

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS  
- NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

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**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# MOROCCO

IRREGULAR MIGRATION EBBS  
AS RABAT CRACKS DOWN ON  
HUMAN SMUGGLING

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## INTRODUCTION

**F**or the last two decades, Morocco has been a key hub for mixed migratory flows. It represents a key country of origin, with 115 460 Moroccan migrants intercepted by European authorities between 2009 and 2022.<sup>1</sup> This flow predominantly involves direct transit between Morocco and Spain (including the Canary Islands), with 60%, or 70 185 Moroccan migrants, arriving through these routes.<sup>2</sup> The country has also assumed importance as a staging point for foreign migrants and asylum seekers trying to get to Europe, with many, though not all, from sub-Saharan Africa. The level of foreign migration via Morocco has oscillated over the last decade. However, foreign migrants continue to attempt crossing via land routes into Spain's enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, and maritime routes to mainland Spain and the Canary Islands.

In 2022, despite Morocco grappling with overlapping crises that delayed the country's post-COVID recovery and exacerbated factors traditionally driving migration, there was a decrease in arrivals to Spain from and through Morocco. The primary decline came on the Canary Islands route, which registered 15 682 arrivals, a decrease of 32% from the previous year. While the route involves migrants embarking from Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia, it is likely that the decline in movement is attributable to changing dynamics in Morocco. In fact, Morocco acted as a key launching point for most migrant arrivals in the Canary Islands between 2020 and 2022.<sup>3</sup> While the early months of 2022 saw substantial smuggling activities along this route in continuation of dynamics observed during the last quarter of 2021, departures from southern Morocco and Western Sahara dropped after March.

At the same time, migrant departures from the northern shores of Morocco to the Spanish mainland, the second most important route between the two countries during 2022, mostly continued at a slow pace throughout the year. In 2022, 14 213 sea arrivals to mainland Spain were recorded (involving departures from Morocco and Algeria).<sup>4</sup> This represents a 25% decline from 2021, with most migrants detected likely to have departed from Algeria rather than Morocco. The decrease in departures along this route is aligned with trends observed since 2019, with a steady drop in arrivals across this migratory path given increased efforts by Morocco to lock this route, enhanced cooperation with the EU and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Besides its role as a transit hub, Morocco continues to be an important country of origin for migrants. Reflecting broader migratory patterns, Moroccan sea arrivals to Spain decreased by around 16% during 2022 across the Canary Islands and Western Mediterranean routes. However, Rabat's shift in approach to irregular migration has altered dynamics for the movement of Moroccan migrants,

who increasingly attempted sea crossings from the north of the country, particularly during the high season of migration, with embarkations towards the Canaries increasingly seen as more costly and deadly.

The overall drop in migrant movement through Morocco appears to be mainly linked to geopolitics. Specifically, the decrease in irregular migration occurred amid a diplomatic rapprochement between Rabat and Madrid in which Spain endorsed Morocco's position on the Western Sahara conflict. In the wake of the easing of tensions between both sides, Moroccan authorities systematically clamped down on irregular migration, including tightening border controls along the country's coastline and forcibly moving foreign irregular migrants away from coastal cities and embarkation zones.

However, the decline in movement was not even across the country. The Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, for instance, saw land arrivals rise by 53% in 2022. The proliferation of mass entry attempts into these cities took place in a context marked by worsening conditions for foreign irregular migrants in Morocco, raising human rights concerns over authorities' handling of these events on both sides of the border.

While the government's counter-smuggling efforts disrupted maritime departures, there are indications that smuggling groups adapted to the shifting context. Notably, smugglers sought to maintain their activities by changing departure locations, diversifying services provided to migrants and seeking to co-opt low-level government officials. Nevertheless, strengthened border enforcement operations appear to have undermined organized groups' capacities to adjust their modus operandi quickly.

Despite the overall drop in migration from and through Morocco during 2022, it is likely that interest in movement through the country will remain elevated. Sustained demand for movement indicates that smuggling groups will continue to diversify their offer and methods as they seek to adapt to increased surveillance. Geopolitical factors and entrenched migration drivers in Morocco and the broader region suggest that the north African country will continue to play a central role in the regional migration landscape.

## Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2022 – the reporting period for this study – field researchers in the region collected data through semi-structured interviews with smugglers, migrants, community members, transporters, NGO personnel, international observers and others.

Open-source data relevant to human smuggling and trafficking was systematically collected and analyzed on a weekly basis. This data was used to formulate questions and inquiry areas for field research and validate field interviews collected by researchers.

