

NORTHWEST AFRICAN (ATLANTIC) ROUTE

Migrant Smuggling from the Northwest African coast to the Canary Islands (Spain)

UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants | First Edition - July 2022

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Since 2020, around 40,000 people from West and North Africa have departed from the Northwest African coast across the Atlantic Ocean, and irregularly entered Spain at the Canary Islands. This interactive story map investigates the characteristics of migrant smuggling along this route. The analysis is based on field research conducted by UNODC on the Canary Islands, Spain, in November 2021, in cooperation with the Spanish national authorities. The findings have been triangulated and updated with academic literature and specialized sources.

Context

A new route?

The Northwest African route refers to the maritime routes connecting several countries and territories along the Northwest African coast (Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal, The Gambia and the Disputed Territories of Western Sahara) with the Canary Islands, Spain. Maritime routes are shaped by obligatory points of passage, locations where physical constraints - sea currents, winds, and water depth - create bottlenecks.¹

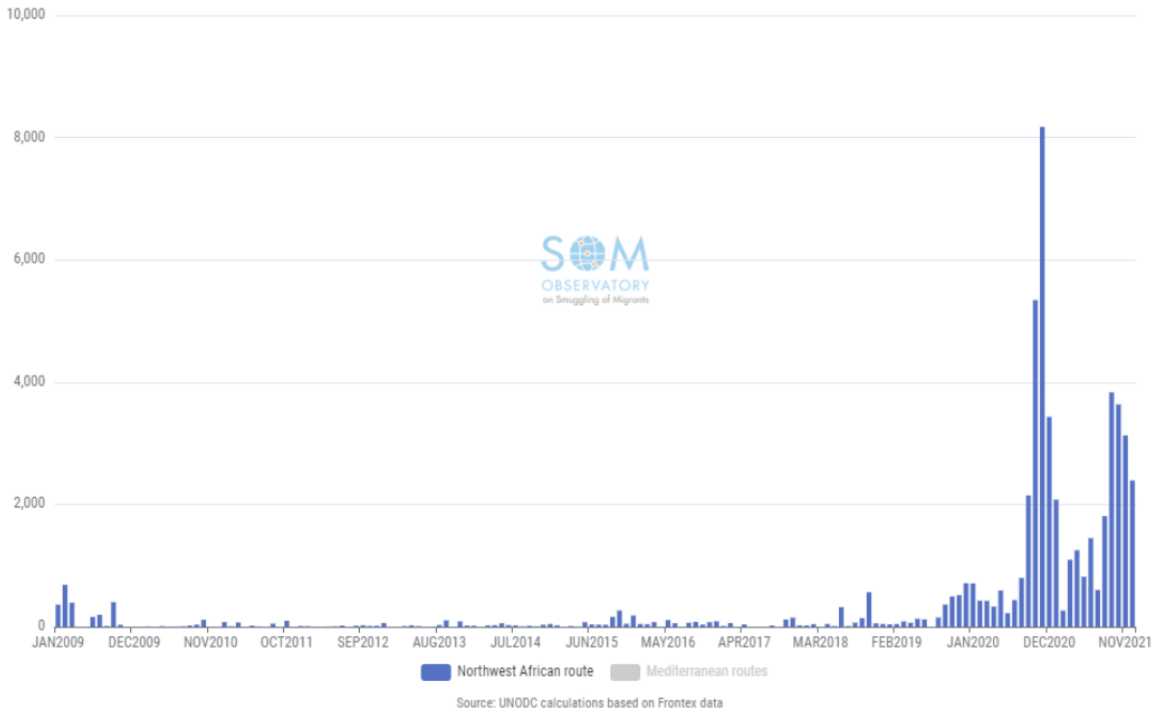
Between the early 1990s and 2005, smaller numbers of West and North African people attempted to reach the Canary Islands along this long and dangerous route.² In 2006, 31,678 people survived the sea crossing and arrived on the Canaries, marking an all-time peak.³

The numbers of people arriving on the Canaries gradually decreased thereafter, to 12,478 people in 2007, 9,181 in 2008 and 46 in 2009.⁴ During 2010-2017, less than 1,000 people per year arrived in Spain along the Northwest African route, before the numbers started to gradually increase again during 2018-2019.⁵ It has been postulated that this decrease during the 2010s was due to increased border patrolling along these maritime routes, and intensification of deportations from Spain.⁶

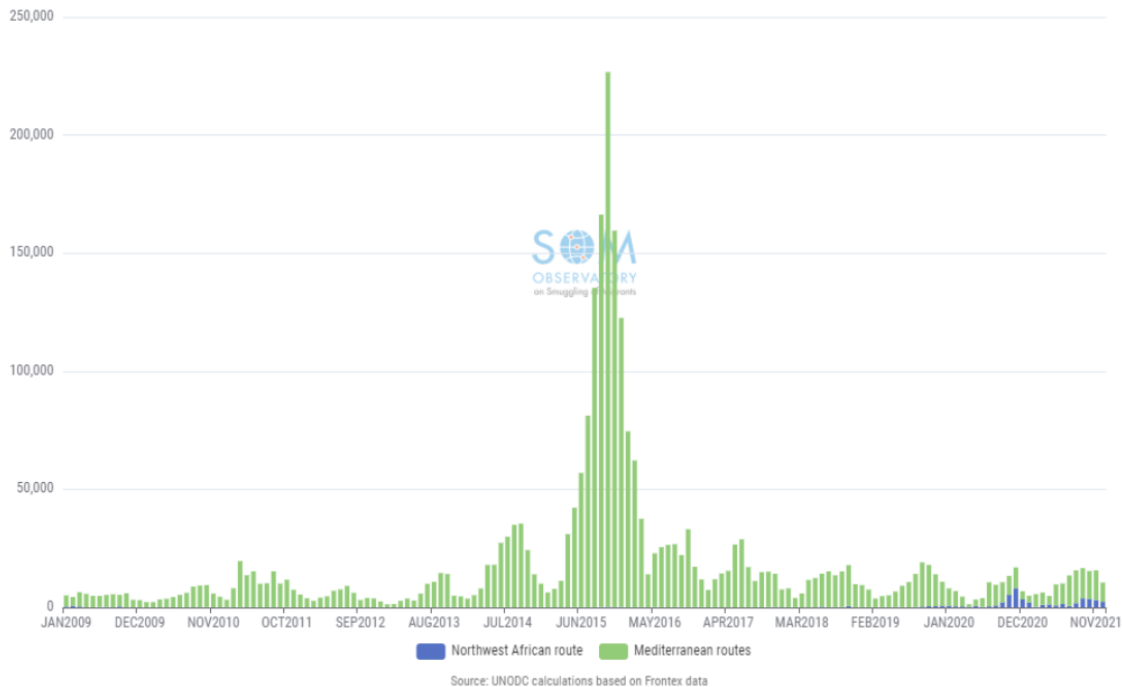
The use of the much shorter and comparatively less dangerous Western Mediterranean route from Northern Morocco to mainland Spain as an alternative may have also contributed to the decline in the use of the Northwest African route. During the period 2009-2016, between 5,000 and 8,500 people per year arrived in Spain on the Western Mediterranean route. The number of people using the Western Mediterranean route increased significantly thereafter, during 2016-2019, reaching an all-time peak of 56,245 people in 2018. The number of people using the Western Mediterranean route has been in decline since 2019.

In 2020, a new increase in arrivals on the Canary Islands was registered: 23,271 people survived the sea crossing and landed on the island.⁷ Most arrived during the last quarter of 2020 (17,147 people).⁸ During 2021, the pace of arrivals declined compared to the last quarter of 2020, with 22,316 people surviving the sea crossing during that year.⁹ In 2021, over half of the people who arrived in Spain irregularly travelled along the Northwest African route (22,316 out of 41,945, or 53 per cent), with 47 per cent arriving on the Western Mediterranean.¹⁰

Number of people arriving in Spain on the Northwest African route, 2009-2021, by month



Number of people arriving in Spain on the Northwest African route compared to the Western, Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes, 2009–2021, by month



Why did the use of the Northwest African route increase again?

In autumn 2020, when more people started to arrive irregularly on the Canary Islands (Spain), many countries in Europe and North Africa were implementing measures to contain the spread of COVID-19.¹¹ In North African countries, lockdowns directly resulted in the reduction of economic activities domestically, while the global impact on trade, mobility and energy prices led to a fall in foreign revenues.¹² The consequences for small business owners and salaried workers, and especially for people working informally, were particularly harsh.¹³ April 2020, for example, 57 per cent of Moroccan businesses permanently or temporarily ceased their activities.¹⁴ The contraction had a negative impact on the revenue-generating capacity of the low-income segments of the population, including both national and foreign residents.

Many men and women living in North African countries considered emigrating. A young Senegalese man interviewed by the Observatory on the Canaries in late 2021 had been working on a construction site in Algeria at the outbreak of the pandemic (March 2020). When his employer contracted COVID-19, he lost his job and could not find any other work in Algeria. When he could no longer afford to buy food, he started begging - and considering migrating to Spain.

The figures cited in this analysis refer to people who arrived irregularly on the Canary Islands, having crossed the ocean from the Northwest African coast. While no official data is available on the incidence of smuggling of migrants along this route, the field research findings show that the majority of the people who arrived irregularly were smuggled to the Canaries. Those who were not smuggled collectively organised their journey by gathering the necessary

resources (boat, engines, fuel) and sharing the costs among the passengers, receiving no financial or material benefit (see section on [Smugglers](#)).

The UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants refers to “[smugglers](#)” when it can reasonably be assumed that migrant smuggling offences are constituted, as per Article 3 of the [UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol](#), and including attempted smuggling offences. The word “[facilitator](#)” is used whenever the elements of: (a) irregular entry into a country; and/or (b) financial or material benefit, can reasonably be assumed not to be in evidence.¹⁶

Counter-smuggling response

Since the early 1990s, Spain and countries in Northwest Africa have reinforced border control to curb the irregular migration of African people to the EU, both through bilateral cooperation agreements and the multilateral initiatives of the European Union (EU).¹⁷ More recently, international cooperation on migration has extended to combating smuggling of migrants. The law enforcement authorities of Spain, Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal and The Gambia now conduct joint migrant smuggling investigations. Morocco and Spain intensified judicial cooperation in recent years, in order to investigate higher-ranking members of organized criminal groups committing smuggling of migrants offences. The first extraditions of suspected smugglers between these countries involved two men extradited from Morocco and Mauritania to Spain in 2021, according to Spanish authorities interviewed by the Observatory.

Spain ratified the [United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime](#) and its Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air in 2002. As a Member State of the EU, Spain is also covered by the EU framework on counter-smuggling, commonly referred to as the Facilitators Package.¹⁸

The Spanish Criminal Code criminalizes the “facilitation of illegal immigration” and domesticates the EU Facilitation Directive in Spanish law.¹⁹ Unlike in the UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol, the purpose of “financial or material benefit” is not required to constitute the crime according to Spanish law, but is rather considered an aggravating circumstance. Involuntary manslaughter and trafficking in persons are the two offences most frequently reported as committed concurrently with smuggling of migrants in the Spanish jurisdiction,²⁰ and would constitute aggravated smuggling offences according to the UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol.

The Spanish Criminal Code foresees three to twelve months of imprisonment for a smuggling of migrants conviction as a basic offence ([Article 318 bis](#)).²¹ However, when the acts are committed as part of an organized criminal group or endanger the life and safety of smuggled migrants, offenders face four to eight years of prison time.²²

The Spanish counter-smuggling response is coordinated by the Ministry of Interior – with responsibility for border management and immigration management – and involves several law enforcement agencies: the *Guardia Civil*; the Intelligence Centre for Counter-Terrorism and Organised Crime (CITCO); and the National Police. The National Police and *Guardia Civil* conduct investigations on smuggling of migrants and related crimes within the framework of their border management duties (see section on [Smugglers](#) for an overview of recent and ongoing investigations).

