

# **MAGHREB MIGRATIONS: HOW NORTH AFRICA AND EUROPE CAN WORK TOGETHER ON SUB-SAHARAN MIGRATION**

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## **SUMMARY**

- Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria are increasingly becoming destination countries for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa.
- To differing degrees, each country is moving towards ‘security first’ policies on migration management.
- Maghreb governments are making this shift partly in response to rising public dissatisfaction with migrants’ growing presence in their countries, especially in urban coastal regions.
- This change in attitude among the general public combined with evolving policy approaches are likely to limit EU countries’ ability to ‘externalise’ migration management to North African states.
- The EU can assist Maghreb governments to improve their domestic migration management systems by providing tailored support, thereby at least partially helping authorities assuage North African citizens’ concerns.

# The end of an era

In what may be the first gathering of its kind, in April 2024, the president of Tunisia, the president of Algeria, and the head of Libya's presidential council convened in Tunis. They had come together for an inaugural meeting on boosting regional cooperation. Migration emerged as a focal point, and the three parties agreed to examine how to better coordinate border security and cooperate on migration-related problems. The leaders resolved to present a unified stance on the issue in their discussions with both European and sub-Saharan African states.

The event was notable because the countries of North Africa have long resisted deepening regional cooperation with one another. Yet the leaders' interest in migration was perhaps no surprise. Rising numbers of people arriving in the region – and growing social tensions related to arrivals – are causing governments in the Maghreb to shift their stance. This follows many years of talks, agreements, and deals between North African states and their European counterparts which effectively boil down to an effort to deter and prevent migrants from crossing the Mediterranean into Europe.

Yet that era may now be coming to an end. This policy brief argues that Maghreb governments' attitudes to sub-Saharan African migration are changing in ways that European policymakers – who are still heavily preoccupied with 'externalising' migration management to North African states – must grasp. The Tunis summit suggests Maghreb countries' political leadership might yet conclude they no longer want to serve as Europe's border guards. Moreover, even when North African governments agree to externalisation arrangements with the European Union, these are increasingly unlikely to find favour among their citizens. At the same time, rising migration flows into the Maghreb have brought novel challenges that governments lack the experience – and often the willingness – to address comprehensively.

The paper presents an overview of key migration trends in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. It discusses the domestic implications of an increase in migrant arrivals and analyses how governments have approached this issue. The paper concludes that both governments and societies in these countries are increasingly unwilling to serve either as buffer zones for European states or as destination countries for sub-Saharan migrants.

The pressure on Maghreb countries' borders means they are encountering challenges that are not dissimilar to those that European countries have long grappled with. Though their situations are by no means identical, the growing convergence of challenges between these North African states' experience of migration and those of Europe also present an

opportunity. European policymakers can make a new offering to Maghreb states that draws on their own experience and provides practical solutions to the new type of challenge. This can include assistance on developing domestic migration management systems, enhancing data collection to underpin future decisions in this arena, and improving returns processes.

## Migration and the Maghreb

### Shifting patterns

Migration from sub-Saharan Africa to the Maghreb has deep roots. Historically, North Africa has been both a key transit location and a destination for migrants from across the continent: some migrants travel there to try to make it to Europe, but many also aim to stay in the region in order to work, send remittances home, and settle.

Over the past two decades, migration dynamics have evolved considerably. The 2011 Arab uprisings influenced the scale and complexity of migratory movements towards the Maghreb, as higher numbers and diverse flows of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers arrived in these countries. The violence that followed the overthrow of the regime in Libya the same year caused nearly a million people to flee the country for Tunisia, including sub-Saharan Africans; Libyans; and Tunisian returnees. This surge led to a significant increase in the number of individuals requiring humanitarian assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Tunisia. In 2007, the UNHCR supported only 87 people in Tunisia; in 2011, the organisation was assisting over 4000 refugees and asylum seekers. By early 2024, the figure had surged to 28,200. The conflict in Libya also displaced thousands of migrants towards other North African countries and the Sahel, including Algeria. A more recent surge in migration flows has arisen from deteriorating economic and political instability in west Africa and the Horn of Africa.

Migration routes are dynamic and have shifted over time. Most recently, in 2023, Tunisia – historically a country of origin – evolved into a key transit hub, surpassing Libya as the primary departure point towards Italy. Over 97,000 migrants were recorded arriving in Italy from Tunisia in 2023, over three times more than in 2022. Nearly 80,000 sub-Saharan migrants accounted for most departures from Tunisia last year. This change is driven by several complex factors, including migrants’ search for safer routes, worsening conditions for migrants within Tunisia, and the rapidly evolving human smuggling market fuelled by rising demand for sea crossings. Morocco also serves as a crucial starting point for both local and foreign migrants seeking to reach Europe.

In 2023, 7,910 Moroccan migrants arrived in mainland Spain through the Western Mediterranean Route while another 5,817 Moroccans reached the Canary Islands through the Atlantic Route. Public data on the number of foreign migrants transiting via Morocco are not available, but most sub-Saharan irregular migrants departing from Moroccan shores move along the Atlantic Route. During the same year, 6,443 Algerians arrived in mainland Spain through the Western Mediterranean route. Maritime crossings by sub-Saharan nationals via Algeria remain limited.

Migration northward is spurred by socioeconomic and political factors. Most migrants arriving in the Maghreb are from west African countries, including Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, and Senegal; a smaller proportion hails from east Africa, including Sudan and Eritrea. Many migrants from are escaping poverty and seeking better job opportunities. Since 2021, political instability has surged in the Sahel and west Africa, marked by military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, Niger, Gabon, and Chad, leading to considerable internal and external displacement. Additionally, over the past decade, conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, and Sudan have significantly increased irregular migration within Africa and towards Europe. Notably, the conflict in Sudan in April 2023 displaced 6.1 million people internally and forced 1.5 million people to seek safety in neighbouring countries such as Chad, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Libya. While remaining comparatively modest, the number of Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers in Tunisia rose significantly from 513 in January 2023 to 7,921 by June 2024. Overall, individuals come to the Maghreb in search of better economic opportunities, education, family reunification, or to escape persecution, violence, and political instability. Flows of people are diverse, ranging from students and economic migrants to refugees and asylum seekers.

