

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2022 SERIES



**GLOBAL
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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

MOROCCO

ORGANIZED CRIME, GEOPOLITICS
AND ECONOMIC WOES DRIVE
NEW TRENDS IN 2021

JULY 2022

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INTRODUCTION

In 2021, human smuggling to and through Morocco remained largely steady, with key maritime routes linking Morocco and Moroccan-administered Western Sahara to the Canary Islands, as well as from Morocco's north coast to the Spanish peninsula. It was also the deadliest year since international organizations began collecting statistics, with deaths particularly high on the route to the Canary Islands (also known as the Atlantic route). Between 1 January and 22 December, at least 955 migrants died on the route, the highest figure the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has registered since 2014.¹ The actual number of deceased is likely to be much greater, given that many boats disappear, leaving no trace on the perilous journey. The Spanish non-governmental migrant rights group Caminando Fronteras (Walking Borders) estimated that 4 016 people lost their lives trying to reach the Canary Islands in 2021.² Bidirectional overland routes between Morocco and Algeria continued, with a marked increase in the number of young Moroccans crossing into Algeria, often in search of onward travel to Tunisia and Libya.

Prices remained relatively stable along all major routes throughout the year. Migrants paid an average of €1 300–€1 500 to reach the Canary Islands, departing from one of a number of launching points along the coast of Morocco and Moroccan-administered Western Sahara. Meanwhile, prices charged by smugglers for movement to the Spanish mainland averaged between €1 800–€2 500 for departures between Nador and Al Hoceima, and €400–€1 400 for those between Tangier and Salé. Overland crossings from Morocco to Algeria (mostly involving Moroccan nationals) generally cost between €100 and €120, while prices for travel in the opposite direction averaged €350.

However, while prices were largely stable, the demographics of the Canary Islands route did shift, particularly in the last quarter of 2021, with more Moroccan women and minors embarking along the route. The nationalities of migrants transiting Morocco also grew increasingly diverse, with more nationals from throughout West Africa, East Africa and the Horn, as well as countries like Bangladesh, using the country as a staging point in their efforts to get to Europe. Criminal networks facilitating irregular-migrant flows across all major routes continued to rely on both evasion and corruption.³

Events during the year underscored the politicization of migration enforcement by the Moroccan government. In May 2021, approximately 8 000 migrants, including thousands of minors, entered the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla over a 48-hour period after the Moroccan government declined to enforce their side of the border in response to a diplomatic row with Spain.⁴ Rumours that the Moroccan authorities intended to relax border control after Ramadan, which ended on 13 May, had been circulating for weeks ahead of the event.



Moroccan migrants save a man who got into difficulty attempting to reach Ceuta, May 2021. Photo: Fadel Senna/AFP via Getty Images

Structural economic factors and geopolitical realities make it likely that Morocco's role as a source and transit country for people trying to reach Europe will increase in 2022. Socio-economic drivers including unemployment and the impact of COVID-19 are likely to continue to push many Moroccans and sub-Saharan migrants to look for alternatives elsewhere. Given the constant demand, routes and smuggling methods used by smugglers and organized-criminal networks are likely to become more sophisticated and more dangerous.

This brief is part of the latest round of publications emerging from GI-TOC research on human smuggling and trafficking in Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Niger, Chad and Mali.

Since 2018, the GI-TOC has undertaken monthly monitoring of human smuggling and trafficking in North Africa and the Sahel. The first report of the project, 'The human conveyor belt broken', published in early 2019, described the fall of the protection racket by Libyan militias that underpinned the surge in irregular migration between 2014 and 2017. The second report of the project, 'Conflict, coping and COVID,' published in early 2021, detailed the evolution of human smuggling and trafficking in the face of Libyan conflict and the region wide COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring both the disruption of the system and its broader continuity.