[Frontex](#), the EU Border and Coast Guard Agency, supports the Spanish authorities in the identification of refugees and migrants who arrive in Spain, family tracing, fingerprinting, and debriefing on cross-border crimes (including migrant smuggling), according to the Frontex Joint Operation Plan for Spain.

Maritime surveillance and border control along the Northwest African route is conducted by the Mauritanian, Moroccan, Senegalese, Gambian and Spanish authorities. A Moroccan man interviewed by the Observatory on the Canaries in late 2021 had been intercepted at sea six times by the Moroccan authorities. A Frontex Liaison Officer has been based in Dakar, Senegal, since 2020, and the Agency is currently discussing a working arrangement with the Senegalese border authorities on information exchange, capacity building, and operational cooperation.²³

Smuggled refugees and migrants in Spanish and international waters are rescued by the Spanish search and rescue service, [Salvamento Marítimo](#) (also known as SASEMAR). Since 2018, *Salvamento Marítimo* conducts operations in close coordination with the *Guardia Civil*. The *Guardia Civil* is hence currently involved in both counter-smuggling and search and rescue operations (see section on [Risk and Abuses](#)). Spanish and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also conduct awareness-raising on the Northwest African coast and alert the Spanish authorities when they identify a vessel in distress.

Smuggling demand

Who takes this route?

While there are limited official statistics on the profiles of people who irregularly arrive to the Canary Islands (Spain) from the [Northwest African route](#), the Observatory's field research sheds light on the national origins, gender and age composition of recently arrived refugees and migrants.

According to key informants interviewed, the majority of the people who arrived in 2006 were Senegalese men, often described as fishermen. By 2020 – almost fifteen years later – the profiles of people travelling along this route had dramatically changed. Half of the people who arrived in 2020 were Moroccan, mostly men. They departed from Southern Morocco and Western Sahara. Many arrived in search of better economic opportunities on mainland Spain and the rest of Europe, often after having tried and failed to access legal pathways for regular migration. The other half were men, women, boys and girls from West Africa, who departed from the coasts of Mauritania, Senegal and The Gambia. In 2021, West Africans outnumbered Moroccans in terms of arrivals. Many of them had lived in Algeria and Morocco for some months or years, before deciding to take the [Northwest African route](#).

Number of people arriving on the Canary Islands by nationality/region of origin, 2020 (total 23,029) and 2021 (total 22,351)



Source: UNODC Observatory calculations based on FRONTEX data. Figures for individual countries in Sub-Saharan Africa not available.

Based on figures provided by the Regional Government of the Canary Islands and by UNICEF, the Observatory estimates that 76 per cent of the people who arrived in 2020 (total 23,029) were men (17,450), 12.7 per cent were women (2,950) and 11.3 per cent children (2,629).²⁴ Just under half of the children who arrived in 2020 were Moroccan (1,201), and the others were mostly from Mali (574) and Senegal (445).²⁵

Gender and age disaggregated data are not available for other years, as women, girls and boys are all counted in the same category. The data do not specify how many women travel alone, with children, or with partners, nor how many children travel with a parent or legal guardian, or unaccompanied. According to the Regional Government of the Canary Islands, 35 per cent of the people who arrived in 2021 were women and children (7,810 out of 22,316 in 2021). 2,488 unaccompanied and separated children arrived on the Canary Islands (Spain) between December 2019 and July 2021.²⁶ If the proportions of women and children were roughly similar, as was the case in 2020, this implies that less than half all the children who arrived on the Canaries in 2020 travelled with their parent or guardian.²⁷

Key informants interviewed on the Canaries shared accounts of children travelling alone in order to join their parents, who had previously migrated to Europe.²⁸ In these cases, restricted access to family reunification for children of migrant parents, especially for those residing irregularly in Europe, drives demand for smuggling of their children unaccompanied, and the exposure of these children to unsafe journeys.

According to key informants interviewed on the Canaries by the Observatory, increasing numbers of Moroccan and West African women are smuggled along this route. Many women take this route to join male spouses or partners who had previously migrated irregularly. The field research conducted by the Observatory also shed light on the experiences of women travelling alone. The women interviewed were from Morocco, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea, and left their country of origin to pursue better economic opportunities, escape gender-based violence, and provide income for their family members in their countries of origin.

Available statistics for 2020 suggest that the majority of women travelled without a child (78 per cent of children arrived unaccompanied by a parent or guardian). Smuggling of women along this route is not well understood because of lack of data. The conflation of women and children in the Spanish statistics implies that they are travelling together, however this does not seem to be the case. The smuggling of women, and the smuggling of children (girls and boys), are distinct issues and require separate policy responses.

While the majority of people arriving in the Canary Islands are young adults - aged 20-35 years, according to key informants -, women, men, girls, and boys of all ages were smuggled on the Northwest African route in 2020 and 2021. The Observatory interviewed two Moroccan men who were over 50 years old and were financially responsible for their families in north-western Morocco. As they could no longer earn enough income to sustain their families in Morocco, they sold all their assets and were smuggled to the Canary Islands. They had been promised a job in the agriculture sector by friends on mainland Spain.

No official statistics are available on the educational and socio-economic background of people smuggled along the Northwest African route. The people interviewed during the field research presented a variety of different profiles. While a few had only completed primary school and had worked mostly in small businesses, others had completed secondary education and had been employed in factories in their countries of origin. A few had studied at university level and hoped to resume their studies once they arrived in mainland Europe.

West Africans on the move

Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania, as well as Western Sahara, have historically been important destinations for seasonal and long-term migrant workers from West Africa.²⁹ In Mauritania, for example, men and women from other West African countries are employed in construction, fisheries, and food, often informally.³⁰

The Observatory interviewed a woman from Côte d'Ivoire who had worked in Western Sahara in fisheries and food, mostly in the processing of guano and frozen fish, together with her partner (a West African man). The salary she and the other workers received did not allow them to cover basic day-to-day expenses. Shortly after losing her apartment, as she and her partner could no longer afford the rent, she had an unplanned pregnancy. Among the few options available for survival, they chose "*to hope for a better future*" in Europe and contacted a smuggler to take them to the Canary Islands, Spain.

Other interviewees explained how they decided to attempt to irregularly enter the European Union (EU) in order to exit degrading and exploitative living and working conditions in North African countries. Instances of discrimination, forced labour, robbery and abuse were widely reported by West African men and women who had lived and worked in Algeria, Morocco and Western Sahara before reaching the Canary Islands. Delays in the payment of salaries, sexual harassment and other forms of abuse are among the challenges faced by West Africans working in Mauritania.³¹

"In Algeria, everyone goes to look for work at the side of the road, they [employers] come to look for you every day at the side of the road for menial work, but sometimes they will not pay you. [...] I worked for one month for the Arabs, sometimes they paid me, sometimes they didn't."

Guinean man interviewed by the UNODC Observatory on the Canary Islands (Spain).

According to recent studies, the majority of West Africans who live and work in North African countries do not intend to move onwards to the EU irregularly and/or through smuggling.³² Those who left in 2020 and 2021 on the Northwest African route mostly departed from southern Morocco and Western Sahara. Whereas in 2006, West Africans arriving on the Canary Islands mostly departed from Senegal (according to the recollection of key informants), in 2021 most left from North Africa. Small numbers of Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Syrians who were previously living in Algeria and Morocco were also smuggled along the route during 2020-2021.

Young men and children from Mali arrived in greater numbers in 2021, often departing from Mauritania or Senegal. Malian interviewees mentioned conflict in the Sahel, coupled with political instability, as a main driver of migration. Violence and hostilities have intensified in the Central Sahel region, resulting in at least 5,000 deaths in 2021.³³ Internal and cross-border displacement increased by 30% between 2020 and 2021.³⁴ In May 2021, a coup d'état marked a change in the leadership of the transitional Government of Mali.³⁵

"I left my village because my husband beat me. In Mali there is the war, and it's hard. My mother had an illness affecting her eyes, so I decided to cross the water to help her [financially]."

Malian woman interviewed by the Observatory in the Canary Islands (Spain)

Few people smuggled along the Northwest African route apply for international protection on the Canaries. Only 10 per cent of asylum applications between January and September 2021 in Spain were lodged on the Canary Islands (4,165 out of 41,423).³⁶ Many applicants on the Canaries are South American and reached the islands by air.³⁷ Among those who come from the Northwest African route, Mali and Western Sahara are the main origins of those applying for international protection.

Limited access to legal advice upon arrival was mentioned by key informants as one of the reasons for the low number of applications.³⁸ However, even when duly informed about their rights, eligible applicants may decide not to apply for international protection on the Canaries, so that they can travel onwards to mainland Spain and access employment opportunities, or join friends and extended family members in other EU countries (the latter in contravention of the EU's Dublin Regulation No. 604/2013, requiring applications for international protection to be lodged in the country of first arrival in the EU).

People who apply for asylum on the Canary Islands are required to remain in the region until the procedure is finalized, with few opportunities to earn an income. The Canary Islands is one of Spain's most disadvantaged regions. In 2020, 36 per cent of the population was at risk of poverty and social exclusion.³⁹ When asked about his plans, a Moroccan man interviewed for this research said: *"People here [at the reception facility] are nice, but I am here to work, not to be a burden. I want to go to [mainland] Spain. I need to feed my children."*



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Reasons for using a smuggler: refused access to legal migration channels

While the people interviewed on the Canaries had varied and often multiple reasons to migrate, their reasons for using a smuggler were similar across different nationality, gender and age groups. The people interviewed by the Observatory consistently reported that they used a smuggler only when faced with the impossibility of accessing the limited available regular pathways for migration. Many interviewees not only considered migrating regularly, but also tried multiple times to obtain the required documentation and submit applications through different channels and intermediaries.

Applying for a visa that grants the right to work in EU countries is costly, and requirements for applicants holding an African passport are demanding.⁴⁰ A Spanish employment visa must be sponsored by a Spanish employer, while a self-employed visa requires the applicant to prove that they have a viable business plan and sufficient resources to implement it.⁴¹

The case of a Moroccan man interviewed by the Observatory exemplifies how, even with a pre-existing job offer, the barriers to regular labour migration can be high. Aged 64, the man had worked in the agricultural sector in Spain in the early 1990s, with a visa and regular residence. After a few years, he decided to return to his village in north-western Morocco, where his family lives. Thirty years later, when the economic crisis hit in 2020, access to opportunities for income generation became challenging. He re-established his contacts in Spain and identified a former employer who was willing to offer him a job – with the prospect of a significant contribution to his family's income. This time, however, the only way to access this job was to use a smuggler, as the job offer did not meet the requirements for a long-term work permit.

Young Moroccans have reduced access to regular pathways for migration, compared to previous generations.⁴² A young Moroccan man interviewed by the Observatory started assessing the options for irregular travel when he realised that he could not meet the requirements for financial means, in order to access regular pathways. He first contacted a Moroccan woman from his village who had permission to travel to the EU, and who offered to enter into a marriage contract with him, in exchange for around US\$4,000. The man paid her the fee and waited for two years, but the woman never provided the travel documents.

After this experience, he decided to attempt to cross the land border irregularly to Melilla (Spain) from Nador (Morocco), by swimming at night and hiding for hours at sea. After two years of failed attempts, which severely compromised his physical and mental health, he

decided to look for a smuggler, someone with a good reputation, who could help him to reach the Canary Islands (Spain).