There are many reasons migrants decide either to stay in the Maghreb or attempt to leave. These include the availability – or otherwise – of options to gain regularised status and

integrate in Maghreb countries, alongside the strength of economic prospects in different states and particular regions. Many migrants initially intend to settle in the Maghreb but unfavourable conditions in these regards compel them to move on. Strict border controls and financial constraints also induce them to remain in North Africa. A 2020 survey in Tunisia found that two-thirds of sub-Saharan migrants intended to leave the country. Conditions have since worsened for foreigners in Tunisia, which means it is likely that even more migrants are now looking to leave.

A minority arrives legally via air routes, facilitated by visa waivers established bilaterally with origin countries; the very existence and durability of such arrangements have made Maghreb countries stand out as accessible destinations. This movement includes students and economic migrants who later overstay and lapse into irregularity. The majority appears to travel irregularly via trans-Saharan land routes across the Sahara Desert. Such routes pass through significant transit hubs like Agadez in Niger, Gao in Mali, and Tamanrasset in Algeria. Organised networks make use of these hubs to facilitate the smuggling of migrants, drugs, and other contraband. These networks are resilient and can adapt their activities to changing dynamics, including increased enforcement by states and related agencies. Journeys across these desert routes are often long and perilous, lasting weeks to years, with migrants making stops in hub towns to work and save money for further travel.

Trans-Saharan migration increased significantly in the 1990s, driven by turmoil in parts of west and east Africa and by Libya's pan-African immigration policies of the time: the Qaddafi regime began accepting substantial numbers of sub-Saharan migrant workers, including from west Africa and the Horn of Africa. From the year 2000 onward, a societal backlash against migrants in Libya effectively redirected some movement to other Maghreb countries or Europe. Before the uprisings, Libya hosted around 2.5 million migrants, primarily from sub-Saharan Africa. Pre-2011 estimates indicate that between 65,000 and 120,000 sub-Saharan Africans entered the Maghreb each year, with 70-80 per cent making for Libya. Since 2011, Libya has remained a primary destination for sub-Saharan migrants, but worsening conditions have driven many to seek safer havens elsewhere in North Africa. Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia emerged as these alternatives, providing job opportunities and serving as strategic staging posts to Europe, leading to more sub-Saharan migrants arriving in these countries over the past decade.

Alongside these shifts, Niger's military government decision in 2023 to repeal Law 36-2015 also made an impact. This law, which made it illegal to transport migrants from Niger to Libya and Algeria, was a crucial part of an EU-supported effort to reduce migration. The law's implementation from 2016 onward partially redirected human smuggling operations from

Libya to Algeria, increasing movement towards Algeria and from there to Morocco and Tunisia. Following its repeal in November last year, departures to Algeria rose. Prior to the repeal, around 400-500 migrants left from Niger to Algeria each week; this has since jumped to between 500 and 1,000. The repeal has also reduced the cost of crossings due to greater competition among smugglers, lower risk of arrest, and cheaper bribe costs. Such falling prices may further encourage migration to Algeria, and from there to Morocco and Tunisia.

Economic and political instability in west Africa, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa is expected to continue to drive the movement of sub-Saharan Africans towards the Maghreb and Europe.

## Local impacts

Historically, immigration has been a low-salience issue in the Maghreb: throughout the post-independence period, citizens have prioritised socioeconomic matters such as unemployment and corruption. Immigration was long nearly absent from political discourse, while discussions on migration policy rarely featured in the public debate. However, over the past decade migration has gradually gained prominence following the rise in irregular sub-Saharan migration to Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia and associated challenges. This shift has been accompanied by a surge in anti-migrant attitudes, and the politicisation of migration.

Sub-Saharan migration holds attractions for Maghreb governments and some economic sectors. The public and private education sector in Morocco, Tunisia, and to a lesser extent Algeria has long drawn students from across Africa. Attracted by a wide choice of educational opportunities, high-quality programmes, and relatively low costs, growing numbers of sub-Saharan students have helped sustain the development of private universities in particular. This has been especially pronounced in Morocco and Tunisia, where government initiatives have promoted academic exchanges to strengthen continental ties. These students also contribute to the local economy through their spending on accommodation and living expenses.

Beyond education, other sectors have benefitted from undocumented migrants. Irregular migrants meet labour demands in agriculture, construction, and domestic work. This migration addresses the need for low-skilled labour, as these strenuous and low-paid jobs are unappealing to the local workforce. In these sectors, sub-Saharan migrants primarily engage in informal employment, which is a common practice in the Maghreb. In Tunisia, informal jobs constitute over 85 per cent of the workforce in agriculture and fishing, and over 69 per cent in construction.

However, public concern is growing about the social and demographic impact of rising sub-Saharan migrant populations. In Morocco and Tunisia, fears around social cohesion and public security have been kindled by the emergence of neighbourhoods characterised by high concentrations of sub-Saharan nationals and makeshift camps housing homeless migrants. Local residents, especially in these locations, perceive these demographic shifts as a threat to social cohesion, which further exacerbates anti-migrant sentiment. Politicians have consequently begun to talk openly about these developments. In May 2024, a Tunisian member of parliament raised the issue of the presence of thousands of migrants in the area of el-Hmaizia, home to around 700 local residents, in Sfax governorate, claiming this had led to a rise in tensions between Tunisians and migrants there. The potential strain on public services caused by increased population density is another critical issue, especially given migrants often settle in poorer areas where public resources are already stretched thin.

Crime is a particular flashpoint. Offences committed by sub-Saharan nationals receive extensive media coverage, which often disproportionately highlights the actions of a few individuals. This media portrayal perpetuates stereotypes and stigmatises entire migrant populations, leading to generalised fear and hostility.

