging, whereas content created by those who have been in Spain for longer periods offers more mixed narratives.[141] Typically, videos of crossings from Morocco, widely circulated back home, depict men dancing and singing, and are reportedly used as marketing material by smuggling networks.

## Why the north-west African route? Migrant perceptions

Proximity to the West African coast is important in terms of perceived accessibility for migrants. Those interviewed in the Canary Islands espoused the belief that the route was the quickest and most direct to Europe, prompting many to choose this avenue.[142] Accounts given by acquaintances of prospective migrants who had taken the journey previously were also cited as key factors in encouraging others to follow.[143]

Although closer to points of departure than other well-traversed routes to Europe, the north-west African route is regarded as the most dangerous, with an estimated ratio of one death to every 40 arrivals on the Canary Islands as of early 2021,[144] an estimate that increased to about one death for every 20 arrivals for 2021 as a whole.[145] These estimates are based on IOM figures, widely perceived to be a conservative reading of fatalities – ratios are far higher if using data collated by other civil society organizations, including Caminando Fronteras. Many migrants were unaware that they were being taken to the Canary Islands, or even that the islands existed, only to find themselves taken there instead of mainland Spain.[146] The danger associated with travel along this route is cited as a reason for smugglers to withhold information from migrants so as not to discourage them from undertaking the journey.[147] However, most migrants interviewed in the Canary Islands reported being well aware of the dangers of the north-west African route prior to embarkation.

# RESPONSES BY THE SPANISH GOVERNMENT

Spain's long-standing tripartite approach to quashing movement on the north-west African route – border securitization and externalization, surveillance and deportations, and economic and development aid to source countries – has been rolled out once again in the wake of the rise in migration after 2019, with few modifications.[148] Those changes that have been made largely relate to the isolation of arrivals on the Canary Islands, effectively seeking to draw an imaginary border between archipelago and mainland; and the difficulties to deportations posed by COVID-19-induced border closures.

By 2019, when arrivals started materially increasing, reception infrastructure built in the wake of the 2006 spike in arrivals had been largely dismantled, leaving the Canary Islands poorly equipped to handle the substantial rise in arrivals. Spanish authorities are accused of failing to act. Despite Frontex and Spanish intelligence agency warnings issued since 2018 that the north-west African route was intensifying, the 2020 surge triggered a crisis response.[149]

Because of this, corners were reportedly cut in the government's response, breaching human rights and the rule of law.[150] Repeatedly, due process was allegedly ignored regarding irregular arrivals, including failure to provide legal assistance. Similarly, returns procedures are said to have been repeatedly breached, rendering many legally null and void.[151] These procedural breaches heightened risks that arrivals eligible for international protection did not receive it. For example, it is widely claimed that many Malian nationals arriving in the Canary Islands were deported to Mauritania without having their right to apply for asylum explained to them.[152] Throughout 2020, when 4 126 Malian nationals arrived in the Canary Islands irregularly, only 189 (under 5%) requested asylum – this figure spiked in 2021 after human rights defenders signalled procedural breaches.[153]

Border externalization continued, with ongoing emphasis on bilateral relationships centred on migration with Senegal, Mauritania and Morocco.[154] March 2022 saw a sharp reversal in Spain's position on the sovereignty of Western Sahara, which had been a source of tension with Morocco over the previous year. Spain moved away from its traditionally neutral stance and, instead, effectively recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the contested region.[155]

**Las Raices camp, the largest in Tenerife until its closure in 2022, was notoriously ill-equipped.** *© David Ramos/Getty Images*

This about-face came after three months in which irregular arrivals from Morocco to Spain far exceeded those of the previous year. On 8 April, Morocco and Spain signalled a 'new phase' in diplomatic relations, signing an agreement that committed the parties to 'relaunch and reinforce cooperation in the ambit of migration', underscoring the relationship between Spain's diplomatic position on Western Sahara and Morocco's cooperation on migration management. Increased deployment of Spanish maritime patrols is envisaged to be part of the measures adopted in the framework of the new agreement. Spanish government spokespersons emphasized the impact of the agreement, citing that, since it was reached, 40% of boats seeking to embark from Morocco towards the Canary Islands were being intercepted by Moroccan and Spanish authorities.[156] It has not been possible to verify these figures; however, official statistics of irregular arrivals on the north-west African route demonstrate a decline in the second quarter of 2022.

