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

info@peterlang.com - www.peterlang.com

Open Access: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution CC-BY 4.0 license. To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.
Chapter 9  Morocco’s influence on WMR and WAR transit: Key relationships with Africa and Europe and growing geopolitical weight

Abstract: Given historical ties and shared sea and land borders with Spain and Europe, Morocco serves as a linchpin in migration routes from North and Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe (through Spain), and is increasingly a key actor in both European border externalisation and broader geopolitics. Initially invited labour migration from Morocco to Spain shifted to mixed migration flows, gaining visibility from the European public and policy perspective at the turn of the century. EU and Spanish securitisation and monitoring measures, in tandem with Moroccan state cooperation, began to specifically address Sub-Saharan transit migration. Such policies and practices continue to focus on irregular arrivals by sea to Spain’s Canary Islands, or irregular crossing to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. Despite political signals of reform, at the domestic and international levels, Moroccan state migration policies and practices continue to face critique, and largely deter transit migration with dispersal or clandestine and discretionary state practices. These transit migrants can face gendered and racialised outgroup prejudice and rhetoric both in Morocco and in Europe. While Moroccan nationals themselves have accessed Europe through the Central Mediterranean via Italy, recent shifting or increasing trends of movement on the Western Mediterranean and Western African routes promise to continue. Domestic conflicts like the Rif crisis, and restrictions in Italian migration policies may be contributing factors, alongside Covid-19 border disruptions and the socioeconomic impacts of the crisis affecting livelihoods.

Keywords: EU border externalisation | transit migration | discretionary migration governance | intersectional vulnerabilities | multi-level securitisation

The Kingdom of Morocco is a lower middle income, parliamentary constitutional monarchy with a population of roughly 36.5 million (when including the Western Sahara), located in North Africa and bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, Algeria and Mauritania (World Bank 2021). At the same time an origin, transit and sometimes destination country, it is pivotal in the landscape of migration between Africa and Europe, and has assumed an increasing leadership role in both regional and global migration management (Benjelloun 2021; Messari 2018). Morocco serves as the departure point for Europe on the traditional Western Mediterranean route (WMR), as migrants
access Spain either via the sea routes crossing the strait of Gibraltar (from Tangier to Tarifa), or traverse land routes in North Africa into the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Moroccan territory.

This chapter offers an overview of the historical trajectory of Moroccan emigration and immigration, before observing recent trends in EU-bound migration, and identifying key patterns in Morocco’s shifting and expanding role as a transit country in mixed migration flows between Africa and Europe. It notes how the country’s domestic migration governance is intertwined with its diplomatic or geopolitical positioning and significant relationships with Spain and the EU, all of which has continued securitisation-related consequences for the WMR and WAR (Western Africa) routes, particularly exacerbating intersectional vulnerabilities of Sub-Saharan and North African migrants.

9.1 Morocco’s historical migration profile and the shift to a transit context

While throughout the twentieth century Morocco largely was a country of emigration, the 1990s saw a shift to irregular and transit migration. This decade was preceded by Spain’s recent accession to the EU and marked by Spain’s economic success; while Spain experienced seasonal labour demand, increasingly restrictive political and legal measures in EU migration requirements meant any corresponding and growing migration flows became irregular. Moreover, the 1990s involved political and economic developments within Africa that transformed Morocco into a significant transit country, with migratory movements primarily from Sub-Saharan countries. This was linked to the 1985 institution of the Schengen zone and free movement regime in the EU, with a multiple-entry Schengen visa afforded to Moroccan citizens, as well as Ceuta and Melilla forming part of the Schengen area. Civil unrest and economic crises in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria and the Ivory Coast led to refugee migration during this time, and Libyan restrictions on labour migration in 2000 also encouraged economic migration. Later, post-2000 mixed flows to, through and out of Morocco were not exclusively economically motivated but also drew from a variety of factors including war, natural disaster, climate change and rapid population growth, among others (Benamar and Ihadiyan 2016).

In particular, the literature emphasises post-2000 Sub-Saharan flows through Morocco to Europe, with a spike of Sub-Saharan migrants arriving in Morocco in 2006 (Berriane M. et al. 2015; Mghari 2007). With respect to post-2000 Sub-Saharan transit migration, a 2007 demographic study of Sub-Saharan Africans transiting in Morocco found that the most prominent nationalities included
Morocco's migration profile is linked to the state as an influential geopolitical and regional actor. A founding member of the Organisation of African Unity (1963), historically Morocco's African foreign policy under Kings Mohamed V and Hassan II boasted strong ties with Senegal, Gabon, Guinea and the former

9.2 Morocco as a geopolitical force with significant regional influence

Morocco's migration profile is linked to the state as an influential geopolitical and regional actor. A founding member of the Organisation of African Unity (1963), historically Morocco's African foreign policy under Kings Mohamed V and Hassan II boasted strong ties with Senegal, Gabon, Guinea and the former
Zaire. Cultural and social ties were also established via Moroccan universities hosting students from African states since the mid-1980s, and the country has long served as a religious influence in Western African Islam, via its religious leadership in the Tijani branch of Sufi Islam (Berriane J. 2014; Berriane M. 2018).