The public debate on social media can veer towards anti-black racism. Social media platforms have become hotbeds for anti-migrant rhetoric, hosting campaigns that depict migrants as a threat to national identity and public safety. The dissemination of stereotyped views of migrants on social media – and to a lesser extent in traditional media – hinders a constructive dialogue: the debate is often polarised between viewing migrants solely as a security threat, and focusing exclusively on humanitarian aspects. Sub-Saharan migrants often face widespread discrimination and xenophobia, which manifest in various forms including verbal and physical violence. This creates an environment of exclusion. In Morocco, sub-Saharan Africans frequently encounter discriminatory practices that marginalise them from mainstream society. A 2020 survey by a Tunisian NGO found that 89 per cent of nearly 1,000 sub-Saharan migrant respondents had experienced insults, half had experienced acts of racism, and a third reported physical violence.

Negative narratives can gain traction quickly. In June 2017, a “No to Africans in Algeria” social media campaign went viral amid public frustration about sub-Saharan migrants begging on the streets of Algiers and other coastal cities. Claims about migrants taking jobs, spreading illnesses, and engaging in criminal activities were also prevalent. In response, a counter-campaign emerged, with Algerians condemning these statements as racist. However, anti-migrant campaigns have continued to emerge on Moroccan and Tunisian social media in



more recent years.

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Although the number of irregular migrants in the Maghreb remains relatively modest, the increase in migration has led to significant economic impacts, integration challenges, and a rise in anti-migrant sentiment. Their arrival has presented significant integration issues, with racism, language barriers, and limited access to services being key issues. These matters are compounded by a lack of effective policy interventions, resulting in heightened social tensions and strained community relations. Sensationalised media coverage further contributes to a deteriorating environment for migrants.

Addressing these issues necessitates a multifaceted approach that recognises the changing picture of migration in the region. However, most Maghreb governments resist acknowledging this reality and are instead focused on avoiding becoming migrant destination countries. This resistance is driven by internal dynamics, especially the troubled socioeconomic context, and the need to manage migration as part of cooperation with Europe. In this context, security-driven approaches have prevailed.

## Approaches to migration: Security first

### Morocco's ambiguous stance

#### Migration relationship with sub-Saharan Africa

Since the mid-1990s, Morocco has emerged as a destination for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, especially west Africa. Morocco's historical ties with sub-Saharan Africa, combined with diplomatic efforts to attract students, led to a substantial increase in sub-Saharan student enrolment. The kingdom hosts over 18,000 sub-Saharan students in various educational programmes, including several thousand recipients of Moroccan government scholarships. The Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation plays a crucial role in supporting foreign students administratively. Around 70,000-200,000 people are estimated to make up the undocumented sub-Saharan migrant population. Although visa-free travel facilitated the rise in arrivals, in 2019 Morocco imposed an electronic visa requirement for nationals of Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea, and Mali to deter irregular migration to Europe. Significant numbers of migrants continue to enter the country via Algeria and Mauritania.



## Policy

Over the past decade, migration governance in Morocco has changed substantially, reflecting the country's expanding role from primarily a source of emigrants to a major transit and destination country. Migration policy reform efforts have been heavily influenced by Morocco's geostrategic interests and its relationships with European and African partners. Despite various shortcomings, Morocco has the most developed experience of migration governance in the Maghreb, although recent years have seen a return to more restrictive policies.

In 2013, Morocco embarked on a comprehensive migration reform, shifting from a security-driven approach to an approach that recognised its role as a host country. Morocco's National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum, adopted in September 2013, aimed to create a comprehensive regulatory and institutional framework for managing different aspects of migration and asylum. The Moroccan government introduced measures to enhance access to rights and integration for regularised migrants and refugees, including access to the labour market, public health services, and public schools.

Morocco's shift in migration policy was driven by domestic and external factors. Domestically, the strategy aimed to address the complexities and challenges associated with increased migration flows. The growing presence of irregular migrants challenged the country's existing, largely ad hoc, migration management systems. Externally, foreign policy considerations appeared to be the primary drivers of this shift. Morocco sought to align with international human rights standards and improve its global image, particularly after facing significant backlash following mass-crossing attempts at Ceuta and Melilla in 2005, where 13 migrants were shot dead. The Moroccan government recognised the need to reform its policies to comply with international norms.

The pursuit of improved migration governance is linked to Morocco's external relations with both Europe and Africa. The EU's interest in curbing irregular migration provided both push and pull factors for Morocco. The country aimed to move away from being perceived externally as the EU's border guard and towards a proactive policy aligned with international priorities while maintaining close cooperation with Europe. Following the reform, Morocco continued to position itself as a reliable partner for the EU, linking migration issues with other strategic interests.

The reform was also influenced by Morocco's ambition to rejoin the African Union (AU).

Morocco left the Organisation of African Unity in 1984 after the AU recognised the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. The kingdom's absence from the AU and its reputation as 'Europe's policeman' undermined its ambition to become a continental power, challenges that the new migration policy aimed to address. The announcement of the reform occurred amid increased diplomatic activities that laid the groundwork for Morocco's return to the AU, which Morocco rejoined in 2017; the country subsequently earned the title of "Leader of the African Union on the Issue of Migration".

The implementation of the new strategy has been gradual, involving reforms and initiatives to enhance managing migration and protection for migrants. The most significant achievements include regularisation campaigns: the first regularisation campaign in 2014 provided legal status to approximately 23,000 migrants, primarily from sub-Saharan Africa and including around 5,500 Syrians. A second campaign followed in late 2016 which regularised the status of around 25,000 people. The authorities demonstrated flexibility in handling applications, aiming to regularise the greatest possible number of migrants, underscoring their intent for this drive to succeed. Alongside other goals, these initiatives aimed to integrate migrants into the formal economy, and improve their access to rights and protections. Furthermore, Morocco adopted a new anti-human trafficking law in August 2016. However, an asylum law remains pending, with the UNHCR handling refugee status determinations.