Early on the morning of 24 June 2022, between 1,300 and 2,000 people, mostly boys and men from Sudan and South Sudan, attempted to irregularly enter Spain from Nador to Melilla by climbing the high wire fences at the land border and destroying an access gate. Between 23 and 37 people died and many more were injured during the attempt. There is no evidence of smuggling of migrants in relation to this incident.⁴³

EU countries have similar requirements for long-term visas with authorization to work. Often, such as in the case of France, applicants who wish to apply for a long-term visa, but do not have a pre-existing job offer, must present proof of income, accommodation and health insurance to the relevant authorities.⁴⁴

“To go to France, I needed to apply for a visa. So first I got my passport and then I applied for a visa at the French embassy in Abidjan [Côte d’Ivoire]. I applied four times, but it was refused each time. I don’t know why I couldn’t get a visa. I even paid an intermediary who worked at the French embassy, because I was told that you need to know someone at the Embassy in order to be granted the visa, but it did not work. There is so much corruption. After these rejections, I decided the next-best option would be to go to Morocco and try to reach Europe from there.”

While there are no official statistics on the rates of visa refusal in this context, field research suggests that they are high. Furthermore, people with limited financial resources may never be able to meet the minimum requirements for proof of income. Two young Guinean men interviewed by the Observatory, who had considered applying for a long-term work visa, ultimately opted for a smuggler because they did not have the necessary financial resources to apply and to show proof of income.

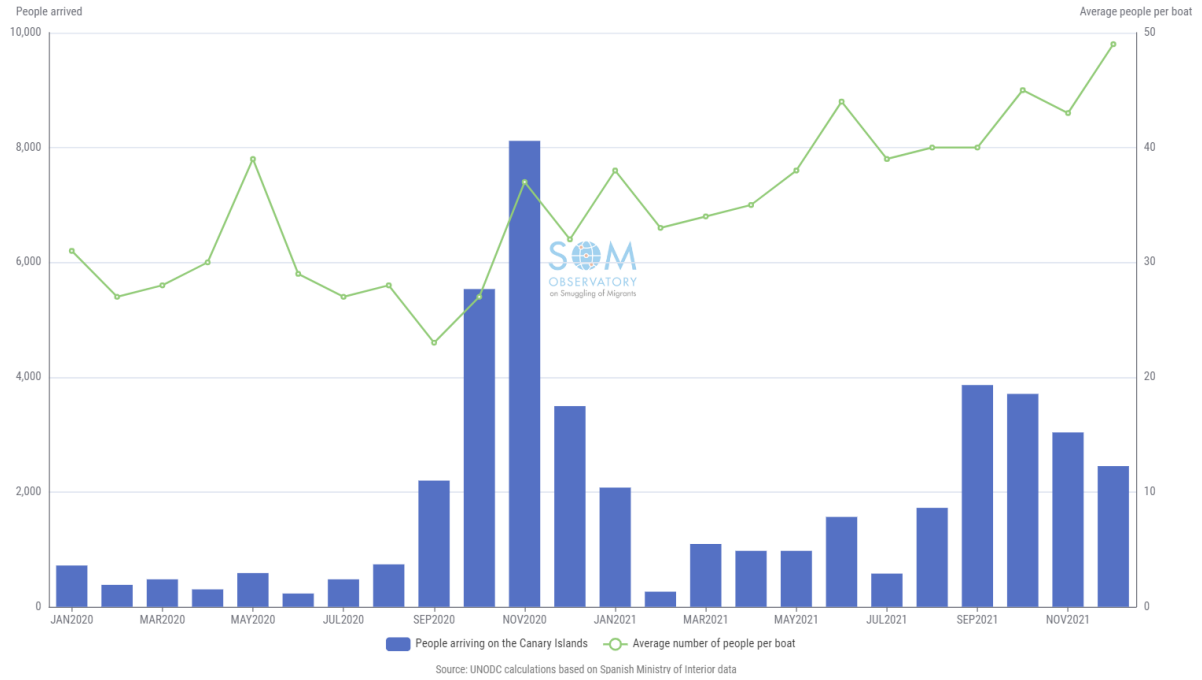
Incidence of smuggling

There are no official data on the incidence of smuggling, i.e. the proportion of people travelling along the Northwest African route who are smuggled. The Observatory’s research indicates that most people arriving irregularly on the Canary Islands since 2020 are smuggled. According to key informants, smuggling to the Canary Islands started to emerge in 2006. Before that, people crossed the ocean on independent or collectively-organised journeys. Since 2006, groups of smugglers have emerged. The border management strategies implemented by Spain and Northwest African countries require a greater level of specialization on the part of smugglers.

Few people now travel independently, without a smuggler organising the journey. Those who do, gather in small groups of around 15 people, and embark on the sea crossing from the closest departure points in southern Morocco and Western Sahara.

The Northwest African route includes a number of different maritime journeys. It is characterised by the use of various different types of boats (see section on Journeys), with between 10 and 200 passengers on board. In general, boats arriving in 2021 were more crowded than in 2020. The average number of passengers per boat was 30 in January 2020 and 49 in December 2021. One “patera” (fiberglass fishing boat) departing from The Gambia in 2021 arrived with 196 people on board.⁴⁵ The arrival of more crowded boats may be a sign of increased professionalization of smuggling activities, and of a potential decline in independent and collectively-organised crossings.

Number of people arriving irregularly on the Canary Islands and average number of people per boat, by month, 2020-2021



Journeys

Migrant smuggling routes

In West and North Africa

Some West Africans interviewed by the Observatory on the Canary Islands, Spain, used smugglers to travel from West African countries to Mauritania, Algeria or Morocco. A woman from Côte d'Ivoire left in 2019 to join her husband, a fellow Ivorian, who was working in Morocco. She travelled by pick-up truck across Mali, within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) free movement area, reaching Mauritania after a week of travelling. In Mauritania, she found a new contact to smuggle her into Western Sahara; a taxi driver specializing in this route, recommended by her husband.

A man from Guinea travelled independently as far as northern Mali. There he met a "coxeur" (smuggler) known as "Baye Fall" a pseudonym inspired by the Baye Fall Islamic Sufi movement in Senegal, who helped him cross the border into Algeria. This smuggler connected people on the move with drivers operating between Timbuktu (Mali) and Bordj Badji Mokhtar (south-western Algeria). As the young Guinean man did not have enough funds to pay the smuggling fee, "Baye Fall" offered him accommodation and transportation in exchange for a week of unpaid work at a car wash nearby. The Guinean man was especially grateful to his *coxeur* for his services, and contacted him again later on in the journey when he tried to escape from an exploitative situation.

Some of the people interviewed by the Observatory on the Canaries did not use a smuggler or facilitator to travel within West Africa. As the ECOWAS free movement zone facilitates regular mobility within West Africa, many West Africans arrange the first parts of their trips independently and regularly. Nationals of several ECOWAS countries, including Senegalese and Malians, also have facilitated rights of entry and residence in Mauritania.⁴⁶ The trade area between Mali, Senegal and Mauritania is very active and some traders who circulate frequently offer transportation services to people on the move, sometimes in exchange for a fee.⁴⁷ A young man from Senegal interviewed by the Observatory hitchhiked his way to Mauritania, travelling for free on trucks carrying merchandise.

As shown in previous Observatory research (see [Migrant Smuggling to Morocco and the Western Mediterranean](#) and [West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean](#)) smuggling across West and North Africa is mostly perpetrated by small groups of loosely connected actors or individual smugglers. Recent studies indicate that the proportion of people using smugglers and travel facilitators within the ECOWAS sub-region has increased in recent years, particularly since the outbreak of COVID-19.⁴⁸

Mobility in West Africa, which includes the free movement area of ECOWAS, was affected by COVID-19 restrictions and the ensuing border closures (both full and partial) during 2020 and 2021.⁴⁹ Between April and June 2020, only four per cent of points of entry in West and Central Africa were open to travellers, while 26 per cent allowed for restricted movements (including the transportation of goods, returning nationals, and humanitarian convoys).⁵⁰

From West Africa to North Africa by air

Many West Africans benefit from a visa-free regime with Morocco and hence rely on facilitators acting as travel agents to arrange the trip. For example, citizens of Côte d'Ivoire entering Morocco and staying for no longer than 90 days can do so visa-free.⁵¹ If people cross at official border points and with the required documentation, smuggling of migrants is not perpetrated. Two women interviewed by the Observatory had travelled by air from West Africa to Morocco (Casablanca Airport). One Ivorian woman met a Malian man in Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), who

suggested that she travel regularly to Morocco by air and then use his smuggling services to reach the Canary Islands (Spain) along the Northwest African route. Once she arrived in Casablanca (Morocco), the interviewee paid US\$3,000 in cash to the smuggler, who defrauded her, took the money and used it to pay for his own passage to the Canaries.

The second woman, from Guinea, had travelled to Morocco in 2011 by plane. She met a fellow Guinean woman who facilitated her access to travel documents and plane tickets. Nationals of Guinea are exempted from requiring a visa to enter Morocco, but need an “Electronic Authorization for Travel to Morocco – AEVM”.⁵²

These cases show how mobility pathways can substantially change the migratory experience and demand for smuggling services, with demand tending to decrease where legal pathways are accessible.



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From North Africa to Spain

Many interviewees on the Canaries had also tried to reach Europe along other irregular routes. Many of the men interviewed had first attempted irregular independent border crossings, before being smuggled. Interviewees considered the Western Mediterranean route preferable to the Central Mediterranean or the Northwest African for their first attempts. The Central Mediterranean route is considered dangerous because of the risk of death at sea and the need to rely on smugglers from the point of the desert crossing into southern Libya.

A Guinean man who had been working in Algeria and lost his job due to COVID-19-related measures first considered reaching Europe from the Libyan coast. He decided to change his plans when he heard that a friend had lost his life at sea in the Central Mediterranean. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 999 people died or went missing in 2020 and 1,553 in 2021 in the Central Mediterranean.⁵³ Two young Senegalese men interviewed on the Canary Islands had attempted to reach Libya from Niger in 2014 and 2019, but were either intercepted by border guards and refused entry, or deceived and abandoned by their smuggler in the desert.

Within Morocco, people try to cross at different points along the borders. People trying to reach Spain from Morocco may consider both options: the Western Mediterranean route from northern Morocco and the Northwest African route. A Moroccan man interviewed by the Observatory had previously tried to cross by sea from Nador and Tangier (northern Morocco,

Western Mediterranean route), as he considered the Northwest African route more dangerous, due to the longer distances and adverse weather conditions. People attempt independent land border crossings from northern Morocco into Ceuta and Melilla, or gather in small groups and collectively organize the crossing, without ever using a smuggler (see [Migrant Smuggling to Morocco and the Western Mediterranean](#)). Crossing the Western Mediterranean route without using a smuggler is more feasible than the Northwest African route.

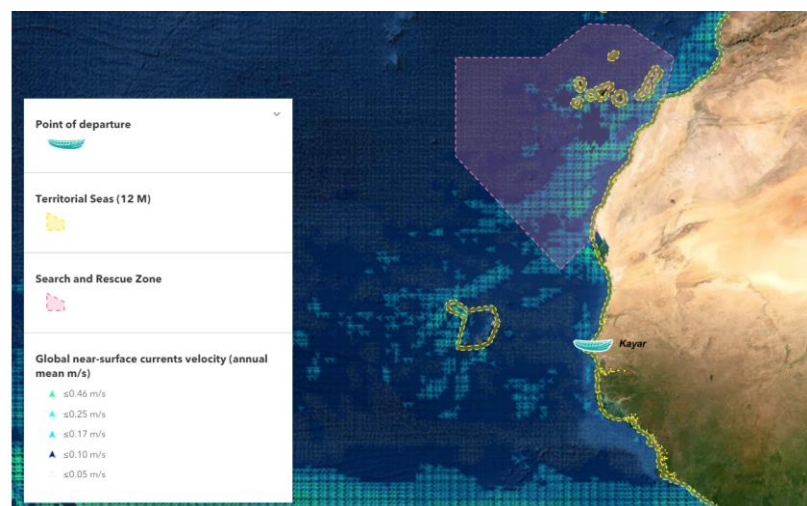
The sea crossing

Departure points for the Northwest African route are spread out across vast distances along the Northwest African coast, from The Gambia in the south to Morocco in the north (a distance of around 2,500km). The sea crossing to the Canary Islands (Spain) is around 100km from Morocco and Western Sahara, while it is up to 1,700km from the coasts of Senegal and The Gambia.

