Moving Towards Europe
Diverse Trajectories and Multidimensional Drivers of Migration across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic
Bibliographic Information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

This edited volume is based on research conducted in the framework of the Horizon 2020 Project ITFLOWS – IT Tools and Methods for Managing Migration Flows – which has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 882986. This volume reflects only the views of the authors, and the European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

The authors of this volume would like to thank the participants in the ITFLOWS closed-door online expert workshop “Drivers and patterns of mixed migration towards the EU”, held on 28 September 2021, as well as the ITFLOWS project internal reviewers, for their invaluable feedback and input on earlier versions of this work.

Cover illustration: Shutterstock.com

ISSN 2624-8905 • ISBN 978-3-0343-4639-9 (Print)
DOI 10.3726/b20682

This publication has been peer reviewed.

© 2023, Asli Selin Okyay, Luca Barana, Coleen Boland (eds).
Published by Peter Lang Group AG, Lausanne, Schweiz

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Chapter 6  Mali’s migratory complexity: A tale of shifting migratory movements on three routes

Abstract: Mali has suffered from growing political instability and insecurity over the last decade, with widespread consequences on internal displacement and international mobility. Framed within broader patterns of regional mobility, EU-bound irregular migration has unfolded along different corridors towards Italy and Spain, following non-linear trends on different routes. In this chapter, several drivers contributing to shaping such trends are analysed, starting with the conflict and instability cycle in certain regions of the country, which – together with economic and environmental factors – has affected patterns of forced displacement, but also the activities of smuggling and mobility facilitation networks. The case study on Mali also shows how migratory corridors to key countries of transit such as Niger and Algeria have proved resilient to the introduction of restrictive national policies, and how the conflict in Libya has had a multifaceted effect in terms of secondary drivers, at times enhancing irregular movements through the country or hindering the activities of smuggling networks. Lastly, EU’s Italy’s border policies on the Mediterranean Sea are assessed, investigating their potential role in diverging the migratory movements towards Spain after 2017.

Keywords: instability in the Sahel | European border policies | Libyan conflict | smuggling | Algeria

Mali has received international attention due to the deepening political instability affecting the country over the last decade. The widespread consequences of internal displacement and international mobility have inspired policy responses at the national and international level. Trends of ‘irregular border crossings’ (IBCs) at the EU’s external frontiers and of asylum applications in Italy and Spain signal how mixed flows of Malian migrants along the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR), the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR) and the Western Africa Route (WAR) in 2009–20 have intensified, despite their wavering strength in different moments of the decade on different routes. In particular, the major shifts on the CMR during this period can be identified in a first, limited, wave of arrivals in 2011; the sudden intensification of irregular crossings in 2014–17, with a momentary reduction in 2015; and the significant drop starting in 2018. In Spain, the most significant turning points have been the momentary surge
in asylum applications in 2013, their new, gradual increase since 2017 and the
growth in irregular arrivals registered in 2018 on the WMR. Meanwhile, rising
numbers of Malian nationals have been recorded on the WAR from 2018 to 2020
(although this route reflects much less volume than the WMR and CMR), with
the higher numbers of arrivals recorded at the beginning (2009) and at the end
(2020) of the period under analysis. These fluctuating trends on diverse routes
reflect the multifaceted impact of social, political and economic drivers in coun-
tries of origin and transit, whose development, alongside their complex interac-
tion with national and international policies, will be examined in this chapter.

6.1 Migration profile

Mali, a landlocked country in the Sahel, is a low-income economy, vulnerable to
widespread poverty and food insecurity: the extreme poverty rate stood at 42.3 per
cent in 2019 (World Bank 2022). The country displays a rapid demographic growth
(5.88 children per woman in 2018) and an extremely young population: 47 per cent
of Malian citizens are under fifteen and 53 per cent are under eighteen (EASO 2018).
The rate of gross primary school enrolment stands at 77.1 per cent (JRC 2019),
highlighting the need for further investment in access to basic services. Mali is usu-
ally conceived as divided between the north, scarcely populated and poorer, and
the south, where the main cultivated areas are concentrated. Since colonial times,
the southern region has been considered the area where economic dynamism has
taken place, fuelling feelings of abandonment and unrest in the north. However,
this imbalance appears to be less pronounced than conventional wisdom suggests,
especially when the informal and extra-legal economic sector is accounted for. The
urban-rural divide is another important cleavage in the Malian social fabric.

Mali has suffered from growing political instability and deepening insecur-
ity in the last decade, with widespread consequences for internal displacement
and international mobility. The country has faced an armed rebellion in the
north in 2012, followed by a peace agreement in 2015, and combined threats of
insurgency, clashes with armed forces and attacks on civilians in various regions
(especially at the border with Niger and Burkina Faso) in the following years.