In terms of interregional cooperation within North Africa, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania signed the constitutive treaty of the Arab Maghreb Union in 1989 in order to achieve economic integration with the intent of eventual political unification that could better position the Maghreb within the international economic system (Zoubir 2000). However, discord regarding the Western Sahara conflict meant a stalemate, and instead, Morocco has established bilateral agreements with African countries to the south. In essence, North African regional cooperation or integration on migration issues remains unfulfilled; for example, the opposing foreign policy interests and tensions between Algeria and Morocco have repercussions for the entire Maghreb and Sahel regions, which in turn affect migration management and patterns. Since the 1990s, economic development and trade has often been conducted via primary economic partners as the EU and or/its member states, the United States and China, rather than fellow Maghreb countries, leading to vertical rather than horizontal integration of economic policy in addition to migration policy (Kireyev et al. 2019; Zoubir 2000: 57).

After the turn of the century, Morocco’s migration patterns attracted heightened academic and political interest, particularly in light of transit migration from Sub-Saharan Africa, and the state began to impose restrictive immigration policies in 2003. The next significant shift in migration policies took place with Morocco’s 2013 immigration reform, the National Immigration and Asylum Strategy (SNIA), followed by a 2015–16 surge in asylum seekers headed to Europe, leading to a deepening engagement with the EU on migration management (Benjelloun 2021; Natter 2021). At this point, it is also worth highlighting how after leaving in 1984 (due to recognition of the Western Sahara), in January of 2017 Morocco re-joined the African Union, with a speech from the King implying that Maghreb integration was being replaced with an African one; this marked a strategic shift in both Moroccan and African regional foreign and development policy (Messari 2018).

9.3 Scrutinised domestic migration governance and signals of reform

Meanwhile, Moroccan state migration policies, or practices, continue to face critique, with observations as to migrant rights violations in border areas, and
academic consensus that migration policy remains inconsistent, or incomplete (Natter 2021; Jiménez-Alvarez et al. 2021). Despite regularisation processes as a result of the 2013 law, many Sub-Saharan migrants do not meet the definition of asylum seeker or refugee, and thus enjoy limited protections, and can become victims of trafficking either domestically, towards Europe or towards Libya (Ennaji and Bignami 2019; Lahlou 2018a). Moreover, many may continue to aspire to keep travelling towards Europe, as recorded in 2021 national and smaller qualitative surveys, detailed further below (HCP 2021).

Indeed, while the 2013 reform emphasised fighting trafficking, presumably in part due to pressure from international organisations, reality on the ground reflects ongoing phenomena, both in accessing Europe, in moving into Libya or in transiting through Morocco. Firstly, trafficking can often take place in attempts to access Libya, with Moroccan actors operating independently, or Moroccans, Nigerians or migrants from Côte d’Ivoire running criminal organisations (Lahlou 2018a). Sub-Saharan women, meanwhile, can be exploited for prostitution along the journey through Africa (including Morocco) by those from their community of origin. Within Morocco, research indicates that young Moroccan women can disappear in the migration process as well, with girls between eight and fifteen years (termed ‘petites bonnes’) from urban or impoverished areas compelled or deceived into domestic work for wealthier families in largely urban areas, work that can entail labour and sexual abuse (Melgar et al. 2021). Finally, drug traffickers often use irregular migrants of Moroccan origin to transport drugs to Spain as payment for their trip (Lahlou 2018a). In addition to this, other forms of trafficking may continue upon arrival in Europe; a 2017 report in Spain found that the general profile of sex-trafficked workers included Nigerian women between eighteen and twenty-two years old, living irregularly (Melgar et al. 2021).

At the same time, the literature has also pointed to how Sub-Saharan migrant activists or community leaders are active agents in the Moroccan migration landscape, where they help facilitate border crossings or are key players in networks, information and support to either stay in Morocco or continue to Europe (Magallanes-Gonzalez 2021). Morocco can serve not only as a transit country, but as a destination of particularly prolonged transit for Sub-Saharan migrants, who may aspire to migrate to Europe but, in the meantime, navigate legal and societal barriers during their extended stay in Morocco by making a livelihood in the informal sector (Pickerill 2011). Finally, while Sub-Saharan flows are predominantly composed of male migrants, the literature and activists have increasingly provided visibility into migrant women in Morocco, attempting to move
beyond issues of trafficking and sexual violence to illustrate how gender affects mobility as a structural factor (Tyszler 2019).

9.4 Moroccan emigration and diaspora networks

Meanwhile, with roughly 10 per cent of its nationals living abroad (with 3,262,222 nationals living outside of Morocco as of 2020 out of a population of roughly 36.9 million), Morocco has actively and continuously pursued regional and international cooperation in designing policies for successful Moroccan emigration, has established and promoted ties with Moroccan diaspora, and has managed remittances and returns (Berriane M. 2018; UN Population Division 2020; World Bank 2021). In Europe, in addition to colonial ties with states like Spain and France, bilateral worker recruitment agreements in West Germany (1963), Belgium (1964) and the Netherlands (1969) resulted in the establishment of networks that became more rooted thanks to family reunifications throughout the 1970s oil crisis and the political instability (including two coups in 1971 and 1972) in Morocco (Gabrielli 2015). It follows that as of 2019, the largest groups of Moroccan nationals in Europe are found in France (1,020,162), Spain (711,792), Italy (450,557), Belgium (226,216), the Netherlands (180,879) and Germany (105,928) (UN Population Division 2020).