Rather than a single report covering trends and dynamics in 2021, the GI-TOC is publishing a series of briefs, each covering a single country as well as a regional overview brief. These build on the previous reports, mapping smuggling and trafficking, as well as the political and security dynamics that impacted and influenced the irregular transport of migrants in 2021. The series of briefs underscores the rebounding importance of smuggling from and through Libya, Tunisia, Niger, Chad and Mali and the ways in which dynamics are intensifying as the COVID-19 pandemic ebbs and a rough peace is maintained in Libya.

Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2021 – the reporting period for this study – local field researchers across Morocco collected data through semi-structured interviews with smugglers, migrants, community members, security-force officials, politicians, NGO personnel, international observers and others.

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

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



Photo: SOPA Images via Getty Images



DEPARTURES TO SPAIN INCREASE THROUGHOUT 2021 AS ROUTES PROLIFERATE

Maritime departures from Morocco to Spain, both from Morocco's north coast to the Spanish mainland and towards the Spanish Canary Islands increased in 2021. However, the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands was the most active in the country, with a reportedly marked increase in the number of women and children using this route to try to reach Spain in the last quarter of 2021. This has coincided with an increase in reported deaths, owing to harsher winter weather conditions. Migrants' profiles are also more diverse than ever, with Bangladeshis increasingly being included in cohorts that include Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans.

Throughout the year, the route towards the Canary Islands became the preferred route for smugglers due to greater monitoring by Moroccan authorities along the northern coast, and what is perceived to be more lax enforcement measures near coastal launching points to the Canaries. Organized-criminal networks based in the north coast seem to be playing a more active role in facilitating departures to the Canary Islands.

The most common vessels used by smugglers on the Canary Islands route include traditional fishing boats and wooden vessels constructed locally by craftsman working directly for smugglers as well as inflatables. Over the course of 2021, the owners and manufacturers of these artisanal boats have become an important part of the migrant-smuggling system that facilitates departures to the islands. Although 'self-organized' departures by migrants do take place, these are rare along this route compared with departures along the north coast.

During the second half of 2021, prices to reach the Canary Islands appear to have stabilized, with smugglers generally charging migrants between €1 300 and €1 500 to depart from beaches near Dakhla. Prices from other departure points, which have proliferated throughout the year, were generally reported to be similar; with migrants were recorded departing from areas around Safi, Laayoune, Sidi Ifni, Tantan and Agadir. The last quarter of 2021 also saw a more mixed composition of migrant cohorts, departing from the Canaries, with boats full of multiple nationalities regardless of departure point. There are reportedly more departures taking place from obscure and previously unused beaches, a possible indicator that more actors are becoming involved with smuggling, as well as the possibility that smugglers need to diversify their launch points to meet increasing demand for their services.