Malians share an established history of mobility and migration, dating back to
precolonial times, which has been described as a response to cyclical downswings
and food insecurity (Findley 2004). The political economy of French West Africa
contributed to enhancing migration pressures in order to respond to labour
shortages for extensive agriculture in neighbouring areas. While emigration
towards France began to grow after World War II, the country has traditionally
experienced a high degree of population mobility, both internally and across its
borders. The main internal dynamic concerns population movements towards
major urban areas, in particular the capital Bamako. Mali has also been involved in relevant patterns of circular migration at the regional level, as Malian labourers have sought agricultural employment on a seasonal basis in neighbouring countries, such as Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana, but also Senegal and Gambia. Pastoralist populations have been engaged in circular movements from the north to the south of the country and in neighbouring states. The number of individuals involved was estimated at approximately 500,000 in 2013 (Cartier 2013). Both internal and interregional movements also reflect labour opportunities at key artisanal mining sites within Mali, as well as the influences of climate change and environmental degradation on livelihoods and food security (Bolay 2021; Hegazi et al. 2021; van der Land and Hummel 2013). In the past decades, Mali has also hosted different waves of refugees from other countries in the region, notably Mauritania, Côte d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone. Regulations approved in 1998 equate the access of refugees to health, education and labour markets to that of nationals (IOM 2018). At the same time, Mali state authorities have been criticised for a lack of migration regulation and enforcement or laissez-faire approach, as well as for their absence in development efforts, with civil society stepping in to fill these gaps (Trauner and Deimel 2013; Hegazi et al. 2021).

Official figures in 2001 counted more than 920,000 Malian citizens living abroad (8.4 per cent of the Malian resident population), with the large majority (80.6 per cent) in African countries, in particular 56.6 per cent in Côte d’Ivoire. (Di Bartolomeo et al. 2010). Outside the region, long-term emigration flows have mainly targeted France, which in 2001 hosted 94.3 per cent of Malian residents in Europe (Di Bartolomeo et al. 2010). During the 1990s emigration outside Africa diversified and the United States emerged as another preferred destination, alongside France (Findley 2004). Mali signed various cooperation agreements on circulation, stay and co-development with France (1994, 1998 and 2000) and on immigration with Spain (2007).

At the same time, the importance of Mali as a transit country has increased in the 2000s, both for trans-Sahelian and Europe-bound mixed migration flows. As a consequence, Mali has gained a significant position in European policy-making not only as a migration-sending country, but also as a transit country for migrants departing from other Sub-Saharan states. The city of Gao has become a relevant departure point (Cartier 2013). Transit through Mali is facilitated by its membership in ECOWAS (Economic Community of Western African States) and by the provisions of the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment, which entails visa-free entry for ECOWAS citizens throughout the region. Furthermore, Malians have been exempted from visa requirements in several countries in the Maghreb, such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania (Di Bartolomeo et al. 2010: 5). Thus,
in most cases migration flows crossing Mali are not considered irregular, but they become so further down the route towards Europe or other destinations.

Moreover, due to a readmission agreement established between Spain and Mauritania since 2003, deportees from the Canary Islands are often expelled to the African country, where they are then returned to the borders of Senegal or Mali without any assistance (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021: 27). In fact, with respect to all routes (including both WMR and CMR), due to increasing criminalisation in Northern and Western Africa, alongside inter-African deportations and refoulements laid out by several states (including Libya and Algeria), returnees often end up in Mali, which accepts returns of non-Malians as well (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021; Trauner and Deimel 2013).

The increasing relevance of Mali as a transit country has deepened the challenge posed by human smuggling, usually linked to illegal trade and activities of cross-border criminal networks. Human trafficking of Malians and migrants of other nationalities has also been worsening. While internal exploitation of Malian victims is a key matter of concern, international migrants crossing the country are also highly vulnerable to sex and labour exploitation, especially Nigerians. Malian women are vulnerable to sex trafficking in Western Africa, but also in Tunisia and Libya, and to domestic servitude in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia (US Department of State 2020).

To respond to these growing concerns, Mali adopted an Anti-Trafficking Law in 2012, while a National Migration Policy was approved in 2014, with the goal of aligning migration management to international standards and enhancing the benefits of the migration-development nexus (IOM 2018). The new policy also reinstates the importance of enforcing the free circulation provisions of ECOWAS.

### 6.2 Recent trends in EU-bound migration: 2009–2020

Due to the distinctive migratory profile of Mali, EU-bound irregular migration has unfolded along different corridors over the last decade. In particular, during the so-called ‘migration crisis’ of 2014–17, Malians mainly moved along the various trails composing the CMR, while from 2018–20 their presence grew along the routes heading to Spain. The following two sections highlight major patterns of mobility and migration of Malians along these passages.

#### 6.2.1 Recent trends on the CMR

Malians constitute the sixth national group among irregular arrivals on the CMR in 2009–20 (38,663 arrivals, 4.61 per cent of total detections), which contributes
to explaining the relevance that the country has gained in European (and Italian) policy-making. However, there is a deep gap between the number of arrivals from Mali and those from other key countries of origin in Sub-Saharan Africa in the same period, such as Eritrea (119,128 detections, 14.21 per cent) and Nigeria (99,056 detections, 11.82 per cent).