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed in this brief are inherently opaque and the geographic areas covered often remote, volatile or difficult to access. Because of this, the brief should be viewed as a snapshot that will feed into future reporting and analysis from the GI-TOC that is planned to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics in Morocco and the broader region.





## ARRIVALS IN SPAIN DECREASE AS RABAT CLAMPS DOWN ON SMUGGLING

**A** complex combination of factors drives irregular migration from Morocco to Spain. These include unemployment, deteriorating public services and stark regional disparities – all structural challenges accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Geographical proximity further facilitates mobility between the two countries, with only 13 kilometres separating Morocco from Spain at the closest point across the strait of Gibraltar. The two countries also share land borders through Spain's North African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla.

The Moroccan economy began to bounce back from its pandemic-related recession in 2021. However, the conflict in Ukraine and rising global inflation froze this recovery. In particular, the Ukraine war has presented a substantial inflation challenge, given that Morocco's second- and third-largest suppliers of soft wheat are Ukraine and Russia, supplying 25% and 11% of imports, respectively.<sup>5</sup> Coupled with the war-induced price hikes, Morocco grappled in 2022 with an exceptional drought, the worst in decades, which has meant poor harvests.

Moroccans have felt the impact of rising prices in their daily lives. While there have not been any notable shortages of commodities from the markets, price hikes – particularly of food and fuel – put a strain on people's purchasing power. Inflation soared to reach 8.3% towards the end of 2022, up from 1.4% in 2021.<sup>6</sup>

It is not all bleak, however, as the Moroccan phosphate industry is set to benefit from global fertilizer supply shortages, caused by sanctions against Russia, the leading phosphate producer.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, Morocco's economic growth stands at around 1.2% in 2022, down from 7.9% during 2021.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, interest in migration remained high, not only among Moroccans but even more among foreign undocumented migrants living in the country. Over the course of 2022, the situation for these irregular migrants deteriorated, even as they faced increasing obstacles in reaching Europe, when the Moroccan government moved to stem maritime migrant flows.

Following a rapprochement with the Spanish government, which hinged on a recognition of Rabat's claims on the disputed Western Sahara, Moroccan authorities enacted a systematic clampdown on irregular migration across different parts of the country. Among other measures, this took the form

of raids on migrants' houses and makeshift camps, and forced transfers of undocumented individuals away from coastal areas towards interior cities and areas near the border with Algeria.

This has accentuated these migrants' vulnerability. Raids on houses have meant that migrants are increasingly living in a climate of fear. According to testimonies in the press and on social media, police raids often take place at night, leading migrants in some cases to leave their houses in the late afternoon, hide throughout the night and return the next morning. In one instance in early June in Laayoune, the largest city in Western Sahara, one sub-Saharan migrant broke his arm as he jumped from the third floor of a building to avoid arrest by the police.<sup>9</sup>

Forced removals exhaust migrants physically and emotionally, cut them off from travel companions and render their journeys more difficult and dangerous.<sup>10</sup> 'The migrants brought here look tired and hungry when they arrive in the city. They are dropped in the street. Local NGOs often try to help them with food,' said an activist from Béni Mellal.<sup>11</sup>

Internal deportations, however, only act as a temporary measure to alleviate pressure on migration hubs along the coast. Migrants often try to return to coastal cities, even if this is not always easy. Given that they are left stranded in the recipient cities with no financial resources, many try to find temporary jobs to save up for transport costs to move to a bigger city.

While internal transfers seek to disrupt migrants' journeys, they can be counterproductive. This is particularly the case when migrants are moved to cities known as hubs of migration to Europe, such as Béni Mellal. Migrants removed to this city are exposed to two extremes: rampant poverty, as the Béni Mellal–Khenifra region is one of the country's poorest areas; and visible examples of successful Moroccan migrants, many of whom return during the summer season. Internal deportations thus accentuate the vulnerabilities of migrants while at the same time acting as an additional push factor of irregular migration.

In the meantime, Rabat's shift in approach has been more nuanced with respect to Moroccan nationals, who made up a substantial share of the migrants crossing to Spain during 2022. While their numbers decreased during 2022 across the Canary Islands and the Western Mediterranean routes, their movement patterns have adapted to Rabat's new policy, with many increasingly attempting sea crossings from the north of the country, particularly during the last quarter of the year.

## **Mass entry attempts into the Spanish enclaves surge**

The highly guarded and fortified Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla have traditionally served as key access points for irregular migrants and asylum seekers trying to reach Europe. The cities' roles as routes expanded in 2022, with land arrivals rising by 53% in 2022 to reach 1 868. Sudanese nationals stood as the dominant cohort among those arriving in the enclaves, with 633 migrants entering the two cities between January and November, followed by Malians (364) and Guineans (292). This represents a change from the previous year, when Malians accounted for the majority of arrivals (with 332 arrivals throughout the year), while only 208 Sudanese made it to the enclaves. This aligns with what was reported by researchers in Morocco interviewed for this brief, who noted an increase in the presence of Sudanese migrants and asylum seekers, particularly in the north of the country.