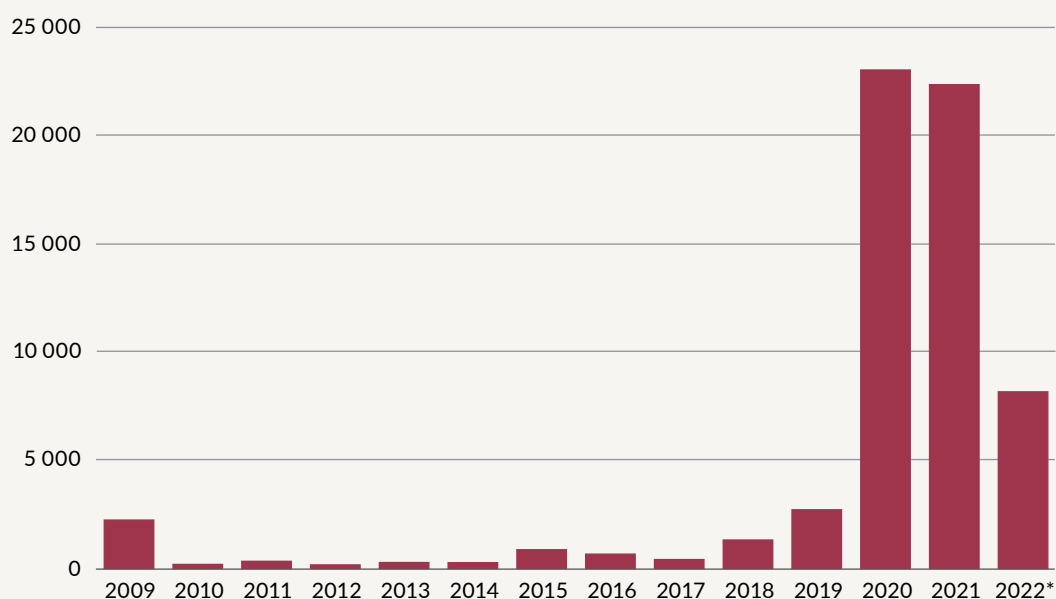


FIGURE 1 Irregular arrivals to the Canary Islands, 2009–May 2022.

NOTE: The majority of those arriving in the Canary Islands depart from Morocco and Moroccan-administered Western Sahara, although these figures also include migrants who departed from Mauritania, Senegal, as well as in extremely rare cases, countries further south.

*The figures for 2022 are from January to May.

SOURCE: Frontex

MONTH	ARRIVALS TO CEUTA AND MELILLA	SEA ARRIVALS TO THE SPANISH PENINSULA	SEA ARRIVALS TO THE CANARY ISLANDS	TOTAL
January	126	814	2 077	3 017
February	16	680	264	960
March	112	1 195	1 095	2 402
April	17	241	1 251	1 509
May	207	1 552	817	2 576
June	4	1 175	1 449	2 628
July	401	2 095	601	3 097
August	81	1 900	1 808	3 789
September	23	4 136	3 833	7 992
October	18	1 919	3 635	5 572
November	36	397	3 129	3 562
December	47	1 274	2 392	3 713
Total	1 088	17 378	22 351	40 817

FIGURE 2 Comparative number of arrivals to different destinations in Spanish territory, January–October 2021.

NOTE: The majority of those arriving in the Canary Islands depart from Morocco and Moroccan-administered Western Sahara, although these figures also include migrants who departed from Mauritania, Senegal, as well as in extremely rare cases, countries further south. Arrivals of Algerian nationals have been removed from the statistics as the vast majority of these arrivals come from Algeria, therefore skewing the overall picture in respect to irregular migration from Morocco to Spain.

SOURCE: Frontex



Migrants in Lanzarote, Canary Islands, head by bus to the island's migrant reception centre. *Photo: Europa Press via Getty Images*

With 291 deaths recorded, the third quarter of 2021 was the deadliest quarter for migration along the Western Africa–Atlantic route since the IOM began collecting data in 2014,⁵ and was also the deadliest route to Europe on record during the same quarter. As of 30 September, a recorded 937 people have died trying to reach the Canaries, although civil-society organizations believe that the actual death toll is likely to be much higher, as ‘invisible shipwrecks’ can go undetected and unreported.⁶ In 2021, the IOM had recorded 384 dead or missing migrants along the western Mediterranean route linking North Africa to the Spanish mainland;⁷ although, as with the Canary Islands route, the actual numbers of deaths are likely to be much greater.

Prices along the main maritime routes along the north coast of Morocco to the Spanish peninsula remained relatively stable throughout the year. Smuggler-facilitated trips to the Spanish mainland via the Alboran Sea cost €1 500–€2 500 for departures taking place between Nador and Al Hoceima and €400–€1 400 for departures between Tangier and Salé.

Smuggler-facilitated trips that try to cross the Strait of Gibraltar were less common in 2021 than in previous years, reportedly due to increased surveillance by Moroccan authorities, as well as changing migration patterns that drew migrants towards the Canaries. However, there has been an increase in the number of Moroccans, normally young men, trying to reach Spain through self-organized trips across the Strait of Gibraltar as well as to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, with regular news of migrants going missing at sea. Self-smuggling is not a new phenomenon in Morocco, though it has appeared to increase in recent years.⁸

Prices along all of these routes can vary, however, depending on the type of vessel used and the assurances provided by smugglers, which may include guarantees of housing and employment prospects upon arrival in Spain. Smugglers use a variety of methods to move migrants along these routes, including inflatable boats, speedboats, ‘pleasure boats’ such as yachts, fishing boats and jet skis. In some cases, groups of migrants arrange their departures directly, collectively pooling resources to purchase stolen vessels on the black market.