At first glance the number of irregular arrivals from Mali appears to follow the general trend for the route, with the peak year being 2016 (10,008 Malians detected, 5.52 per cent of total arrivals). Numbers of Malians on the move clearly intensified during the 2014–17 ‘crisis’. Looking at the national groups reaching Italy, Malians appeared among the top-ten nationalities in seven years during the 2009–20 timeframe, but never in an apical position. In 2014 Mali was the fourth country of origin in terms of arrivals, and Malians reached their highest share of the total number of arrivals in 2017 (5.98 per cent).

The trend in irregular arrivals in 2009–20 has not been linear however. From a relatively low base (and a first wave of almost 2,400 detections in 2011), the numbers of Malians increased dramatically in 2014, then dropped significantly the next year, and climbed again to their peak in 2016. After 2017, arrivals from Mali declined again to a few hundreds. The share of Malians in the total number of arrivals on the CMR dropped as well (from 5.98 per cent in 2017 to 1.8 per cent in 2020).

Table 6.1: Detections of Malian nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Detections of Malian nationals</th>
<th>Total detections</th>
<th>As % of total detections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>11,043</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4,450</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2,395</td>
<td>64,261</td>
<td>3.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>15,151</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1,684</td>
<td>45,298</td>
<td>3.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>9,375</td>
<td>170,664</td>
<td>5.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>5,756</td>
<td>153,946</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>10,008</td>
<td>181,376</td>
<td>5.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>7,119</td>
<td>118,962</td>
<td>5.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>915</td>
<td>23,485</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>14,003</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>642</td>
<td>35,673</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38,663</td>
<td>838,312</td>
<td>4.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on ‘Detections of illegal border-crossings’ (Frontex 2021).
Although the figures on the CMR indicate that Malians have not always constituted a pivotal priority for Italian authorities in terms of yearly irregular arrivals, asylum applications show a different picture. During the last decade, Italy received 49 per cent of all asylum applications filed by Malians in the EU-27, and it has been the top European destination for Malian asylum seekers (38,740 requests in 2009–20) along with France, the traditional destination country in Europe (23,420 requests). Another key fact from the figures on asylum applications concerns the male/female ratio: flows of asylum seekers in Italy have been predominantly male. For each year that we have analysed, the percentage of male asylum seekers has been well above the 90 per cent threshold. On average, women have accounted for just 2.44 per cent of asylum applications in Italy. Nonetheless, a slight shift might be occurring, as an increasing female presence among asylum seekers has emerged in 2019 and 2020, when their share (7.32 per cent and 6.72 per cent respectively) has risen to its highest point of the last decade.

While the stock of asylum seekers at the end of the decade clearly points to Italy as the top destination in Europe, yearly flows of applications followed the pattern described earlier for irregular arrivals: after a first wave in 2011 (3,015 requests), the number of asylum requests peaked in 2014 (9,790) and then

---

Figure 6.1: Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Malian nationals on the CMR, 2009–2020

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on ‘Detections of illegal border-crossings’ (Frontex 2021).
remained at a high level (more than 5,000 requests per year) until 2017. A significant decrease followed, especially in 2019–20.

![Asylum applications of Malian nationals in Italy, 2009–2020](image)

**Figure 6.2:** Asylum applications of Malian nationals in Italy, 2009–2020

*Source:* Authors’ elaboration based on Eurostat annual statistics on ‘Asylum and first time asylum applicants’ (Eurostat 2021).

### 6.2.2 Recent trends on the WMR and WAR

While flows are not as significant on the WMR as the CMR, Malians are among the top five nationalities in IBCs along the WMR land routes in the ten-year period under study for all years except 2015 to 2017, and rank in the top five nationalities in combined WMR sea and land routes from 2018–20 (Frontex 2021). Moreover, as noted earlier, Spanish or interregional involuntary returns often end up in Mali, making it another pivotal country on the WMR (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021).

**Table 6.2:** Detections of Malian nationals on the WAR, 2009–2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Detections of Malian nationals</th>
<th>Total detections</th>
<th>As % of total detections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>2,244</td>
<td>24.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>19.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>8.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>874</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Table 6.2:  Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Detections of Malian nationals</th>
<th>Total detections</th>
<th>As % of total detections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>671</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1,323</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>2,718</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>23,029</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,005</td>
<td>32,549</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on ‘Detections of illegal border-crossings’ (Frontex 2021).

In light of Mali’s return to the top nationalities on WMR land routes in 2018, as well as its emergence among the top five nationalities on sea routes, and given the increase in 2018 IBC detections of Malians indicated in the graph below, 2018 seems to mark a significant year. Malians make up 19 per cent of total sea and land detections on the WMR that year. Specifically, in 2018, Malian nationals rank third behind those from Morocco and Guinea in sea crossings, and also

Table 6.3:  Detections of Malian nationals on the WMR (sea and land), 2009–2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Detections of Malian nationals</th>
<th>Total detections</th>
<th>As % of total detections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6,642</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5,003</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>8,448</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>6,397</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>6,838</td>
<td>6.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>5,654</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>7,004</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>9,990</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>23,063</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>10,747</td>
<td>56,245</td>
<td>19.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>23,969</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>17,228</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12,865</td>
<td>176,481</td>
<td>7.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on ‘Detections of illegal border-crossings’ (Frontex 2021).