In early March, three mass entries into Melilla occurred. Large groups of migrants coordinated to climb the barbed-wire border fence around the perimeter of the city. The first of the three attempts occurred on 2 March, when roughly 2 500 migrants rushed the fence, an attempt that Spanish authorities



described as one of the largest on record. Some 500 migrants, most hailing from sub-Saharan countries, managed to enter that day. The following day, another 1 200 migrants tried to scale the fence, with about 350 succeeding. On 8 March, a third unsuccessful attempt had been made by 1 000 migrants.<sup>12</sup> In all of March, 983 migrants entered the enclaves, compared to 1 092 during all of 2021.

Soon after the incidents, relations between Morocco and Spain witnessed an important development, with implications for migration enforcement. On 18 March, Morocco announced that Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez had written to King Mohamed VI offering Spain's endorsement of Morocco's position on the Western Sahara conflict.<sup>13</sup> This signalled a drastic shift in the Spanish position on this issue. Tensions between both countries date back to the 1970s, with Spain not recognizing Morocco's claims of sovereignty over the contested territory.

In May 2021, a crisis occurred after Brahim Ghali, the leader of the Polisario Front, an insurgent organization contesting Morocco's claims to Western Sahara, arrived in Spain for medical treatment. After this point, Spain saw an influx of arrivals from Morocco.

Between 17 and 18 May 2021, Ceuta witnessed a mass storming attempt, when roughly 8 000 migrants entered the city over a 48-hour period. In the weeks prior to the storming, rumours had circulated among Moroccan and foreign migrant communities that the authorities were likely to relax border controls in the days following the end of Ramadan (on 13 May). On 17 May, videos emerged showing limited security presence in areas normally monitored closely.<sup>14</sup> The incident cemented the perception that Morocco was leveraging migration in its bilateral relations with Spain by tacitly allowing such attempts.

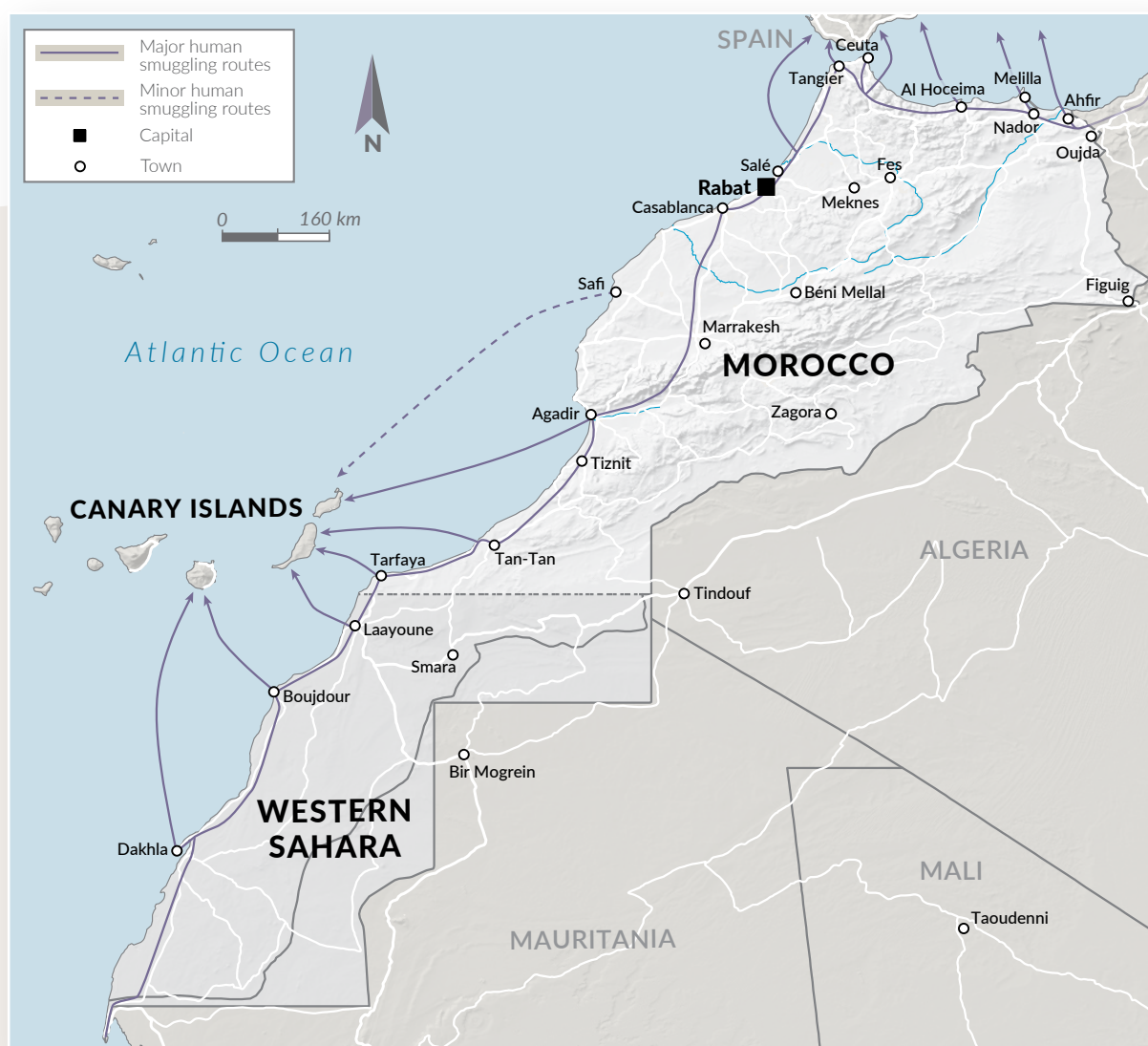
Relations between the two countries changed rapidly following Spain's major change of position on Western Sahara, as did Morocco's border management policy and approach to irregular migration. Returns of Moroccan irregular migrants from Spain to Morocco, which had been suspended since April 2021 – ostensibly due to the pandemic – resumed on 22 March 2022.<sup>15</sup> Normal border traffic between Morocco and the two enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla was restored on 17 May, after the borders had been closed since the spring of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>16</sup>