However, Morocco has on occasion instrumentalised the issue of migration to pursue other foreign policy objectives, notably recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara. This was evident after the European Court of Justice's ruling in December 2016, which excluded Western Saharan territory from certain agreements. In response, Morocco's minister of agriculture warned that hindering these agreements could lead to increased migrant flows into Europe, which Morocco had previously managed and contained.

A crisis in May 2021 further underscored this dynamic. Following the arrival of Brahim Ghali, the Polisario Front leader, in Spain for medical treatment, Spain experienced a surge in migrant arrivals from Morocco. Between 17 and 18 May 2021, around 8,000 migrants entered Ceuta, following rumours that Moroccan authorities would relax border controls after Ramadan that year. An exceptionally limited Moroccan security presence reinforced the perception that Rabat was leveraging migration in its relations with Madrid. Relations between the two capitals improved following Spain's shift in position on Western Sahara, resulting in changes to Morocco's border management.

Despite positive strides, the implementation of Morocco's comprehensive migration reform has faced challenges and shortcomings, including inconsistencies and insufficient resources,

resulting in ambiguous approaches. Many migrants still struggle to access services and protections and reports of human rights abuses persist.

## Deportations and repatriations

The continued arrival of migrants who aim to reach Europe from Morocco has strained the goals of the reform. This prompted a renewed focus on border management and security and overshadowed efforts to ensure humane treatment. Implementation of the reform has thus slackened since 2018, coinciding with intensified counter-migration activities, such as operations dispersing migrants in the north of the country awaiting departure to Europe and the imposition of electronic visas on nationals from key countries of origin in November 2018. In more recent years, the Moroccan government has more regularly begun to use internal deportations from departure hubs to curb irregular migration, leading to a notable clustering of migrants in coastal and interior towns. This has increased the visibility of homeless migrants and put a strain on recipient cities such as Casablanca. In early 2023, tensions escalated in the city due to the rising number of homeless migrants around the Ouled Ziane bus station, where over 1,000 migrants had established camps. Residents expressed concerns about escalating insecurity and disruptions to local businesses. Frequent police interventions occurred to disband the encampment, leading to confrontations between migrants and the police. The situation for migrants deteriorated further after March 2022, when Moroccan authorities began cracking down on irregular migration following Madrid's expression of support for Rabat's claims on Western Sahara. This involved raids on migrants' residences, the dismantling of camps, and forced transfers, exacerbating migrants' vulnerability.

Organised repatriations to countries of origin are managed by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which facilitated the return of 2,457 migrants in 2022, and 2,372 in 2021. The kingdom has no readmission agreements with any sub-Saharan countries. Moroccan media portray these IOM return operations as integral to the authorities' strategy for a migration policy that respects migrants' rights.

Despite intensified border controls, mass entry attempts into the enclaves still take place. A tragic event on 24 June 2022 saw approximately 2,000 people approach the Melilla border. Moroccan forces pushed back most migrants. The incident left a heavy death toll, with at least 23 migrants dying in the stampede and 76 injured. The episode generated local and international reactions, with calls for accountability and measures to prevent anything similar ever happening again.

The increasingly difficult environment for migrants in Morocco underscores the limited

impact of the new migration policy and the challenges in balancing competing interests amid persistent arrivals in the country.

## Tunisia's derailed reform

### Migration relationship with sub-Saharan Africa

Tunisia has not traditionally been a major destination for sub-Saharan migrants, but numbers began rising in the early 2000s. Estimates suggest the presence of 10,000-75,000 undocumented migrants in the country. At around 7,000-13,000, Ivorians are estimated to be the largest group, followed by Guineans. Various other nationalities are also present, including Cameroonians, Chadians, Ghanaians, Nigerians, Nigeriens, Togolese, Sierra Leoneans, and Sudanese.

Tunisia has long attracted sub-Saharan nationals via legal routes for higher education and employment. An established destination for sub-Saharan African students, Tunisia attempted to position itself as an educational hub in North Africa after 2011 as part of a drive to strengthen ties in the continent. Both the government and the private sector accelerated efforts to this end. This included initiatives such as the first Tunisian African Empowerment Forum, held in Tunis in August 2017, to promote Tunisia as a prime destination for sub-Saharan students. But despite these efforts, the number of sub-Saharan students declined from over 12,000 students in 2010 to around 7,500 in 2022, primarily due to bureaucratic hurdles and social integration challenges; Tunisia's private universities in particular have felt the impact.

Migration to Tunisia overall has grown since 2014, driven by factors including the expansion of private universities attracting international students (notwithstanding factors that also undermined Tunisia's attractiveness to sub-Saharan Africa students) and political instability in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire. Another key factor is the Tunisian authorities' removal of visa requirements for a number of west African countries between 2013 and 2015 as part of efforts to enhance relations with the rest of the continent. Thus, most migrants entered Tunisia via commercial flights, staying and working for varying periods before many head to Europe. However, since 2022, land border arrivals via Algeria have increased, contributing to the rise in transit migration through Tunisia.

The 2011 revolution and subsequent Arab uprisings brought significant changes to Tunisia, including shifts in migration dynamics. After 2011, Tunisia's capacity to control departures from its shores weakened, leading to nearly 28,000 Tunisians arriving in Italy between

February and September that year. Simultaneously, the conflict in neighbouring Libya resulted in around 1 million asylum seekers arriving in Tunisia over six months.

## Policy

Tunisia has faced increasing external pressure from the EU and European states to secure its borders and curb migrant departures.

Concerned about potential outflow of migrants from Tunisia, the EU intensified pressure on the country to strengthen border controls, enhance the readmission of Tunisian irregular migrants, and strengthen migration management – to which Tunis agreed. Although Tunisia rejected Italy's 2011 proposal to deploy Italian security forces for coastal patrols, it increased cooperation with Europe on migration issues, including on the readmission of its own nationals and on border management cooperation.