In light of Mali’s return to the top nationalities on WMR land routes in 2018, as well as its emergence among the top five nationalities on sea routes, and given the increase in 2018 IBC detections of Malians indicated in the graph below, 2018 seems to mark a significant year. Malians make up 19 per cent of total sea and land detections on the WMR that year. Specifically, in 2018, Malian nationals rank third behind those from Morocco and Guinea in sea crossings, and also
third behind those from Guinea and Burkina Faso in land crossings. In zooming in on the monthly data, IBC detections of Malians rise significantly starting from the month of May until October when they reach 1,841, and begin to taper off in November and December. By contrast, while in December 2018 there were 993 detections, January 2019 registers only 9. Meanwhile, October 2018 registers the most land detections.

*Figure 6.3:* Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Malian nationals on the WMR, 2009–2020

*Source:* Authors’ elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on ‘Detections of illegal border-crossings’ (Frontex 2021).

The increased numbers of Malians on the WMR in 2018, and later on the WAR throughout 2019 and 2020, as illustrated in the figure below, seem to suggest a diversion of the flow from the CMR. In terms of the WAR, three trends emerge over the selected time frame. As the figure displays, the most significant year for monthly detections of Malians on the WAR was in 2009 (with over 500 detections), with another slight rise in 2013. At the same time, detections also significantly rise from 2018–20.
More specifically, in 2009, Malian nationalities make up the greatest number of detections on the route, and 25 per cent of overall WAR detections. Numbers then remain relatively low until 2013, when Malians make up 19 per cent of all detections along the WAR route, the second most prominent group after Moroccan nationals. These detections are in the months of January through March and then June through August, with the highest number in February. After bottoming out in the following years, in 2018 and 2019 detections begin to rise again, reaching a significant amount in 2020. The number of detections in 2020, 290 (practically all in the month of May), is much greater than the average annual detections for Mali. In looking at Mali over the selected time frame, the year 2020 is second only to the 555 detections of Malians in 2009, but due to the overall surge of WAR detections in 2020, Malian nationals only make up 1.26 per cent as compared with total route detections, ranking third and far behind in absolute numbers (again, 290) after a substantial amount of Moroccan nationals (11,759) and an ‘unknown’ category of nationals (10,620).
Looking at the figures illustrating asylum applications to Spain from Malian nationals, from 2009 to 2011 there were relatively few applications, but they almost doubled from one year to the next in 2012, and then tripled to reach the second highest number of applications in the ten-year period in 2013 at 1,470 (with the exception of detections at their height in 2020). In terms of the male to female ratio of Malian asylum applications, looking at the entirety of applications to the EU over the ten-year period is perhaps more illustrative, given that Eurostat data indicate applications to Spain make up only an average of 8 per cent of those to the EU overall in this timeframe, and the Spanish figures may be unrepresentative (see below). Given this, from 2009–20, Malian asylum applications to the EU reflect a male majority, with 82 per cent of applications from males and 18 per cent from females over the ten-year time frame. While this overall average reflects the general breakdown from 2011–20, the years 2009 and 2010 saw a more balanced breakdown, with 58 per cent male and 42 per cent female, and 47 per cent male and 53 per cent female, respectively.

After 2013, applications almost halve in 2014 and diminish further in 2015, remaining relatively stable through to 2018 where they begin to rise again, reaching the third highest number in the period in 2019, and again, the highest over the course of the period in 2020. Despite a steady increase in the number of asylum petitions of Malians since 2016, the statistics do not reflect the real number of nationals reaching Spain to seek asylum, due to the bureaucratic difficulties that prevent them from successfully requesting international protection.
6.3 Analysis of drivers of recent migration trends

Two broader aspects about emigration from Mali in the last decade seem to emerge. First, asylum seekers and refugees have become a more relevant – but not dominant – feature of migration towards the EU. Second, while the incidence of forced displacement on Europe-bound routes seems to suggest a correlation with the deepening instability in the country, the role of insecurity in Mali as the key driver of emigration has to be balanced against the declining trend of irregular arrivals in 2018–20 and its decoupling from asylum requests in Spain. The impact of other factors along the routes needs to be assessed in order to better understand these diverging trends.

6.3.1 A complex security-migration nexus in Mali: Challenging the conventional wisdom

Established regional differences in migratory attitudes within Mali matter, as the majority of Malians engaging in international migration seem to depart from the region of Kayes, bordering Senegal and Mauritania. An estimate in 2007 found that 80 per cent of Malians in France originated from that region, which has long been considered one of the most peaceful in Mali. Moreover, surveys undertaken in the region signal a deeply rooted social culture that generates long-running expectations for the young to leave. Insecurity does not appear prominently among the factors fuelling such expectations, which are rather based upon a view of migration as ‘the norm’ and ‘the only way out of poverty’, but also on the lack of work at home and the youth’s perceived social responsibility towards their family (REACH 2020).