The duration of the sea journey varies significantly, from 24 hours for boats departing from southern Morocco and Western Sahara and reaching the islands of Lanzarote or Fuerteventura (Canaries, Spain), to more than ten days for those leaving from Senegal and heading to El Hierro (Canaries, Spain).

MARITIME JOURNEYS FROM SENEGAL AND THE GAMBIA

Point of departure

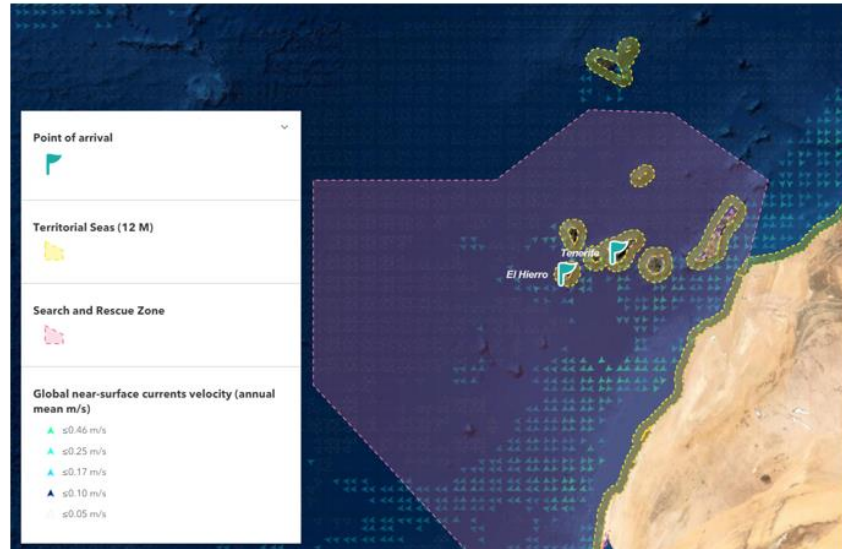


Data source for Global near-surface currents : Laurindo, L., A. Mariano, and R. Lumpkin, 2017: An improved near-surface velocity climatology for the global ocean from drifter observations *Deep-Sea Res. I*, 124, pp.73-92, doi:10.1016/j.dsr.2017.04.009.

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MARITIME JOURNEYS FROM SENEGAL AND
THE GAMBIA

Point of arrival

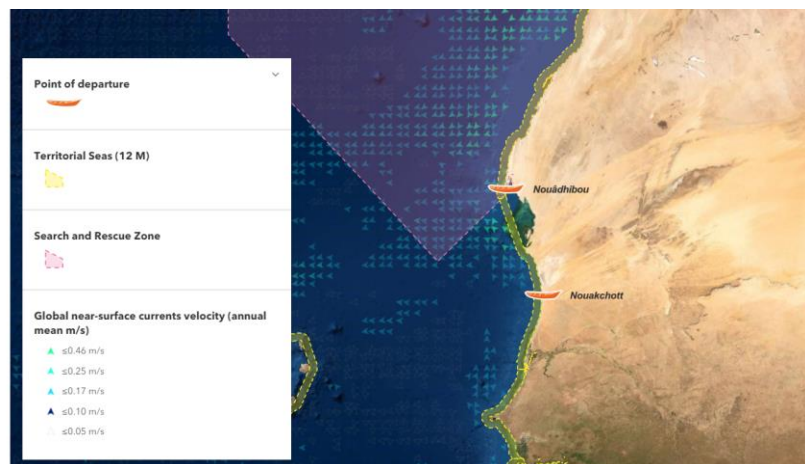


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MARITIME JOURNEYS FROM MAURITANIA

Point of departure

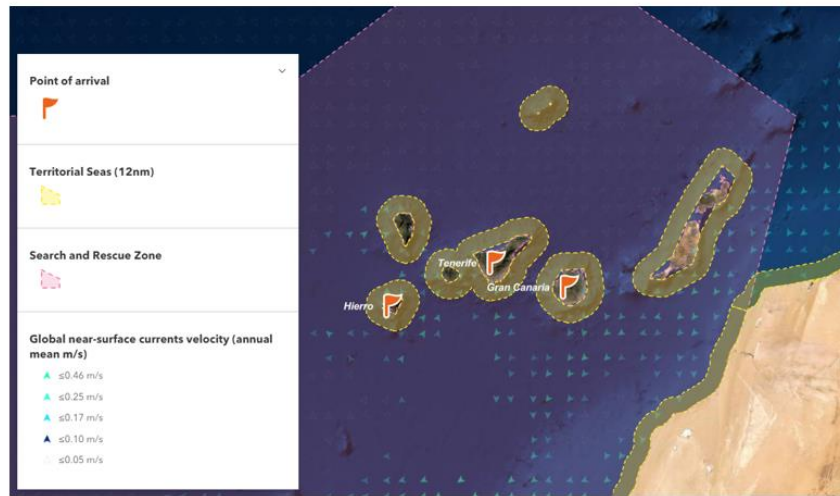


Data source for Global near-surface currents: Laurindo, L., A. Mariano, and R. Lumpkin, 2017: An improved near-surface velocity climatology for the global ocean from drifter observations *Deep-Sea Res. I*, 124, pp.73-92, doi:10.1016/j.dsr.2017.04.009.

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MARITIME JOURNEYS FROM MAURITANIA

Point of arrival

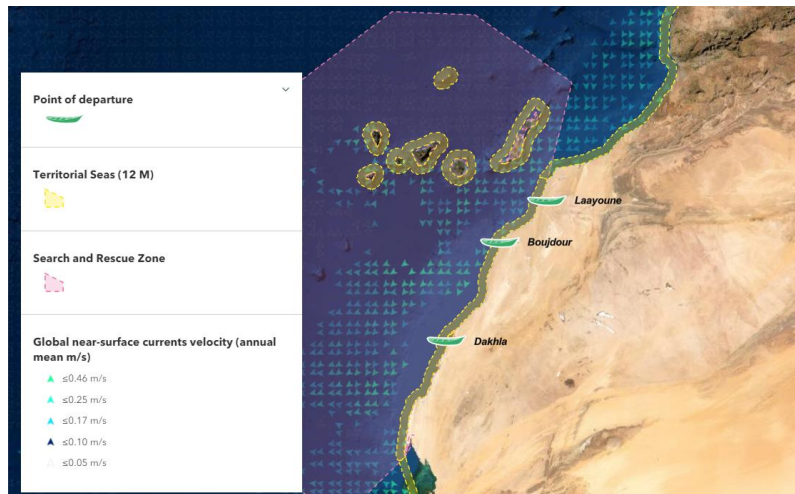
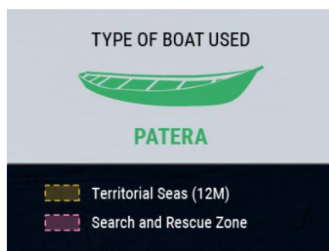


Data source for Global near-surface currents: Laurindo, L., A. Mariano, and R. Lumpkin, 2017: An improved near-surface velocity climatology for the global ocean from drifter observations Deep-Sea Res. I, 124, pp.73-92, doi:10.1016/j.dsr.2017.04.009.

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MARITIME JOURNEYS FROM THE DISPUTED TERRITORIES OF WESTERN SAHARA

Point of departure

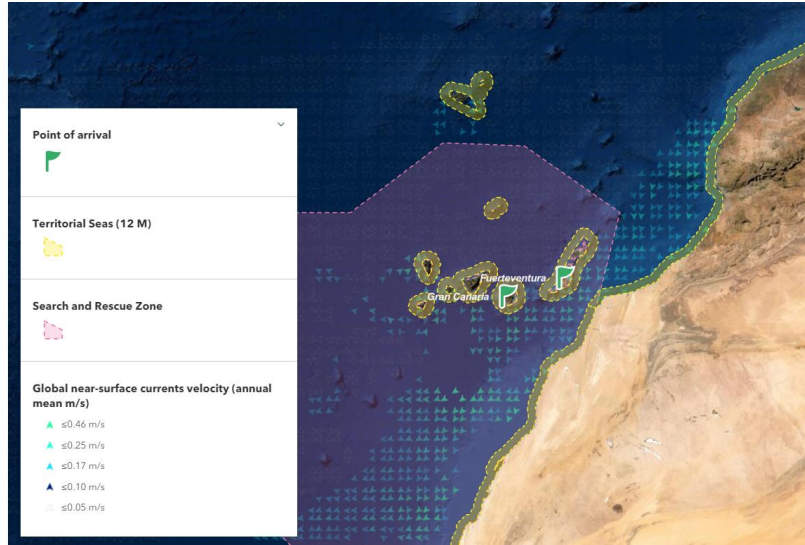


Data source for Global near-surface currents: Laurindo, L., A. Mariano, and R. Lumpkin, 2017: An improved near-surface velocity climatology for the global ocean from drifter observations Deep-Sea Res. I, 124, pp.73-92, doi:10.1016/j.dsr.2017.04.009.

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MARITIME JOURNEYS FROM THE DISPUTED
TERRITORIES OF WESTERN SAHARA

Point of arrival

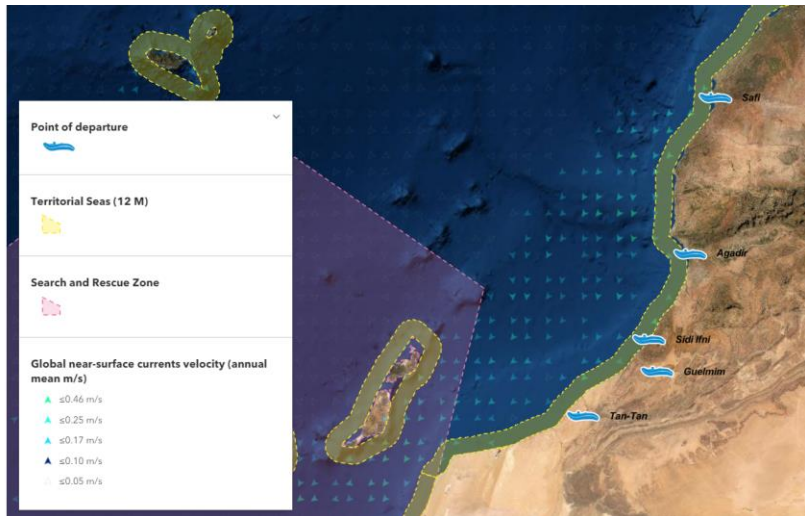


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MARITIME JOURNEYS FROM MOROCCO

Point of departure

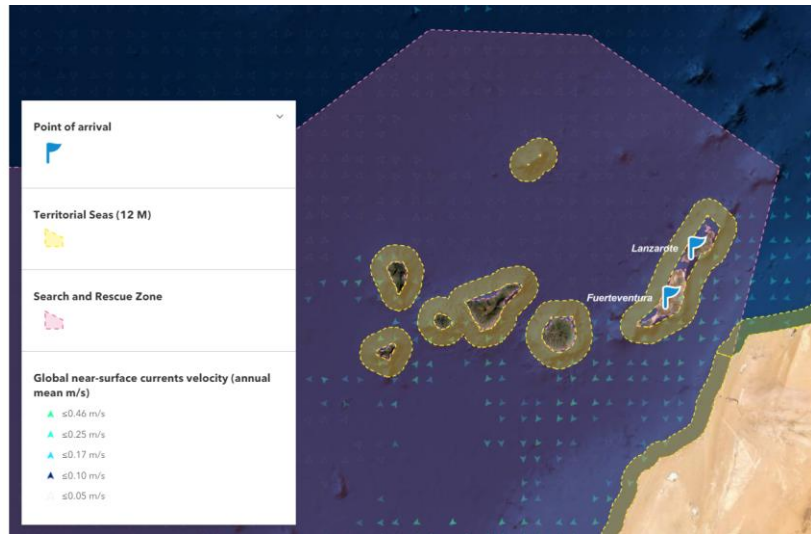


Data source for Global near-surface currents: Laurindo, L., A. Mariano, and R. Lumpkin, 2017: An improved near-surface velocity climatology for the global ocean from drifter observations *Deep-Sea Res. I*, 124, pp.73-92, doi:10.1016/j.dsr.2017.04.009.

