

# MADAR Network – Morocco

This policy brief is based on data collected as part of the projects commissioned by MADAR in Morocco.

## POLICY BRIEF

### The evolution of migration policies: Between repression and integration promises



## Analysis and recommendations

The tragedy at Melilla, on 24 June 2022, underscores the violent consequences of security-driven migration control at the Morocco–EU border. An attempt to cross the land border between Morocco and Spain resulted in dozens of casualties and sparked a widespread civil society mobilisation, calling for truth and justice. Far from being an isolated incident, this episode reflects a persistent pattern of violent repression targeting certain forms of migration, occurring alongside the Moroccan authorities' more "humanitarian" policies of the past decade.

Historically, Morocco was primarily a country of emigration. However, the rise of transit and settlement migration in the late 1990s prompted the adoption of political and legal frameworks aimed at regulating mobility. Initial policies were largely security-driven, but between 2014 and 2017, Morocco briefly shifted toward a more integration-oriented approach, only to return to a more repressive stance after 2018. Based on four field surveys conducted in Morocco and a documentary, this policy brief examines the evolution of migration policies under the influence of three key factors:

- The rise in transit and settlement migration
- The involvement of civil society in supporting migrants
- The geopolitical dynamics between Morocco, the EU, and Spain

## Key messages

- Morocco's integration efforts during the 2014 and 2017 regularisation campaigns deserve recognition but remain insufficient. These efforts must be embedded in a long-term, sustainable strategy,
- Over the past six years, security-focused migration management has increased the vulnerability of migrants in Morocco, undermining both their rights and the country's international commitments,
- While Morocco's hardline stance has been influenced by European states leveraging migration for political ends, cooperation with the EU must be rooted in the protection of migrants' rights,
- To promote sustainable integration, civil society plays a crucial role – especially through cultural, educational, and artistic initiatives.

# Migration management that varies according to migration flows and the national and international context

## 1. A growing challenge for Morocco since the 2000s

After decades with no interest in migration issues, Moroccan authorities began to adopt a security-oriented migration policy in the 2000s, in response to rising “irregular” migration and growing pressure from European neighbours, especially Spain, who was calling for stronger border cooperation. In 2003, the country enacted its first law targeting irregular immigration.

During this period, mass deportations were intensified at the Ceuta and Melilla enclaves, along with interceptions at sea, pushing back both Moroccan and Sub-Saharan prospective migrants from European borders. At the same time, local and international civil society began documenting human rights violations at the borders and offering humanitarian aid to migrants.

## 2. 2014–2017: The unfulfilled promises of Morocco’s integration policy

Launched in 2014, the National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum aimed to “ensure better integration for migrants and improve the management of migratory flows through a coherent, comprehensive, humanist, and responsible policy.” During this period, the humanitarian sector became more professionalised, and integration initiatives led by civil society increased.