Social practices and family pressures could also be conceived as structural drivers predating our period of analysis when it comes to the importance of gender roles and expectations. While Malian asylum-seekers reaching Europe in 2009–20 have been predominantly male, the social construction around gendered mobility at the regional level contributes to influencing the context within which migratory choices are made in Mali. On the one hand, migration of young males is part of family economics and is used to strengthen their family status (Hertrich and Lesclingand 2013: 175), as it is one of the few options in rural settings to acquire the material and symbolic resources to get married. On the other hand, other studies suggest that migration is increasingly considered as an inevitable part of life for many adolescent girls in Mali and that the migratory experience has significant impacts on women’s social position, as ‘it allows girls to […] avoid early marriage’ (Engebretsen et al. 2020). Migration experiences can also expose girls to social practices, especially marriage-related, incongruent
with cultural expectations at home, indirectly influencing marital relationships (ibid.).

Moving back to our analysis aimed at problematising the view of Malians’ emigration as predominantly conflict-related, another element mediating migratory choices in Mali is constituted by shrinking access to natural resources, which is an important driver of rural mobility. While the nexus between the consequences of climate change in the Sahel (such as desertification) and international migration is gathering increasing attention from the literature and the international community, it should be noted that there is still no consensus on the concrete ways in which environmental dynamics are operating in the region. However, although international migration from Mali usually originates in urban contexts, as illustrated by recent interviews with migrants in the country (Mixed Migration Centre 2021a), most of these trajectories still constitute secondary movements after the failure of initial migration projects from rural contexts to major urban centres like Bamako. Rural-urban movements remain both a major pattern of internal migration and often a prelude to international mobility: therefore, the role of competition over natural resources in rural areas cannot be ignored as another wide-ranging driver.

Nonetheless, political instability and armed conflict have certainly played a central role in Mali over the last decade, affecting the socio-political context and economic livelihoods, and acting as a driver of displacement. First of all, it is important to draw attention to the conflict enacted in 2012 in northern Mali, which reflects the combined dynamics of an allegedly weak state, separatist groups or armed rebellion, and jockeying, extremist Islamist groups, in addition to other inter-community disputes. Extremist attacks, including by forces affiliated with the Islamic State, became so targeted, frequent and deadly throughout 2017 and 2018, that the UN Peacekeeping Mission MINUSMA reclassified its listing of civilian threats in 2017, so as to separate out ‘terrorist’ groups from other ‘non-state armed groups’ (Di Razza 2018: 21). Moreover, the peace process initiated in 2015 under the Bamako Agreement has been scrutinised as to its effects years later, as findings highlight how it did not address terrorist groups and the UN presence attracted further threats and violence, it left fighters idle and thus predisposed to armed banditry, and it increased divides among clans as they attempted to consolidate power or reorganise and reposition (Boutellis and Zahar 2017; Di Razza 2018: 21).

The trends of emigration towards Europe could be related to some extent to this insecurity cycle, as the numbers of asylum seekers, refugees and internally displaced persons have been at historically high levels (Migration Data Portal 2021). However, a more careful analysis of the situation on the CMR in 2017–20
seems to nuance this assumption: despite persisting insecurity in the country after 2017, the number of Malians reaching Italy (and Spain after 2018) significantly declined. Furthermore, economic determinants have been singled out as having a much bigger role in shaping migratory aspirations in West African countries, including Mali, than political factors (Schöfberger et al. 2020). Coupled with the declining post-2017 pattern, this seems to suggest that, while the conflict might have partially driven emigration, there is not a straightforward connection between lasting conditions of insecurity in Mali and irregular arrivals of Malians in Europe, at least since 2017. Other elements should be factored into the analysis, such as the disrupting effects on the CMR of an intensifying Libyan conflict, as well as the impact of EU-sponsored policies in countries of transit and the shift towards the WMR, which not coincidentally experienced an increase in arrivals in 2018.

Apparently, a clearer connection with conditions of political instability could be drawn concerning the high 2009 WAR figure (or alternatively the 2010 decrease). A certain consensus has emerged on the fact that Mali saw relatively low levels of violence until around late 2011; however, a previous Taureg uprising in northern Mali, spurred by low economic development and secessionist demands, which lasted from 2006 to 2009, was particularly more violent towards the end of that period, thus possibly explaining the high 2009 numbers and the subsequent drop (Hoogeveen et al. 2018). The long-term consequences of the rebellion could also have a role in the sudden – albeit rather limited – increase in irregular arrivals in Italy in 2011, even if also other national groups, such as Nigerians, experienced a similar surge that year.

