

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2024 SERIES



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

MOROCCO

MOROCCANS DRIVE AN INCREASE IN
MIGRATION THROUGH THE WESTERN
MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE

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JUNE 2024

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is part of a series of briefs published by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s Observatory of Illicit Economies in North Africa and the Sahel. This brief would not have been possible without the support and advice of Mark Micallef and Matt Herbert. The GI-TOC's Publications and Communications teams have been key collaborators, ensuring that the exacting standards of delivery are met.

We would also like to acknowledge the dedicated efforts of a large number of local researchers engaged by the GI-TOC across the region. While we will not name them for their safety, they have our profound gratitude and respect for the excellent work they do under difficult circumstances.

The research for this report was supported by funding under the North Africa and the Sahel, and Lake Chad windows of the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of the GI-TOC and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

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INTRODUCTION

Morocco is a key departure point for both local and foreign migrants embarking on irregular sea crossings to Europe. The country is strategically linked to Spain in particular through three main migratory pathways. These include the land passages into the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, a maritime route to mainland Spain and a maritime route to the Canary Islands. Furthermore, substantial numbers of migrants cross in and out of Morocco over the border with Algeria.

In 2023, human smuggling trends in Morocco were broadly stable, although the dynamics differed by route. There was a significant rebound in movements from northern Morocco to Spain across the Alboran Sea and the Strait of Gibraltar. According to Frontex data, Moroccan arrivals in mainland Spain jumped from 4 307 in 2022 to 7 910 in 2023.¹ Moroccan nationals dominated this route, as security measures restricted foreign migrants' access to the north of the country.

This rise is especially notable given this heightened enforcement, which began during the COVID-19 pandemic and increased further following Spain's endorsement of Morocco's position on the Western Sahara conflict in 2022. Border controls along the northern coast remained tight in 2023 and security forces continued to crack down on smuggling networks. In addition, the government persisted in the forced transfer of undocumented migrants from the northern coastal areas to cities in the interior.

The other main northern Moroccan route to Spain, involving land crossings to Ceuta and Melilla, saw a dramatic drop in 2023. Only 467 arrivals were recorded from 1 January to 31 December, a 75% reduction compared to the same period in 2022.² Despite this, persistent efforts to reach the enclaves continued, including attempts to climb over fences or swim around barriers, underscoring that the decline was largely due to heightened security operations by Spanish and Moroccan forces.

To the south, in the Canary Islands, arrivals from Morocco rebounded slightly in 2023, after falling by almost a third between 2021 and 2022. This moderate increase appears to have been driven primarily by foreign migrants, as Moroccan arrivals decreased. Specifically, only 5 817 Moroccan migrants, the most easily identifiable of those departing from Morocco, arrived in the Canaries in 2023, down from 6 411 in 2022. This was likely due to heightened security and the perception among Moroccan migrants that the route was dangerous and costly, with an uncertain chance of success.

Finally, cross-border movement into Morocco from Algeria also continued. Although reliable estimates were limited, there were indications of a slight increase in arrivals through this route, particularly Algerians planning to attempt the sea crossing to the Spanish enclaves. Movement in the opposite direction, from Morocco to Algeria, also appeared to rise. This mainly involved Moroccans heading to Algeria's north-west coast, from where smuggling to Spain is prevalent.

Over the course of 2023, irregular migration from and through Morocco was influenced by a combination of factors, with intensified enforcement playing a significant role. Morocco had moved to stem migratory flows in 2022, with the government orchestrating a structured crackdown on irregular migrants across the country. Throughout 2023, authorities continued to implement counter-migration measures, including restrictions on migrants' mobility and the forced relocation of undocumented people.

Despite these efforts, poor economic prospects for both Moroccans and foreign migrants drove departures higher. In 2023, Morocco began to bounce back from the overlapping shocks the economy had experienced in the previous year, including a severe drought, rising commodity prices and the global economic slowdown, all of which derailed growth. However, despite the nascent recovery, many Moroccans continued to grapple with the effects of the successive economic blows that have been occurring since 2020, chiefly price hikes, which have strained the purchasing power of citizens and residents alike, especially low-income populations.

This is the latest Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) monitoring report on human smuggling in Morocco. It builds on the series of annual reports that has been issued since 2021, tracking the evolution of human smuggling in Morocco, as well as the political, security and economic dynamics that influence it.³

Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2023 – 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 areas of inquiry for field research and to validate the field interviews collected by researchers.

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed are inherently opaque and the geographical areas covered are often remote, volatile or difficult to access. For this reason, the brief should be seen as a snapshot that will feed into future GI-TOC reporting and analysis to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics in Morocco and the wider region.



MOROCCANS DRIVE AN INCREASE IN MIGRATION THROUGH THE WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE

Human smuggling in Morocco remained broadly steady during 2023. Arrivals in Spain, both in the Canary Islands and on the mainland, were only moderately higher than in 2022, although arrivals in the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla fell sharply. However, this relative stability masked emergent – and significant – differences in dynamics between the routes, as well as shifts in the intensity of departures.

Most notably, there was a rebound in movement from northern Morocco to Spain across the Alboran Sea and the Strait of Gibraltar. While the total number of sea arrivals from the Western Mediterranean route rose by around 18%, this encompassed departures from both Algeria and Morocco.⁴ According to Frontex data, Moroccan arrivals on the Spanish mainland jumped from 4 307 in 2022 to 7 910 in 2023.⁵ In contrast, Algerian arrivals in Spain decreased by around 16% between 2022 and 2023.⁶

In addition to Moroccan and Algerian migrants, a number of other foreign nationalities moved along this route in 2023, albeit in comparatively modest numbers. Notable among these were Guineans and Syrians, who accounted for 226 and 289 arrivals in mainland Spain respectively.⁷

There were fluctuations in departure levels over the course of 2023. Numbers were generally low in the first two and a half months of the year, but interviewees in Morocco noted an increase in smuggling activity on northern beaches after mid-March. This variation can be partly explained by changing weather conditions. However, there were also indications that foreign migrants and smuggling groups were beginning to adapt to the increased monitoring by security forces in the north, particularly given the limited options for departure using other routes early in the year.