Some 500 migrants, most of sub-Saharan origin, managed to jump the Melilla fence, March 2022, Melilla, Spain. © Ilies Amar/Europa Press via Getty Images

Nonetheless, mass entry attempts into Melilla continued. The most significant event took place on 24 June, when around 2 000 people approached the border with Melilla early in the morning. Fewer than 140 migrants made it in, with the majority forced back following a heavy deployment of Moroccan forces. Continued border stormings underscore that while geopolitics influence migration enforcement, there are also concrete challenges around enforcement capacity and the growing numbers of undocumented migrants in Morocco seeking to reach Europe.

This incident was far more violent than the events in March. According to official figures, at least 23 migrants lost their lives in a stampede. Local human rights organizations noted the number of deaths could be higher, accusing Moroccan authorities of lacking transparency on casualties and of restricting access to the hospital in Nador.<sup>17</sup> Another 76 migrants were injured, with many hospitalized. Around 140 Moroccan security personnel and 49 Spanish police officers also sustained injuries. The unprecedented number of migrant deaths triggered local and international reactions, including by the UN Human Rights Office, which called for ‘accountability, reparations for the victims, and preventing recurrence of unlawful deaths’.<sup>18</sup>



**FIGURE 1** Human smuggling routes through Morocco, December 2022.



**Hooks used by migrants to scale the barbed-wire border fence around the perimeter of Melilla.**

© Ilies Amar/Europa Press via Getty Images

A number of factors may explain the continued incidents at the enclaves after March. The growing vulnerability of migrants and asylum seekers in Morocco is a key factor. A Moroccan expert interviewed for this brief noted that the early months of 2022 saw an increasing number of migrants hiding in the forests near the enclaves, partly due to unfavourable weather conditions early in the year. These forests, particularly Gourougou, often serve as hideouts for migrants while waiting for an opportunity to cross into EU territory. A tragedy that occurred in Gourougou forest during January shed light on the living conditions of migrants in the forests, when a Nigerian woman and her three children died after their makeshift plastic tent caught on fire.<sup>19</sup>

Migrants who assemble in the forests around the enclaves tend to be among the poorest, seeing the opportunity to scale the fences to enter the enclaves as their only means of reaching Europe. Those with more means often opt for sea crossings instead. Another factor that played a part in the rising number of migrants hiding in forests was the impact of the land border closures since the start of the pandemic, which also shut the door to asylum seekers hoping to enter the enclaves, enlarging the pool of migrants seeking to enter Spain through the land border.