Looking to the most recent developments, instability in the country has also been fuelled by the deterioration of the crisis in the Liptako-Gourma region, spread across south-east central Mali (as well as Niger and Burkina Faso), where tensions between pastoral farming Dogon and nomadic Fulanis came to a head in 2018 over land and water access points, leading to clashes with the armed forces, attacks on civilians and militia formations (ACAPS 2018). Moreover, the Malian presidential elections took place in the summer of 2018. One survey estimated that almost half of Malians feared becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence during the campaign (Haidara and Isbell 2018). Indeed, there was an uptick in extremist attacks in the months leading up to the election, which ventured down from the north to central Mali and the capital city of Bamako. The UN Secretary-General noted that the three-month period in which the July elections fell represented the deadliest for civilians since 2013 (Gilmour 2019; UN Secretary-General 2018). Still, as previously detailed, it would be simplistic to connect drivers and migration decisions solely to the international intervention,
armed conflict, peace-building and development nexus. As already noted, the effects of climate change and environmental degradation affecting food security, among other dimensions, as well as the (often gendered) cultural and societal understanding of mobility, should also be borne in mind when examining these trends (Hegazi et al. 2021; Bolay 2021).

The intensifying armed conflict engulfing the country has nonetheless influenced internal transit routes operating in the most-affected areas, especially the city of Gao, which is located in the Liptako-Gourma region and has been a key transit point along the WMR: the route may have thus served as a logical choice for those consequently displaced in 2018. At the same time, Gao has also traditionally acted as one of the most important crossroads for journeys using public and private transport from central Mali towards Niger and Algeria. Together with enhanced law enforcement and (limited) controls implemented by Malian authorities, especially in 2018, the insecurity in the area has had a disruptive effect on established smuggling networks and has made Gao a less attractive transit point for migrants departing from Bamako. Since 2018, instability in the region has also prompted migrants from Mali to try other routes towards Burkina Faso and Niger and, at a later time, towards the city of Timbuktu, which consolidated its position as a new smuggling hub towards Algeria in early 2020. This shift from Gao to Timbuktu has also affected the costs of smuggling services to enter Algeria, which are estimated to having increased from 76–122 euro to 229–305 euro in 2020, before the impact of border closures due to the pandemic (Micallef et al. 2021). Interviews with migrants transiting through the country also indicate that the use of smugglers and facilitators is less frequent in Mali (58 per cent) than in Niger (84 per cent), and that the relationship between facilitators and people on the move is much more complex than what transpires from the rigid dichotomy between ‘victims’ and ‘criminals’ that seems to underpin several policy interventions in Mali. The most common services provided in Mali by these actors are not only the crossing of borders, but also accommodation and the facilitation of money transfers (Mixed Migration Centre 2021b). As these changes in Mali occurred concurrently with a decline in irregular arrivals in Italy through the CMR, as well as with the post-2018 drop in Spain, it appears that the role of conflict in driving and mediating migration flows in origin and transit areas is not a given fact, but can produce contrasting effects.

Despite this complex assessment, the security-migration nexus attracted several foreign interventions. The multi-layered Malian crisis has entailed various missions and policy initiatives from the United Nations, the European Union and some European member states (Ioannides 2020). For instance, Italy’s deepening diplomatic foothold in Mali is mainly related to the relevance gained
by immigration from the Sahel in Italian policy-making during the refugee crisis. Mali is also one of the top beneficiaries of the EU Emergency for African Trust Fund, which allocated over 220 million euros to the country (European Commission 2021). Overall, Mali is one of the key African countries where externalisation policies have been applied.

6.3.2 The durability of trans-Saharan corridors and the (disputed) impact of the Libyan conflict

Different legs of the route converging in Libya from Mali have been affected along their trajectories by local developments, which persisted and went through modifications multiple times over the course of a few years. As also made clear by the internal shift from Gao to Timbuktu, the routes followed by migrants departing from Mali have shown a certain degree of adaptability in light of insecurity at home. In particular, the trans-Saharan traits of the CMR have shown a pronounced durability, especially when compared to the dramatic decrease in irregular arrivals experienced at their concluding end in Italy from 2017 onwards. Such misalignment could be partially explained by the large presence of Malians still stranded in Libya’s bottleneck, which amounted to 32,840 at the end of 2019 (IOM DTM 2020). This lowest point in terms of irregular arrivals in Italy could also be partially explained by possible diversion of flows towards the WMR in 2018, or changing mobility patterns along the route. In its Displacement Tracking Matrix, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) identifies three major corridors to Libya used by migrants departing from Mali: through Niger, through Algeria, or through Burkina Faso and then Niger. In 2016, IOM reported that 34 per cent of those migrants in Libya had reached the country using the Burkina Faso–Niger corridor, while 30 per cent had passed through Algeria (IOM DTM 2016). Over the years, while the Europe-bound flow was dwindling, the volume of movements along these trans-Saharan pathways continued to shift: in 2018–19 Algeria became the preferred country of transit for migrants from Mali on the CMR, being used by slightly over 40 per cent of those stranded in Libya. Those years also marked the EU-sponsored crackdown against human smuggling in Niger, especially in the key transit point of Agadez, and the enacting of the Nigerien Anti-Trafficking Law. As analysed in the chapter on Nigeria, the effects of this significant modification to the policy framework

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1 The first time these figures have been made available.
2 In the meantime, the use of the WMR, away from the CMR and Algeria, was also increasing. Please refer to the case study on Morocco.
in Niger intervened upon a grey area of informality often enabling smuggling and other services linked to mobility, sometimes with the tolerance or even the active participation of local authorities (Raineri 2018). At the same time, as already recalled, insecurity in northern and central Mali undermined smuggling networks especially in Gao, a traditional departure point to Niger. The direct involvement of non-state armed groups in human smuggling in northern Mali also remained low as the activity proved to be less lucrative than other illicit trades (Micallef et al. 2019).