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MARITIME JOURNEYS FROM MOROCCO

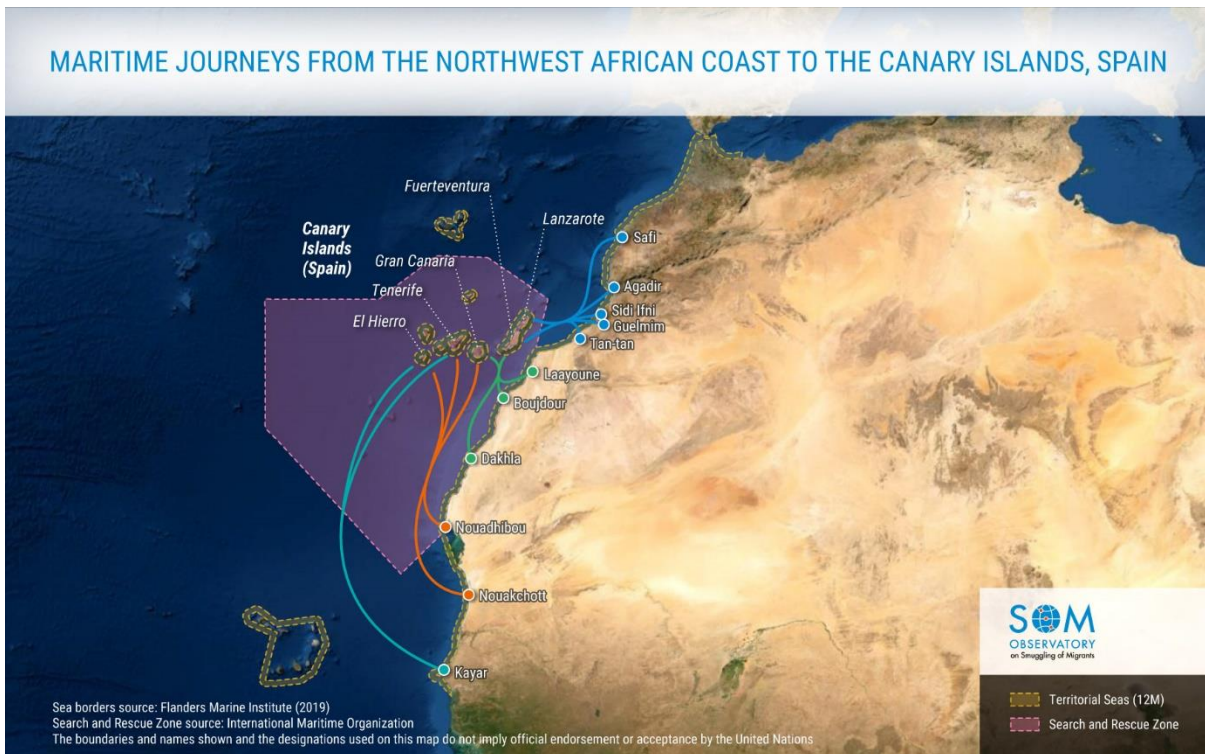
Point of arrival



Data source for Global near-surface currents: Laurindo, L., A. Mariano, and R. Lumpkin, 2017: An improved near-surface velocity climatology for the global ocean from drifter observations *Deep-Sea Res. I*, 124, pp.73-92, doi:10.1016/j.dsr.2017.04.009.

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MARITIME JOURNEYS FROM THE NORTHWEST AFRICAN COAST TO THE CANARY ISLANDS, SPAIN



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Smuggling investigations on this route by The Gambia Immigration Department focused on smugglers based in the fishing village of Kayar (Thiès Region, north of Dakar, Senegal) with agents in Senegal and The Gambia identifying potential clients. A monitoring exercise carried out by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) during September and October 2021 identified the main departure locations along the Senegalese coast during that period in Thiès Region, the islands in the Saloum Delta (Fatick Region) and Saint-Louis on the northern coast.⁵⁴

Accidents and weather conditions may significantly increase the duration of the journey. A Sahrawi man interviewed by the Observatory on the Canary Islands had spent 18 days at sea on a boat in distress, before being rescued by a commercial vessel (for more information, see the section on [Risks](#)). The duration of the journey also depends on the number of passengers, the types of engines and the sea conditions. Boats are usually equipped with two engines – one for backup – and a small gas cooker to heat food.

The types of boats used vary widely, from “cayucos” (Spanish term for wooden dugout canoes – “piroques” - traditionally used for fishing) departing from Senegal, to “pateras” (Spanish term for wooden or fiberglass fishing vessels) departing from Mauritania and Western Sahara. In 2021, people departing from Morocco arrived on rubber boats (in Spanish “neumáticas” or dinghies) for the first time. These boats are much smaller than *pateras* or *cayucos* – they can accommodate around 40 people - and are considered more dangerous. Relatively speaking, *cayucos* are the safer option for crossing the Atlantic, as they are the biggest and sturdiest boats. As they are mostly used to depart from Senegal, people travelling in *cayucos* usually arrive on Tenerife or El Hierro (Canary Islands, Spain).

According to key informants on the Canaries, some boats used for the sea crossing have recently been fabricated in the desert by specialized businesses in Morocco and Western Sahara. The Spanish National Police and Frontex gather information about the vessels after an inspection conducted on the Canaries. However, if the boat is lost at sea or *Salvamento Marítimo* (Spanish Search and Rescue) cannot bring the boat ashore, the boat used for smuggling is abandoned at sea.

TYPES OF BOATS USED FOR SMUGGLING OF MIGRANTS ALONG THE NORTHWEST AFRICAN ROUTE



Getting on board the boat can be physically challenging, and embarkation often takes place out at sea.⁵⁵ A Senegalese man recalled struggling to get on board, while two women who were supposed to travel with him did not manage to lift themselves onto the boat.

“After one week waiting, they brought us to the beach. The boat was in the sea, tied to a mooring post. It was tied just beyond the waves, the sea went right up to my chest. We all had to walk into the sea and past the waves to get to the boat. When we got to the boat, we had to lift ourselves up into it. It was really high, over my head. I managed to climb in, but it was hard. The two young women in our group couldn’t get in, it was too hard for them to climb in. We left them behind.”

Senegalese man interviewed by the Observatory in the Canary Islands (Spain)

The Moroccan, Mauritanian and Senegalese authorities conduct border patrolling at sea, so departures mostly take place at night to evade detection. Boats are equipped with a GPS and/or a compass, but no satellite phone. Once they reach international waters and can access a cell phone network, the passengers make a distress call to the Spanish government emergency number, their relatives, or NGOs.⁵⁶

NGOs conduct information campaigns at the main departure points along the Northwest African coast, disseminating the emergency number of the Spanish government or their own help line. Once they receive a call from a boat in distress or from a concerned relative, they contact the government emergency number and provide the GPS coordinates of the boat in distress.

Salvamento Marítimo (the Spanish Search and Rescue agency) carries out the majority of rescue operations in Spanish and international waters along the Northwest African route. Since 2019, *Salvamento Marítimo* operates in coordination with law enforcement (*Guardia Civil*) through a Single Operative Command. Rescue boats, drones and helicopters constantly monitor the waters in search of vessels in distress.⁵⁷



Senegalese Cayuco, Canary Islands (Spain), 2021. Source: Spanish National Police

Many key informants on the Canaries observed that in 2021, smuggling routes shifted south, with more boats arriving on the island of El Hierro (Canary Islands, Spain) in order to avoid

interception. This route is much longer and riskier than the more direct routes to the islands of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura (Canary Islands, Spain). As a key informant explained:

“it is very risky for those who depart from Mauritania and Senegal. Sometimes to avoid being intercepted by the Coast Guards, [...] they go further [south] in the Atlantic. Once they are in the Atlantic, they try to go back up [north]. They lose a lot of time, and as they do not correctly calculate the fuel, they face difficulties; people die, and the canoes go towards Latin America, to the Caribbean islands.”

WHAT HAS CHANGED SINCE 2006?



Moving on

Many of those who arrive from the Northwest African route do not wish to settle on the Canary Islands. Employment opportunities on the Canary Islands are scarce, both for foreign and national citizens.⁵⁸ Refugees and migrants who have friends or extended family members on mainland Spain or other EU countries can access an important support network for their first months in Europe. Others have job opportunities awaiting them in the agricultural fields in southern Spain. During 2021, the Spanish authorities transferred all adult refugees and migrants who arrived on the Canary Islands (and did not lodge an asylum application there) from emergency facilities to long-term reception centres on mainland Spain. Refugees and migrants with a valid passport can also move independently within the territory of Spain, and therefore can purchase a plane or ferry ticket to the mainland if they have the funds.

Many people interviewed by the Observatory either travelled with their passport in their possession, or requested family or friends to post it to the Canary Islands upon their arrival, in order to avoid losing it during the sea crossing. During 2020, when transfer to mainland Spain was not authorized by the Spanish government, a joint operation by the National Police and *Guardia Civil* led to the arrest of a group of Senegalese people on smuggling of migrants charges.⁵⁹ They were accused of providing fraudulent documentation to recently arrived refugees and migrants on Tenerife (Canary Islands, Spain) in order to facilitate their travel to mainland Spain.⁶⁰ Spanish investigators confirmed that these groups have now halted all operations, as the new policy allows recently arrived refugees and migrants to travel regularly to mainland Spain, disrupting the demand for such services.

Modus Operandi

Contact with smugglers

As the Observatory has examined on other routes (see [West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean](#), [Migrant Smuggling to Morocco and the Western Mediterranean](#) and [Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria](#)) smugglers rarely approach clients directly, but rather their services are sought out by intending refugees and migrants and people already on the move.

In West Africa, information on smuggling services is exchanged in locations where connections, goods and news are exchanged, such as bus stations, taxi ranks, cafes, and hair salons. In Morocco and Mauritania, as well as in Western Sahara, people also gather information on smugglers and/or facilitators in districts where many West Africans reside ("ghettos") and at workplaces where many foreign – and often undocumented – people work.

A woman from Côte d'Ivoire told the Observatory that she overheard some Moroccan and Sahrawi colleagues speaking about using a smuggler to cross the sea while she was working at a fish-packing factory in Dakhla (Western Sahara). Three Moroccan men interviewed by the Observatory asked for recommendations for smugglers from neighbours and community members who had arrived safely in Spain or from close family members who had used the route.