Heightened enforcement in the north of the country has become the norm in recent years, as the Moroccan government has moved to block these routes. Surveillance measures were initially stepped up during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, and were reportedly increased even further following Spain's endorsement of Morocco's position on the Western Sahara conflict in March 2022, which eased tensions between the two countries.⁸

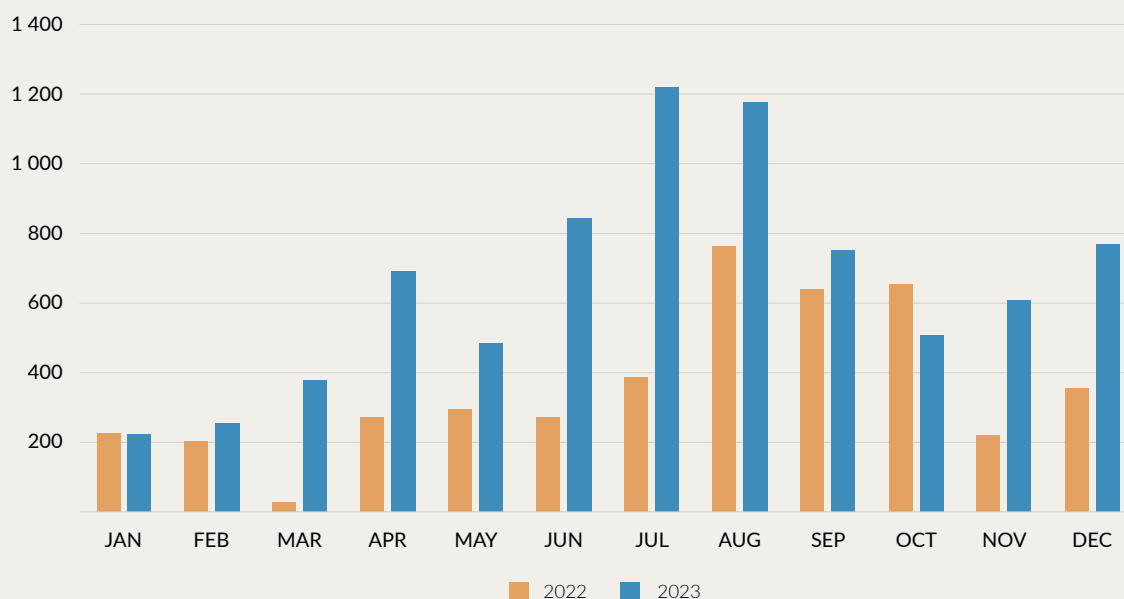


FIGURE 1 Moroccan arrivals in Spain through the Western Mediterranean route, 2022 and 2023.

SOURCE: Frontex

Border controls along the northern coastline remained tight throughout 2023, and security forces continued to crack down on smuggling networks. The government also persisted in regular forced transfers of undocumented migrants, a policy that first emerged as a prominent counter-migration tactic in 2022.⁹ During 2023, these operations accelerated, with migrants being transported from coastal areas in the north, such as Nador, to cities in the interior, including Béni Mellal, Tiznit, Settat and Azilal.¹⁰

In addition, the unofficial restrictions on the use of public transport by undocumented migrants, introduced in 2022, remained in place, adding to ongoing limitations on mobility.¹¹ While these measures were reported to be inconsistently enforced, in some cases private company coaches were reportedly confiscated.

In April, a migrant died after jumping from a train travelling between Taourirt and Nador in northern Morocco.¹² The migrant's actions are believed to have been motivated by fear of arrest at Nador station, where police officers monitor arrivals. These controls appear to have encouraged migrants to attempt to disembark before reaching the station.

These counter-migration measures restricting foreign migrants' access to the north of the country had a significant impact on the nationalities departing from the northern coast, with Moroccans becoming increasingly dominant. This was also reflected in the composition of arrivals in mainland Spain, with only around 14% of arrivals through the Western Mediterranean route in 2023 being nationalities other than Moroccan and Algerian.¹³

The main embarkation points in northern Morocco remained largely stable. Moroccan nationals tended to leave from Nador and the beaches between Al Hoceima and Bouyafar along the Mediterranean coast, as well as from Tangier on the Atlantic coast. Foreign migrants generally embarked from Nador and Tangier.

Journey costs fluctuated throughout the year, depending on the season, but registered a noticeable increase on 2022. In the early months of the year, human smugglers charged between €1 500 and €4 000 per person for the crossing to Europe, exceeding the range of €944 to €1 900 reported in early 2022. During the northern hemisphere summer, the minimum price for a sea crossing jumped to €2 500. Journeys by speedboat reportedly reached a high of €12 000 during the peak migration season.

In general, embarkations from the north were more expensive than those from the south on the Canary Islands route. This was partly due to stricter controls. However, it also reflected the perception that embarkations from the north were safer and offered a greater likelihood of successful arrival in Europe.

Departures from the north continued to be mainly organized by smuggling networks. Groups offering services to Moroccans are generally separate from those that transport non-Moroccan nationals. Although there was a slight increase in the number of embarkations of both Moroccan and foreign nationals in March and April, this was not a sustained trend.