In subsequent years, successive governments launched a comprehensive overhaul of the country's migration policy and institutional framework, focusing on developing a migration strategy. The EU has played a significant role in driving this, increasing funding for migration and mobility initiatives since 2012.

Following a five-year process, Tunisia finalised its National Migration Strategy in July 2017. This aimed to address Tunisia's evolving role as a country of origin, transit, and destination for migrants. The strategy focuses on advocating for the rights of Tunisians in the diaspora and enhancing their contributions to the country's development while also covering a range of objectives: strengthening migration governance; promoting regular migration and preventing irregular migration; and ensuring the rights of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Tunisia.

Several challenges have hindered the strategy's development, including the Tunisian government's lack of prior experience developing migration policies; an absence of strategic vision; political instability; and external pressure. Currently, there remains substantial ambiguity regarding the division of labour on migration between the ministry of social affairs, and the ministry of foreign affairs. Meanwhile, the question of irregular migration remains managed by the ministry of interior, reflecting the perception in Tunisia of irregular migration as a national security issue.

The National Migration Strategy in Tunisia was never formally approved by the government in a ministerial council. Despite this, implementation began in 2017 and various EU-financed projects got under way. The authorities have prioritised – and continue to prioritise –

enhancing the contribution of Tunisians abroad to development, aligning with the strategy's primary focus, and producing more reliable data on migration dynamics to guide policymaking. A project to conduct a nationwide census on migration, the EU-funded "Tunisia-HIMS", started in 2020.

During the 2010s, civil society organisations criticised the authorities' limited focus on protecting migrants' rights in Tunisia and improving their access to services, attributing this to the view of irregular migration as a security issue. Little progress was made on protecting irregular immigrants and asylum seekers, despite this being a declared objective of the strategy. To date, Tunisia lacks an asylum law; a draft asylum bill has been pending since 2018. The UNHCR has handled registration, documentation, and refugee status determination since 2011. Despite lobbying by the EU and the UNHCR, successive Tunisian governments have resisted adopting the bill, fearing it could lead to the externalisation of European asylum procedures to North Africa and that it does not represent a domestic priority.

After 2011, Tunisia's migration policy thus underwent significant transformation – from the absence of coherent strategy to a more structured but ambivalent approach. By 2023, this had culminated in a strict hardline stance. This evolution reflects the interplay of domestic and international factors, including political changes, socioeconomic pressures, and external influences. The politicisation of migration and the rise of anti-migrant sentiments compound the challenges of developing a comprehensive approach to migration that looks beyond security issues. There is little enthusiasm in the country for improving conditions for undocumented migrants. On the contrary, the country's political leadership and large segments of the population perceive irregular migration as a threat to public security and safety, and efforts by the government to crack down enjoy at least some public support. Areas in northern Sfax such as Al-Amra and Jebeniana saw several protests in the first half of 2024. They called on the government to prevent new migrant arrivals and deport irregular migrants. As Tunisia continues to navigate its complex migration landscape, the development of a comprehensive and humane migration strategy remains a critical and ongoing challenge.

Since 2023, Tunisia's migration policy has shifted towards an even stricter approach towards irregular migrants. In February last year, President Kais Saied alleged the existence of a foreign-funded plan behind the arrival of migrants to alter the country's identity and demography. His claim came amid increased irregular migrant flows through the border with Algeria, driving anti-migrant sentiments and instigating social tensions. Social media campaigns embraced an alarmist narrative about the impact of migration on security and the economy. Government policy failed to anticipate the increase in social tensions, which have been simmering for years.

In this context, the Saied government has adopted reactive, ad hoc measures to address domestic concerns and assert control including stricter enforcement of laws restricting employment and housing for undocumented migrants. Authorities began to enforce existing laws, such as fining businesses employing irregular migrants, which led to many employers dismissing their sub-Saharan employees to avoid penalties. This campaign likely aimed to pressure migrants to leave and deter more arrivals to Tunisia. It has significantly changed employment dynamics for irregular migrants. Previously, governments tolerated the presence of sub-Saharan migrants working in informal sectors, but restrictive labour policies made regularising their status difficult. Businesses had little incentive to apply for work permits due to the complicated nature of the process and the prevalence of informal employment also among Tunisians. Attempts by civil society and trade unions to regularise undocumented workers have failed to gain traction. The recent shift towards hardline policies on the issue of irregular migration makes it unlikely that this will happen any time soon.

In terms of external relations, throughout 2023, amid a significant rise in sub-Saharan migration from Tunisia, Italy led efforts to engage Tunisia in signing a new migration deal. Successive visits by European officials to discuss the matter, such as a joint visit by the French and German interior ministers, raised public concerns in Tunisia about the potential effects of European pressure – for example, worries that Tunis might agree a deal that saw sub-Saharan African migrants returned to Tunisia from the EU. Likely aiming to address such concerns, Saied has rhetorically opposed the idea of externalisation, stating that Tunisia will not serve as Europe's border guard or become a resettlement country for migrants. His stance thus likely sought to appease domestic audiences wary of foreign influence. Nonetheless, in July 2023, the EU and Tunisia signed a memorandum of understanding that positioned European migration support within a broader context of a comprehensive partnership package. European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen touted the deal as a model agreement for other southern neighbourhood countries.



However, the agreement has attracted substantial criticism. Within Tunisia, many analysts believe that the government has taken on a significant burden with little in return. Much of the financial support promised under the agreement is contingent on the signing of an IMF agreement, which Saied has repeatedly opposed. Critics argue that the primary benefit of the deal for the president is the legitimisation of his regime and the containment of by capitalising on Europe's migration fears, particularly as his rule faces both internal and external backlash.