"I knew about the sea crossing from our neighbour [a Moroccan woman], as her father had previously crossed the sea. She put me in contact with a man from our town [in north-central Morocco] who wanted to migrate as well." Moroccan man, 51 years old.

Smugglers active along land routes in North and West Africa are typically not connected with those operating along the maritime [Northwest African route](#). Smugglers active in West Africa form fragmented organisations. Their membership is often fluid, with drivers, *coxeurs* and other facilitators entering into *ad hoc* collaborations to serve specific clients. [Smugglers](#) active in the region also seldom have transnational coverage, as they are specialized in facilitating movement within a designed territory or at a specific border crossing point.

In some cases, [smugglers and facilitators](#) active in West Africa direct their clients towards local operators specialized on the [Northwest African route](#). A young man from The Gambia interviewed by the Observatory went to the bus station of his hometown to look for a smuggler for his journey. There he found a Gambian man who arranged his travel to Kayar (Thiès Region, north of Dakar, Senegal) and from there to the Canary Islands (Spain), in cooperation with a Senegalese smuggler.

The first contact is often with a broker ("*coxeur*" in French or "*semsar*" in Arabic), a man or a woman who connects clients with transporters and boat organizers. Migrants and refugees often meet with the boat organizers only at the point of departure (see section on [Smugglers](#)).

Before departure

Once contact is established with the smuggler, clients are instructed to travel independently to the departure point for the sea crossing. In Morocco and Western Sahara, people travel either by public transportation or "*taxi-mafia*" (independent drivers). Once they have arrived at the departure point, they wait for the smuggler to gather enough people, and for a night with favourable weather conditions.

At this stage of the journey, the experiences of Moroccans differ from those of West Africans interviewed by the Observatory. Moroccans stay in low-cost hotels in small towns along the coast of southern Morocco and Western Sahara, often sharing rooms with the smugglers' other clients to reduce costs. Some spend up to a month staying at these hotels, waiting for the smugglers to gather enough clients, prepare the boat, and identify a window of good weather and low risk of interception at sea.

People from Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea who depart from Western Sahara wait in private houses in remote locations – which they describe as “the desert” – in proximity to the departure points. Housing conditions are precarious with limited access to water, sanitation and food.

Several people are involved at this stage of the smuggling process. Boat organizers rely on multiple transporters or taxi-mafia in Morocco and Western Sahara. At the beach, boat organizers cover their faces with a headscarf and use nicknames to avoid identification. They gather the boat, engines, fuel, food and water needed for the crossing, while monitoring sea patrols to avoid interception.

At sea

The boat organizers do not usually travel on the boat. They recruit one of the clients as a boat driver and rely on him to ensure the sea crossing. The boat drivers enter into *ad hoc* agreements for free or discounted passage in exchange for navigating the boat to the Canary Islands (Spain). Boat drivers are commonly men, with experience in sailing or fishing, and take shifts at the rudder in order to navigate the boat day and night.

As experienced sailors, they often provide indications to the other passengers in relation to safety on board, in order to avoid fatalities. Physical distress due to the sea conditions, sunburn, petrol burns, dehydration, and lack of access to water and sanitation facilities, may prompt passengers to make abrupt movements, potentially destabilizing the boat and increasing the risk of capsizing when weather conditions are adverse.

From the departure onwards, passengers and boat drivers are disconnected from the smuggling organization and can only rely on the GPS or compass provided and their own cell phones.

In the few cases when organizers do take the journey, one to three organizers travel on the boat and may or may not act as boat drivers, depending on their skills. As described by a Moroccan man interviewed by the Observatory: *“On the road where we were dropped off, there were more than 20 male members of the organization, but only two of them [Moroccan or Sahrawi men] came with us on the boat.”*



Moroccan Patera, Canary Islands (Spain), 2021. Source: Spanish National Police

Smugglers

Profiles of suspected smugglers

Despite increasing international cooperation and the ongoing activities of Spanish law enforcement, little is known about the profiles of smugglers active along the Northwest African route.

During 2021, according to key informants from the Spanish law enforcement and criminal justice system, the Spanish authorities conducted more than 70 smuggling investigations, leading to the arrest of an average of one to two drivers per boat that arrived (as of November 2021). Between January and November 2021, 150 boat drivers were arrested for smuggling of migrants and related charges on Gran Canaria (Canary Islands, Spain).

Boat drivers are identified during the investigations that take place in the 72 hours following disembarkation. Refugees and migrants who arrive on the Canary Islands are held in administrative detention for 72 hours upon arrival, in detention centres on Gran Canaria and Tenerife, and on a ship moored on Lanzarote. According to people on the move and key informants interviewed on the islands, facilities dedicated to the administrative detention of newly arrived migrants in the Canary Islands often fall short of meeting minimum standards, such as access to water, hygiene and sanitation facilities, and medical care.

Men who are subject to deportation, according to the bilateral agreements currently in place between Spain and countries in North and West Africa, are then transferred to return centres. Deportation of children is prohibited by Spanish law. According to key informants from the Spanish national authorities, deportation of women is logistically challenging and hence seldom carried out.

The Spanish National Police interrogates survivors upon arrival, with the objective of investigating crimes and identifying people who are subject to deportation to their countries of origin. Men or boys who are suspected of smuggling of migrants and related offences are then kept in custody - for a maximum of 72 hours for adults and 24 hours for children – in isolation, until the judge confirms their arrest. The Observatory visited one cell for police custody of child suspects on the Canary Islands, where access to natural light was not guaranteed.

The arrested suspects are all men and boys. Female survivors of the sea crossing (both girls and women) are not considered potential suspects of smuggling of migrants and related offences by the Spanish authorities.

Deportation procedures and smuggling of migrants investigations are often initiated simultaneously, during the 72 hours of administrative detention, and both start with the identification of the point of departure. The Spanish national authorities, with the support of the EU Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, attempt to determine the point of departure of the boats intercepted at sea or that arrive on the islands. The main elements of this assessment are the type of boat, the fuel used, the food consumed on board, and information from the interrogation of survivors.

According to a bilateral agreement between Spain and Mauritania, all people departing from Mauritania and irregularly reaching Spain by sea can be returned to Mauritania, regardless of their nationality. Deportations to Mauritania resumed during the second half of 2021. People who have not expressed their wish to apply for asylum during the time available may be subject to deportation to Mauritania. Those who do express the wish to seek asylum remain on the Canaries to have their asylum application assessed there.

According to the Spanish law enforcement authorities, smugglers who arrive from the Northwest African route do not have a specific profile, besides being male. Most suspects are between 20 and 40 years old, though a number (less than five) of boys were under investigation for smuggling of migrants and related offences as of late 2021, for acts committed during 2020 and 2021.

People from coastal countries, such as Senegalese and Moroccans, are more likely to have navigation skills and hence act as boat drivers. Behaviour on the boat is considered by law enforcement as the main element revealing indications of criminal actions. People who hold the rudder, share the food, use the GPS or give instructions to the other passengers during the sea crossing are suspected to be smugglers, or “*patrones*” (bosses) in Spanish.

A Spanish lawyer specializing in migration issues informed the Observatory about one of her clients, a young Sahrawi man who arrived on the Canary Islands in late August 2021, after 13 days adrift at sea. A few days after his departure from Northwest African shores, the GPS provided by the organizers stopped functioning. The passengers quickly lost their way and spent many days at sea trying to reach the Canary Islands. More than ten people died of dehydration in the following days, including the boat driver.

According to the lawyer, when the driver died, the young Sahrawi man took the rudder, in a last attempt to reach the coast. The survivors were rescued by *Salvamento Marítimo* on the thirteenth day at sea. When asked who was the boat driver, many survivors indicated the young Sahrawi man. Videos from patrolling drones confirmed that he had indeed held the rudder. As of late 2021, this man was in prison on the Canary Islands, facing charges of aggravated smuggling offences and up to 20 years in prison.

Although they are not usually suspected of migrant smuggling, women often play an important role during the sea crossing. They may be in charge of the food, arbitrate potential disputes and play an active role in decision-making on the boat. However, women generally receive no financial or material benefit from supporting the other travellers. A young man from The Gambia recalled how the women on his boat decided to make the distress call to an NGO when the engine broke down. They had noted down the number before departing and communicated with the NGO staff, who provided advice on how to proceed. In Northwest Africa, women also act as smuggling brokers - “smasriya” (plural of semsar) or “coxeurs” - connecting smugglers with people who want to migrate.

No information on ongoing investigations of smugglers active at departure points as organizers (collecting money, providing the equipment for the departure) along the Northwest African coast is currently available.



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Prosecutions

Most key informants from Spanish law enforcement and the criminal justice system stressed that counter-smuggling operations on the Canaries are missing the target, as they focus on the prosecution of boat drivers. As of late 2021, Moroccan, Senegalese, Malian, Mauritanian and Gambian men were detained in the prisons of Gran Canaria and Tenerife (Canary Islands, Spain) on migrant smuggling charges, as boat drivers. As boats often carry people of different nationalities, boat drivers do not necessarily have the same nationality as the other survivors. One Moroccan man awaiting trial for migrant smuggling charges had arrived on a boat with his family members, wife and children, after allegedly organizing several sea crossings.

Boat drivers are accused of facilitating the irregular entry of the people who travelled with them in exchange for a discount on their fee or free passage. According to the Spanish judicial authorities interviewed by the Observatory, the discount or the free passage qualify as “financial and material benefit”, as per Article 3 of the [UN Protocol on Smuggling of Migrants](#). Article 318 bis of the Spanish Criminal Code does not require a financial or material

benefit to constitute the crime of smuggling of migrants, but rather considers it an aggravating circumstance.

Prior to 2015, a “state of necessity” was invoked during judicial proceedings to dispute the criminalization of boat drivers, so that they were not held liable for smuggling of migrants offences. In 2015, the revision of the Spanish Criminal Code to better align with the [UN Protocol on Smuggling of Migrants](#).⁶¹ included provisions to address the severe penalties set out for all smuggling of migrants offences, considered by the legislator to be, “*in many cases, disproportionate.*” Article 318 bis was therefore revised in order to mitigate the penalties for basic smuggling offences, reserving more severe penalties for aggravated smuggling offences, i.e., involving organized crime and/or endangering the life or integrity of the migrant. Paragraph 1 includes exemption from criminal sanctions if the objective of the perpetrator is “*solely to provide humanitarian assistance to the person in question.*”⁶²

Since then, the number of boat drivers accused and convicted of smuggling of migrants offences has gradually increased. During 2020-2021, almost all those investigated, prosecuted or convicted of smuggling of migrants and related offences on the Canary Islands arrived as boat drivers.

According to the Observatory’s interviews with Spanish prosecutors, boat drivers are themselves rarely associated with an organized criminal group, and if they are, they usually represent low-level actors. Nevertheless, a majority of boat drivers prosecuted in Spain are charged with aggravated migrant smuggling offences, convicted, and handed down prison sentences of four to eight years. Their actions are considered to have seriously endangered the lives and safety of the passengers, or they are considered to have accepted that the passengers would face a high risk of death or serious injury during the sea crossing.

If people lose their lives during a boat driver’s journey, the penalties are increased by one to four years for each person’s death, as homicide or manslaughter charges are added. Many boat drivers are hence sentenced to 10 to 20 years in prison for aggravated smuggling.

According to key informants from the Spanish criminal justice system on the Canaries, the provision on humanitarian assistance as grounds for not imposing penalties (Art. 318 bis of the Criminal Code) has not been invoked since 2015.

Most defendants rely on lawyers appointed *ex officio*, who often lack specialized knowledge on smuggling of migrants and related offences. The few specialized defence lawyers active on the Canary Islands are not sufficient to represent the hundreds of defendants facing trial during 2020-2022.