Some strategies and initiatives for the socio-economic, cultural and political integration of Moroccan expatriates include the Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans Living Abroad (1990), the Ministry for the Moroccan Community Residing Abroad (2000), the Council for the Moroccan Community Abroad (2007) and the ‘Strategy of Mobilisation of the Competences of Moroccans Residing Abroad’ (2009). Apart from these Moroccan communities in Europe, somewhat feminized highly skilled workers have formed Moroccan communities residing in North America (Canada and the United States) and the Gulf states (Berriane M. 2018; Berriane J. 2019). Finally, remittances remain a continued and key support for the Moroccan economy (Lahlou 2018b).

9.5 Recent trends in EU-bound migration from Morocco: 2009–2020

In turning towards an analysis of recent trends in EU-bound migration, for every year between 2009 and 2020, Morocco has been among the top five countries in terms of detections of ‘illegal border-crossings’ (IBCs) by Frontex on the WMR, with the exception of 2016, when the country fell to the sixth place. In 2017, Morocco became the country with the greatest number of arrivals on the route to
Spain, and from the following year onwards it remained with the second greatest number.

Over the last decade, Moroccans have constituted the second national group on the WMR with 31,120 detections, 17.63 per cent of the total sum. The only demographic group with more crossings included Algerians, with 38,275 crossings or 21.69 per cent. On the other hand, Guineans represented the third nationality, but remained far behind Moroccans in terms of numbers, with 21,479 detections between 2009 and 2020, or 12.17 per cent.

![Graph showing detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Moroccan nationals on the WMR, 2009–2020.](image)

**Figure 9.1:** Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Moroccan nationals on the WMR, 2009–2020

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

In comparative terms, the evolution of detections of Moroccans followed the same pattern as WMR flows overall, with the slight difference that, while arrivals through the WMR began to augment in 2014, and then rise significantly from 2016 to 2017, the number of detections of Moroccan nationals remained steadily low until the end of 2016, before the rise. By the end of 2017, Morocco had become the top reported nationality on the WMR, constituting 20.4 per cent of total detections.
Again, when looking at the entirety of the WMR, in 2018 Morocco emerged as the main point of departure in reaching the EU, with nationals from several countries of Sub-Saharan Africa using it as a territory of transit. Despite the heterogeneity of nationalities using the WMR, 2018 saw Moroccans rise to the second most reported nationality on the route, a trend that continued through 2020. Given this, it is useful to further consider the monthly detections; in zooming in on monthly statistics on the sea route (there is a general absence of land route detections) and understanding what time of year flows are significant, Moroccan detections seem to rise in the second half of the year, largely summer and early fall. The detections peak in the month of October 2018 (the most significant over the ten-year period at 2680 detections, again solely via the sea route), with other noteworthy peaks (in order of volume) in the months of July 2018 (1,631), June 2019 (1,046), September 2019 (943) and August 2017 (894). Such summer-month crossings are perhaps more feasible in terms of weather conditions, as opposed to the rest of the year.

In terms of moving from the ten-year average to a yearly contextualisation of percentage of Moroccan nationals on the route, while between 2010 and 2016 Moroccans made up less than 10 per cent of total detections, they began to rise above 20 per cent from 2016 onwards. The year 2019 saw the highest total of arrivals at 26.43 per cent, with 2020 at 20.48 per cent, returning to the 2017 levels. This 2018 increase might be linked to Moroccans shifting from the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) to the WMR in that same year. Although
between 2009 and 2013 there was no significant difference in use of the two routes, in 2014 the number of Moroccans opting for the route to Italy increased. Between 2014 and 2017, 17,699 Moroccans were detected on the CMR, with more than 4,500 reported annually in 2015, 2016 and 2017. However, during the first months of 2018 the situation reversed, and the number of Moroccans using the WMR more than doubled the number in 2017, which had already increased as compared to the previous year. Concurrently, in 2018 detections of Moroccans on the CMR plummeted to 433.

Table 9.1: Detections of Moroccan nationals on the WMR (sea and land), 2009–2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Detections of Moroccan nationals</th>
<th>Total detections</th>
<th>As % of total detections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>926</td>
<td>6,642</td>
<td>13.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>5,003</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>776</td>
<td>8,448</td>
<td>9.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>6,397</td>
<td>7.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>6,838</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>5,654</td>
<td>8.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>684</td>
<td>7,004</td>
<td>9.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>722</td>
<td>999</td>
<td>7.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>4,704</td>
<td>23,063</td>
<td>20.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>6,336</td>
<td>23,969</td>
<td>26.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>3,528</td>
<td>17,228</td>
<td>20.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31,120</td>
<td>176,481</td>
<td>17.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Turning to Europe, in spite of Spain’s close proximity, for the last ten years Germany has constituted the top destination in international protection requests by Moroccan nationals. From 2009 to 2020, the country received 16,115 applications from Morocco, followed by Italy with 9,475, and then Spain with 6,680. Moreover, it is noteworthy that over the ten-year period, Switzerland and the Netherlands do not fall far behind Spain in terms of absolute numbers, receiving 6,320 and 5,830 asylum requests respectively. Over the past decade, Germany has remained one of the top three countries receiving Moroccan asylum requests, constituting the first recipient of these requests in 2009 and 2010, and between 2013 and 2017. Between 2015 and 2020, Germany received more than 1.9 million asylum requests overall. In examining the data on Moroccan asylum
applications to Germany, it is important to note how the percentage of women has always remained below 20 per cent, with the figure not even reaching 10 per cent between 2012 and 2014.