Since Rabat's shift on irregular migration, security forces have made several attempts to demolish migrant camps. Confrontations between the police and migrants became more violent during this period in the context of a growing number of raids on the camps in a bid to force migrants to leave the area, according to the Association Marocaine des droits humains in Nador (Moroccan Association for Human Rights, AMDH).<sup>20</sup>

These changing dynamics also take place amid a shifting demographic profile of migrants hiding in the forests. An increasing number of migrants and asylum seekers appear to hail from Sudan, according to interviews and press reports. This is also reflected in the growing number of Sudanese arrivals in the enclaves, as noted above. Moreover, according to the AMDH in Nador, Sudanese nationals account for the largest number of missing migrants in the wake of the 24 June event.



**Spanish law enforcement officers in vessels at the Tarajal beach breakwater, July 2022, Ceuta, Spain.**

© Antonio Sempere/Europa Press via Getty Images

After June, authorities intensified operations removing migrants from coastal areas. Sub-Saharan migrants were rounded-up, loaded onto buses and escorted by police officers away from the coast to inland towns such as Béni Mellal, Tiznit and Rachidia. In some instances, migrants were also left in the desert, near the Algerian border.

Some migrants were not only removed from coastal areas but also prosecuted on migration-related offences. Reliable information on the total numbers of migrants sentenced following the June incident is difficult to obtain. However, at least 33 migrants who were arrested following the mass entry attempt of 24 June were sentenced to 11 months in prison each in July, while another 14 migrants were sentenced to eight months in prison in August. Several of these migrants were tried for serious crimes, including disobedience, armed gathering and violence against public officers. The AMDH in Nador reported in October that the Court of Appeal in Nador hardened sentences for 14 migrants from eight months to three years of imprisonment. According to the same association, most of the arrested migrants hail from Sudan and Chad.

Beyond the land crossings, maritime entries into the enclaves also continued during 2022. Migrants often swim to the enclaves – from the beach of Tarajal to reach Ceuta and from the beach of Béni Ansar to reach Melilla. Usually, migrants attempting to use these routes first try to enter the well-guarded port of Béni Ansar in the dark to avoid being detected. The migrants typically hide in the port all day and start swimming in the dark, in the early hours of the morning. Moroccan minors are generally more likely to attempt swimming to the enclaves, particularly as they are exempt from push-back operations.

While only a few hundred metres separate Morocco's part of Béni Ansar from Melilla's harbour, this crossing is dangerous due to the strong currents and the movement of ships and ferries using both ports. Throughout the year, several deaths at sea in this stretch were reported as a result.

The last week of August appears to have seen increased attempts to reach Ceuta, with 28 August reportedly registering the highest number of simultaneous attempts. On this day, over 200 Moroccan and foreign migrants tried to enter using both land and sea routes, but mostly the latter. Reportedly,

while around 80 foreign migrants attempted the sea crossing from the beach of Belyounesh, west of Ceuta, another 100 Moroccans tried to swim to the city from the beach of Tarajal, south of Ceuta, before Moroccan authorities intercepted them. Another small group used inflatable rings. Such crossing attempts often occur in the early hours of the morning as migrants seek cover from the low visibility due to fog.<sup>21</sup>

Smuggling networks are also operating along the maritime route between Melilla and Morocco. In January, Spanish police dismantled a network of five individuals who were smuggling mainly sub-Saharan. The network, composed of five Moroccan and Spanish nationals, used a pleasure boat carrying a Spanish flag that had been stolen in Melilla.

