

FROM ORIGIN TO TRANSIT: NORTH AFRICA AND THE ENDLESS CYCLE OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION IN THE EURO- MEDITERRANEAN SPACE

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Irregular migration in North Africa has been a central issue for at least three decades. It has become highly present in Euro-Mediterranean politics since the early 1990s. Human mobility in the zone has evolved from episodic labor and post-colonial movements to a governance issue. Irregular migration can be defined as a movement that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit, and receiving country (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2011). Unlike regular migration, the reasons behind irregular border crossings generally come from inequalities, conflicts, governance failures, and limited opportunities.

The Mediterranean basin became one of the most visible spaces for irregular migration. According to UNHCR (2023), the Central Mediterranean route is an active hub globally. It reflects the endless cycle of irregular migration despite the continuous efforts to manage it.

Historically, there is a traditional perception of countries of origin in North Africa, such as Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Libya. This perception has gradually changed by the countries' transformation into transit spaces for Sub-Saharan African migrants. These migrants are seeking an entrance to Europe. This change accelerated, particularly after 2015. The European Union adopted the *European Agenda on Migration*. The agenda focusses on cooperation with third countries and introducing externalized border control mechanisms (European Commission, 2015). Such policies are designed to reduce and manage arrivals. However, they have also contributed to the prolonging presence of migrants. As a result, North Africa no longer functions as a departure zone but as a space for temporary settlement, repeated border crossing attempts, and containment.

This kind of role shift has given rise to multidimensional consequences. Firstly, transit states face institutional strain, limited integration capacity, and social tensions. Secondly, irregular migrants experience situations of uncertainty, restricted legal protection, and vulnerability. "The endless cycle" of irregular crossings despite the continuous securitized policies shows that migration in the region is not a single series of movement from origin to destination, but a recurring cycle rooted within broader structural conditions. As Castles, de Haas, and Miller (2014) argue, migration systems are shaped by interconnected political, economic, and social dynamics that cannot be addressed through border control alone.

The main question guiding this study is how North Africa's transformation from a region of origin to a transit space is redefining state responsibilities, border governance, and the meaning of migration within a securitized Mediterranean policy. North Africa today occupies an ambivalent position: geographically African, politically entangled with Europe, and structurally

pressured by EU migration agreements. The core problem identified in this research is the emergence of a prolonged "in-between" phase, where migrants are trapped in transit spaces that were never designed to host them long-term, while states struggle to balance external pressures and internal capacities.

To address this issue, this study purports to discuss four central sections. Initially, it looks at the historical migration profile of North African States. Moving forward, it investigates the impact of EU border externalization and bilateral agreements. Alongside this, the study considers the concept of transit migration and indefinite temporariness and concludes addressing the socio-political consequences for both migrants and host societies.

The historical migration profile of North African States (from “origin” to the early steps towards irregularity and transit)

Tracing the historical migration profile of North Africa should perhaps start with a simple yet unforgotten corner: for most of the twentieth century, the region’s dominant “migration identity” appeared as a geographical departure point shaped by colonial ties, labor recruitment and family settlement in Europe. Already by the post-war period, cross-Mediterranean movement had become both massive and structured: Simon & Noin (1972) note that “since 1946” the migration of North Africans toward Europe developed in “a more and more massive and diversified” way, with Algerian migration in particular reaching very high levels by the early 1970s. This detail is not minor as it anchors the idea that origin is not an episode in North Africa but rather a historical layer. Analysis by Fargues (2017) on the Mediterranean migration system confirms that North Africa functioned as primarily a region of labor export toward Europe, forming long-standing migration corridors between the Maghreb and Western Europe.

The “origin profile” did not rely only on spontaneous mobility; it was also built

through state channels and labor management. In the Tunisian context, for instance, an early arrangement was described where permanent recruitment functioned in coordination with national-level employment, and regular employment to France increased significantly by 1970 (Simon & Noin, 1972). Across North Africa, the same historical mechanism shows how migration was progressively regulated through quotas and documentation. For example, Algerian workers were required to hold a *certificat de résidence* (certificate of residence) after the 1968 agreement. At the same time, this mobility was never purely “legal” or purely “illegal.” CARIM analysis shows that, historically, irregular or “clandestine” labor could be tolerated in practice because it supplied flexible labor which is an arrangement that made migrants vulnerable and exploitable while still functioning inside the economic system (de Haas, 2008; CARIM 2009/7). Irregular migration did not suddenly occur in a blink. It has historical roots in the gap between labor demand, selective entry rules, and migrant strategies. Therefore, it should not be interpreted as a sudden anomaly but rather as a structural component of the migration system (de Haas, 2008).

