



The Challenge of Coordinating Border Management Assistance between Europe and the Maghreb

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Executive Summary

Europe's border security no longer stops at its frontiers. Dealing with irregular migration and other transnational challenges to border security requires close partnerships with Europe's neighborhood, including the states of the Maghreb: Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. The Maghreb has been a key point of origin and transit for irregular migration to Europe for decades, but rising numbers of departures by Maghrebi nationals to Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with instability in Libya and the Sahel, have driven home the importance of cooperation to European policymakers. As a result, Europe has committed new resources to build Maghrebi states' capacity to manage their borders and both reduce irregular migration and address the region's cross-border security challenges, such as transnational terrorism and human, arms, and drug smuggling.

Managing migration in the Maghreb remains a formidable task due to geographic, structural, and economic factors. One is the length and remoteness of the region's land and maritime borders, coupled with limited resources for surveillance equipment and labor supply. Another is coordination, with limited information-sharing among defense, law enforcement, and customs personnel, and among the three countries.

Corruption among border guards is also common, as smugglers and migrants use bribes to facilitate their passage across borders. Finally, because smuggling and migration are mainstays of border region economies, there is limited political will to act decisively to close borders.

An ongoing challenge for cooperation between the Maghreb and Europe is the different perspectives of European and Maghrebi policymakers regarding the risks associated with irregular migration. While European governments face immense political and public pressure to curb irregular migration, Maghrebi governments are more ambivalent about the issue. For Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, transnational terrorism and narcotics and arms trafficking pose a much greater threat to their internal security, especially since the collapse of Libya. These countries view irregular migration, by contrast, as less of a security threat and, instead, as a means for their populations to access better economic opportunities, especially during times of social unrest. This perspective informs the Maghreb's priority of securing additional legal pathways for their nationals to travel and work in Europe. But it also makes cooperation to curb irregular migration, especially of Maghrebi nationals, a delicate issue for the governments of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.

To date, Europe's cooperation with the Maghreb has focused on counterterrorism initiatives and efforts to reduce irregular migration to Europe. Much of this still occurs at a bilateral level; Spain, for example, has taken the lead in cooperating with Morocco, while Italy is a key interlocuter with Tunisia. Support on migration can take the form of operational coordination (such as information-sharing, joint patrols, and deploying liaison officers); capacity-building (including training, equipment purchases, and assistance in building physical infrastructure); or development assistance to address the drivers of migration in the region.

Rising numbers of departures by Maghrebi nationals to Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with instability in Libya and the Sahel, have driven home the importance of cooperation to European policymakers.

But while cooperation on counterterrorism seems to have produced results, the impact of European programming on migration is less evident. The Maghreb's borders remain permeable to migration despite European investments, which seem to lead to often fleeting shifts in migration routes rather than a curbing of flows altogether.

Shared transnational threats and cross-border challenges mean that Europe needs to continue engaging with Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia on border security issues. Policymakers should consider the following lessons as they respond to migration challenges in the region:

- ▶ **Migration and border security are inextricably political topics in the Maghreb.** Successful cooperation to build border enforcement capacity and promote regional stability will likely require Europe to make compromises to meet Maghrebi interests, such as providing options for greater visa liberalization or additional labor migration opportunities.
- ▶ **Rethink zero-tolerance approaches to border security in the region.** Some cross-border issues, whether in the form of commodity smuggling or emigration of Maghrebi nationals, will likely continue, reflecting their role as an economic lifeline for underserved border regions. Instead of practicing zero-tolerance policies, policymakers should work with local officials to prioritize threats and use resources to target bad actors (such as arms or drug traffickers), reduce loss of life on migration routes, and promote stability in these regions to avoid sudden migration shocks.
- ▶ **Use development efforts to complement security programming.** Efforts to secure borders by halting irregular cross-border movements will have limited success in the long run without efforts to develop viable livelihood opportunities as alternatives to local smuggling industries in underserved border regions. Policymakers should closely coordinate their security programming with development programming for these regions to reflect the reality that these interventions represent two sides of the same coin with regard to pursuit of greater stability.