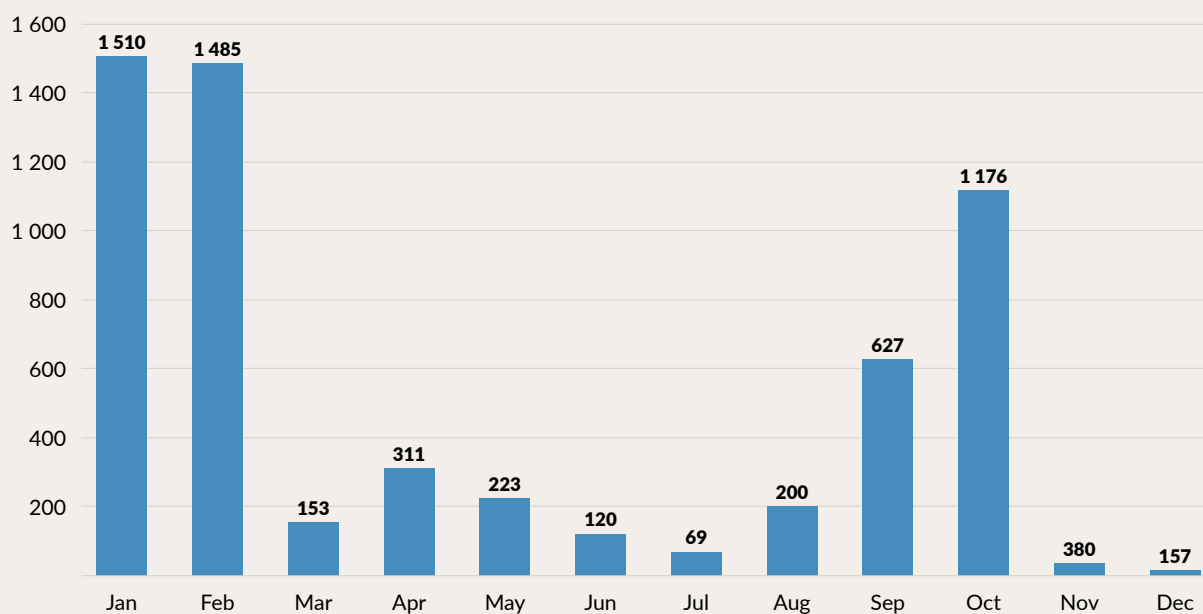
The operation exposed a typical modus operandi for this service. The network was divided into two branches: the Moroccan-based group was in charge of recruiting and accommodating migrants in a ranch close to the city of Nador. This group was also responsible for transporting migrants on the morning of the trip to a forest area close to departure points. Migrants were then guided on foot to the exact point of embarkation. The Melilla-based branch organized the crossing, supplied the boat and received the migrants once in Spanish territory.

## Stemming migrant flows on the Canary Islands route

Migrant flows on the Atlantic route, linking southern Morocco and Moroccan-administered Western Sahara to the Canary Islands, slowed overall during 2022. According to the UNHCR, the Canary Islands registered 15 682 arrivals between 1 January and 31 December, a decrease of 32% from last year. While not all of the migrants arriving on the islands embarked from Morocco and Western Sahara, GI-TOC reporting and data from Frontex suggest that most did, with 7 561 Moroccans recorded as having disembarked in 2021 and 6 411 in 2022.



A group of migrants are rescued at the Port of Gran Tarajal on 2 February 2022 in Fuerteventura, Canary Islands, Spain. © Europa Press/Getty Images



**FIGURE 2** Moroccan arrivals through the Western African route between January and December 2022.

These sea crossings are primarily arranged by smugglers, with little indication that self-smuggling occurs. The networks are typically composed of a combination of Moroccans and sub-Saharan, with the latter – particularly Gambians and Senegalese – often acting as middlemen facilitating the recruitment of migrants. Most smuggling groups along this route offer services to migrants regardless of nationality, with passengers on board the boats they operate often constituting a mix of Moroccans, sub-Saharan and Asians.

Despite the broad pattern of a slowdown along the route, there were substantial fluctuations in activity during the year. According to the Spanish Interior Ministry, the early months of 2022 saw substantial smuggling activities, with 5 871 migrants arriving between January and March, compared to 3 426 over the same period in 2021.

In fact, during early 2022, high demand by migrants pushed prices up. Interviewees reported that the cost of sea crossings during this period ranged between €1 900 and €2 834, compared to €1 300–€1 500 in 2021. Several variables influence the prices demanded from each migrant, with sub-Saharan and foreign migrants often charged more and Moroccans paying lower fees. Prices also depend on the point of departure and the type of boat used in the sea crossing. Embarkations during the early months of the year mostly occurred from Laayoune, Tarfaya, Boujdour and Dakhla, along the coastline of Western Sahara.

Nonetheless, after a period of heightened departures between January and February, flows of arrivals into the Canary Islands declined after March, falling from 2 410 in February to 1 895 in May and only 1 089 in August. According to Frontex data, the decline in arrivals of Moroccans was even more substantial, falling from 1 485 in February to only 223 in May, declining further to 200 in August before rebounding in early autumn, with 627 Moroccan nationals arriving in September and 1 176 in October.<sup>22</sup>

While some of the decline in early March was related to bad weather, the overall drop in crossings was driven by the tightening of border controls along the Moroccan coastline following Rabat's change of track after March.

In the wake of the agreement with Spain, Morocco moved to tackle departures from Moroccan-administered Western Sahara. On 21 March, Khaled Zerouali, director of migration and border control at the Interior Ministry, visited Dakhla, his first trip to the region since late 2020.<sup>23</sup> While there, he instructed local commanders to tighten border surveillance and crack down on human smuggling networks. These instructions, in turn, led to a rise in enforcement activity along the littoral areas of the Western Sahara. Workshops supplying migration boats, which often involve few individuals and operate in uninhabited areas close to launching points, were also targeted in the area. Moreover, the government launched a campaign to register traditional fishing boats in La Sarka village in August. La Sarka is a fishing village in Dakhla that has acted as a key launching point for migrant boats towards the Canary Islands.