![Figure 9.3: Asylum applications of Moroccan nationals in Germany, Italy and Spain, 2009–2020](image)

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

In absolute numbers, Germany has initially been the most requested destination by Moroccan asylum seekers in Europe. However, since 2016, the number of requests started to decrease, while those in Spain began to grow. The number of petitions in the two countries was roughly the same in 2018, with 1,355 applications to Germany and 1,310 to Spain. Spanish applications rose to 2,535 the following year, making it the first intended destination country among Moroccan asylum seekers, and also remained significant in 2020 at 1,090 applications.

Over the ten-year period, asylum applications to Spain by Moroccan nationals average out to 8 per cent of all such applications to EU countries. However, in 2019, applications to Spain reached up to 25 per cent of total applications and reached up to 15 per cent of the total in 2018 and 2020. The gender breakdown of Moroccan asylum applications to Spain is similar to the percentage for Germany, in that they are predominantly male. In the ten-year period, there were an average of 18 per cent applications from women and 82 per cent from men; this is generally the breakdown each year. However, the gap does close significantly in 2015, when women constitute up to 37 per cent of Moroccan asylum applications to Spain, as compared to 62 per cent men.

Finally, with respect to the West African Route (WAR) to Spain’s Canary Islands, it should be noted that IBCs of Moroccans registered by Frontex are
significantly lower than on the WMR. At the same time, this deserves mention as Morocco is one of the WAR points of departure, and Moroccans rank within the top five nationalities each year of the ten-year period under examination, except for 2009 and 2015 (where they rank sixth). The detections remain few until 2018 and 2019, when they at least triple to almost 1,000 each year, followed by an almost twelve-fold increase in 2020 to 11,759 Moroccan IBCs (Frontex 2021). This should be considered in conjunction with the fact that, again, Frontex reports Moroccans as the second greatest number of nationals detected on the WMR as well from 2018 to 2020, practically entirely sea route detections.

9.6 Mixed migration flows from Morocco: Understanding key drivers of EU-bound migration on the WMR and WAR

The observations in the previous sections highlight several patterns in mixed migration flows of Moroccans along the WMR and WAR, the route shifts pivotal in Morocco’s alleged transit country role, and trends in Moroccans seeking asylum in Europe over the 2009–20 period. Among those, it is worth recalling an increasing trend of detections of Moroccans on the WMR from 2013 to 2018; a greater number of Moroccan arrivals en route to Spain via the WMR starting in late 2016, with Morocco becoming a top nationality on the WMR from 2017 onwards; a shift in volume between the WMR and CMR in 2018 significant for Morocco as a transit country; changing percentages of asylum applications to Germany and Italy versus Spain; and increased detections of Moroccans on the WAR route from 2018 onwards. In contextualising these trends, it is helpful to go into further detail regarding developments in Moroccan domestic migration management and corresponding international cooperation, as well as Morocco’s evolving economic development and ongoing management of the Rif crisis. These potentially inform not only outflows, but also shifts in movement and transit patterns or alternative destinations.

Also, new policy developments played an increasing role. As mentioned in the Morocco profile, the first restrictive immigration law since independence in 1956 was enacted in 2003, initiating a series of more restrictive policy interventions throughout the decade (Natter 2014). These included increased patrols of the Spanish borders and the reinforcement (on both sides) of the fence between Morocco and the Spanish autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla (the subject of an ongoing sovereignty dispute between the two countries), a point of entry into Europe from the Moroccan mainland. In efforts to pursue further economic cooperation and knowledge sharing with Europe, Morocco may increasingly leverage its role in security and migration from Africa to Europe (Baida 2020).
9.6.1 Migration control and increasing international visibility: Securitisation and economic interests versus migrant rights discourses

The deaths of migrants on the Moroccan-Spanish borders of Ceuta and Melilla in 2005 in particular catalysed both domestic and international media attention regarding flows to Europe, and prompted the dispatch of a European Commission delegation in October that same year (European Commission 2005; Natter 2014). While Morocco’s Ministry of the Interior remained responsible for migration control, new international actors including the International Organisation for Migration and the United Nations High Commissariat for Refugees came on the scene, in addition to local civil society efforts (Natter 2014). On the one hand, the literature observes an increasing trend of intolerance towards Sub-Saharan migrants in media and societal discourses, including considering them a social and security threat (Gazzotti 2021). On the other hand, the 2005 migrant deaths brought about the creation of the Council of Sub-Saharan Migrants in Morocco and local initiatives like the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH) to support migrants in the face of Moroccan and European policies, and later the Anti-Racist Defence and Support Group of Foreigners and Migrants, with the acronym GADEM (GADEM 2018; Natter 2014).