The European focus on Maghrebi border security is likely to only increase in the coming years. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened challenges facing Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, including economic difficulties, social unrest, and political tensions. These issues, as well as heightened border security measures meant to limit the spread of the virus, have further escalated some cross-border challenges in the region, notably irregular migration. There are few indications that these pressures will ebb soon.

While they have little choice but to engage, European states have great latitude in deciding how they engage with Maghrebi states.

While they have little choice but to engage, European states have great latitude in deciding *how* they engage with Maghrebi states. There is an urgent need to develop approaches that are strategic, predicated on addressing underlying drivers of border insecurity, and that recognize political exigencies linked to border issues. Ultimately, this must cater not just to European needs, but also to the needs and interests of governments and citizens in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.

1 Introduction

Europe's border security needs and interests no longer halt at its frontiers. Over the last 25 years, the European Union and its Member States have increasingly partnered with and relied on countries in the continent's near abroad to mitigate cross-border threats and challenges.¹ Within this transnational architecture, the states of the Maghreb—Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia—have come to play a critical role, which has grown since the 2011 Arab Spring.² Many of the transnational challenges at the top of the European policy agenda intersect with those experienced in the Maghreb. The region is an origin point and a key transit zone for irregular migrants bound for Europe. Moreover, drug traffickers increasingly route products destined for European markets through Maghrebi states. Terrorist groups linked to the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda also operate across the region, feeding fears of infiltration and of threats to European states. As one Moroccan security official noted, “what happens [in] the Maghreb has repercussions on the other side of the Mediterranean.”³

Border security capacity and bilateral coordination on the southern rim of the Mediterranean has become a vital concern for European policymakers. Thus, the European Union and its Member States have implemented numerous programs to help Maghrebi nations develop border security systems that are more robust and effective. Surveillance equipment has been installed, notably along Tunisia's unstable frontier with Libya.⁴ Security and defense forces with border security responsibilities have been provided training to improve technical capacities (and, to a lesser degree, their attitudes toward border communities).⁵

Yet, despite the substantial efforts of European states and other partners, the permeability of frontiers in the Maghreb and between the Maghreb and Europe remains high. This suggests a need for broader rethinking of policy approaches, rooted in a comprehensive review of Maghrebi states' border management challenges, their needs and interests, and their prioritization of threats.

This report examines the border security situation within the Maghreb. It begins by focusing on the Maghrebi states' cross-border priorities and threats. It next details the structural factors impeding the development of better border security in the region, including coordination gaps. The report then analyzes the efforts of the European Union and its Member States to address Maghrebi border security challenges. Finally, it offers a brief set of lessons learned and next steps for policymakers.

1 Luiza Bialasiewicz, “Off-Shoring and Out-Sourcing the Borders of Europe: Libya and EU Border Work in the Mediterranean,” *Geopolitics* 17, no. 4 (2012): 846.

2 Anna Di Bartolomeo, Tamirace Fakhoury, and Delphine Perrin, *CARIM Migration Profile: Tunisia* (San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy: Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration, European University Institute, 2010), 4; Vasja Badalič, “Tunisia's Role in the EU External Migration Policy: Crimmigration Law, Illegal Practices, and Their Impact on Human Rights,” *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 20, no. 1 (February 2019): 85; Migration Policy Centre Team, *MPC Migration Profile: Morocco* (San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy: Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute, 2013), 4.