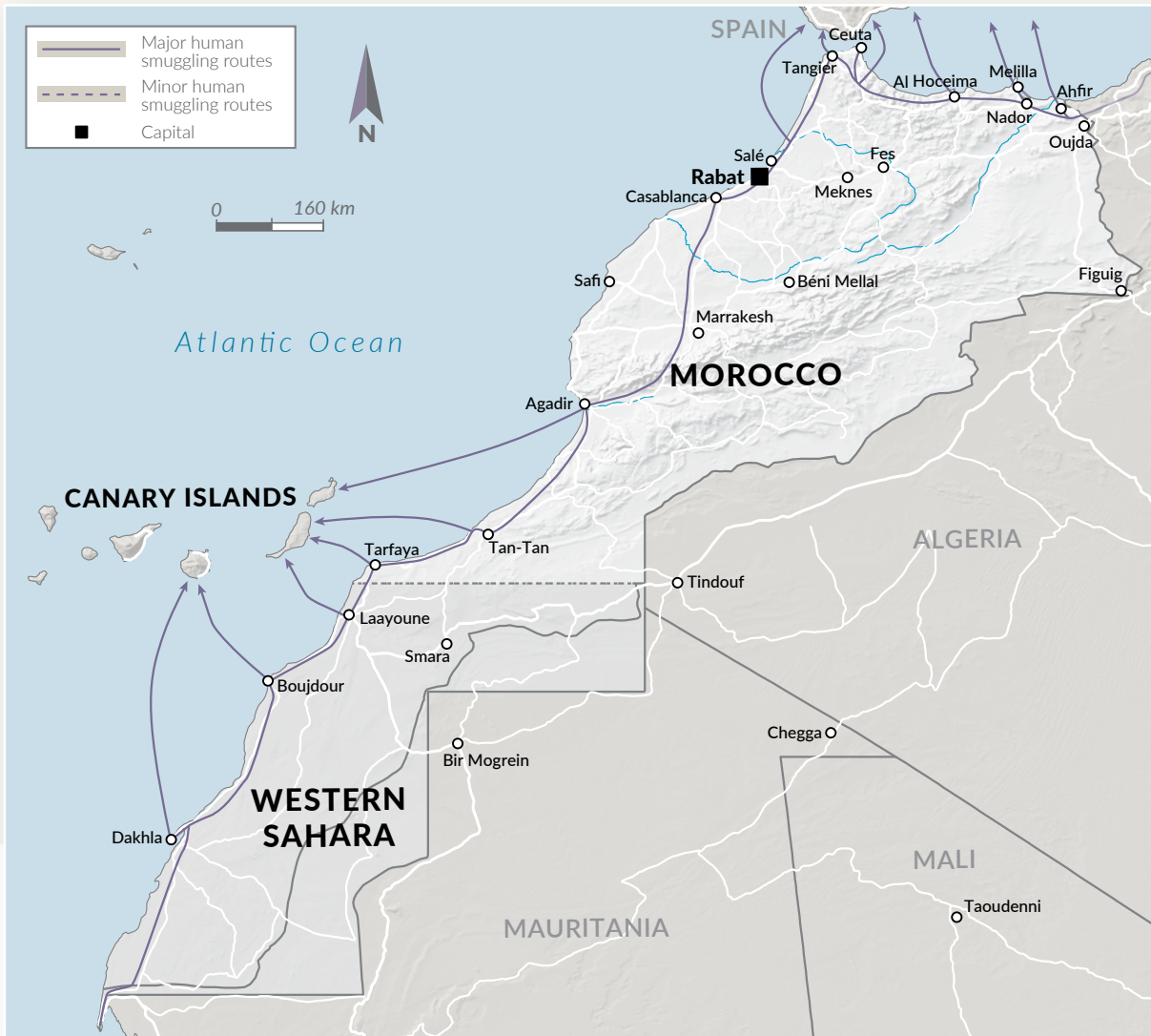


FIGURE 3 Human-smuggling routes through Morocco and Moroccan Administered Western Sahara, 2021.