The focus thus moves to Algeria, a country which has traditionally emphasised its sovereignty in managing its borders and has remained uncooperative with the EU on migration management. After having introduced a law in 2008 criminalising irregular entry into its territory, Algeria responded to the crises in its neighbourhood in the first half of the decade, including the conflict in Mali, by increasingly linking immigration to terrorist threats and by securing its own frontiers, notwithstanding the persistence of traditional mobility patterns across its borders, especially among the Tuaregs (Teevan 2020). A new and revamped securitised policy adopted by Algerian national authorities has made the tentative shift in 2018–19 from the Nigerien leg of the CMR to the Algerian one short lived: Algeria had already militarised the control of its frontiers, but in 2018 it went even further by conducting several raids and abandoning Malian nationals in the desert across the border (Zardo and Loschi 2022). These interventions ended up anticipating the decrease of Malians transiting through Algeria already in 2019 (41 per cent, slightly down from 42 per cent the year before) and, in a more pronounced fashion, in 2020, when the share dropped to 27 per cent (IOM DTM 2021a).

The partial disruption of flows crossing Niger and policy developments in Algeria have therefore affected the trajectories of Malians, as also underlined by the diversion of their movements towards Chad in 2017–18 (Tubiana et al. 2018). However, despite the recrudescence of Algeria’s policies, Malians remain amongst the primary nationalities represented in the immigrant population there (Teevan 2020), as the country has traditionally served as a destination for Sub-Saharan migrants, especially from West Africa (Lahlou 2018), applying an ambivalent approach to their contribution to the local economy.

3 For further analysis on the role of Niger as country of transit please refer to the case study dedicated to Nigeria in this book.

4 Over 35 per cent of Libya-bound migrants from Mali kept on choosing this route even in the years of relative decline of this corridor, namely 2018 and 2019.
The country of ‘alternative destination’ where the scenario for Malians has changed more dramatically over the last decade has been Libya. The inception of a decade-long conflict in 2011 after the toppling of the Qaddhafi regime may have facilitated the first wave of departures of Malians in 2011 and, most significantly, the decisive increase of their numbers during the ‘migration crisis’ in 2014–17, concurrently to the intensification of the civil conflict in Libya.\(^5\) In fact, Libya had long been a key destination country for Malian workers before 2011. While the inflow of economic migrants has not completely faded during the last decade, the deterioration of the economy has impacted the immigrant population. The profile of Sub-Saharan workers in Libya has changed as well, being composed predominantly of single males with a lower level of education. Malians employed in Libya reflect this profile and are mainly hired in agriculture (El Kamouni-Janseen et al. 2019). The reduced attractiveness of the Libyan labour market could be a factor at play when considering the increasing number of migrants attempting to reach Italy in 2011 and then in 2014–17, due to the reduced opportunities of employment available there. At the same time, secondary drivers of emigration from Libya have been mainly connected to forced migration, not only as a consequence of enduring violence, but also of widespread discrimination and exploitation (Crawley et al. 2016), especially after 2014, when the security situation further worsened. While this applies generally to all Sub-Saharan migrants transiting and/or residing in the country, it rings true especially for Malians, because of their vulnerability to trafficking in Libya. Moreover, rising emigration from Mali has also been indirectly affected by the influence of the Libyan crisis: significant numbers of Tuaregs were for instance engaged in security forces in Libya under Qaddhafi and many of them returned in Mali after 2011, fuelling the ensuing instability in the north (Cartier 2013). The influx of Libyan arms in the Sahel, and particularly in Mali, is also estimated to have played a role in nourishing regional and national instability. In turn, it partially drove the increase in Europe-bound flows culminating in 2016 on the CMR and in the following increase in arrivals on the WMR in 2018.

6.3.3 The effects of securitised European border policies and Covid-19

As drivers – especially linked to conflict – interacted in such contrasting ways in shaping Malians’ mobility in contexts of origin and transit, it is also important to

\(^5\) For an analysis of the broader role of Libya as a country of transit please refer to the case study on Nigeria in this report.
assess the impact of European policies, especially at the concluding ends of the CMR and WMR. The sudden rise of asylum applications of Malians in Spain in 2013 could have been already related to the role of European policies, with particular reference to the dynamic of French and Spanish bilateral agreements with Mali within the EU’s cooperation framework on migration control and development. At that time, relations deteriorated between France and Mali with regard to readmission agreements and overall cooperation, while a strengthening of ties with Spain in migration control and police cooperation was taking place (Trauner and Diemel 2013: 25).