3 Interview with Moroccan security official, Rabat, January 2019.

4 Jack Detsch, “[Pentagon Partners with Germany on Tunisia Border Security](#),” *Al-Monitor*, February 23, 2018.

5 U.S. Department of State, “[TSCTP and West Africa Border and Regional Security Program Matrix](#),” September 2019.

2 Migration Dynamics and Priorities in the Maghreb

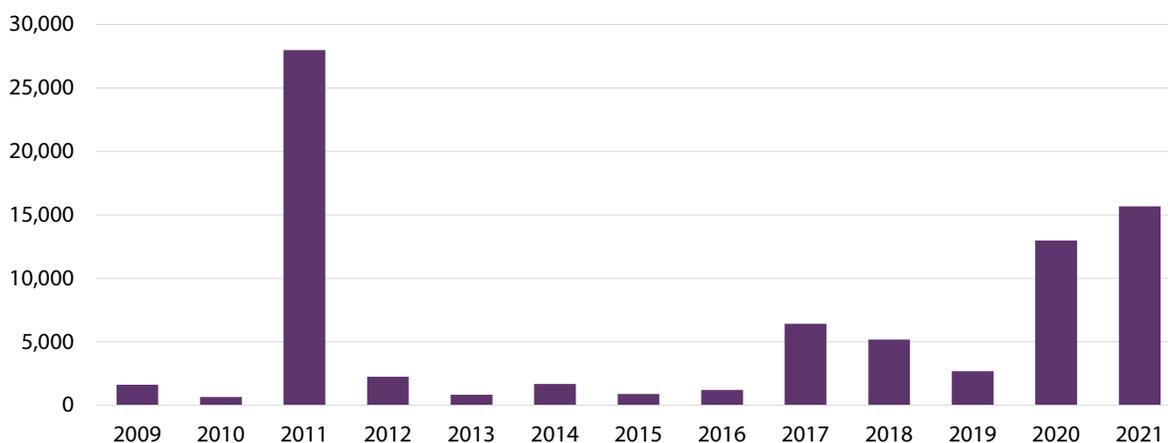
Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia have been key origin and transit points for irregular migration to Europe for decades. Since 2017, however, the routes used by irregular migrants coming from or moving through the region have shifted significantly, leading to heightened domestic sensitivities regarding migration in the Maghreb. Stakeholders in Europe have noticed the shift in routes, and both bilateral aid and cooperation between the European Union and Maghrebi states have increased in the wake of rising arrivals. However, significant differences remain in how the two regions view the issue of irregular migration, as Maghrebi states rarely perceive it to be a significant threat or priority. This misalignment poses challenges to crafting effective, consensual cooperation between European and Maghrebi states on migration.

A. Irregular Migration Trends and Routes in the Maghreb

Irregular migration from the region to Europe in the early 2000s largely involved Algerians, Moroccans, and Tunisians moving directly to Europe by sea. At the same time, transit migration—primarily involving sub-Saharan Africans—became a significant issue for Morocco (although not Algeria or Tunisia).⁶ Significant volumes of departures directly from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia ebbed in the 2010s, seemingly prompted by the Maghrebi states' tightening of maritime border security. However, the large pulse of Tunisian irregular migration toward Europe in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring, and the attendant collapse of security enforcement along Tunisia's borders, underscored just how quickly such trends can shift if border controls weaken (see Figure 1).⁷

FIGURE 1

Irregular Border Crossings into Europe by Tunisian Migrants Detected on the Central Mediterranean Route, 2009–21



Note: The Central Mediterranean route entails departures from North Africa heading to Italy and Malta.

Sources: For data from 2009 to 2020, Frontex, "Migratory Map—Detections of Illegal Border-Crossings Statistics," accessed February 9, 2022. For data from 2021, Italian Ministry of Interior, "Cruscotto statistic giornaliero," updated December 31, 2021.

6 Commission of the European Communities, "Intensified Cooperation on the Management of Migration Flows with Third Countries" (commission staff working paper, SEC/2003/0815 final, July 9, 2003), 5.