From the late 1980s into the 1990s, however, departure was tightened in ways that made irregularity more visible. The Migration Policy Paper on North Africa by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (2020) shows the widening of the Schengen visa system to an “explosion of irregular migration since the mid-90s,” particularly how controls and readmission practices relocated Europe’s border pressures beyond the northern shore and into North Africa itself. Visa regimes by countries such as Spain and Italy during the early 1990s

significantly reduced legal opportunities for North Africans. Migrants started to rely on irregular routes across the Mediterranean (de Haas, 2008). In other words, the region remained a place for people to leave, but the conditions of leaving changed, and that change significantly mattered. People who cannot access visas or family reunification face a stark decision as Souiah (2013) describes, “stay... or emigrate despite restrictive policies,” and these restrictions push them toward “costly and risky strategies” (Souiah, 2013). This reflection connects the lived language of irregular migration precisely to the social space from which the term *Harraga* emerged. *Harraga* (حراقة) is derived from “*hrag*” (to burn) and is commonly associated with “burning” borders and/or documents in the context of clandestine crossings. It is used here not as a slogan, but rather as a historical marker: it captures how irregular migration was given a cultural name and a narration linked to its act, which is a response to a tight mobility mechanism.

The historical origin profile of North Africa was not eliminated as irregular migration appeared. Instead, this historical profile reveals accumulation over replacement: departure remains at the center, but restrictions evolvingly produced a shadow layer of irregular practices. Mediterranean migration systems evolve gradually rather than through abrupt transformations, with existing migration corridors adapting to new political and economic constraints as stated by Fargues (2017). The migration context of North Africa had already undergone “major changes” by the end of the 1990s as border practices increasingly reshaped mobility across the Mediterranean as Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung states in its Migration Policy Paper (2020). The region does not “change

identity overnight.” It carries its origin role, pushing the margins slowly to start to look like transit.

The impact of EU border externalization and bilateral agreements (between Bilateral Management and Crisis of Individual Salvation)

The Mediterranean space in North Africa has gradually transformed from a space of exchange into a frontier. This transformation can be seen as a direct result of shifting political paradigms, moving from structured state-to-state cooperation to a more securitized strategy that is swinging between bilateral management and crisis of individual salvation. There is a sort of tension created by this so-called evolution, a tension between sovereign rights of states to control their borders and the individual’s drive for survival.

The management of migration through formal bilateral frameworks was historically focused on emphasizing labor needs and the importance of social stability. As Katharina Natter explains in “*Fifty Years of Maghreb Emigration*,” states were once primarily the actual designers of migration in North Africa, using several agreements to monitor labor in favor of growing European economies. Looking at the 1968 Accord Franco-Algérien, which organized the “*circulation, l’emploi et le séjour*” (circulation, employment, and residence) of Algerians, paves the way to understand that this agreement put great emphasis on economic stability stating that in the event of a “*crise grave affectant sérieusement la situation de l’emploi en France*” (a grave crisis seriously affecting the employment situation in France), a joint commission would act accordingly to re-examine the migration quotas. This

negotiated mobility is therefore seen later in the 1987 Accord Franco-Marocain and the 1988 Accord Franco-Tunisien, which sought to provide legal certainty for residents and workers. This process outlines migration as a manageable administrative process.

Despite the continued spirit of adjustments, the late 20th and early 21st centuries underwent a game change toward “border externalization.” The European Union began “outsourcing” its border controls to North Africa, precisely targeting irregular routes. Bianca Carrera Espriu discusses that this “new vision” treats countries like Egypt as a direct asset in a “border offshoring framework,” which is exemplified by the multibillion-euro deals signed in Cairo in 2024. This shift is explained in the 2008 Protocole entre la France et la Tunisie that emphasizes “*la gestion concertée des migrations*” (concerted management of migration). While there are developments mentioned in the protocol, there are also explicit links to financial aid to the “*réinsertion socio-économique des ‘clandestins’*” (socio-economic reintegration of “clandestines”) ultimately turning North African states into “gatekeepers.” The dominance of “*l’approche sécuritaire*” (the security approach), as Abderazak Bel Hadj Zekri notes, often disregards the important essence of human rights when it comes to containment. The socio-psychological impact of certain tight policies on individuals is profound. As described by Catherine Wihtol de Wenden, a global paradox where the “*généralisation de la possession des passeports*” (generalization of passport possession) has created a “right to exit,” yet the restrictive visa regimes have simultaneously ignored the “right to entry.” A profitable system therefore is

created for smugglers that continually prospers as the borders get more tightened, as Wihtol de Wenden terms “*économie de la frontière*” (economy of the border). In Tunisia, the youth view of their future is shifted becoming highly dependent on mobility. Mohamed Jouili observes that youth no longer aim for collective political change but rather pursue “*al-khalas al-fardi*” (- الخلاص الفردي individual salvation). A “salvation” undertaken through a deadly journey on “*qawarib al-mawt*” (- قوارب الموت death boats), Jouili describes it as “*safar bi-madhaq al-milh*” (- سفر بمذاق الملح travel mixed with the taste of salt).