On the black market, smuggling networks can purchase boats that would normally cost €2 600 for as little as €730, including sometimes accessing them from local officials. These prices can fluctuate considerably depending on availability and demand. Smugglers are also able to procure boats illegally, by working directly with legitimate boat suppliers to procure boats under fake identities and registration.

Finally, various ‘turnkey’ packages are also on offer through highly organized networks. According to one interviewee, for example, Bangladeshis are offered packages that can cost up to €12 000, which includes travel from country of origin to destination in Spain. The process can take as long as six months. The same interviewee also reported that Guinean nationals are being offered all-inclusive packages for €6 000. These involve transport from Conakry to Spain, with housing and fraudulent residence papers promised upon arrival. Transnational networks are reported to offer similar packages to other West African nationalities as well, with smugglers based in Morocco tapping into networks of recruiters in source countries.



NEW TRENDS ON THE MOROCCO-ALGERIA BORDER

Smuggling networks facilitating illegal crossings in both directions across the Morocco–Algeria border remained active throughout 2021. The main routes across the border have remained broadly the same for the last decade, with the Algerian town of Maghnia (to the east of the city of Tlemcen) and the Moroccan cities of Oujda and Ahfir serving as key transit areas.⁹ Migrants cross between both Oudja and Ahfir along multiple points to access Maghnia (if crossing from Morocco, and vice versa). The Moroccan towns of Bouarfa and Figuig also serve as key hubs of migrant-smuggling activity, although these points see considerably less movement than the northern itineraries outlined above.

During the second half of 2021, reportedly movement along the Oujda and Ahfir crossings increased in both directions compared to the first half of the year, mainly driven by enduring economic hardship in Morocco. Furthermore, reportedly there were fewer sub-Saharan migrants moving from Morocco into Algeria through this route, as more sub-Saharan migrants are probably opting to depart from Morocco for Europe along the Atlantic route from Morocco and Moroccan-administered Western Sahara to the Spanish Canary Islands.

During the second half of 2021, the number of Moroccans, mostly young men, trying to reach Libya and to a lesser degree Tunisia via Algeria reportedly increased. Embarkations through these countries have been a longstanding dynamic for Moroccan irregular migrants, however popularity of the central Mediterranean route had ebbed in the late 2010s in response to highly publicized cases of detention and abuse of Moroccan migrants in Libya.¹⁰ Prices for smuggler-facilitated travel from Morocco to Algeria via Oujda remained stable at between €100 and €120. Moroccan migrants also travel irregularly into Algeria independently of organized networks, taking more circuitous and clandestine routes and paying around €60 to individual guides from isolated communities along the Algerian border. These transactions, however, do not offer any guarantees of reaching the other side of the border, and the actors involved are generally individual freelancers who are not necessarily part of established networks. Thus, irregular crossings along these routes do not rely on structured corruption of border officials, but rather depend on evading Moroccan or Algerian patrols and surveillance authorities.

Owing to the highly clandestine nature of the overland crossings from Morocco into Algeria, reliable estimates of how many Moroccans are crossing into Algeria during a given period are hard to obtain. There were several indicators that during 2021, more and more Moroccans opted for Algeria as a transit country to Spain or Libya. For instance, there was a reported increase in Moroccan minors and young men being detected and detained in Tunisia and Libya, as well as Moroccans arriving in Spain via Morocco, as evidence of the popularity of this route. There has also reportedly been an increase in the number of Moroccans arriving in Lampedusa, Italy, via Libya, a further indication that Moroccans are increasingly opting to transit Algeria to eventually reach Libya.