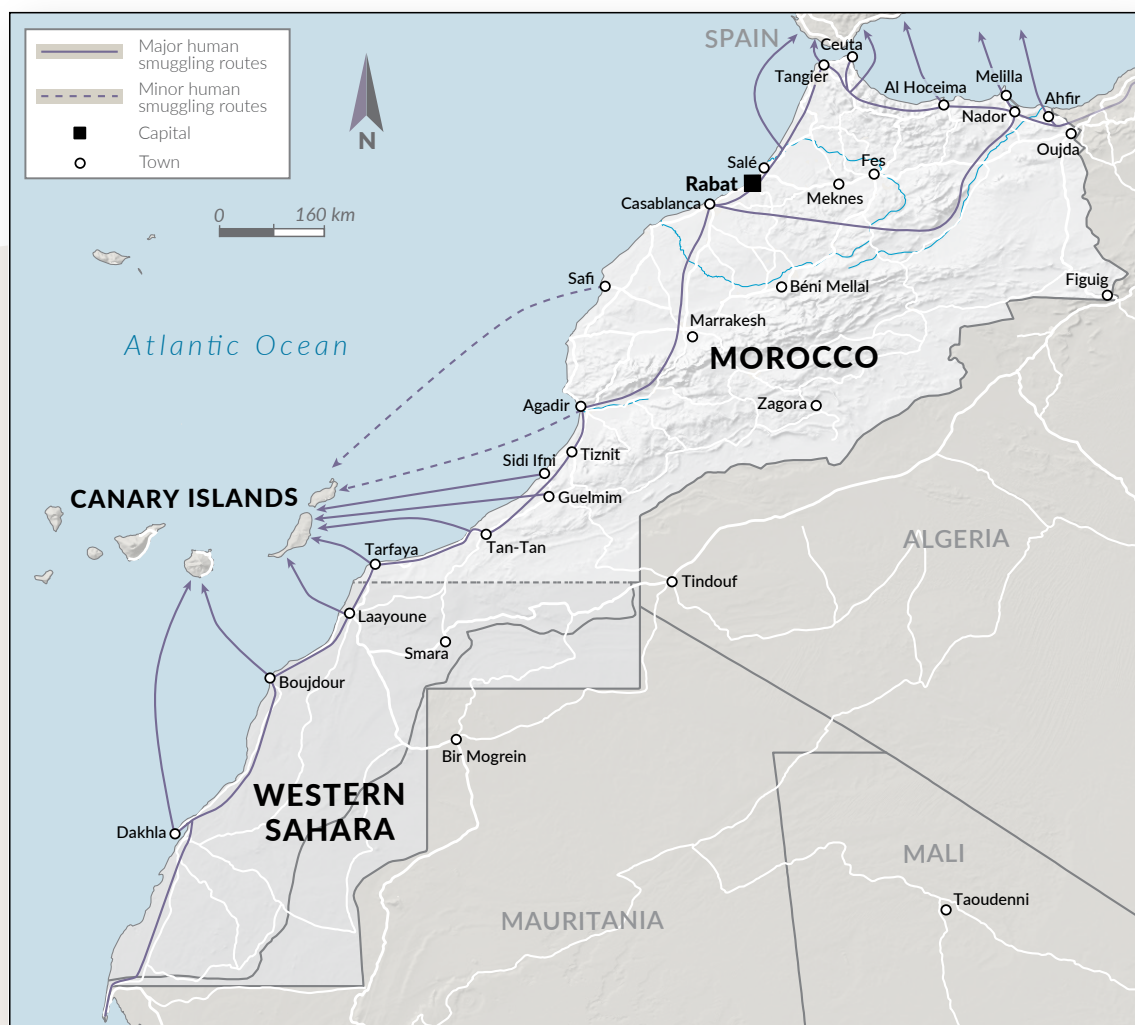


FIGURE 2 Main human smuggling routes through Morocco.

In addition to managing sea crossings, Moroccan maritime smuggling networks reportedly play a crucial role in facilitating the overland transport of migrants to and through northern Morocco, circumventing increased controls and ad hoc restrictions on the use of buses. According to a journalist with knowledge in this area, smugglers used unofficial, deserted roads to avoid unwanted attention, resulting in longer and more expensive journeys.

On the whole, smuggling networks adapted to the more robust security presence in the north in 2023. One interviewee in Morocco reported that smugglers continued to try to establish corrupt relationships with security officials to facilitate their activities. In addition, networks responded to enhanced enforcement by changing departure beaches and the locations of migrant hideouts. They also further expanded their use of simultaneous launch operations, typically using jet-skis, to overwhelm security forces and reduce the risk of interception.

Drug trafficking networks have also become more involved in human smuggling. This is not a new phenomenon, but the intersection intensified in 2023, probably due to the higher profitability of human smuggling caused by rising prices. In practice, this led to the greater use of the speedboats traditionally associated with drug trafficking, commonly known as 'narcolanchas', to transport migrants from Morocco to Spain. Notably, in some cases, the boats were also carrying drugs, with the migrants being unaware of this.

There were also indications of an uptick in the use of violence against migrants by smugglers on routes from northern Morocco. Boat pilots on smuggler craft reportedly used physical force to make migrants disembark quickly, in order to limit their time in Spanish waters and avoid arrest. An incident in late November highlighted this, when four people drowned after a group of 30 Moroccan migrants were coerced and pushed from a moving speedboat just off the southern coast of Andalusia. One smuggler was reported to have threatened the migrants with a gun.¹⁴

While some migrants travelling from northern Morocco to Spain continued to engage in self-smuggling, using jet-skis, kayaks and inflatable boats, this was less common in 2023. This form of movement is attractive mainly because it is cheaper than using smuggling networks, particularly after the recent increase in the cost of a sea crossing. While self-smuggling has long been practised by Moroccans, and most self-smugglers in 2023 were Moroccan nationals, foreign migrants were also observed using this method. One Moroccan researcher noted a small number of self-smuggling attempts by sub-Saharan migrants in and around Tangier. This trend, which was also observed in Tunisia, could be attributed to sub-Saharan migrants' knowledge of the terrain and their response to the escalating prices of sea crossings. Although this phenomenon is still rare, it is likely to become more widespread in the future.

Sharp drop in land arrivals in the Spanish enclaves

The other main route to Spain from northern Morocco involves land crossings to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. These decreased dramatically in 2023, with only 467 arrivals recorded throughout the year, a 75% reduction compared to 2022.¹⁵

This decline was mainly due to heightened security operations around the enclaves by both Spanish and Moroccan forces. According to interviewees in Morocco, the authorities increased checkpoints at the entrances to northern towns near Ceuta or Melilla, particularly Nador, to prevent migrants from approaching them. These controls were largely successful in preventing groups of migrants from gathering near the enclaves.