It is argued that in order to polish Morocco’s international image, the monarchy increasingly has taken on a progressive role or positioning when it comes to immigration policy, while the administrative state maintains the prioritisation of state interests over migrant rights (Natter 2021). For example, the aforementioned December 2014 SNIA was purportedly propelled forward by the King, likely in response to the pressures of scrutiny from a September 2013 BBC documentary broadcast accusing Morocco of human rights violations against migrants, as well as an AMDH report on the same subject (Lahlou 2015; Natter 2021). SNIA measures targeted migrant regularisation and integration, legal reform and further migration diplomacy, marking a clear shift to transit migration policies (Benjelloun 2021). Such reforms signalled Morocco’s commitment to international human rights, and also represent the monarchy’s attempt to respond to domestic pressure for reform, to gain legitimacy as part of the overall state apparatus, and to encourage cooperation rather than dissent on the part of humanitarian civil society actors (Natter 2021). As previously mentioned, these reforms may also have been an attempt at improving relations with the EU and Sub-Saharan countries. However, later analysis indicates that the 2013 reform and SNIA have not necessarily improved the situation for migrants. While two regularisation campaigns took place, the Moroccan state security
force crackdowns following these regularisations have swung the pendulum of migrant rights protections in the other direction (GADEM 2018; Gazzotti 2021). Moreover, those migrants who have been able to obtain authorisation can still find socioeconomic integration very difficult, with lack of employment opportunities and challenges in accessing basic services including healthcare (Baida 2020). They may still remain willing to migrate onwards to Europe, or even Canada or the United States, despite having obtained authorisation and the right to work in Morocco (Lahlou 2015).

As a result of the 2015–16 surge in asylum seekers in Europe, unfolding at that time through other routes, further key European-level agreements and interventions involving Morocco included the commitments made during the 2015 Valetta Summit on Migration between European and African partners, leading to the country receiving funds from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) ‘for stability and addressing the root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa’ (European Commission 2021; EU and Morocco 2019). In terms of cooperation with neighbouring countries, the EU holds its second largest migration cooperation portfolio with Morocco, at a total of 346 million euro as of May 2021, with 238 million euro of this drawing directly from the EUTF (European Commission 2021). However, while these funds are meant to essentially manage irregular migration and support Morocco’s SNIA, Morocco and Spain have intermittently cooperated in border surveillance on the European end, and this, in combination with Moroccan state practices directed towards security rather than targeting migrant protections, could explain continued WMR flows (Carrera et al. 2016; Kostas 2017). Meanwhile, the fact that in July and December 2019 the EU increased EUTF funding, largely for migration control rather than protections, could also partially explain the drop in WMR crossings occurring that year (European Commission 2018). Finally, while Spain holds a privileged bilateral migration relationship with Morocco (complemented by EU funding), after at least twenty years of negotiation the EU itself has not been able to achieve a readmission agreement with Morocco via its EU-Morocco Mobility Partnership established in 2013 and reaffirmed in 2019 (EU and Morocco 2019). This is likely due to Morocco’s attempt to maintain good relations and take on a leadership role with Sub-Saharan states both economically and geopolitically, among other factors (Carrera et al. 2016).

In this sense, the transactional migration governance relationship between Morocco and the EU, an amalgamation of economic interests and migration or securitisation agendas, should be emphasised, especially with regard to the socioeconomic situation informing Moroccan emigration or transit migration. Morocco has a fairly stable, market-oriented economy with continuous growth
over the past decades (with the Covid-19 years being anomalous), although it is still affected by high levels of unemployment, poverty and illiteracy, especially in rural areas. In relation to this, the country has experienced climate cycle changes over the past decades in terms of precipitation rates, temperatures, drought periods and extreme events, all of which affect rural livelihoods in Morocco (Van Praag 2021). Apart from the migration funds described above, the EU is Morocco’s most important economic partner, and as of 2017 represented 59.4 per cent of its trade and 64.6 per cent of its exports. The Moroccan diaspora in the EU makes up the majority of remittances among the global Moroccan diaspora, as well (Teevan 2019).

9.6.2 Domestic dispersal policies and conflicts: Corresponding to route shifts?

Given this context, in understanding origin contexts and migration management, it is important to further understand the migration control of transiting Sub-Saharan migrants since 2013’s SNIA. In implementing the SNIA’s new migration policy, authorities began relocating migrants from northern (specifically Tangier, Tetouan and Nador) to southern cities, and the literature points to cooperation between Spain and Morocco between July and August of 2018 that manifested as detention and dispersal efforts throughout the majority of Moroccan cities, relocating Sub-Saharan migrants from their chosen urban areas to smaller towns or cities (Gazzotti and Hagan 2021). These dispersal policies targeting transiting migrants might explain increasing detections on the WMR route starting from 2013. For example, studies note increasing immobility and insecurity that Sub-Saharan migrants encounter in Morocco, which not only results from crackdown and dispersal approaches at the hands of Moroccan state security forces, but is also interconnected with security contractors and informal networks that facilitate irregular border crossings to Spain (Iranzo 2021). Transit migrants report feeling trapped or stranded in Morocco, subject to surveillance and persecution, forced to remain in hiding to avoid arrest, or exposed to other insecurities like labour exploitation, destitution or begging (ibid.). Alternatively, Moroccan government migration control in terms of these dispersal policies may have contributed to the 2018 increase in the percentage of Moroccans overall on the WMR route, as compared with other nationalities; that is, the relocation of Sub-Saharan migrants may have acted as a deterrent in continuing to their final destination. These potentially contrasting consequences of a dispersal policy demonstrate the complex and multiple effects of any given migration policy on migratory trends, and the difficulty of reading such a
policy’s effects, especially as they relate to irregular flows and clandestine or discretionary state practices.