Prices from Algeria into Morocco, typically Oujda via Maghnia, are considerably higher than prices from Morocco to Algeria, averaging approximately €350. As with crossings in the opposite direction, smugglers facilitating crossings from Algeria to Oujda are reported to work directly with corrupt officials on both sides of the border.¹¹ In the second half of 2021, migrant-smuggling activity reportedly rose along this route, with a notable increase in the number of Sudanese, Bangladeshi, Yemeni and Palestinian migrants arriving in Oujda. An interviewee who systematically follows irregular migration in Morocco reported that over the final two months of 2021, migrants were paying between €300 and €500 to reach Oujda from Algeria, with prices depending on the nature of the arrangement made with smugglers and the final destination within Morocco.

The second half of 2021 also saw a notable increase in the number of migrants who had reportedly been in Libya and had opted to either return and/or try to reach Europe via routes that depart from Morocco. In August, for example, a large contingent of Sudanese migrants, estimated at around 300, arrived in Oujda from Algeria over a three-week period. Interviewees and local human-rights activists reported that the cohort included teenagers and young adults in their mid-twenties who were from al-Fashir, Darfur, Khartoum and Omdurman.¹²

An interviewee in northwestern Morocco who interacted directly with these migrants explained that many migrants said they had 'fled' detention centres in Libya, where they had been held for between 4 and 18 months, and in some cases for as long as three years. The interviewee said that some migrants reported paying for their release, while others escaped while they had been 'loaned' out to work on construction sites. These testimonies are corroborated by extensive research conducted in Libya by the GI-TOC. Some of the Sudanese migrants managed to travel to Nador and tried to enter the enclave of Melilla but were blocked by Moroccan authorities.

Migrant smuggling along this route is likely to continue despite surveillance efforts by both governments at the border, as the situation in Libya remains dire for migrants. Smugglers have proven capable of changing their modus operandi and finding ways to facilitate irregular crossings. Furthermore, smuggling networks with connections to source countries such as Sudan and Bangladesh, for example, instruct migrants that it is easy to transport them into Morocco irregularly via Algeria or Libya given that it is difficult for nationals from these countries to obtain visas to Morocco. This phenomenon has developed following the establishment of a corridor between Dhaka (in Bangladesh) and Libya, with highly sophisticated networks offering whole-journey packages worth between €5 000 and €7 000.



Photo: Lluís Gené/AFP via Getty Images



THE COMPLICATED GEOPOLITICS OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION

The underlying structural drivers of irregular migration from Morocco to Spain – economic hardship amid renewed border closures in the final quarter of 2021, the collapse of the tourism economy and a sharp rise in unemployment, especially in the informal sector – are unlikely to dissipate, which means that not only is the demand for smuggling services likely to grow among Moroccans, but incentives by the Moroccan government to allow irregular departures to take place may increase. It is hard to overstate the ways in which the issue of irregular migration shapes bilateral relations between Morocco and Spain.

Perhaps no example illustrates this fact better than what took place in May 2021, when roughly 8 000 migrants, including between 1 500 and 2 000 minors, entered the Spanish enclave of Ceuta over a 48-hour period. The surge of arrivals, which began on 17 May, occurred within the context of disputes between Morocco and Spain over the Spanish government's decision to allow Polisario leader Brahim Ghali to travel to Spain for medical treatment under a false name, using an Algerian diplomatic passport.

Interviewees in Morocco confirmed rumours that the authorities were likely to relax border controls in the days following the end of Ramadan (on 13 May) had been circulating for weeks. Information about a possible easing of border controls spread within Moroccan communities through social media and messaging apps, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook. Interviewees reported that in the days leading up to 17 May, there was a noticeable influx of hundreds of Moroccan youths who were sleeping in the streets waiting for the border to open. 'You could count them by the hundreds, they were just waiting for the opportunity,' explained one interviewee who interacted with migrants in the days leading up to 17 May.¹³

'Migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and Moroccan candidates were waiting,' explained another interviewee. 'They knew the borders would open, so they were ready.' WhatsApp groups also played a role in the dissemination of the message among these groups. However, community leaders – individuals who have lived in Morocco for some time and serve as community organizers – played an especially important role in spreading this information by word of mouth. These individuals are not directly involved in migrant- smuggling activities, but they do help disseminate credible information about events on the ground, such as official and de facto changes in government policy and law-enforcement activity, and often act as a resource that migrants can consult in order to mitigate risks in advance of trying to enter Spain irregularly.