“We have tens of boys in jail, whose crime was navigating a boat in order to try to save people”
(Key informant, Government of Canary Islands, Spain).

Key informants from the Spanish criminal justice system provided information on two cases of defendants extradited to Spain for migrant smuggling offences. One concerned an Ivorian man detained in Dakhla (Western Sahara) in the early 2000s, and another a Mauritanian man extradited from Mauritania in recent years.

Official statistics on convictions for smuggling of migrants and related offences were not available at the time of writing. Key informants from the Spanish criminal justice system however reported a very high conviction rate, relative to the number of prosecutions.

The main prosecutorial evidence for such cases is the written testimony of protected witnesses, i.e. other survivors who travelled on the same boat and identified the boat driver(s). The status of protected witness is only used to identify boat drivers and investigate their potential involvement in smuggling of migrants. The field research did not indicate any boat drivers being accorded the status of protected witness in the framework of investigations into the organizers and higher-level members of smuggling organizations.

Testimonies are often provided in the form of written statements, as the protected witnesses are likely to have left the islands by the time of the trial. Other sources of evidence include videos taken by passengers themselves or by the *Guardia Civil* drones, and direct observations during Search and Rescue operations.

Boat drivers often cover their faces, a practice that helps to protect against sunburn during the days at sea, and try to get rid of any clothes that could identify them as fishermen as soon as they are in international waters (raincoats, etc.). Many pull the rudder up as soon as another vessel approaches, in order to avoid being identified as boat drivers, exposing themselves and the other survivors to a high risk of collision during rescue operations, and of death at sea.



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The role of Transnational Organized Crime

During 2020-2021, Spanish law enforcement arrested four Moroccan men suspected of involvement in organized crime (“a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences” according to the [United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime](#), “in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit”). One of the four men had registered multiple irregular entries and was hence considered an affiliated member of a smuggling group.

The sea crossing along this route, often described as life-threatening and traumatizing (see the section on [Risks](#)), raises concerns around the victimization of boat drivers by smuggling

organizers based in Northwest Africa. This is due to the presence of potential elements of “abuse of a position of vulnerability” (one of the possible means of trafficking in persons) and “forced criminal activities” (a possible exploitative purpose of trafficking in persons).

The case of a Moroccan smuggler linked to organized crime

In November 2021, a Moroccan man was convicted of smuggling of migrants and related offences by the court of Gran Canaria (Canary Islands, Spain). The man arrived in November 2020 on Gran Canaria, during the period when the highest numbers of people were arriving on the Canary Islands from the Northwest African Route. At that time, the majority of people who arrived on Gran Canaria were not permitted to leave the port of Arguineguin. One of the other survivors recognised the Moroccan man. His brother had left with him on a boat and died during the sea crossing. Other family members of people who had travelled with the Moroccan man sued him for aggravated smuggling.

The Moroccan authorities carried out investigations and confirmed that the Moroccan man had navigated the boat provided by an organized crime group dedicated to smuggling of migrants along the Northwest African route. The Spanish authorities arrested him, confiscated his phone and interrogated him. He was facing four years in prison for smuggling of migrants – as he is considered to be loosely associated with the smuggling organization -, plus 16 years of prison for aggravating circumstances: one year for each person who lost their life on the boat that he was navigating.

Key informant, Spanish judicial authorities, interviewed by the Observatory on the Canary Islands (Spain)

Links with other illicit activities

Smuggling of migrants along the Northwest African route does not appear to be connected with other types of smuggling and trafficking. Corruption offences by border guards are the crimes most commonly associated with smuggling along this route, as they can be instrumental in ensuring a successful crossing. In the words of a Moroccan man interviewed by the Observatory: “*On my seventh attempt, the last one, the Sahrawi [male] smugglers gave a bribe [of around US\$1,500] to someone at the military base [patrolling the sea]; that is how we succeeded.*”

There are no open investigations for trafficking in persons in the context of smuggling of migrants along the Northwest African route. However, women from Côte d’Ivoire and Guinea smuggled along this route are considered to be at risk of trafficking, and further research is needed to shed light on their potential victimization.



Mauritanian Cayuco, Canary Islands (Spain), 2021. Source: Spanish National Police

Fees

According to key informants, the fees requested by smugglers operating along the Northwest African route range between US\$1,500 and 3,000. However, people interviewed by the Observatory paid up to US\$3,700 for a single passage. Fees vary according to a number of factors, including the departure point, the type of boat used and the perceived purchasing power of the potential passengers. According to key informants, the latter is mostly inferred on the basis of their origins, with North Africans (Moroccans, Algerians, Sahrawis) paying higher prices and travelling in better – and safer – conditions compared to West Africans.

A Moroccan man interviewed by the Observatory had refused an offer to cross for US\$500, suspecting a scam.⁶¹ Smuggling offers to cross from Western Sahara on rubber boats are the cheapest, while sea crossings on *pateras* or *cayucos* (see above) with a smaller number of passengers (less than 30 people) are the most expensive, according to key informants.

These figures should be considered as indicative only as they could not be verified with other sources. From these indications, the Northwest Atlantic route is more expensive than the Central Mediterranean Route (see [West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean](#)), but comparable to fees requested at some of the crossing points of the Western Mediterranean route (see [Migrant Smuggling to Morocco and the Western Mediterranean](#)).

Fees are mostly paid in cash before departure. Smugglers charge higher fees when multiple attempts are included in the price. In such cases, smugglers retain only a percentage of the fee paid if the boat is intercepted at sea and returned to the Northwest African coast. In order to mitigate the economic loss resulting from multiple failed attempts, a woman from Côte d'Ivoire interviewed by the Observatory arranged a specific payment method with her smuggler. She agreed to pay the higher fee that would include multiple attempts, but instead of handing over the full amount in cash before departure, she paid 10 per cent in cash, and gave her bank debit card and passport to the smuggler. Once she arrived at the destination,

she communicated the PIN number to the smuggler, so that he could withdraw the full amount from her bank account.

Fees for sea crossings typically do not include prior transportation by car, or accommodation. Fees can also be negotiated; in-kind forms of payment were reported by interviewees. In-kind forms of payment often include an element of labour exploitation, as in the case of a couple (man and woman) from Côte d'Ivoire who worked for free on a farm before departure, as a form of payment of the smuggling fee. Based on situations they had witnessed rather than personally experienced, interviewees described how women and girls who are sexually abused by their smugglers may receive a discount on the fee for the sea crossing.

Income originating from smuggling derives entirely from the fees paid by clients. According to key informants, total income can amount to up to US\$80,000 per boat. This income is used to cover the direct costs of smuggling operations, which include the cost of the boat (amounting to around US\$10,000 for an unregistered boat, according to key informants), the two engines (of which one is usually new), fuel, the gas cooker, any bribes paid to officials, and in a minority of cases, food and accommodation before departure.

Risks and Abuses

Women, men, girls and boys travelling by boat along the Northwest African route are exposed to abuses and human rights violations perpetrated in the context of smuggling of migrants. Survivors interviewed by the Observatory spoke of the many people who die at sea, because of adverse weather conditions, low-quality equipment, lack of navigation skills or rescue operations performed by commercial vessels not equipped for such rescues.

Before departure

When they get in touch with a smuggler, refugees and migrants are exposed to the risk of fraud. In order to mitigate this risk, the people interviewed by the Observatory had agreed to pay on the beach right before departure, instead of advancing a payment.

People with limited financial resources may enter into agreements with smugglers for alternative forms of compensation. They pay by working for free for a smuggler or an employer intermediated by the smuggler, often in exploitative conditions, including low wages, degrading treatment and sub-standard accommodation.

Working conditions offered by smugglers are in line with those generally accessible to West African men and women working in North Africa, especially for workers with an irregular status and/or informally employed. People interviewed by the Observatory had worked for years in degrading and exploitative conditions in Morocco and Algeria, and hence considered the smugglers' offers to be equivalent to other jobs they had had in those countries.

Sexual abuse by smugglers was also reported by key informants as a potential risk, especially for women and girls travelling alone.

During the sea crossing

During the first hours after departure, refugees and migrants crossing the Northwest African route risk being intercepted by Mauritanian, Moroccan, Senegalese or Gambian authorities. While there are no official statistics available on the number of people intercepted at sea, the field research suggests that this is a common experience. Smuggling fees are also adjusted to account for the risk of interception (see section on Fees) .

A woman from Côte d'Ivoire attempted the sea crossing six times before succeeding. Each time, she was intercepted by the Moroccan authorities and placed in detention, where she was exposed to abuses perpetrated by law enforcement and prison guards. People intercepted at sea by the Moroccan authorities are typically released after a few days of detention, and transferred to remote areas of Morocco.

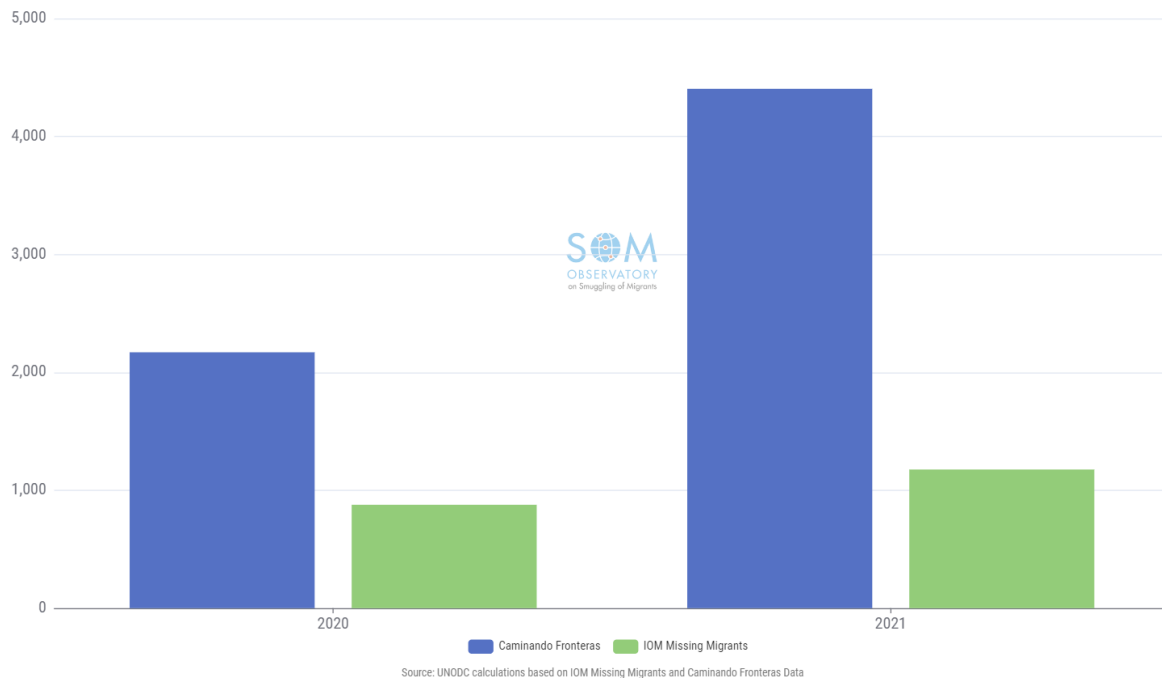
For those who reach international waters, the risk of death on the Northwest African route is high. According to official statistics compiled by IOM, for every 20 people who arrived, one person died or went missing during the sea crossing to the Canaries in 2021.⁶³ However, the number of people dead or missing may be much higher. The Spanish NGO Caminando Fronteras has received phone calls from the friends and families of 4,404 people who took the Northwest African route in 2021.