Moreover, as the region has been subject to various conquests since ancient times, Morocco is culturally and ethnically diverse, and competing historical narratives and historic tensions can affect migration flows. Tamazight is one of its official languages, spoken by the indigenous Amazigh population, with Classical Arabic then serving as the other official language; the latter forms part of the pan-Arab project in the wake of independence from France, shaping the narrative of Morocco as an Arab-Islamic state (French and Moroccan dialect Arabic are also widely in use) (Jay 2016). The more recent presence of immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa has also increased religious diversity (Berriane M. et al. 2015). In light of this context, particularly relevant for the period under study is the Tamazight-speaking ethnic population of the Rif region in northern Morocco.

More specifically, in October 2016, widespread protests erupted in Alhucemas in response to the death of Mohssine Fikri, reflecting ongoing social unrest due to widespread political corruption, low levels of development and the Moroccan government’s neglect of economic development in this northern part of the country (Zaireg 2018). At that point in time, the Hirak Rif Movement quickly formed, with Nasser Zefzafi as one of its prominent leaders. After months of social protests and heavy repression by state security forces, in May 2017 Zefzafi and other leading activists from the movement were detained and charged with serious accusations, including crimes against the internal security of the state. The cycle of social upheaval and violence at the hands of the police may have factored into many Moroccans’ decisions to leave the country. This deteriorating situation in the northern region of Rif can go towards explaining how the number of detections of Moroccan nationals remained steadily low until the end of 2016, when they suddenly escalated, with Morocco becoming the top reported nationality on the WMR by 2017 at 20.4 per cent of total detections.

### 9.6.3 Policies in the European context: Shifts on the CMR and a continuously evolving relationship between Morocco and Spain

It is also useful to look at policies in the European context when proceeding on to further understand the shifts in 2018 and especially in comparing the WMR and CMR routes. Again, a notable shift takes place in 2018, with a decrease in CMR and increase in WMR detections. During the first months of 2018, the number of Moroccans using the WMR more than doubled the number in 2017, which had already increased as compared to the previous year. There may be a twofold explanation for the shift between the two routes. Firstly, the routes were
likely affected by the sea border shutdown implemented in Italy. Specifically, in 2017, the Italian government issued a code of conduct for NGOs running migrant rescue ships in the Mediterranean, which banned vessels from entering Libyan territorial waters, and imposed closer cooperation with the police, among other measures, threatening to bar NGO ships from Italian ports if non-compliant (Vecsey 2020). Then, restrictive migration policies beginning in the summer of 2018 were spearheaded by the country’s then Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini. Such policies went from discouraging Mediterranean search and rescue missions by NGOs to encompassing all actors, including Frontex and the Italian Coast Guard (Dennison and Geddes 2021). Moreover, they also restricted migrant rights upon arrival, which could perhaps have encouraged Moroccans to choose Spain as a viable alternative route, and may explain the October 2018 peak in detections of Moroccans crossing into Spain. A comparable pattern has been also spotted among Sub-Saharan migrants privileging Morocco as a transit country over Niger or Algeria in 2018–19. For instance, migrants interviewed around that time in Timbuktu, Mali, indicated they were intending to travel to Morocco (39 per cent) and Spain (21 per cent) – most of them coming from Guinea and Mali. This is a clear shift from a couple of years before, when migrants transiting in the Malian city predominantly stated Algeria (78 per cent) as the next destination of choice in their journey (Horwood et al. 2019).

Secondly, it is argued that Moroccan authorities could have used migration practices as a leveraging instrument in their negotiations with the EU to obtain funding for migration control, with 2018 measures perhaps having directly contributed to an increase in 2018 WMR flows (Harris et al. 2018). Alternatively, it is also possible that these security and military crackdowns may not so much serve as a leveraging instrument, as much as maintaining security interests of the Moroccan state despite commitments to migrant rights. While 2018 Italian government measures allegedly redirected migrant flows to the WMR, the earlier described dispersal operations by Moroccan state authorities could also have contributed to the 2018 increases in WMR arrivals. Reports signalled that Moroccan state authorities were destroying migrant camps along the northern coast, as well as expelling migrants from the territory, outside of official declarations or legal procedures. Specifically, 6,500 individuals were allegedly either arrested or displaced between July and September of 2018 by Moroccan security or military forces (GADEM 2018).

By the end of 2019, while the presence of Moroccans on the WMR versus the CMR was still greater, the number of detections on the former had dropped from the historic record of the previous year. In this respect, Spain continuously dialogues with Morocco in a fluctuating political and diplomatic relationship
with oftentimes diverging priorities, as the two states work off of a readmission agreement dating back to 1992, which even allows for the return of third-country nationals. However, Spain and Morocco cooperation on readmission has increasingly translated into a series of informal arrangements (Lixi 2017). Moreover, while Morocco may accept returns of its adult nationals who entered Spain irregularly, it can be more reluctant to accept third-country nationals in practice. Notably, it is argued that observation of the Spanish and Moroccan readmission agreement can breach the principle of non-refoulement, through the use of illegal pushbacks. Returns of migrants without adequately conducting asylum procedures (especially with regard to minors) has been constantly documented and reported in recent years at the borders of Ceuta, Melilla and in the Canaries, thus perhaps explaining decreases on the WMR (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021; Martínez Escamilla and Sánchez Tomás 2019). Still, the 1992 agreement allows for legal returns as well, which, when (sporadically) implemented, could also have deterrent effects and help explain a decrease in WMR detections from 2018 onwards.