Migrants attempt to reach the border separating Morocco and Ceuta, May 2021. Photo: Fadel Senna/AFP via Getty Images

While migrants entered Ceuta without the direct assistance of smugglers, sources from migrant communities indicated that smugglers were advertising the sale of inflatable tubes and small boats to migrants considering trying to reach the enclaves by sea. Multiple interviewees explained that they had witnessed migrants rushing to the beach to depart for Ceuta in small inflatable rafts, undeterred by the fact that the sea was particularly choppy on the afternoon of 17 May into 18 May.

As news spread of non-existent border security along various beaches near Tangier, sub-Saharan migrants and Moroccan nationals began seeking transport to coastal launching points. Two separate interviewees reported that transporters began arranging trips full almost exclusively of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa to the beaches, with one reporting prices between €75 and €100 for trips that normally would cost €10.

This price increase was attributed to high demand for transport among migrants who were desperate to leave before border controls were implemented again. 'There are large groups who have been waiting for this kind of opening,' explained one interviewee in June. 'Even those who had no plans to leave quickly gathered their things once they heard migrants could get into Ceuta.'

Against this context, it is clear that the Moroccan government's stance toward combatting migrant smuggling, therefore, will have to be considered with Moroccan-EU relations, bilateral relations with Spain, as well as negotiations over the status of Western Sahara.



Photo: Fadel Senna/AFP via Getty Images



CONCLUSION

Interviewees and experts in Morocco believe that migrant demand for smuggling services in Morocco is likely to increase in 2022, not only as a result of the aforementioned domestic structural drivers, but also due to the negative economic and security outlooks for much of the Sahel, West Africa and the Horn of Africa.

In fact, there are already signs that Moroccans are searching for alternative routes to Europe beyond the maritime routes from North Africa. In November 2021, for example, a new tactic used by migrants to reach Europe emerged, in which an Air Arabia Maroc Airbus 320 that took off from Casablanca, destined for Turkey, was forced to land after a Moroccan man on board appeared to suffer a medical emergency. The plane landed on the Spanish island of Majorca so that the man could receive medical attention, at which point more than 20 male passengers, reportedly all Moroccan except for one Palestinian, managed to escape the plane, with several scaling the perimeter fence. At least two migrants managed to get on a ferry to Barcelona, and the man who had been taken to the hospital was arrested after being given a clean bill of health.¹⁴ His companion, who accompanied him to the hospital, fled shortly after but was eventually detained.

Less dramatically, during the last two months of 2021, there has been a growing number of Moroccans reportedly flying to Istanbul to try to enter Europe irregularly. From Turkey, migrants use the Balkan route that sees them either try to cross the Turkish land border with Greece, taking boats to the Greek Isles, or in rarer instances, taking boats that cross directly from Turkey to Calabria, in Italy. The market for falsified documents that allow for air travel to Turkey, as well as fake visas and work permits for Spain, Italy and France, is also booming, according to interviewees in Morocco. Similar developments have also been seen in Turkey. This demand is in part driven by restrictions on mobility and delays in renewals of work permits.

Throughout 2022, a range of external and geopolitical factors will increase demand for smuggler services in Morocco, with the country continuing to serve as a major source and transit country for people trying to reach Europe irregularly. Similarly, a proliferation of routes exiting Morocco, as well as a diversification of methods used by smugglers and organized-criminal networks, is likely to continue and accelerate. Furthermore, while the vast majority of migrants are likely to be male, the percentage of women seeking to migrate irregularly is likely to increase, which may have policy repercussions both in transit and destination countries. Routes are likely to get more complex and more dangerous, while smuggling networks are set to get more sophisticated.



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