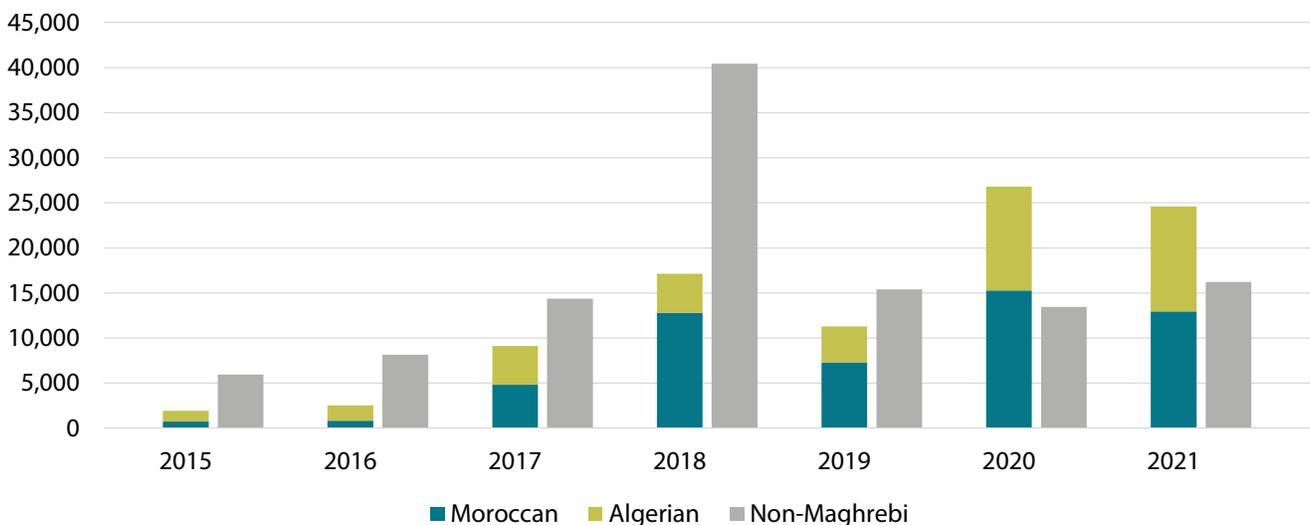
7 Matt Herbert, "At the Edge: Trends and Routes of North African Migrants" (ISS Paper 298, Institute for Security Studies and Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Pretoria and Geneva, November 2016), 3.

By the early 2010s, rather than embarking directly for Europe, most Algerian and Moroccan irregular migrants traveled via third countries. Turkey, and later Libya, became the primary embarkation points for Maghrebis.⁸ Embarkations from Tunisia also declined significantly, although this may reflect a slackening in irregular migration writ large during the period.⁹

These two patterns shifted beginning in late 2017. First, Tunisian irregular migration, which had been limited since 2011, surged as young people sought to escape the growing economic crisis and political gridlock in the country.¹⁰ Nearly all irregular migrants left directly from Tunisia, transiting either to Sicily or Italy's Pelagic islands. Concurrently, Algerian departures from their origin shores rose significantly, due both to rising violence in Libya (previously the primary point of departure for Algerians) and rising interest in migrating, driven by economic and social frustrations.¹¹ Moroccan irregular migration also surged beginning in 2017. Spanish and Portuguese apprehensions of Moroccan nationals rose to 5,498, from 768 the year before (see Figure 2), due mainly to increased numbers of Moroccan irregular migrants using the western Mediterranean route.¹² By 2018, nearly all Moroccan irregular migrants apprehended by European states transited from Morocco to Spain, or to a far lesser degree Portugal, embarking either from the Atlantic coast, around Tangier, or in littoral areas on the Alboran Sea.¹³ This pattern also marked a shift from previous routes via third countries such as Libya, where instability and the imprisonment of Moroccan migrants led Moroccans to avoid the country.

FIGURE 2

Irregular Border Crossings into Europe by Moroccan, Algerian, and non-Maghrebi Migrants Detected on the Western Mediterranean and Eastern Atlantic Routes, 2015–21



Note: The Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes involve embarkations from North and West Africa heading to Spain or Portugal. Source: Frontex, “[Migratory Map—Detections of Illegal Border-Crossings Statistics](#),” accessed February 9, 2022.