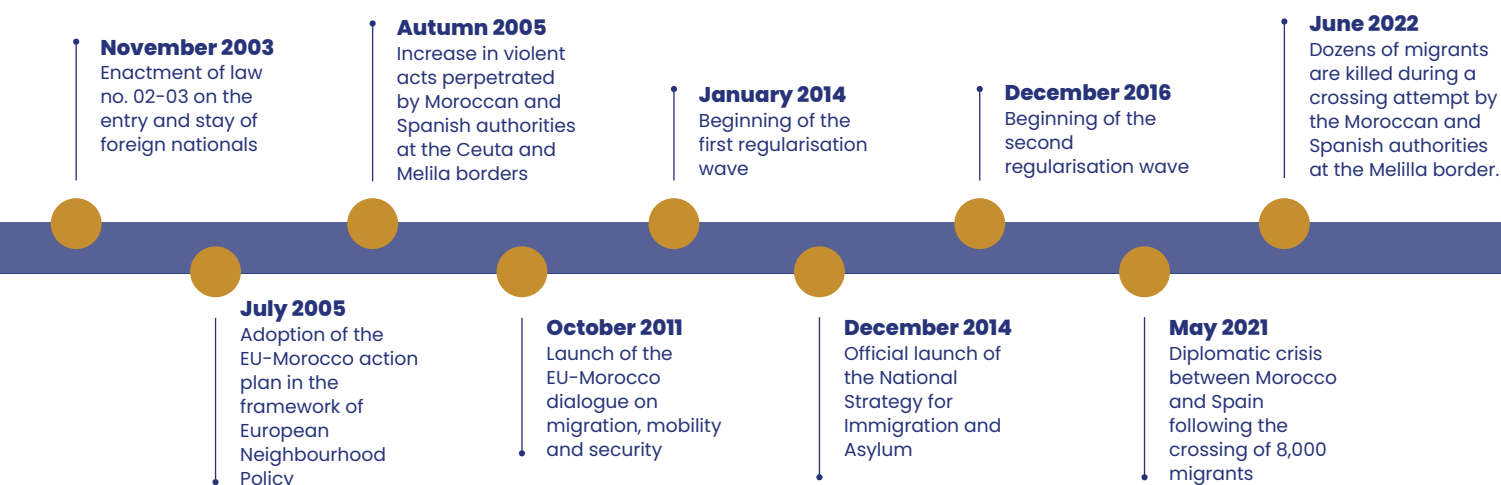
Despite regularising over 50,000 migrants during two campaigns (2014 and 2017), the Strategy’s impact remains mixed. The numerous legal and institutional reforms intended to improve the reception of refugees and migrants in Morocco have largely failed to materialise in practice. Access to work, healthcare, and education remains limited, making integration particularly difficult – especially for women and unaccompanied minors.

## 3. 2018: The Return of Repression

Since 2018, the widespread instances of arrest, deportation, and destruction of migrant camps mark a clear return to a repressive approach to migration management. Migration has increasingly been used as a diplomatic bargaining chip in Morocco–Spain relations, amid broader geopolitical tensions. While Morocco’s northern coasts are heavily patrolled, a new migration route has emerged via the Atlantic toward the Canary Islands – one of the deadliest routes in the world.

The integration policy introduced with the National Strategy has become increasingly fragile. Renewing residency permits has become more difficult for regularised individuals, and the vast majority of irregular migrants still lack access to social protection. Many are subject to labour exploitation, wage discrimination, and rights violations. Civil society, although actively mobilised to fill the gaps left by the State in terms of humanitarian support and integration, often finds its efforts clashing with the state’s security-driven priorities.

## Major dates in the Moroccan migratory policy



## Recommendations for a sustainable integration policy

### **1. Make the respect of humanitarian rights a core principle of migration policy**

Moroccan authorities must expedite the adoption of a legal framework on migration and asylum that aligns with both the National Strategy and Morocco's international obligations. Sufficient human and financial resources must then be allocated to ensure its effective long-term, nationwide implementation.

### **2. Strengthen and sustain integration efforts**

Morocco should, in line with the National Strategy, uphold the fundamental rights of all migrants, regardless of legal status, and facilitate access to residency. This includes access to education, healthcare, and social protection systems, as well as to the formal labour market. Special programs should also target the protection of women and unaccompanied minors.

### **3. End unlawful border and inland operations**

Moroccan government must immediately end roundups targeting irregular migrants, as well as arrests, arbitrary detentions, and collective expulsions. The principle of non-refoulement must be respected in all circumstances, in line with both Moroccan law and the country's international obligations. Independent investigations should be conducted to shed light on the various episodes of violence at the borders and to clearly identify perpetrators.

### **4. Facilitate civil society actions**

Rather than criminalising acts of solidarity, Morocco should acknowledge the critical role of civil society in migrant integration, as well as in the development, implementation, and monitoring of migration policies. Civil society organisations, academia, and the media should join forces to advocate for migrant rights, amplify migrant voices and combat stereotypes through awareness campaigns.