Moreover, Moroccan security forces stepped up patrols in the rural areas and forests where migrants traditionally gather and camp out before attempting to scale the enclaves' fences. These operations resulted in the arrest of migrants who had already circumvented the checkpoints on the main roads. The detained migrants were deported to towns in the interior of the country. Thus migrants were prevented from organizing collective entry attempts, which are usually coordinated over a period of months.

Despite the increased security, however, sporadic crossing attempts continued, underscoring that the demand to reach the enclaves remained high. These attempts included the use of sea routes, by swimming or using boats. Migrants swimming to Ceuta start from the beaches of Fnideq, while those aiming for Melilla set off from the beaches of Béni Ansar. Both Moroccan and non-Moroccan migrants, including Algerians, Syrians and sub-Saharan Africans, were involved in sea crossing attempts in 2023, both individually and in small groups. A collective attempt took place on 17 January 2023, when around 20 migrants from Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Guinea and Chad swam towards Ceuta.¹⁶ They departed from an area near the city at around 1.30 a.m. and reached Spanish territory around dawn. Such endeavours are inherently dangerous, and several cases of drowning and disappearance have been reported.

Pleasure boats or dinghies were also used to reach Melilla. Unlike swimming attempts, these embarkations appeared mainly to involve Moroccan nationals. On 19 November, for example, 13 young Moroccans departed from the typically well-monitored Atalayoun marina in Nador, which is part of the Marchica tourist project, and arrived at Las Carabos in Melilla.

Attempts by large numbers of migrants to climb the fences around the two enclaves collectively also continued. The most significant of these took place on 17 November, when Moroccan security forces confronted around 1 000 migrants seeking to cross the fence separating Fnideq from Ceuta. While most of the migrants were stopped, about a hundred managed to approach the outer barrier of Ceuta. It remains unclear whether any migrants entered the city successfully. The police intervention led to clashes with the migrants, who were armed with 'white' weapons such as knives. A total of 80 people were injured, including 30 migrants and 50 Moroccan security officers. The incident was followed by migrant arrests and deportations to cities in the interior such as Tinghir.



A mass entry attempt into Ceuta by sub-Saharan migrants, 17 November 2023.

© Antonio Sempere/Europa Press via Getty Images

While mass entry attempts are usually carried out by sub-Saharan migrants, one incident in 2023 involved Moroccan nationals. At around 11 p.m. on 6 November, Moroccan security forces thwarted a collective effort by about a hundred young Moroccans to breach the barrier between the Bario Chino border post and Melilla. The youths were believed to have come from towns adjacent to Melilla, including Béni Ansar, Farkhana and Nador. Around a dozen migrants reportedly entered the city. The security forces' heavy-handed response, which included the use of tear gas, resulted in an unconfirmed number of injuries.

Finally, a recently developed tactic involving the use of paragliders to fly over the fences separating the Spanish cities from Morocco was also employed in 2023. On 6 October, a migrant reportedly reached Melilla in this way. Despite a rapid response from the Spanish Guardia Civil patrol, the migrant managed to escape, abandoning the paraglider next to the fence. This mirrors an incident on 1 December 2022, when another migrant used a paraglider to reach Melilla, but this method remains extremely rare.

Fluctuation in movement towards the Canaries

In total, migrant arrivals in the Canary Islands spiked by 157% in 2023, reaching 40 330.¹⁷ However, this rise was mainly fuelled by migrants departing from Mauritania and Senegal rather than Morocco.

In line with the overall trend, departures from Morocco increased during the year, but only by 12.6% compared to 2022. Additionally, this moderate rise appears to have primarily been driven by foreign migrants, as there was a decrease in Moroccan arrivals on this route in 2023. From January to December, just 5 817 Moroccan migrants, the most easily identifiable of those departing from Morocco, arrived in the Canaries, down from 6 411 in 2022. The reasons for this decline were the heightened security and the perception among Moroccan migrants that the route is dangerous and costly, with an uncertain chance of success. In contrast, the growing use of this route by foreign migrants is likely to have been influenced by increased enforcement in the north of the country and the higher cost of the crossing to mainland Spain.