This externalization is carrying human cost, reflected in the grim data trends of the North African region. According to the UNHCR operational data by the end of 2024, approximately 199,400 individuals arrived through Mediterranean routes, meanwhile having an estimation of 3,580 individuals who were dead or missing. Amnesty International, argues in its report under the title “*Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*,” that EU policies contribute to making sea crossing attempts increasingly dangerous by “prioritizing borders over human life” and “outsourcing sea operations to the Libyan Coast Guard.” Having an environment increasingly influenced by EU border externalization and bilateral agreements, has turned transit countries into zones of “*mu’anah wa hirman*” (- معاناة وحرمان suffering and deprivation), as Mohammed Nejib Boutaleb identifies, which often returns survivors to cycles of torture and detention and putting deep pressure on both migrants and host societies. “*Migration flows are like water flows*” and cannot be stopped by fences, as Zohry reminds us. The current system of externalization

shows success solely in making migration flows of North Africa more lethal, replacing bilateral cooperation of the past with a crisis of human security.

The concept of transit migration and indefinite temporariness (The in-between status)

The North African transition from a departure space to a “transit space” as historically depicted in the first section, gave a new meaning to the migratory flows. The reference to the concept of “indefinite temporariness,” in this section, is where the experience is not a linear path anymore but rather marked by fragmentation, waiting, and survival. An “in-between” status that is not merely a geographic location, but a whole structure built on the intersection of the restrictive European policies and the internal dynamics of North African societies. Hein de Haas argues that the very term “transit migration” can be misleading, as it often blurs how the process of “irregular settlement” looks like. Migrants stay trapped for years, accumulating the costs for the next step of the journey. This sort of “waiting room” effect has transformed North Africa into an active series of urban hubs.

In Algeria, temporariness has seen a shift in terms of the demographic and functional role of the territory. Nacer-Eddine Hammouda, in his analysis for CARIM (*“La migration irrégulière vers et à travers l’Algérie”*), puts a strong emphasis on the “duration of transit” which is lengthening. He observes that for Sub-Saharan migrants, Algeria’s role as a quick corridor to the coast turned gradually to a place of temporary settlement. In other words, a station where individuals are waiting to step in the next train, yet the waiting time

is not a pause. Nacer-Eddine Hammouda argues that these individuals often get involved in informal labor markets such as construction and agriculture in southern and coastal cities. A “stratégie d’accumulation” (accumulation strategy) is created, making the transit a multiphase project stretched over many years. This reality reveals a legal paradox: Ryszard Cholewinski and Kristina Touzenis explain in a legal perspective for CARIM that individuals exist in a “protection gap.” Their presence is economically used but legally criminalized, resulting in a state of “permanent irregularity.”

In Morocco, the transit transformation produced a forced settlement zone. As Abdelkrim Belguendouz argues in his sociopolitical analysis (*“Le Maroc et la migration irrégulière”*) that Morocco got pushed to perform the role of Europe’s gendarme. Having external pressure eventually pushed a shift in the country’s internal policy. The country is no longer a “point de passage” (a passing point) but a “pays de destination forcée” (country of forced destination). Belguendouz puts great emphasis on how the security logic that is seemingly prioritized by bilateral agreements, traps individuals in a cycle of material loss. Migrants are physically present, but they are excluded from the legal and social fabric of the Moroccan society. This sort of stuckness meets with what Mohammed Nejib Boutaleb identifies “al-istid’af” (- الاستضعاف being rendered vulnerable). The indefinite temporariness is the condition carrying a waiting nature and eroding the migrant’s physical and psychological health.

In Libya, the situation represents an extreme manifestation of this “endless cycle.” The collapsing of the state authority has turned the transit situation into a

“fragmented trap” where governance is weak and uncoordinated (Okpanachia & Kaunert, 2023) In case of an absent unified system; transit is affected by a multiplicity of actors, including militias and human traffickers. The waiting period, therefore, gets monetized by those people through means of extortion and forced labor. The indefinite temporariness becomes a cycle of capture and release. Amnesty International argues in its report *“Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea,”* that migrants are intercepted at sea by the Coast Guard and returned to detention centers. The transit clock therefore gets restarted with every capture creating a loop of continuous suffering.