### **5. End the externalised management of European borders**

These policies come at a significant human cost. The European Union and Morocco must instead promote migration policies that respect human rights, prioritise integration, ensure access to international protection, and strengthen sea rescue efforts. Diplomatic disputes between Morocco and Spain should be decoupled from migration management. Cooperation between the EU and Morocco must fall within the framework of the Marrakech Pact adopted in 2018, which promotes international cooperation for safe, orderly and regular migration.

## Investing in shared experiences to shift mentalities

Field studies highlight the importance of awareness-raising efforts in combating racial discrimination and biases against migrants. Programs centred around sharing personal experiences and fostering cultural exchange – particularly through art – have proven effective in promoting acceptance and supporting sustainable integration.



Photo credits: Racines aisbl – BOZA!

Statistical annex: Data related to foreign residents in Morocco

In addition to the elements of migration policy discussed in various texts on Morocco, such as those published by MADAR, the statistical data presented in the tables below is also worth highlighting.

The first set of data pertains to the evolution of irregular migration movements originating from Morocco (Table 1). It shows that interceptions of Moroccan nationals attempting to leave the country irregularly fluctuated between 13,000 and 30,000 during the period from 2017 to

2021. In contrast, interceptions of foreign nationals peaked at over 70,000 in 2018, before declining to just over 22,000 in subsequent years.

This leads to two observations: (1) leaving Morocco irregularly is becoming increasingly difficult; (2) other migration routes, either less controlled or more dangerous for irregular migrants, seem to have emerged in the central Mediterranean or along the West African coast.

Year	Interceptions of Moroccans attempting irregular migration	Interceptions of foreign nationals attempting irregular migration
2013	7.359	24.880
2014	11.586	26.230
2015	7.273	28.211
2016	7.064	29.286
2017	13.261	50.961
2018	18.190	70.571
2019	17.134	56.839
2020	20.243	20.045
2021	30.612	32.509
2022	11.908	22.369

Table 2: Evolution of the number of refugees and asylum seekers recorded by UNHCR in Morocco between 2016 and 2024

Year	Number of refugees and asylum seekers
2016	5.478
2017	6.734
2018	6.779
2019	7.775
2020	9.736
2021	13.533
2022	18.248
2023	18.102
2024	18.369

Source: Statistical report on UNHCR population of concern UNHCR Morocco – 30 November 2024

Table 1: Irregular Migration Movements Originating from Morocco – 2013 to 2022

In parallel with this data, another notable trend has emerged in Morocco since 2016 (Table 2). It concerns the continuous rise in the number of refugees and asylum seekers recorded by UNHCR in Morocco over the past nine years. Their number has quadrupled between 2016 and 2024, increasing from 5,478 to 18,369. From a migration policy perspective, this suggests that whenever monitoring efforts intensify significantly, a similar rise in “protection of migrants’ rights” occurs via the UNHCR, in an effort to mitigate the impact of restrictive measures on both European and African public opinion.

Source: United Nations. International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. 28 November 2022.

Table 3: Distribution, by nationality, of refugees and asylum seekers recorded by the UNHCR in Morocco in 2024

Country of origin	Asylum seekers	Refugees	Total
Syria	6	5.401	5.407
Guinea Conakry	2.229	131	2.360
Senegal	1.800	86	1.886
Sudan	1.203	483	1.626
Ivory Coast	1.311	221	1.532
Central African Republic	40	1.236	1.276
Mali	633	65	698
Cameroon	464	83	547
Yemen	2	528	530
Nigéria	400	29	429
Democratic Republic of the Congo	216	117	333
South Sudan	14	254	268
Palestine	15	123	138
Tchad	114	9	123
Gambia	116	2	118
Undetermined	703	365	1.098
Total	9.296	9.073	18.369

Source: Statistical report on UNHCR population of concern UNHCR Morocco – 30 November 2024