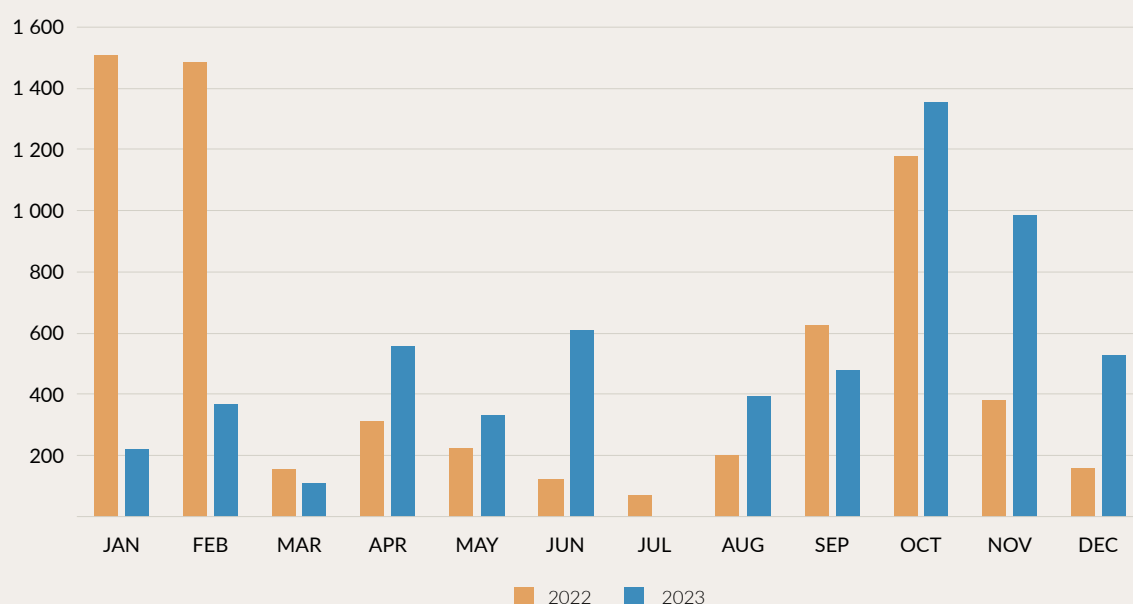
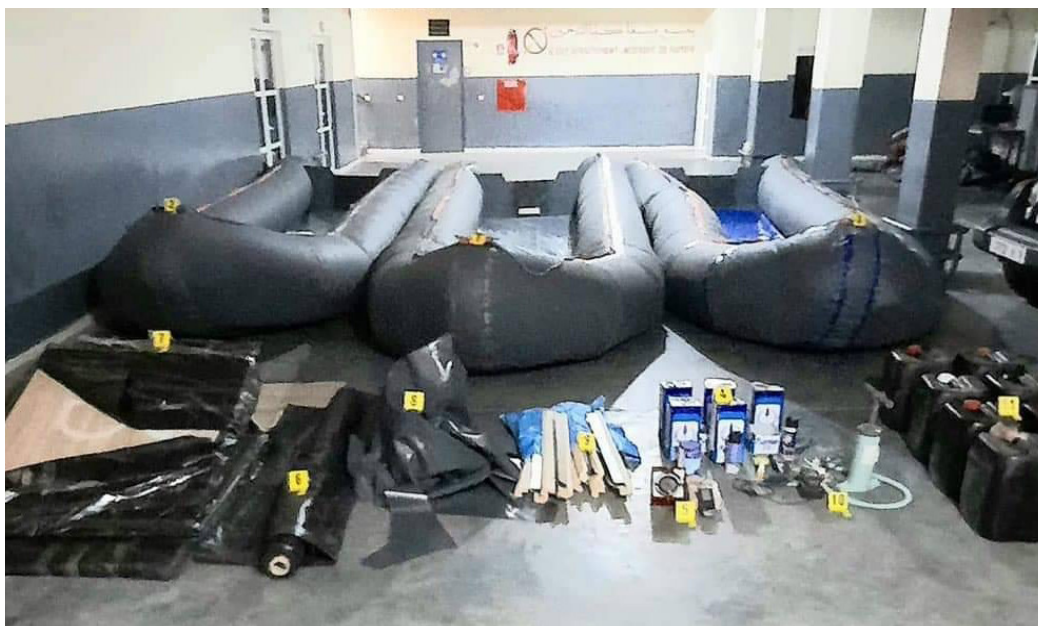


FIGURE 3 Moroccan arrivals in Spain through the Western African route, 2022 and 2023.

SOURCE: Frontex



Moroccan security forces seize boats used for irregular crossings in Laayoune, November 2023.

Photo: Official Facebook page of the Moroccan national police force

Most sea crossings on the route to the Canary Islands involve the use of human smuggling networks. These are typically headed by Moroccan smugglers, with lower-level members including both Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans. Moroccans also often act as coordinators and overland drivers, leveraging their knowledge of the local area. Sub-Saharan Africans, particularly Gambians and Senegalese, usually act as intermediaries, recruiting migrants for the journey.

The big bosses are Moroccan. But you can't recognize them because their faces are covered. There are people who you only see at the time of the embarkation. The rest are of different sub-Saharan nationalities.

Interview with an Ivorian migrant in the Canaries, November 2023

Smuggling groups along this route typically cater to migrants of all nationalities and transport mixed groups of passengers, including Moroccans, sub-Saharan Africans and Asians. In one case, an interviewee noted that a sub-Saharan migrant had acted as the pilot of a vessel carrying Moroccan nationals. However, there are still smugglers who group migrants by nationality, and will not arrange embarkations with both Moroccans and foreigners. One young migrant from Sidi Ifni said that he had travelled to Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, on a 15-metre boat with 30 other Moroccans on board.

Migrants often first approach smuggling networks through intermediaries, whose role it is to identify potential clients and act as liaisons. This initial contact takes place either in departure zones in southern Morocco or the disputed territory of Western Sahara, or in cities in northern or central Morocco. In some cases, migrants find intermediaries through referrals or encounter them in markets and cafés. Some foreign migrants noted that they had been approached by intermediaries who were actively seeking clients in their circles or in cafés. Some intermediaries also use social media channels to identify and connect with potential clients.

While I was living on the streets, I met a sub-Saharan man who advised me to go to Europe. He claimed that he could assist. He took my wife and me to a Moroccan man in Dakhla. We provided payment to the sub-Saharan, and then we paid the Moroccan as well, as they were partners.

Interview with a Cameroonian migrant who arrived in the Canaries in October, November 2023

The process of arranging a journey appears to be broadly similar for Moroccan and foreign migrants. Once a booking with a smuggler is confirmed, migrants are accommodated in safehouses, which are usually regular houses or warehouses. One migrant described the safehouse he was in as a 'cave' (a location unlikely to be detected). Most safehouses are close to embarkation points, but some are quite far away. A few interviewees mentioned being placed in safehouses in Tan Tan before eventually departing from Dakhla, 300 kilometres to the south.

The waiting period can last up to several weeks, depending on factors such as weather conditions and the level of security enforcement. To avoid being discovered by the authorities, sub-Saharan migrants are often instructed not to leave the safehouses. 'Since I had a residence card, I was the one who went out to buy food or anything necessary, as I could do so without problems,' one migrant noted.

On the day of departure, migrants are driven to the embarkation point, usually in the early hours of the morning, around 1 or 2 a.m. The vehicles used carry about 20 people.

The mafia [the smuggling network] doesn't say anything. When they are ready, they come at night and say, 'Get ready, we're leaving.' They come in a hurry, because the police can come at any time and arrest us.

Interview with an Ivorian migrant in Spain, November 2023

Embarkations in 2023 mainly occurred from Tarfaya, Tan Tan, Agadir and Guelmim, in Morocco, or Laayoune, Boujdour and Dakhla in Western Sahara. There were also isolated embarkations from other points such as Sidi Ifni. The trend of a northward shift in departure points towards the centre of Morocco, first observed in late 2022, continued. Notably, locations such as Guelmim in south-west Morocco also maintained increased activity. The frequency of departures from these points fluctuated according to law enforcement conditions, resulting in occasional shifts in prices.