The in-between status phase is not just a legal or political procedure but an embraced cultural space. As noted by Hassen Boubakri in the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung PolDiMed study, the transit period has pushed to the emergence of “migrant neighborhoods” such as in cities like Sousse, Sfax and Tunis. Sub-Saharan migrants and North Africans coexist in precariously. This environment shows what Mohamed Jouili describes as a “*thaqafat al-fajwa*” (ثقافة الفجوة - culture of the gap) by which the ability to move forward or return is frozen. It creates a social identity by “burning” time and hope.

The “transit” role in North Africa gradually evolved into a system of containment functioning as a geographic filter. Only those who have more resources and luck can break from the cycle of indefinite temporariness.

The socio-political consequences for both migrants and host societies

The transformation toward transit space in North Africa has brought socio-political consequences for both migrants and host societies. Migrants experience legal precarity. Without a recognized legal status, many are pushed toward unprotected labor and become vulnerable to exploitation. This reality is often affected by deeper structural failures; as Ben Guita and Ben Djilali (2015) explain, irregular migration is a direct symptom of economic and political instability: “تنامي الهجرة غير الشرعية يرجع إلى مجموعة من الأسباب... ترتبط أساساً بمشكلة التنمية والتهميش (The growth of illegal migration is due to a variety of causes... primarily linked to the problem of development and marginalization). Migration precarity is tied with the limitation of access to services which leaves migrants highly dependent on informal networks rather than legal and institutional support. This type of legal marginalization further deepens psychological pressure. As Benyattou and Brahimi (2022) explain, the severe psychological consequences of the liminal existence فحص بعض المتغيرات النفسية لدى حالات خاضوا تجربة الهجرة الغير شرعية (Examining psychological variables in cases who underwent the experience of illegal migration). Migrants experience the deep trauma of the journey, and the uncertainty of legal status. This eventually creates a state of “psychological suspension” without being able to integrate or plan the future. Moreover, Zenati Saliha (2024) notes that the central drivers behind these movements are not only economical but also psychological, which makes migrants aspire for a better life. عوامل وأسباب الهجرة غير الشرعية من وجهة نظر أخصائيين اجتماعيين ونفسيين (Factors and

causes of illegal migration from the perspective of social and psychological specialists). Zenati mentions that the decision toward these irregular movements is a psychological defense mechanism, used as a trick to escape inner conflicts. “ وهذه الظاهرة ماهي إلا تجليات لميكانيزمات النفسية كالحيل الدفاعية التي يستخدمها الفرد للهروب من مشكلة ” (This phenomenon is nothing but a manifestation of psychological mechanisms, such as defense mechanisms, which the individual employs to escape a problem). On the institutional level, states are facing limited capacities. The UNECA (2014) report shows that many North African governments gave much importance to border control, securitization, and cooperation with the EU. This focus is directed to reduce migratory pressure but failed to make migration strategies at the national level. In this context, migration should address integration and social welfare. Practically, migrants in transit spaces accumulate needs such as housing, education, and health care. The IOM’s Regional Strategy for the MENA Region (2025–2029) stresses the necessary need to move beyond security toward “safe, orderly, and regular migration” that works on the resilience of both migrants and host societies. The IOM’s *“Perspectives from the South”* report shows the overlapping roles countries occupy in migration systems which challenges the simplistic dichotomy between sending and receiving states. Castles and Delgado Wise (2008) argue that migration should be understood as a development force in structure and governance. In practice, accommodation in transit countries is not merely temporary for migrants; rather, it is a space full of competing priorities such as security, human rights, and economic interests.

The socio-political consequences in North Africa are multidimensional. For migrants, it is a matter of manifestation of legal precarity and exclusion; for host societies, it is a matter of pressure and strain. These outcomes eventually show the structural reality tied to balanced responses and inclusive governance in the region.

Conclusion

Studying Irregular migration in North Africa reveals how persistent the issue is. The “endless cycle” that cannot be simplified between origin and destination. The region functioned primarily as a departure zone. Over time, the occurrence of restrictive European policies, bilateral agreements and the externalization of border controls have deeply influenced the Euro-Mediterranean space to become a hub filled with temporariness. Migrants eventually find themselves caught under conditions of uncertainty and survival.

This shift brought socio-political consequences. On the one hand, migrants face legal precarity, exploitation, and trauma. On the other hand, host societies face institutional strain and limited integration capacities. The in-between phase highlights that irregular migration in North Africa is a structural phenomenon. A phenomenon that is highly dependent on historical, economic and political factors rather than a temporary anomaly

The North African case when it comes to irregular migration, shows that securitization and externalization of borders can exacerbate human suffering while control remains inefficient. Efficiency requires balancing strategies between borders and development in favor of human rights and social welfare.

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'Migration flows are like water flows, you cannot
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Migrants in the throes of multiple crises:

fragmented state authority, informal networks
and forced (im)mobilities in Libya

Eyene Okpanachi & Christian Kaunert

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