Overall, the implementation of migration reform in Tunisia since 2011 has encountered numerous obstacles, including successive government changes and institutional weaknesses. Such challenges have affected reform across many policy areas in Tunisia since the revolution and often resulted in fragmented and inconsistent policy implementation. Importantly, until 2022, migration remained a low-priority issue for successive governments, with matters such as the economy and corruption taking precedence. Now, the presence of irregular migrants in Tunisia has become more prominent in public discourse, with increasing media discussions highlighting growing concerns about the implications for society and an intensifying politicisation of the issue.

## Deportations and repatriations

Since July 2023, Tunisia has engaged in the controversial practice of deporting migrants to the borders with Algeria and Libya. This started following violent clashes between locals and migrants in Sfax governorate, which resulted in the death of a Tunisian man. The unrest occurred amid growing numbers of migrants living in precarious conditions, and burgeoning hostility towards them. Initially, the authorities used forced deportations to quell tensions and restore order, removing over 1,000 migrants to border areas within two weeks. The continuation of deportations since then suggests this may become a systematic part of the Tunisian approach to managing migration. Thousands of migrants are estimated to have been deported since July 2023, although exact figures are difficult to obtain.

While deportations from Tunisia are not entirely unprecedented, they have historically been limited and sporadic, involving small numbers of people in isolated incidents. The 2023 wave of collective expulsions marks a significant shift, likely inspired by similar practices in Morocco and Algeria. Human rights organisations have widely criticised these deportations, as migrants are expelled without due process, leading to the expulsion of asylum seekers and exposing those deported to significant risks.

Observers argue that the president sought to scapegoat sub-Saharan migrants to boost his popularity. However, his approach has impacted Tunisia's economic relations with sub-Saharan Africa. Following Saied's initial inflammatory statement in February 2023, Tunisian goods were blocked in sub-Saharan ports and calls for the boycott of Tunisian products in sub-Saharan countries spread on social media. The government initially retreated, and implemented ad hoc measures to support migrants and ease tensions through diplomatic efforts. However, sustained social tensions in Sfax governorate led it to double down on its hardline approach.

Similar to practices seen in Morocco, the Tunisian authorities also resorted to internal forced relocations in 2023 as part of their migration management approach. In September 2023, migrants were forcibly relocated from a makeshift encampment in the city centre of Sfax to rural areas in the northern part of the governorate. This relocation resulted in a significant concentration of homeless migrants in these underprivileged regions, provoking substantial anger and frustration among citizens and prompting repeated protests. Residents in the northern part of Sfax governorate have expressed concerns about the impact on security and agricultural activities, as migrants established makeshift camps in olive groves, hindering farmers' access to their land. At the same time, newly arrived migrants who crossed the border from Libya and Algeria started heading directly to these encampments, leading to a rapid increase in the migrant population there. This situation has exacerbated negative perceptions of migrants and intensified calls from local residents for their deportation. The internal forced relocations have thus proved ineffective, merely shifting the problem from one area to another without offering a sustainable solution.

Likely attempting to find an alternative to deportations and forced relocations, and trying to avoid reputational damage and risks to its relations with sub-Saharan countries, Tunisian authorities now aim to increase the repatriation of irregular migrants. Several sub-Saharan countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Guinea organised repatriations for their citizens from Tunisia following Saied's remarks in February 2023. However, these repatriations were arranged ad hoc, as Tunisia lacks formal agreements on returns with sub-Saharan countries. Now, the Tunisian government seeks to establish such agreements to facilitate more organised returns. Meanwhile, formal returns from Tunisia are primarily arranged through the IOM. Over 3,000 migrants were repatriated by the IOM between January and May 2024, a notable increase from 2,557 in 2023, and 1,614 in 2022. Efforts are being made to further expedite return operations.

## Algeria's hardline strategy

### Migration relationship with sub-Saharan Africa

Algeria is traditionally a key country of origin for migration to Europe. However, it is now a crucial transit and destination point for sub-Saharan Africans. The country's extensive borders with Sahelian nations serve as critical routes for migrants heading to Maghreb states or Europe.

Algeria's role as a destination country is growing, with unofficial estimates suggesting the presence of around 100,000 sub-Saharan migrants in the country. These migrants primarily originate from neighbouring Mali and Niger, in addition to nationals from various countries including Burkina Faso and Chad. Algeria also represents an important transit point for migrants making for Tunisia or Morocco. Departures by sub-Saharan migrants from the Algerian coast to Europe remain limited.

The patterns of sub-Saharan migration to Algeria have shifted over the past decade. Historically, migrants arriving in the country remain in southern border regions such as Tamanrasset but many now reside in northern cities and coastal areas where they look for employment. The average length of stay for migrants in Algeria has increased and now exceeds three years. This is due to declining economic opportunities in Algeria since 2014, compelling migrants to remain longer to accumulate sufficient funds before either returning home or continuing their journey.

### Policy

Algeria has no migration policy as such. Instead, the authorities predominantly view migration through a security lens. Algeria's strategic priority remains to secure its southern borders to mitigate migration flows, and address broader security threats such as arms trafficking. This objective has driven enhanced engagement with neighbouring Sahelian states, bolstered by heightened border surveillance, physical barriers, technological advancements, and increased military presence to intercept smuggling operations. Nonetheless, migrant arrivals continue.

Like Tunisia and Morocco, Algeria lacks an asylum law. The UNHCR remains the primary contact point for refugees and asylum seekers.

Algeria's security-driven approach to migration has come under pressure from the volatile

situation in the Sahel, including recent coups in Mali and Niger. The Nigerien government's cancellation of migration cooperation with the EU and repeal of Law 36-2015 has increased pressure on Algeria.

## Deportations and repatriations

Central to Algeria's migration policy is its contentious deportation practice, initiated in the mid-2000s. In December 2014, Algeria expanded this approach under an unofficial agreement with Niger, allowing the annual repatriation of thousands of migrants, most from Niger. Algiers framed this arrangement as a way to combat the emerging begging industry in Algeria, which was dominated by Nigerien migrants. The deportation process typically involves police raids in cities such as Algiers and Oran, in which migrants are detained in temporary facilities before being taken to Tamanrasset in the south. From there, they are repatriated via military convoys to Niger.