Tensions between smugglers and migrants reportedly arose at embarkation points, for example over dissatisfaction with the quality of the boat or the conditions of the crossing. A Moroccan migrant who travelled from Sidi Ifni in March said that his fellow passengers were angry. 'It was going to be a long and difficult trip. There was no food or water. Everyone was nervous,' he said.

Migrants also reported that members of the smuggling networks at the embarkation points were often armed with guns, knives and machetes. 'When you get to the edge of the sea, you must accept what the mafia tells you,' one interviewee said. Another migrant said she had been afraid and wanted to cancel the trip, but boarded the boat out of fear.

When I looked at the sea, I felt so scared. I looked at my daughter and said, 'I don't want to go.' At that moment, other migrants told me that if I stayed, the Arabs would kill us. I had to get on the boat.

Interview with an Ivorian migrant in Spain, November 2023

Female migrants are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation by smugglers. One migrant reported being raped by a smuggler in Morocco, while another said that a smuggler had attempted to rape her and only left her alone after she pleaded that she was pregnant.

When I was three months pregnant, I tried to cross for the first time. When we arrived at the sea, the smugglers didn't let me in the boat. I didn't understand why. I had to go back with one Moroccan smuggler. He took me to a remote field. Then he pulled out a long knife and attempted to rape me. I cried and told him that I was pregnant. In the end, he put me back in the car, and left me a little further from the field. I walked to the nearest town.

Interview with an Ivorian migrant in Spain, November 2023

In 2023, the prices charged by the networks operating on the route from Morocco to the Canary Islands were broadly similar to those in 2022. According to interviewees, the cost of a journey from southern Morocco or Western Sahara to the islands ranged from €1 500 to €3 000 in the first months of the year. In the second half of the year, the cost fluctuated between €2 500 and €3 500. In October, however, prices reportedly fell. A Senegalese migrant who travelled from Dakhla on 8 October recounted paying €1 500 for the trip.

Various factors contribute to the cost structure, including the point of departure, the type of boat and the often pivotal negotiations by the intermediaries. Lower prices are charged for babies and children. In one instance, a woman paid MAD20 000 (€1 834) for herself and MAD15 000 (€1 375) for her daughter. In addition to the cost of the sea crossing, some migrants reported paying further amounts for food and water while staying in safehouses and for life jackets. Payments are made in cash, often in instalments, with an initial deposit made when booking the trip and the remainder on departure or arrival. One Moroccan migrant from Dakhla said he had paid half (€2 000) 15 days before his departure date.

While it is unclear whether self-smuggling is taking place from Western Sahara, it appears to be occurring in other locations in southern Morocco, particularly Sidi Ifni. The experience of one Moroccan migrant who smuggled himself from Sidi Ifni to Lanzarote provides an illustrative example. He and 20 other people from the same region pooled their resources to buy equipment, with one person making the necessary purchases, including the boat and fuel. The group set off from the port of Sidi Ifni. One of the migrants operated the boat while the others covered themselves with large bags to avoid detection. The cost per person was approximately €2 000, and the trip was organized over a two-week period.

The journey to the Canary Islands remains extremely dangerous, and there were several shipwrecks on the route in 2023. Sailing in poor conditions increases the risks. Migrants reported problems such as boat overcrowding and difficulties such as running out of fuel or breakdowns that left them stranded at sea awaiting rescue.

Slow increase in movement across the Morocco–Algeria border

Lastly, cross-border movement between Algeria and Morocco continued in 2023. Although it is difficult to obtain reliable estimates of the number of migrants crossing the border in a given period, there are indications that the number of arrivals in Morocco from Algeria may have increased slightly compared to the previous year.

While cross-border movement involves many different nationalities, there was a slight but notable increase in the number of Algerians arriving in Morocco, mostly to make the sea crossing to the Spanish enclaves. Previously, such journeys were relatively rare, as Algerians tended to embark from their home country. In August, footage emerged of two young Algerian men attempting to breach the border between Morocco and Algeria near the city of Saidia, before being intercepted by Algerian authorities. There were also reports of Algerian migrants drowning while trying to swim to the Spanish enclaves.



Movement in the opposite direction, from Morocco to Algeria, also appeared to increase. These journeys generally involve Moroccans attempting to migrate through Algeria's north-west coast, where smuggling towards Spain is prevalent. There were reports of an increase in the number of Moroccans taking speedboats from Algeria to reach Spain.

This rise in movement to Algeria began in 2022 and appears to have been fuelled by rising prices and heightened enforcement in Morocco, which reduced the likelihood of successful journeys. An Algerian interviewee noted that Moroccans were increasingly embarking from Algeria due to fewer controls. Moroccans were reportedly charged around €6 000 in Algeria for a sea crossing to Europe, compared to €9 000–€10 000 for a similar service in Morocco. Interviewees indicated that Algerians paid lower prices, often around €5 000.

In addition, a growing number of sub-Saharan migrants reportedly left Morocco for Algeria, in order to reach Tunisia and undertake a sea crossing from there. This movement increased in the second half of 2023, apparently prompted by the mounting difficulties in migrating from Morocco, outlined above, and the significantly lower prices for embarkation from Tunisia. An interviewee noted that this pattern was particularly evident among Sudanese refugees in the final months of 2023.

Smugglers play a major role in facilitating movement across the Morocco–Algeria border, using vehicles to transport migrants in both directions. The primary routes connect the Algerian town of Maghnia, 52 kilometres west of Tlemcen, with Oujda and Ahfir in north-eastern Morocco. There are several crossing points along the border between Oujda and Ahfir, which are used for travel in either direction.

In Morocco, migrants aiming to reach Algeria first take buses or trains to Oujda, where they hire smugglers to facilitate their border crossing. Similarly, migrants in Algeria aiming to reach Morocco arrive in Tlemcen and use either public transport or more clandestine means of transport.

