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Migration Trends in Morocco: Implication for the European Union

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The increase in irregular migration from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel has resulted in the transformation of Morocco from an emigration-only country into a transit and immigration one. EU support for Morocco focuses on the protection of the country's borders, controlling the migration flow to Europe, and the implementation of readmission agreements. The EU also provides financial and technological support and helps to reform immigration policy. Due to the unstable humanitarian situation and growing number of refugees in Morocco, this cooperation should also include the Sahel region.

Emigration Country. Until the mid-1980s, Moroccans emigrated for economic purposes to the EEC (mainly to France, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands). They were recruited as guest workers under bilateral agreements (temporary labour migration). The 1973 oil crisis and visa requirements for non-EU citizens under the 1985 Schengen Agreement reduced temporary labour migration and encouraged Moroccan workers to settle in Europe and to bring their families. The consequences of this new European visa policy was an increase in the number of undocumented migrants in the 1990s reaching especially Spain, which introduced visas in 1991 (see Table 1 below). From that time, Moroccans began to cross the Mediterranean by boat. Their attempts often resulted in death. Those who manage to reach the Spanish border are often returned to Morocco without being able to apply for international protection, based on a bilateral agreement concluded in 1992 (but in force since 2012), which concerns, among others, patrols in the Strait of Gibraltar and intercepting vessels with migrants before they reach international waters. Morocco has also concluded such agreements with other EU countries (e.g., with France and Germany).

Transit Country. Foreigners from Sub-Saharan Africa like Mali, Mauritania, or Nigeria, also have been attempting to enter the EU through Morocco since the early 1990s. They travel by sea or land (crossing the border wall around Spanish enclaves Ceuta and Melilla in Africa, built in 1993 and 1996) and then apply for international protection in Spain or another EU country. In 2008-2016, about 8,500 migrants reached Spain illegally via these routes; half of them were Moroccan and the other half were foreigners mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2018, the number increased to 57,000. Citizens of African countries other than Morocco numbered 35,000 (of the larger figure, 20% were Guineans and 16% were Malians).

The progressive transformation of Morocco from an emigration-only country into a transit one and the growing number of illegal border crossings sparked cooperation with the EU and other countries in the Maghreb and Middle East in the field of migration. It is based on readmission agreements, border control, and support for integration programmes for migrants. Recognized as a safe country and being a state party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Morocco is a significant country for the implementation of a return policy. Among the returnees are refugees whose access to the asylum procedure is guaranteed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Recently the number of refugees has increased (2017—4,770; 2018—5,900; on

average 25% come from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel). However, the lack of a national asylum system (implementation is ongoing) hinders their access to registration. The refugees have limited access to medical assistance and other needed services.

Morocco is a member of the Euro-African dialogue on migration and development, ongoing since 2006 (Rabat Process), and the Mobility Partnership signed in 2013, under which talks on the abolition of visas for Moroccans continue. The lack of consent is associated with Morocco's refusal to sign the EU readmission agreement (negotiations have been ongoing for 20 years). The implementation of this agreement would mean that Morocco, as a main transit country for migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, has the obligation to take back people who have been proven to have arrived in Schengen territory through Morocco.

The EU provides Morocco with financial and technological support under the Union's European Neighbourhood Policy and Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, allocating €232 million for border protection system and €1 billion for the integration of foreigners since 2014. In total, 7,400 women and children (victims of human trafficking) have benefited from these funds, 3,600 migrants took up entrepreneurship education and training, and 5,800 have participated in the voluntary return programme to their countries of origin. The EU has supported reform of the Moroccan immigration system. More and more foreigners who had entered the country illegally now have access to the labour market in Morocco. In 2014-2018, these people numbered 73,000, which makes Morocco a leader among African countries in terms of managing migration efficiently. This status was highlighted at the UN Intergovernmental Conference in December 2018 in Marrakech where the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration was adopted. Despite this, Morocco still has not implemented its full migration programme and legal migrants continue to experience problems with access to healthcare and education and are afraid of forced deportation.

Immigration Country. In Morocco, there are as many as 700,000 irregular migrants. Citizens of most African countries need a visa when travelling to Morocco. In order to limit irregular migration from Sub-Saharan Africa, Morocco supports economic development in some countries in the region by investing mainly in construction, mining, banking, and telecommunications (in 2016, this support comprised 85% of all Moroccan foreign investment, mainly in Nigeria, Senegal, and Mauritania). The African Union's readmission of Morocco in 2017 is seen as an asset. A regional economic and financial hub—Casablanca Finance City—was also created to support companies investing in Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, university student exchanges are a legal way to take up migration offers by the national government. More and more students from Sub-Saharan Africa study at Moroccan universities each year. In 2017, there were as many as 18,000 (for comparison, in France there were 72,000 and in Russia 17,000 from all Africa in 2018). A significant number of students decide to return to their countries of origin after graduation due to problems entering Morocco's labour market.

The deteriorating situation in the Sahel and the growing number of refugees (especially from Mali and Burkina Faso) remain the biggest challenge for Morocco. The number of terrorist attacks in the region is increasing, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso. According to the U.S. State Department, there were 150 terrorist attacks in 2018 in Burkina Faso, three times more than in the previous year. Problems with maintaining security, along with high levels of poverty, malnutrition and disease outbreaks in 2019 led to the resettlement of 4.2 million people in the Sahel (1 million more than a year earlier). Morocco is taking steps to stabilise the situation in this region. Since 2005, it has been a member of the Trans-Saharan Partnership and the Global Forum on Terrorism to combat terrorism. Moroccan troops took part in the fight against the Boko Haram terrorist group in Niger in 2016. Between 2005 and 2014, Morocco helped train 500 Malian imams to counter extremist interpretation of Islam and limit terrorism.

Conclusions. Morocco will remain one of the EU's most important partners in reducing illegal migration. The financial and technical support provided by EU institutions has contributed to the reform of Moroccan immigration law and to an improvement in the situation of some migrants. By doing this, Morocco has become an example to other African countries in how to manage migration. The next step for the EU is to conclude visa negotiations for students, scientists, entrepreneurs and others from Morocco and thus show support for legal migration. The creation of a national asylum system recognized by the UNHCR will provide better living conditions for refugees and facilitate access to asylum procedures. Morocco could also negotiate readmission agreements, especially with the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa where it maintains investments, for example, in Senegal and Mauritania (both are state parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol).

The situation in the Sahel requires a regional approach—cooperation and involvement of Morocco, the EU, and other African countries—due to the poor level of security, the number of resettlements in that region, and migration to the EU, especially of Malians. This cooperation should not only concern security issues but also an improvement in living conditions, including for women and children, along with economic development, in particular the creation of new jobs.

Table. Irregular migration to Spain by sea in 1999–2019

Year	Number
1999	4,859
2000	15,025
2001	18,517
2002	16,670
2003	19,176
2004	15,675
2005	11,781
2006	39,180
2007	18,057
2008	13,425
2009	7,285
2010	3,632
2011	5,441
2012	3,804
2013	3,237
2014	4,552
2015	5,315
2016	8,162
2017	21,971
2018	57,498
2019	26,168

Source: Spanish Ministry of Interior.