Since 2015, Algerian authorities have conducted two types of expulsion convoy: official convoys repatriating undocumented Nigerien migrants to Niger and non-official convoys expelling non-Nigerien migrants whereby they are left at the border and forced to walk into Niger. Evidence also exists of expulsions to northern Mali.

These operations have faced severe international criticism as a violation of international law. Concerns relate to the treatment of migrants, conditions in detention centres, and reports of migrants being abandoned in the desert. Nonetheless, the Algerian government maintains that its actions are in the interest of national security, claiming that repatriated migrants are voluntary returnees.

Niger has repeatedly protested against the treatment of its nationals and the expulsion of non-Nigerien migrants to its territory. In March 2018, expelled Malians responded by attacking the Algerian embassy in Bamako, and called on the AU to remind Algeria of its obligation to treat fellow Africans with respect and dignity. However, expulsions to Niger continued, with around 40,000 people expelled to Niger between 2014 to 2019. Deportations increased in subsequent years, with 23,171 people expelled in 2020, over 27,000 in 2021, at least 24,250 in 2022, and around 26,000 in 2023.

Following the repeal of Law 36-2015 in November 2023 and the resulting increase in migrant departures to Algeria, the Algerian authorities increased deportations. Over 17,000 people were sent to Niger in the first three months of 2024 alone. This escalation has created a severe humanitarian situation, leaving migrants stranded in border regions with limited resources

and overwhelming reception centres in Niger.

This situation has led to renewed tensions with Niger, which summoned the Algerian ambassador in April 2024 to express its discontent. Niger's military junta publicly condemned Algeria for abandoning migrants in Niger's desert areas and accused Algerian authorities of raiding migrants' houses, stealing their valuables, and endangering their safety. In turn, the Algerian government summoned the Nigerien ambassador and the Algerian foreign ministry described Niamey's statements as unsubstantiated, demanding the issue be discussed bilaterally.

Algeria appears to have concluded no agreements with other sub-Saharan countries on migrant return. However, sizeable numbers of migrants are repatriated through the IOM. In 2021, the IOM facilitated the return of 1,971 migrants from Algeria while 1,306 were returned in 2022.

Algeria's migration policy appears uninfluenced by its relationships with African partners or its active presence within the AU. The government's focus on security remains paramount and it rejects criticism as attempts to tarnish its image abroad. This stance suggests that foreign policy considerations have little impact on Algeria's handling of migration.

Probably influenced by Morocco's regularisation initiatives, the government announced a plan to conduct a regularisation campaign for sub-Saharan migrants in 2017. This announcement occurred amid a surge of anti-migrant sentiment, with the government attempting to save face by launching such an initiative; around the same time, the government was also aiming to boost trade with sub-Saharan Africa. This plan never materialised, possibly due to political changes. Shortly after the announcement, the prime minister, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, was dismissed. His replacement, Ahmed Ouyahia – a hardliner on migration – opposes regularisation and has increased the rate of deportations.

Although unintentional, Algeria's stance on migration aligns with European objectives to make onward travel to Europe difficult. Nonetheless, the country remains the least cooperative in the region on migration with the EU. Unlike its neighbours, Algeria does not see itself as a key EU partner on migration. The Algerian government's strong emphasis on sovereignty, influenced by its colonial history, makes it suspicious of external interference. Moreover, EU efforts to involve North African and Sahel states in joint migration control activities clash with Algeria's desire to maintain its regional clout.

## The changing picture

Maghreb countries' roles have become increasingly diverse in terms of sub-Saharan African migration flows. Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria are not only countries of origin for migration to Europe but have emerged as key hubs for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, both as transit points and destinations.

Migration policies in Morocco and Tunisia have undergone notable reforms, albeit with distinct trajectories and motivations. Morocco has made substantial strides in implementing migration reform, driven largely by internal considerations, whereas Tunisia's efforts have been much more fitful, heavily influenced by European pressure and lacking in robust domestic ownership. However, both countries have increasingly adopted security-orientated migration policies in response to growing migrant arrivals. In contrast, Algeria has consistently pursued unilateral measures; its authorities view irregular migration as a security matter above all else. Across the board, the topic of migration has become a crucial concern, as each country aims to limit arrivals.

The three states' approaches to cooperation with the EU further differentiate them: Algeria is wholly uninterested, while Morocco and Tunisia demonstrate greater openness, partly due to their reliance on EU development aid. Yet, despite cooperation with EU countries and the investment by European countries, irregular migration continues amid the adaptability of smuggling networks to enforcement measures.

Understanding evolving migration dynamics in the Maghreb region is crucial for European policymakers to manage migration in a way that balances humanitarian questions, security concerns, and considerations around societal stability. Directly or indirectly encouraging harsh policies that target migrants can damage the EU's reputation by implicating it in repression and abuse. In this regard, the EU's deal with Tunisia in July 2023 drew criticism within the context of growing targeting of migrants in the country.

Meanwhile, a major media investigation published in May 2024 examined the EU's role in deportation operations to the desert carried out in Tunisia, Morocco, and Mauritania. The investigation matched vehicles used in these round-ups and expulsions to those provided by European countries. It further found the EU was aware of these practices. Despite knowledge of abuses, the EU has continued to support the security forces involved. This implies a degree of complicity, or at least a failure to act to prevent cruel treatment.

The European priority is focused on limiting departures from the North African coast, which Maghreb countries are purportedly cooperating on. Maghreb countries focus on preventing maritime departures within the framework of their cooperation with European countries. However, they also fail to support migrants while also resorting to ad hoc internal deportations. As the examples of Morocco and Tunisia show, this approach has led to the emergence of makeshift encampments and homelessness that cause consternation in local populations. Approaches that leave migrants stuck in these countries can thus be a factor that triggers instability.