Similarly, when looking at fluctuations in Moroccan asylum applications to Europe, European policies might also inform such changes. Again, while asylum applications to Germany remained significant, requests from Moroccans began to decrease in 2016, with increasing requests to Spain from that year, alongside decreasing requests to Italy from 2018 onward. Two factors might explain this. On the one hand, while Morocco did not enter the top ten nationalities with the greatest number of petitions, Moroccans likely attempted to obtain international protection there as a result of Germany’s migration policy under Merkel, along with Germany’s labour market opportunities. Indeed, from 2009 until 2015, applications increased steadily, spiking in 2016. This 2016 spike can perhaps be partially attributed to public declarations of openness to asylum seekers, as in August 2015 Chancellor Angela Merkel stressed the capability of Germany to cope with asylum seeker arrivals (Oltermann 2020). The perception that Germany offered better possibilities of labour market access and societal integration could have served as a pull factor.

However, applications to Germany from Morocco sharply declining in 2017 and continuing to decrease going forward could parallel a shift in German discourse on migration policies. In particular, in early 2016 and again in 2018, several political parties in Germany, including Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union, began to advocate for Morocco to be declared as a ‘safe country’ alongside Algeria (Bölinger and Conrad 2016; CEAR 2019). In other words, public and political discourse characterised Moroccan asylum seekers as not requiring international protection. Moreover, anti-immigrant populist parties obtained
seats in the German Parliament in 2016, citing events such as the attack in a Berlin Christmas market as a reason for more restrictive asylum policies (Oltermann 2020).

Secondly, as previously referenced apropos of Italy, an initial increase in the number of Moroccan asylum applications had begun in 2014, with a decrease from mid-2018 onwards. In understanding this, it should be noted how the Gentiloni government policies, promoted by Interior Minister Marco Minniti, asking that NGOs stop save-and-rescue operations at sea, as well as engaging in cooperation with Libya, perhaps contributed to the drop in sea arrivals in Italy between 2016 and 2018 (Dennison and Geddes 2021). However, such policies may not have had as great an impact on Moroccan nationals as those of the Conte government with Matteo Salvini as the country’s Minister of the Interior. Again, policies under his government could go towards explaining a decrease in Moroccan asylum seekers from mid-2018 onwards. In particular, the September 2018 ‘Salvini Decree’ approved by the Council of Ministers abolished migrant protections, facilitated deportation and suspended refugee application processes of those deemed ‘socially dangerous’ or with a past criminal conviction (Cervi et al. 2020). These policies may have discouraged Moroccan nationals from seeking asylum in Italy and illustrate the drop in applications from mid-2018 onward.

Still, European policies aside, Spain’s historical ties and geographical proximity to Morocco are undoubtedly linked to Moroccan migrants’ decisions to seek asylum there, with the majority having chosen the WMR and WAR routes to arrive. Furthermore, domestic conflicts like the Rif crisis and crackdown against social activists in the north of Morocco beginning in the second half of 2016 might have served as an impetus for the rise in asylum requests in Spain, geographically most proximate to the Rif region through the border cities of Ceuta and Melilla; not only did the total detections on the WMR significantly increase in the following year of 2017, but Moroccan nationals formed a higher percentage than usual of total detections, at over 20 per cent.

Finally, these considerations affecting movements from 2018–20 with reference to the WMR might also inform the growing popularity of the WAR from 2018 onwards. In addition, increasing use of the WAR could be due to long-held migrant perceptions that the journey is relatively short, with information sharing about this increasingly facilitated by social networks (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021). Moreover, the 2020 exponential increase along the WAR could also be explained by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, further analysed in the section on future developments. The most obvious rationale includes the disruptions that Covid-19 state measures caused to mobility, including border
closures, along with the socioeconomic impacts of the Covid-19 crisis affecting livelihoods in Morocco. In addition to this, interviews with migrants indicate that misinformation was circulating that deaths from the pandemic had increased labour demand in Europe (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021; Monreal Gainza and Paredes 2021).

9.7 Concluding observations: Multilevel migration control with compounded effects on migrant vulnerabilities

Morocco has become an increasingly crucial player over the past few decades in relation to mixed migration flows between Africa and Europe, and even more so in recent years. The findings here indicate that the factors involved go beyond geographical positioning. Not only does Morocco receive significant funds from the EU (the second largest recipient among EU neighbours), it also exercises its weight with Sub-Saharan African neighbours and in contesting the Western Sahara with Algeria. Any geopolitical jockeying by the Moroccan state is mutually affected and informed by the interests and corresponding actions of North African and Sub-Saharan states and regions, as well as those of the EU and Spain, all with significant impacts for transit migration. Finally, patterns observed in this chapter impact gendered and intersectional vulnerabilities of Moroccan nationals en route to Europe, as well as those Sub-Saharan migrants transiting through Morocco.