While these counter-smuggling activities significantly disrupted the operations, they have not ground them to a halt. Embarkations were reduced from Dakhla, but continued from points such as Tan Tan, Tarfaya, Boujdour and Laayoune. According to an interview with a Moroccan migration researcher, the border controls also led to a northward shift in embarkation points towards the centre of Morocco, with locales such as Agadir and Guelmim seeing increased activity.

The continuation of smuggling to the Canary Islands reflects the reality that smuggling networks in southern Morocco and Western Sahara tend to be resilient and capable of adapting to shifting dynamics. While strict controls and arrests of suspects disrupt business, in many cases this is only temporary. One Moroccan expert noted that when the head of a network is captured, less prominent members within the network either take over or establish their own operations. Faced with tighter controls, smugglers are reportedly also seeking to co-opt low-level government officials.

The continuation of smuggling activities has been further enabled by the sustained high demand for migration, despite rising prices. During the summer season, sea crossings to the Canary Islands soared to average between €2 500 and €3 500, up from €1 900–€2 834 earlier in the year.

The nationalities of migrants seeking passage also shifted, with more foreigners and fewer Moroccans departing towards the Canaries. Moroccan youth, in particular, lost trust in smugglers' ability to help them cross successfully via the route – a trend driven by frequent shipwrecks over the past two years.

Moreover, the resumption of deportation flights from the Canary Islands and rising prices further undermined demand by Moroccans and cemented the view that this route is dangerous, costly and does not present a high prospect of success. Unlike sub-Saharan migrants, who have been driven by heightened policing in northern Morocco towards embarkation from the south, Moroccans have alternative options, including movement through northern Morocco, via the Balkan route, and access to falsified visas.

## Persistent border enforcement in northern Morocco

Migrant departures from the northern shores of Morocco to the Spanish Peninsula, representing the second most important route from Morocco to Europe during 2022, mostly continued though at a slow pace throughout the year.

Sea arrivals in Spain via the Western Mediterranean route reached 14 213 during 2022, down 25% from 2021. These involve departures made from both Morocco and Algeria, and while it is not possible to determine the exact number, the majority of departures are believed to have been made from Algerian territory.

Moroccan nationals were the second-largest nationality of arrivals along this route, with 4307 arriving in Spain along this route between January and December, decreasing from 4 955 during 2021.

Breaking with the pattern seen elsewhere in Morocco, interviewees indicated that activity along the route has been relatively limited since the beginning of the year, due to heightened monitoring by security forces of the northern coast. This enforcement reportedly predates the warming of relations with Madrid, and had been expanded during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a major factor leading Moroccans and foreigners to turn to the Canary Islands route. After March 2022, however, security pressure in the north has further increased and internal deportations of foreign migrants from cities in the north accelerated.

However, departures increased during the second half of the year, as options in other areas of the country became scarcer, more dangerous and less successful. Among other things, smugglers took advantage of the good weather in summer to launch simultaneous departures of jet-skis as a strategy to bypass coastal security, according to Frontex.<sup>24</sup> In addition to activities by smuggling networks, self-smuggling using jet-skis, kayaks and inflatable boats, mostly by Moroccan migrants, remained a key method employed.



A Moroccan policeman speaks with a group of migrants in Casablanca, January 2023.

© AFP/Getty Images



Overall, law enforcement efforts have also shaped which nationalities use the Western Mediterranean route, with Moroccans increasingly making up the overwhelming majority of those using this route. Many of the Moroccans departing from the north reportedly come from the Rif region.

As in southern Morocco and Western Sahara, human smuggling networks active in the north frequently attempt to co-opt low-level state officials. One example of how this can work came to light in early July, as security forces attempted to arrest four people in a car. A woman in gendarmerie uniform and claiming to be from Casablanca tried to halt the arrest, declaring that those in the car were her family members. Investigators discovered that the woman in question was a middleman working with a human smuggler. She had acquired the uniform from a gendarmerie officer, who sold it to her for 5 150 Moroccan dinars (€491).<sup>25</sup> Reportedly, the officer claimed to be suffering from financial difficulties.

Prices for sea crossings from the north fluctuated in 2022 depending on seasons. In the early months of the year, prices ranged between €944 and €1 900, jumping to exceed €2 000 as of June before ebbing again with the approach of winter. Trips on board speed boats can reportedly exceed €4 000 during the high season of migration.