Such unrest can in turn heighten migration pressures on Europe as Maghreb nationals themselves flee instability. Although Maghreb countries currently cooperate on border management, current or future governments in the region might find that the costs of acting as Europe's border guards outweigh the benefits. EU policymakers must therefore account for the local context and specific impacts of migration in each country in their work with North African governments to devise strategies that support development and stability in the Maghreb. Doing so aligns with Europe's strategic interests. The logic of externalising border control measures to the Maghreb is unlikely to be tenable in the future.

Migration challenges affect the Maghreb and Europe in similar ways. The persistent drivers of migration and the resilience of smuggling networks suggest that arrivals in the Maghreb and maritime departures to Europe will continue, increasing both the profitability and sophistication of smuggling operations and the risks for migrants. Yet the shared nature of the challenge could enable a joint approach to address the issue collaboratively. While maintaining border management cooperation is important, this alone will not address the complex, long-term migration challenges faced by Europe and the Maghreb.

## Into a new era

Mutual understanding of shared challenges and interests on migration is crucial to building effective cooperation between Europe and North Africa. The time when the EU and its member states can outsource responsibilities to Maghreb neighbours is nearing its end. Europeans should get ahead of this curve. They can do so by investing more in collaborative efforts that deliver sustainable, long-term solutions and by promoting evidence-based migration policies.



## Develop robust domestic migration management systems

Maghreb countries currently lack robust migration management systems. Yet the domestic impact of increased migration can be significant and in some cases is exacerbating the fragility of these countries. A strong migration management system entails a comprehensive legal framework, evidence-based policies, and effective border controls. Continuous monitoring and feedback mechanisms are required to ensure the system's effectiveness and adaptability to evolving migration trends and challenges, benefiting both migrants and host communities.

Developing robust migration governance systems in Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria is crucial for several reasons. First and foremost, such systems are critical for safeguarding the human rights of migrants, ensuring they are able to seek asylum and protection from exploitation. Effective governance also enhances these countries' ability to manage the arrival of undocumented migrants, which is crucial for maintaining national security and public order. By implementing policies that promote the integration of regularised migrants into society – such as access to education, healthcare, and employment – these states can reduce friction between local populations and newcomers. Moreover, proper governance is a prerequisite for fostering awareness and understanding of migration issues among the population, thereby helping to combat xenophobia and discrimination and countering alarmist narratives.

The EU and European countries can realistically contribute to this challenge by focusing on developing partnerships, capacity building, and mutually beneficial initiatives that respect the sovereignty and priorities of Maghreb countries. Instead of pushing for overarching governance or legislative reforms, the EU can provide funding and resources to support locally led migration initiatives that align with Maghreb states' priorities. This approach empowers local governments and ensures that assistance is context-specific. The EU and European countries can offer technical advice and capacity building programmes tailored to the specific needs and priorities of each country. This can include migration data collection, assistance efforts to support refugees and asylum seekers, and improvements to return processes.

## Invest in data collection

Robust systems for data collection on migration flows, migrant demographics, and socioeconomic impacts are also essential to better managing migration in Maghreb states. This includes collecting data at borders, within communities, and through consulates and

embassies. Such data will help create evidence-driven migration policies that ensure the protection of migrants' rights. For instance, collecting data on the health status of migrants (including prevalent health conditions), access to healthcare services, and barriers to accessing care is essential for ensuring that migrants' right to health is protected. It also plays a crucial role in protecting the public health of the recipient society.

Better data collection can also help enable targeted humanitarian assistance. For example, if data identify a region in a country as a major transit point hosting many vulnerable migrants lacking adequate support, the government can respond by collaborating with NGOs and international organisations to deploy emergency resources, such as food and medical care. This ensures that vulnerable migrants receive necessary aid and reduces strain on local communities.

Comprehensive data collection can furthermore reduce anti-migrant sentiment by countering misinformation. Governments and civil society organisations can utilise accurate data to debunk myths and engage in informed public discourse. Providing clear, evidence-based information helps address fears and misconceptions, fostering a more nuanced understanding of migration issues and reducing the impact of sensationalist narratives. In this way, data-driven approaches contribute to more effective migration management.

A collaborative approach involving both Maghreb countries and the EU and member states would be the most effective way to achieve this. It will require Maghreb governments to invest in training for local officials and agencies responsible for data collection and analysis, ensuring they have the skills and resources needed to carry out their tasks effectively. European countries can assist by providing funding and technical assistance to Maghreb governments to develop and implement data collection systems. This can include support for technology, training, and infrastructure. In addition, European policymakers can promote partnering between academic institutions and research organisations in the Maghreb and in Europe to conduct joint studies on migration trends, improving shared expertise and resources.

Additionally, the EU can play a role in supporting and funding initiatives aimed at protecting and assisting refugees and asylum seekers. This could be achieved through: direct assistance to governments and local civil society organisations; providing assistance to migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers; and through key UN agencies such as the IOM and the UNHCR. This approach can enhance the protection and service provision for refugees and asylum seekers in the region.

## Halt controversial deportation operations and adopt formal return processes

Improving return processes is crucial for both the Maghreb and the EU. Maghreb countries have conducted controversial deportations to border areas, leaving migrants stranded without resources and at risk of death and exploitation. Adopting formal return processes helps ensure that deportations are conducted in accordance with international standards and legal frameworks, safeguarding the rights of migrants and eliminating dangerous practices. For Maghreb countries, adopting formal return processes could help them improve their relations with sub-Saharan partners. For the EU, the adoption of formal return processes could help address criticism that the bloc effectively contributed to the practice of deportations.

The EU could also support Maghreb countries to carry out structured and humane return processes, which can also contribute to resolving migration challenges more ethically and effectively. This support could include: providing technical assistance to develop and implement return systems; allocating funds to support the establishment and improvement of return processes; and operational support to help organise and fund logistical aspects of return operations.

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