More recently, as already noted, the detections of Malians on the CMR have followed the general pattern of decreasing arrivals inaugurated in mid-2017, after a number of significant policy developments in Libya and in the Mediterranean, among them the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and Tripoli’s government in February 2017. Italy has heavily invested in the policies promoted in the same year by Italian Minister of Interior Marco Minniti, including his strategy of ‘“mending”, sewing and repairing’ (Liga 2018: 12) relations with different local actors in Libya, such as militias, tribes and mayoral authorities both on the coast and in the south, with the explicit goal of reducing the number of irregular arrivals by dismantling and de-potentiating smuggling operations. Other measures, such as the delegation of Search and Rescue responsibilities to Libyan authorities and the training of the Libyan Coastal Guard, went in the same direction. Restrictions on NGOs operating rescue ships in the Mediterranean were also put in place by the Gentiloni government, followed in 2018 by a decree introduced by the government led by Giuseppe Conte that weakened asylum and international protection in Italy. Further restrictive migration policies were introduced under the new Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini (Vecsey 2019). These measures have significantly distanced the Italian approach from the humanitarian stance of the naval mission Mare Nostrum launched in 2013. A more restrictive framework – especially when it comes to the shift to the Sophia and Irini EU sea operations – has been implemented, which has also been meant as an instrument of deterrence to disincentivise departures from Libya and beyond (Mali included). These measures affected the CMR, and thus would go towards explaining the rise in WMR and WAR detections in 2018.

Finally, the rise in Malian detections in 2020 on the WAR might be attributed to shifts and volume of overall migration routes caused by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, IOM has reported a 39 per cent decrease in the weekly flow at key crossing points in West and Central Africa between January and May 2020 (Horwood et al. 2020). Migrants from Mali – among others – have reported increasing difficulty in crossing national frontiers on traditional
corridors along the CMR in Niger (67 per cent) and Mali (56 per cent) due to the pandemic, but also in moving freely within the same country. People crossing Niger have also stated a decrease in the access to smugglers (26 per cent), much more than in Mali (Mixed Migration Centre 2020). In the Sahel, mobility has then recovered.

Apart from these mobility repercussions like border closures causing – apparently temporary – route shifts, forced displacement, insecurity and conflict continue unabated in countries along the CMR, WMR and WAR, and secondary movements have become significant as the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic affect countries of origin, transit and destination, thus influencing the volume of the flows (IOM DTM 2021b). For instance, mobility had recovered in the Sahel already over the course of 2020 (Mixed Migration Centre 2020), as also signalled by the increasing number of arrivals in Italy.

It is also worth noting that access to political asylum in the Canary Islands presents many challenges because the region has not been sufficiently strengthened with specific capacities and the needed infrastructure. There is a shortage of economic and logistical resources to accommodate the entrances of asylum seekers, which mainly affects those arriving from Sub-Saharan Africa, e.g., due to a lack of interpreters and counsellors (Martín 2021). These considerations can be taken into account alongside the impacts of Covid-19 described earlier.

### 6.4 Conclusions

The challenge posed by drivers of migratory movements originating in Mali is twofold. First, in comparison to other countries of origin examined in this book, Mali acts as an origin for significant movements of irregular migrants reaching both Italy and Spain along different EU-bound migratory routes (CMR, WMR and WAR). As migratory trends on these corridors have been so diverse over 2009–20, the question concerning a deterministic relation between drivers (framed as ‘causes of migration’) in a single country of origin and wavering patterns of arrivals in multiple destinations appears even more complex to untangle. For instance, the evolution of the conflict and instability cycle in certain regions in Mali, especially the Liptako-Gourma area, has presented different effects on displacement, as trends in irregular arrivals have not automatically reflected or corresponded with the intensification of violence in Mali. Instability has also influenced smuggling and mobility facilitation networks in the country, which have been disrupted – and sometimes diverted – by the spreading of conflict around the city of Gao.
Second, these shifting trends question the role of secondary drivers and policies in different countries of transit – especially Niger, Algeria, Libya and Morocco – and introduce the issue of the diversion of the flow of Malian nationals from one route to others, in particular when it comes to the reduced irregular arrivals on the CMR after 2017 and the ensuing increases on the WMR in 2018 and on the WAR in 2020. In this chapter, we have highlighted several factors in contexts of transit that may have played a role in shaping such migratory dynamics, starting with the durable and ever-shifting nature of migratory corridors from Mali to key countries of transit as Niger, Algeria and Morocco. In particular, we have investigated the consequences of restrictive policy evolutions in these countries, and how these interventions have interacted with the free circulation regime of ECOWAS, which is key to understanding the first steps of migrants leaving Mali and moving through these migratory complexes. Nevertheless, our analysis cautions against drawing a straightforward connection among these dynamics. The movement of people in countries of transit has usually been co-influenced by multiple factors at the same time, and the transition in the use of one route over another does not follow clear-cut patterns. This rings particularly true when looking at the role of European policies at the common external frontier in the Central Mediterranean Sea, hailed as a success in stemming irregular arrivals through the CMR, but whose impact has potentially diverted (part of) the flow towards Spain, and has been in turn heavily shaped by the different phases of Libyan conflict.

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