Policies initially also appeared to sketch an unlawful border for irregular migrants and refugees between the Canary Islands and the Spanish mainland (and consequently the rest of the EU). Mirroring approaches taken in other irregular migration entry points on Europe's outer borders, such as Lampedusa and Lesvos, Spanish authorities limited official transfers from the Canary Islands to the mainland and were widely perceived by stakeholders in the Canary Islands to have temporarily blocked irregular arrivals reaching the mainland independently.[157] Between December 2020 and April 2021, when a court in the Canary Islands reiterated the illegality of such actions, migrants and refugees seeking to travel lawfully from the Canary Islands to the Spanish mainland, by air or sea, reported being prevented from doing so.[158] Many, although certainly not all, migrants endured poor housing conditions in the

Canary Islands, particularly in the notoriously ill-equipped Las Raices, the largest camp in Tenerife, which closed in 2022.[159] These, together with the perceived attempted blockage of migrants in the Canary Islands, were believed by many stakeholders there to have formed an aspect of a wider policy toolkit designed in part to deter would-be travellers.[160] Both the blockage and the poor conditions were reported by migrants in the Canary Islands to communities back home, but this appeared to have little effect on arrival figures.[161]

COVID-19-related border closures rendered returns – a key element of the EU's migration strategy, and historically central to Spanish authorities' approaches[162] – largely impossible between 2020 and March 2022, with only sporadic deportation flights in the intervening period.[163] Deportations, most commonly to Laayoune on the weekly Air Maroc flight from Gran Canaria,[164] have been dogged by allegations of malpractice, with the rights of migrants and refugees to challenge deportation orders reportedly breached, and expired deportation orders allegedly used as the unlawful basis for deportation.[165]

Cumulatively, these reports from migrants and refugees in the Canary Islands, and stakeholders working closely to support them, paint a concerning picture of disregard for international and national legal frameworks governing migration and safeguarding the rights of migrants and refugees.[166] Nonetheless, many migrants and refugees also reported good housing conditions, and many stakeholders noted that elements of the response have strengthened over time.

# CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated long-standing structural drivers of irregular migration across the north-west African route, contributing to a surge in movement, with drastic humanitarian impacts – both regarding fatalities at sea and the human rights breaches of those disembarking in the Canary Islands, particularly in the first year of the route's reopening. A number of trends – including the increased use of inflatable dinghies on some crossings – appear to be making the route even deadlier, with 2021 the worst year on record.

Economic strain in countries across West and North Africa continues to be the principal catalyst for movement along the north-west African route. Currently, such pressure looks set to deepen, as spiralling global inflation rates, triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, are forcing up the prices of staple items, fuelling hunger and discontent.[167] Climate change, which is reducing harvest yields across many regions in West Africa, further compounds long-term economic stresses. Analysis of drivers would therefore point to sustained high levels of movement across this route. Furthermore, it is clear that a number of campaigns aiming to deter movement, including through awareness raising, in key destination countries such as Mali, have had little impact.[168]

While a shift in diplomatic relations between Spain and Morocco may herald a medium-term decline in movement across the Canary Islands route due to enhanced enforcement in Morocco, this will only hold while diplomatic relations remain warm and is unlikely to prove a sustainable long-term solution. As one government official in Mbour, Senegal, noted regarding the structural drivers of movement across the Canary Islands route: 'When the sea is going to be calm, as long as the problem of youth employment is not resolved, there will always be illegal immigration'.[169]

Safeguarding the rights of those moving irregularly should, therefore, be a key policy priority, and bilateral relationships built around migration management should not enable deportation and repatriation approaches that breach the human rights of those on the move.

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150 In a March 2021 report, the Defensor Del Pueblo concluded that the Spanish system 'is not effective in offering dignified reception systems'. These include the unlawful detention of migrants in the Port of Arguineguin in late 2020 in conditions widely reported to breach Article 3 of the European Human Rights Convention, and the enduringly poor conditions at several migrant detention camps on the islands. In Las Raices, located in one of the coldest and most humid areas of Tenerife, migrants slept in leaking tents, causing widespread illness. Key informant interviews in the Canary Islands, March/April 2021. Interviews with migrants in Las Raices, journalists, civil society activists and health professionals in Tenerife, Gran Canaria, March 2021.

151 The right to legal assistance is enshrined in international and Spanish law, and includes the right to see a lawyer, in the company of an interpreter if necessary, prior to the signing of any expulsion order. This did not happen in many cases, rendering many expulsion orders null and void due to breach of due process. Interview with Daniel Arencibia Borrego, lawyer, Gran Canaria, 12 March 2021. See, among others: *Abogacía Española*, *La Subcomisión de Extranjería denuncia la falta de asistencia jurídica a inmigrantes llegados a Canarias*, 11 November 2020, https://www.abogacia.es/actualidad/noticias/la-subcomision-de-extranjeria-denuncia-la-falta-de-asistencia-juridica-a-inmigrantes-llegados-a-canarias.

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GLOBAL INITIATIVE
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## ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 600 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

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This report was corrected on 11 May 2023.
Irregular entries into the EU from more than one other route exceeded those on the North-West route in 2022.