As observed in previous years, departures along this route occurred from different points, including the beaches along the Alboran Sea, near Saidia, Bouyafar, Nador and Al Hoceima, as well as from beaches on the Atlantic coast between Tangier and Rabat. The second half of the year saw more dangerous attempts to reach Europe, with migrant boats leaving from as far south as Casablanca to reach southern Spain.

There was a small increase in the number of smugglers claiming to bring migrants to Portugal in 2022, largely due to the risk of interceptions. According to a migration researcher interviewed for this brief, this is especially the case when the organizers are fishermen engaging in smuggling and seeking to promote their business.<sup>26</sup>



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## CONCLUSION

**M**igrant flows between Morocco and Spain decreased during 2022 across different routes, except for land arrivals into the Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla. As outlined, the drop in departures reflects heightened counter-smuggling efforts by the Moroccan authorities. However, it does not necessarily denote a decreasing interest in migration.

Interviewees in Morocco noted that interest in migration remains elevated, particularly among Moroccan youth, and that demand among foreign migrants often living in precarious conditions is even higher. This is exacerbated by growing restrictions that have made the lives of foreign migrants in Morocco even harder. Given persistent migration drivers, it is likely that the interest in migration will continue during 2023.

At the same time, Morocco's economic growth has lost momentum due to overlapping shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and a grinding drought. While the government is seeking to adopt measures to alleviate the economic impact on the most vulnerable, the situation remains fragile, especially as public resources come under growing pressure. The government expects growth to reach 4.5% in 2023, although these projections hinge on positive assumptions about a global economic recovery, particularly in the EU. The outlook for an economic rebound thus remains uncertain.

Nonetheless, while Morocco is grappling with its own migration challenges as an origin, transit and destination country, its approach to migration management appears to be rooted in political choices and not simply a matter of capacity. This successful instrumentalization of migration is likely to provide Rabat with continued leverage in its partnership with the EU.

Nonetheless, the evolution of migrant smuggling throughout 2022 underscores that while increased security can disrupt activities and reduce sea crossings, it cannot eradicate the business. Smuggling networks are able to adapt to the new context and circumvent police controls.

Moreover, some counter-migration measures are likely to deliver only temporary outcomes in terms of reducing migration. Chiefly, a plank in Morocco's anti-migration strategy revolves around accelerating rounding-up operations along the coast, removing migrants away from coastal cities. This approach, however, accentuates the vulnerabilities of migrants on the move, which in turn propels migration drivers. Interviewees indicated that for many migrants, stringent border control only delays their journeys and does not reduce their intent on reaching Europe.

Critically, for many Moroccans, maritime departures towards Spain are not the only alternative. In fact, Moroccans feature among frequently reported nationality of arrivals in Europe across different routes. During 2022, 3 117 Moroccans arrived in Europe through the Western Balkans route, nearly double the 1 249 arrivals during all of 2021.

It is likely that the gradual closing of the sea routes will lead Moroccans to press alternative paths, such as the Balkans. Moreover, as interviewees in Morocco have indicated, there appears to be an increasing demand for falsified documents, with Moroccans also tending to use fraudulent documents to reach Europe by transiting through other countries.

For instance, in October 2022, Tunisian authorities arrested three Moroccans at the Tunis-Carthage Airport. After checking-in for a flight to return to Morocco and passing police controls, the three passengers proceeded to the gate of a flight headed for Europe, where they were arrested before boarding the plane. The passengers turned out to be in possession of falsified travel documents containing Tunisian exit stamps. A similar modus operandi has been observed in Turkey in the past. Since then, Ankara has started imposing restrictions on Moroccan passengers. 'Turkey now requires Moroccan travellers in some cases to obtain return tickets and present proof of work or study,' noted one Moroccan interviewee. This explains why Moroccans may be looking at other destinations for transit.

Similarly, following a tactic that emerged in November 2021, a Casablanca-Istanbul Pegasus Airlines flight made an emergency landing at Barcelona's El Prat Airport on 7 December, caused by a pregnant woman faking labour. As soon as the doors of the plane opened, 28 individuals jumped out seeking to escape. However, the police arrested 16 people, including at least eight to be deported to Morocco.<sup>27</sup>

Desperate and dangerous manoeuvres such as these denote that in Morocco's present circumstances and level of demand for migration, methods and routes are likely to continue to diversify in 2023. The role of smuggling networks and document fraud is likely to become more important. As a Moroccan expert explained, 'smuggling networks are very good at marketing their business. They even use increased restrictions and border controls to lure in more migrants. They are simply responding to a market.'

# NOTES

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