The cost of crossing the border in either direction is between €150 and €250. For women, the price can be higher, reportedly around €300. An Ivorian migrant who arrived in Morocco in 2021 said, 'When we arrived in Algeria, we were defrauded. Then we decided to travel to Morocco. To go there, my wife and I had to pay €150 each.' It is important to note, however, that the cost of crossing into Morocco can vary depending on the nature of the agreement made with the smugglers and the final destination within the country.

Human smugglers may also be involved in other illegal activities, such as the illicit transport of food, fuel and drugs. In addition to Moroccans and Algerians, sub-Saharan Africans are involved in these networks, acting as intermediaries to attract clients. Networks on both sides of the border rely on collusion within the security forces to facilitate their operations.

Smuggling efforts may even involve some coordination between Moroccan and Algerian networks. For instance, Algerian smugglers transferring migrants to Morocco may coordinate with Moroccan networks that can provide temporary accommodation in Oujda and transport to departure points in Oujda, Nador or Tangier. However, this depends on the services requested by the migrants.

Self-smuggling also occurs across the Morocco–Algeria border, although it is reportedly becoming increasingly difficult because of stricter security controls.

I walked from Tlemcen to Morocco, despite all the difficulties. It was very challenging because if the Moroccan or Algerian police see you, they stop you and take all your belongings, such as your phone and money. The worst moments of my journey were at the border between Morocco and Algeria.

Interview with a Guinean migrant, November 2023

Another migrant said: 'In Algeria, I arrived at a train station where some people explained to me how to cross the border into Morocco. A car took us and left us in the desert in a border area, next to a group of people. We walked for two days through the desert to the border. We had to wait in a cave in the mountain until we could cross the border. Then we crossed into Morocco, running through the night.'

Migrants who attempt the crossing independently can arrange to be picked up at the border by the so-called taxi mafia and transported to the coast. Others choose to look for work in border towns such as Oujda while they prepare for the sea crossing.

After arriving in Oujda, which was the first city I entered in Morocco, I stayed there for almost a year until I had the opportunity to go to Dakhla and take a boat from there.

Interview with a foreign migrant, November 2023



FOREIGN MIGRANTS FACE HEIGHTENED ENFORCEMENT

Morocco moved to stem migratory flows in 2022, with the government orchestrating a structured crackdown on irregular migrants across the country. Throughout 2023, the authorities continued to implement counter-migration measures. These included raids on migrants' homes and regular forced transfers of undocumented people from coastal areas to cities in the interior. In some instances, arbitrary arrests reportedly even affected migrants legally residing in Morocco.

During the year, the authorities declared the interception of approximately 87 000 irregular migrants, including Moroccan and non-Moroccan nationals.¹⁸ However, this figure is significantly higher than the estimates of disembarkations provided by international organizations. Additionally, the authorities dismantled 250 smuggling networks during the year.¹⁹

There are two elements of Morocco's intensified counter-migration policy that require further analysis. First, as noted above, undocumented migrants faced ongoing limitations on mobility, due to the sporadic implementation of the unofficial restrictions on the use of public transport that were introduced in 2022.

These restrictions contributed to the growing influence of the so-called taxi mafia, drivers who facilitate the clandestine transport of migrants within Morocco. Migrants expelled to remote areas often have to rely on this service to return to coastal areas. One migrant reported that he had been removed from Tan Tan several times and had to pay between €100 and €150 each time to return.

Forced relocations themselves are another concerning security tactic. In 2022, the GI-TOC reported on the development of these operations in northern Morocco, with migrants being transported in buses to remote inland cities such as Béni Mellal, Tiznit, Settat and Azilal.²⁰ In 2023, there appeared to be an uptick in these operations in southern Morocco, particularly in Tan Tan, where arrests reportedly increased in the second half of the year due to a rise in smuggling activity, and in Laayoune in Moroccan-administered Western Sahara. Apprehended migrants were reportedly held in temporary detention centres before being transferred to more isolated areas.



Sub-Saharan migrants gather near Ouled Ziane station in Casablanca, January 2023.

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Internal expulsions have mainly been used to disperse migrants and impede embarkations, but do not provide a lasting solution. They also exacerbate migrants' vulnerability by separating them from their homes and jobs, severely limiting their financial options. While migrants' attempts to embark from the coast may be temporarily disrupted, the immediate economic challenges they face increase their risk of homelessness and potential involvement in exploitative labour situations out of desperation.

Increased deportations in 2023 led to a significant concentration of migrants in several towns in central Morocco, resulting in heightened visibility and tensions. While coexistence between Moroccans and foreign migrants is generally peaceful, there were reports of rising xenophobia in cities with large migrant populations.

In early 2023, tensions arose in Casablanca over the growing number of homeless migrants, particularly around the Ouled Ziane bus station, where over 1 000 migrants, many of whom had been living there for years, had set up makeshift camps. Residents complained about worsening insecurity and the unsanitary conditions caused by the camp's expansion, which was disrupting nearby businesses.²¹ While the Moroccan authorities had previously tolerated the encampment, mounting discontent prompted the police to intervene to disperse the migrants. In some instances, the police were met with resistance, and videos of migrants throwing stones at police cars circulated, reinforcing negative perceptions.

Bleak economic prospects continue to drive migration

In 2023, Morocco began to bounce back from the overlapping shocks the economy had experienced in the previous year, including a severe drought, rising commodity prices and the global economic slowdown, all of which derailed growth. With the recovery, the country registered annual growth of 3% in the first half of the year, driven by improved agricultural production, a rebound in tourism and positive net exports.²²

But despite the improvement in macroeconomic indicators, many Moroccans continued to grapple with the effects of the successive economic blows that had occurred since 2020. Price hikes strained the purchasing power of citizens and residents alike, especially low-income populations. While Morocco has not experienced the food shortages seen in countries such as Tunisia, rising food prices were a key driver of inflation, which peaked at 10.1% in February 2023, before falling to 4.3% in October.²³

Morocco's drought, the worst and longest in the country's recent history, was a major contributor to inflationary pressures. While there was a partial recovery in agricultural production in 2023, the crisis led to a number of job losses in rural areas across the country.