In looking at multilevel migration governance in the Moroccan case, Europe and Spain continue to outsource border management to Morocco, as between 2019 and 2020 Spain provided 30 million euros to Morocco from the General State Budget to improve and upgrade vehicle fleets for border enforcement, directed at stemming irregular migratory flows towards Europe (Barbero and López Sala 2021). The Spanish and Moroccan relationship is multifaceted, including technology sharing, joint patrolling and temporary work permits for Moroccans (Lixi 2017). However, as their relationship has developed, while based in the 1992 readmission agreement, Spain and Morocco often work via informal cooperation in terms of readmission (Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012).

It is worthwhile to note the symbolism and relevance of how the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration was adopted at an Intergovernmental Conference in Marrakech, Morocco by the majority of UN member states in December of 2018 (and endorsed by the UN General Assembly a few days later). Since its signing, there has been criticism of not only signatories’ lack of implementation (Spain and Morocco are signatories), but also the fact that states may use it to legitimise practices that are not in keeping with
its objectives, and that it does not provide adequate protections to migrants in the first instance (Bloom 2019; Guild 2020). The Compact makes only vague references to key human rights on which migrants may be particularly dependent, including the right to liberty, protection of private and family life, and protection against expulsion. For example, migrants are often detained in arbitrary ways, outside of the normal function of the criminal justice or public health systems (ibid.). No substantive political reform has taken place in terms of migrant rights, and the current ‘transit’ migrant treatment, inaptly named as migrants become immobilised in Morocco, looks as if it will continue.

In this sense, a dichotomy has emerged between the allegedly progressive and rights-oriented migration policy reform in 2013, positioned as spearheaded by the monarchy, versus actual practices of Moroccan authorities and in particular security forces in the form of dispersal policies and detention. These can cause immobilisation that deters further journeys, or alternatively can encourage departure from Morocco at any cost (Iranzo 2021; Natter 2021). In combination, there is a lack of true opportunity for socioeconomic integration in the face of these unfulfilled or non-implemented migration commitments and policies (as well as the current Moroccan economic context) (Baida 2020). Added to this is the amplified public and societal othering of Sub-Saharan migrants which can lead to their experience of further vulnerabilities and violence, a public attitudes trend that has been increasing over the past decade (Gazzotti 2021).

In zooming in on Moroccan policy itself (as influenced by multilevel actors), gendered and intersectional vulnerabilities underly the shifting migration dynamics this chapter has overviewed. Moroccan migration policy has been criticised as abandonment by the state, in that while migrants may not face deportation or incarceration, they are immobilised in a way that similarly breaches rights, while saving state resources (Gross-Wyrtzen 2020: 900). One illustration includes a repeatedly noted gendered phenomenon: given how many West and Central African women in Morocco have children, they may be more limited in their mobility than males. They are not only possibly indebted to smugglers or other migrants, but also are restricted by childcare responsibilities that may limit aspirations to move on to Europe. Such limitations and responsibilities may even go so far as to restrict their movement within Moroccan cities (Gross-Wyrtzen 2020: 890; Stock 2012).

Indeed, it is illustrative to take into account the gendered and intersectional vulnerabilities interrelated with inconsistent or ‘alegal’ migration governance and how this relates to real or perceived constraint and opportunity structures regarding asylum processes, in family strategies of Moroccan nationals moving towards Europe. For example, it seems possible that whether or not a pregnancy
was deliberate (i.e., often possibly a result of rape), either the mother herself or a smuggler or partner might consider this a strategy to avoid deportation and obtain family reunification rights upon arrival in Spain (Dubow and Kuschminder 2021; Tyszler 2019). It is also theorised that children can be a part of these gendered family mobility strategies: for example, Moroccan families may send their sons on an attempt to clear the fences of Ceuta and Melilla with the hopes of avoiding pushbacks as minors are entitled to international protection (Queirolo Palmas 2019). Finally, the discourse and rhetoric surrounding black bodies and Sub-Saharan migration in Morocco, as well as migration from the African continent to Europe, maintains securitised and racialised tones that appear to be fomenting anti-immigrant attitudes and even violence (Buehler and Han 2021; Landau 2021). This can lead to facilitating securitisation policies rather than working towards long-term or substantive improvement in migration governance policy. Gendered outgroup prejudice often applies to Sub-Saharan men, particularly in the case of being made visible by blackness (Gross-Wytzen 2020: 888).

In this vein, Morocco will clearly remain pivotal in mixed migration flows between Africa and Europe, and the dynamics of migration control are characterised by multi-level securitisation policies that can be challenged with migrant rights discourses or diplomatic overtures, but ultimately influence exacerbated intersectional vulnerabilities and societal consequences for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers across both continents. In light of the lack of sustainability of certain discretionary practices and securitisation measures, this entails continued migration and asylum mobilities and shifting dynamics in the future in terms of Morocco-to-EU flows.

**References**


Domenico di Fiesole, European University Institute, pp. 91–100, https://www.doi.org/10.2870/541854


Frontex (2021), Migratory Map, data as of October 2022, https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map


Magallanes-Gonzalez, Cynthia (2021), ‘Sub-Saharan Leaders in Morocco’s Migration Industry: Activism, Integration, and Smuggling’, in *The Journal of


Zaireg, Reda (2018), ‘King Mohammed VI’s Speech: How the Street Became Morocco’s Main Political Player’, in Middle East Eye, 6 August, https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/72294