Despite the alarming numbers, there is no government or international service dedicated to the identification of dead bodies, the tracing of missing persons, or communication with those who have lost contact with a family member or friend who attempted the sea crossing. The UN Secretary General has highlighted the obligations of UN Member States with regard to the collection of bodies, identification of the dead, investigation of the cause of death, return of the remains to families, and provisions for an appropriate burial. International standards set out the rights of family members of deceased refugees and migrants to take part in an investigation and to obtain available information on the cause of death (among other rights).⁶⁴

The bodies of those who die on the boats, often of dehydration, starvation or illness, are disposed of at sea by the other passengers. Even when this is not the case, *Salvamento Marítimo* dedicates all available resources to assisting survivors, and dead bodies are seldom collected and brought ashore. Bodies are rarely identified, and there is seldom official communication with friends and family members outside of Spain.

The Spanish NGOs Alarmphone and Caminando Fronteras are among the few organizations that support the family members and friends of missing persons and keep track of the number of boats that disappear at sea. During 2021, more of the phone calls to Alarmphone were from family members and friends of people who had departed from Senegal and Mauritania, rather than from Morocco and Western Sahara. This is indicative of the dangers of these routes, compared to the shorter ones departing from Western Sahara and Morocco. While there are no official statistics on departures, key informants indicate that as of late 2021 more people left on the Northwest African route from the north of Western Sahara or southern Morocco, rather than from Senegal, The Gambia and Mauritania, in search of a safer route.

Number of people who lost their lives or went missing at sea on the Northwest African route, by source, 2020-2021



Shipwrecks happen all along the route. In 2020, shipwrecks were recorded off the coast of the Canaries, **Spain** (Gran Canaria, Lanzarote, Fuerteventura, Tenerife, El Hierro), **Senegal** (M'bour (Thiès Region), Saint-Louis), **Mauritania** (Nouadhibou, Nouakchott), **Morocco** (Tantan, Guelmim (Guelmim-Oued Noun Region), Tarfaya (Laâyoune-Sakia El Hamra Region), and Western Sahara (Dakhla, Laâyoune).

Many people interviewed by the Observatory had travelled with their cell phone, their most important documents (passports, laminated diplomas) and the phone number of one of the NGOs that conduct awareness-raising campaigns along the Northwest African coast, alert the Spanish authorities in case of boats in distress, and maintain contact with the family members of those travelling.

A young Gambian man talked about his sea crossing experience: *“We spent three days at sea. Everything was burning. After a few days, the [rubber] boat started to deflate. We were very stressed, we started discussing about making the phone call. The women were keeping everyone’s mood up, they were doing better than the men, they were thinking more clearly, and they told us that we needed to call Nadia [pseudonym, NGO worker]. Then we decided to call her, we told her about our situation, and she explained what was going to happen.”*

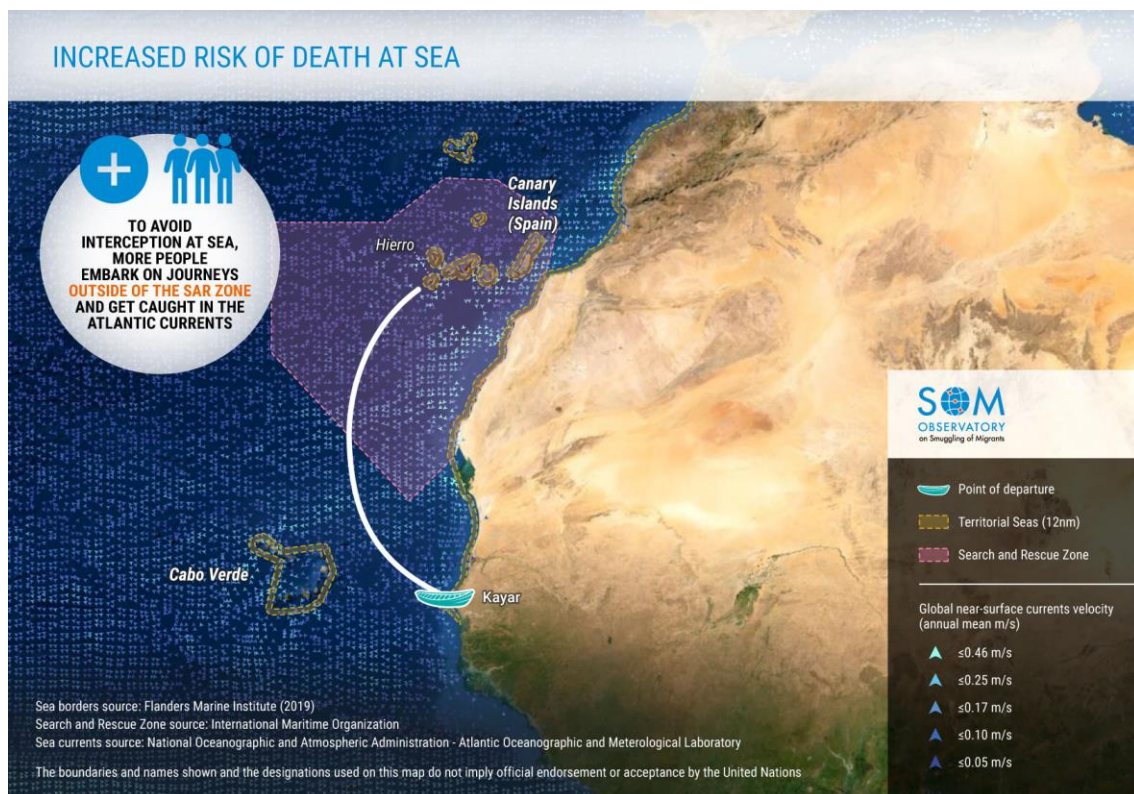
While boats navigating towards Fuerteventura or Lanzarote (Canary Islands, Spain) can rely on the Moroccan or Spanish cell phone network to make the distress call for most of the journey, those heading towards El Hierro (Canary Islands, Spain) are outside of the range of cell phone networks and cannot make a distress call. Unlike other routes (see [West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean](#)), smuggling boats moving along the Northwest African route are not provided with a satellite phone.

According to key informants, more boats have started heading to the island of El Hierro in the far southwest of the Canaries archipelago, which registered an increase in arrivals in 2021, in order to avoid interception. As set out in the section on Journeys, this trip can take more than ten days and is characterized by strong currents towards the Caribbean Sea.

While *Salvamento Marítimo* is solely dedicated to Search and Rescue (SAR) operations, evidence-gathering also takes place during rescue operations. Testimonies of crew members and images taken by drones are used for the identification of the boat drivers. Key informants have warned that the evidence collection may compromise the effectiveness of SAR activities, as boat drivers may drop the rudder for fear of being identified, at the very moment when collision with the rescue vessel may put survivors' lives at risk.

The intensification of border control in order to combat smuggling of migrants by Spain, and by Northwest African coastal countries in cooperation with Spain and the EU, has led smuggled people to take longer and riskier routes. This has serious implications for the protection of the human rights of smuggled migrants (one of the objectives of the UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol).

If the passengers are fortunate, boats that are carried away by maritime currents towards the Caribbean Sea are intercepted by commercial vessels operating along these trade routes. Rescue operations carried out by commercial vessels are extremely risky, as commercial vessels lack the equipment and the crew lack the expertise to perform rescue operations. A young Sahrawi man interviewed by the Observatory was rescued by a Chinese commercial vessel after 18 days at sea, south of El Hierro. He was rescued along with 14 others; their boat had departed from Laâyoune (Western Sahara).



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

At destination

Survivors arrive on the Canary Islands (Spain), after many days at sea in overcrowded boats, with no reliable access to food and water (there is often a small gas cooker only on *cayucos*), and no access to hygiene and sanitation facilities. People of all ages show signs of skin burns, due to fuel leakages from the engine and the cooker. Burns are often inflamed and sometimes infected by the mix of sunburn and salt water. Survivors show signs of post-traumatic stress disorders due to the experience of the sea crossing and witnessing the fatalities at sea.

There are no open investigations on trafficking in persons in the context of smuggling along the Northwest African route to the Canary Islands (Spain). However, key informants highlighted the risk that the route may be used for trafficking of women and girls from West Africa for the purpose of sexual exploitation in Europe.

Methodology

This story map is based on field research conducted on the Canary Islands, Spain, in November 2021 by the [UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](#).

The primary data collected included 18 in-depth interviews with people on the move from Morocco (5), Guinea (4), Côte d'Ivoire (3), Senegal (2), Mali (1), Burkina Faso (1), and The Gambia (1), as well as from Western Sahara (1), who arrived on the Canary Islands in 2021 on the Northwest African route and were adults at the time of the interview. The interviewees were staying in reception facilities on the islands of Gran Canaria and Tenerife, Canary Islands. Twelve are men and 6 are women.

Additionally, 26 in-depth individual interviews were conducted with key informants on the islands of Gran Canaria and Tenerife. Key informants included Spanish government officials, international and local non-governmental organisations, international organisations, experts and professionals.

Interviews were purposively selected on the basis of their profile and expertise (see the [Observatory Methodology](#) for more information). The findings from the interviews have been analysed, triangulated and updated with existing literature and statistics.

Terms used

- **Cayuco:** A Spanish term used to describe a large (up to 25 meters in length), flat-bottomed, wooden fishing boat. The boats have the capacity to carry up to 150 people, and are most often used for fishing in Senegal and The Gambia.
- **Central Sahel:** The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) defines “Central Sahel” as the border area of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (see: OCHA (2022). *Central Sahel Crisis: Key Figures as January 2022*. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs).
- **Coaxers/Coxeurs:** English/French term for single individuals, usually West or Central Africans, who approach recently arrived people at bus stations or motor parks in West and Central Africa and direct them towards the desired service (accommodation, transportation etc.).
- **ECOWAS Free Movement Region:** the Free Movement Protocols of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) provide for citizens of ECOWAS Member States to have the right to enter another country within the sub-region and remain for up to ninety days, provided that they have a valid travel document and an international health certificate. The 15 ECOWAS Member States are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea (Bissau), Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Mauritania was previously a member of ECOWAS, but withdrew in 2000 and is currently an Associate Member.
- **Facilitator:** the word “*facilitator*” is used here whenever the elements of (a) irregular entry or (b) financial or material benefit, could reasonably be assumed not to be in evidence according to the primary or secondary sources used.
- **Ghetto:** group accommodation for West and Central Africans in Morocco and Algeria - it can refer to a district, a building or an apartment.
- **Northwest African (Atlantic) route:** includes the sea journeys from West and North African countries such as Senegal, The Gambia, Mauritania and Morocco to the Spanish Canary Islands.
- **Organized criminal group:** “*a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences*” according to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.
- **Patera:** a Spanish term used to describe a small, flat-bottomed, wooden fishing boat. The boats have the capacity to carry around 20 people, and are most often used in Morocco, Mauritania, and in Western Sahara. In French, the term “*pirogue*” is often used to describe this type of boat.
- **Schengen area:** consists of 26 countries that have agreed to allow people and goods to pass freely across their borders without passport or other controls: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.
- **Semsar:** plural *smasriya*, Arabic for “broker,” term for single individuals who approach recently arrived people, provide information, and direct them towards the desired service (accommodation, transportation etc.).

- **Smuggler:** the word “*smuggler*” is used throughout when it can reasonably be assumed that the crime of migrant smuggling is constituted, as per Article 3 of the UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol.
- **Smuggling of Migrants:** “*the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident*” (Art. 3 of the [UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol](#)).
- **Taxi mafia:** term used to refer to Moroccan drivers who transport people in-country and to sea crossing departure points.
- **Western Mediterranean route:** includes the sea journeys from Morocco and the western coast of Algeria to the Spanish mainland and the Balearic Islands, as well as land crossing from Morocco to Ceuta and Melilla.

End notes

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