The economy was further affected by the 8 September earthquake in the High Atlas mountains, south-west of Marrakesh. The event killed at least 3 000 people, destroyed 19 000 buildings and damaged some 60 000 others.²⁴ It caused significant internal displacement, increasing the populations of Marrakesh and Taroudant by 33% and 45% respectively, and put further pressure on the already strained social support systems in these areas.²⁵



A huge earthquake hit central Morocco in September 2023, causing significant internal displacement.

© Carl Court/Getty Images

Interviews indicated that a growing number of people, including those in the middle class, were facing challenges in obtaining basic necessities, contributing to a perception of a deteriorating quality of life. This sentiment was supported by research from the World Bank, whose household confidence index for Morocco fell to an all-time low in the first and second quarters of 2023, with 87.3% of households surveyed feeling that their quality of life had deteriorated over the previous year.²⁶ Only 53.4% of respondents said they believed they had enough income to cover their expenses.

Rising inflation was particularly hard on irregular migrants, many of whom earn extremely low incomes. One Ivorian migrant, for example, reported that her job as a cook in a restaurant in Casablanca paid just €5 a day. These economic dynamics had a direct effect on foreign migrants' decisions to leave Morocco. Moroccan migrants interviewed in the Canary Islands also cited poverty and the difficult financial situation, including price hikes and unemployment, as reasons for their decision to leave.

Rising inflation may also, counterintuitively, have curbed migration in 2023. The high cost of basic goods, combined with increases in the prices charged by human smugglers, meant that it took much longer for migrants to raise the necessary funds for a journey. Nevertheless, embarkations continued, with migrants in some cases resorting to unconventional ways of generating income. One Cameroonian migrant explained that he had raised the substantial sum of €1 000 demanded by smugglers by begging on the street.

Finally, frustration over the quality of public services increased in Morocco in 2023. Specifically, a months-long teachers' strike highlighted the deteriorating conditions in the public school system and exposed the growing anger of public sector employees struggling with rising prices. The strike also disrupted the school year, causing widespread frustration. An interviewee in Rabat observed: 'More and more, we hear people talking about how they are fed up with the situation. Some are thinking of leaving the country, despite never considering this before.'



CONCLUSION

Human smuggling trends in Morocco remained relatively stable in 2023. There were moderate increases in migrant arrivals in Spain, including in the Canary Islands and on the mainland, while a notable decline in arrivals was recorded in the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. However, underlying this stability were significant differences in route dynamics and fluctuations in departures throughout the year.

The rise in maritime departures indicated a sustained interest in migration among both Moroccan and foreign nationals. Various factors influenced irregular migration from and through Morocco in 2023, including increased enforcement operations. Despite these measures, the allure of better economic opportunities for both Moroccan and foreign migrants continued to drive departures. Cross-border movement into Morocco from Algeria also contributed to migratory flows.

Maritime departures from Morocco towards mainland Spain and the Canary Islands continued to be arranged mainly by smuggling networks. These are typically headed by Moroccan smugglers, with lower-level members including both Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans. In addition to arranging maritime journeys, these networks reportedly play a crucial role in transporting migrants by land within the country, circumventing increased controls and the ad hoc restrictions on migrants' use of public transport.

Smuggling networks adapted to Morocco's robust security measures in 2023. They reportedly sought to establish corrupt relationships with security personnel to facilitate their operations and sustain their activities. Additionally, they adapted to enhanced enforcement by changing departure beaches and the locations of migrant hideouts.

A notable trend evolving in the north was the increased involvement of drug trafficking networks in human smuggling. While this intersection is not new, it appeared to intensify during the year. This was probably due to the higher profitability of human smuggling caused by rising prices. This development coincided with an uptick in the use of violence against migrants by smugglers along the routes from northern Morocco.

The use of smuggling networks remained the main mode of travel for migrants departing from Morocco, but self-smuggling also continued, albeit to a lesser extent. This means of travel is appealing primarily because of its lower cost, especially after the increase in the price of sea crossings in 2023. Most self-smugglers are Moroccan nationals.

Although self-smuggling is a long-standing practice among Moroccans, foreign migrants also appeared to be using this method in 2023. The emergent involvement of sub-Saharan migrants in this smuggling method, a trend also observed in Tunisia, could be attributed to their knowledge of the terrain and their response to the escalating cost of sea crossings. While still relatively uncommon, this phenomenon is likely to become more widespread in the future.

Smugglers play a crucial role in facilitating the movement of migrants across the Morocco–Algeria border in both directions. Those engaged in human smuggling are also reported to be involved in other illegal activities, such as transporting contraband goods like food, fuel and drugs. In addition to Moroccans and Algerians, sub-Saharan Africans are also part of these networks, acting as intermediaries to attract clients. Networks operating on both sides of the border often rely on collusion with security forces to facilitate their activities.

Developments in migrant smuggling in 2023 highlighted that while increased security measures can disrupt activities and reduce sea crossings, they cannot eliminate the business of smuggling entirely. Smuggling networks, encouraged by persistent demand, demonstrated their ability to adapt to the changing environment and evade law enforcement controls. Furthermore, certain counter-migration operations, such as the forced internal relocation of migrants, only yielded temporary results in terms of reducing migration.

Looking ahead, interest in migration is likely to continue, driven by the persistent factors that fuel the phenomenon. Despite Morocco's counter-migration efforts, smuggling networks have proved extremely resilient. Consequently, they are likely to remain key players in facilitating movement from Morocco. These networks thrive on high demand, and their operations become increasingly sophisticated in this situation, as evidenced by the growing involvement of drug trafficking groups in migrant smuggling. These factors will pose additional challenges to efforts to combat smuggling and exacerbate the already significant risks faced by migrants.

I am truly grateful for being saved, as many people die on the journey. Crossing the sea is perilous. Suddenly, the fuel ran out, and panic ensued. We feared for our lives. It was the wind that eventually got us moving. The Spanish maritime guard came to our rescue, but I was barely conscious. The next thing I knew, I woke up in hospital.

Interview with an Ivorian migrant in the Canary Islands, November 2023



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