8 Herbert, “At the Edge,” 7.

9 Herbert, “At the Edge,” 15.

10 Matt Herbert, *‘La mal vie’: The Routes, Drivers and Politics of North African Irregular Migration* (Pretoria: The Institute for Security Studies, 2019), 16.

11 Herbert, *‘La mal vie’*, 9.

12 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “[Mediterranean Situation: Spain](#),” accessed March 25, 2019; International Organization for Migration (IOM), “[Flow Monitoring: Europe](#),” accessed February 20, 2020.

13 Herbert, *‘La mal vie’*, 10–12.

Between 2017 and 2021, the trend of Maghrebi irregular migrants embarking directly from their origin countries toward European shores continued. The COVID-19 pandemic, and associated economic disruptions in Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, substantially magnified this phenomenon, driving the level of Maghrebi irregular migration to unprecedented levels. Spanish and Italian security forces in the Mediterranean and the eastern Atlantic intercepted slightly more than 42,000 Moroccans, Tunisians, and Algerians in 2020, with Moroccan migration particularly shifting from cross-Strait and cross-Alboran sea movement to departures from the country's south toward the Canary Islands.¹⁴ In 2021, the level of Moroccan migration ebbed slightly compared to the previous year, with Algerian migration roughly the same, while Tunisian irregular migration surged to levels not seen since 2011.¹⁵

Transit migration through the three Maghrebi states also shifted, primarily affecting Morocco. There, migration of foreign nationals to Spain increased significantly in 2018.¹⁶ Since then, levels have fallen somewhat but remain substantially higher than those of the mid-2010s. Tunisia, too, has seen a sharp increase in foreign nationals seeking to embark from its shores toward Europe, although the trend is more nascent and smaller than in Morocco, with 2,722 irregular migrants detained by Tunisian security and defense forces in 2020, compared to 1,257 the year before.¹⁷ The level of transit migration in 2021 has substantially eclipsed that seen in 2020, with 7,134 foreigners intercepted by Tunisian authorities.¹⁸ Despite significant transit migration across Algeria toward Morocco (and to an increasing degree toward Tunisia), few transit migrants depart from Algeria for Europe.¹⁹

B. *How Maghrebi Governments View Irregular Migration*

Irregular migration is not considered a significant threat in any of these three Maghrebi states. Rather, governments tend to view the emigration of their citizens as a solution to economic issues (such as high unemployment) and resulting social tensions. While criminalized, the illicit crossing of borders is generally tolerated, with limited or no sanctions levied on migrants or smugglers apprehended by state security forces at sea and land borders.²⁰ In Tunisia, under the former Ben Ali regime, one Tunisian researcher explained that “the main instruction for anyone intending to migrate clandestinely was that, if caught, the person should deny as [far] as possible that they were Tunisian, throw away their identification, and change their dialect.”²¹ In other words, Ben Ali's government was less interested in limiting irregular migration than in lessening the diplomatic tensions resulting from their citizens' embarkation to Europe. While Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia have taken sporadic actions to stop their nationals from migrating irregularly, they are generally reluctant to get rid of this pressure valve, given the three governments' limited ability to address the underlying economic, social, and governance gaps that drive migration in the first place.

Governments tend to view the emigration of their citizens as a solution to economic issues ... and resulting social tensions.

14 Frontex, “Migratory Map—Detections of Illegal Border-Crossings Statistics,” accessed August 10, 2021.

15 Matt Herbert, *Losing Hope: Why Tunisians are leading the surge in irregular migration to Europe* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2022).

16 UNHCR, “Mediterranean Situation: Spain”; IOM, “Flow Monitoring: Europe.”

17 Mark Micallef et al., *Conflict, Coping and COVID: Changing Human Smuggling and Trafficking Dynamics in North Africa and the Sahel in 2019 and 2020* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021), 54.

18 Author calculations based on Tunisian Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defense [press releases](#).

19 Author analysis of Algerian Ministry of Defense [press releases](#).

20 Herbert, *‘La mal vie’*, 27.

21 Herbert, “At the Edge,” 3–4.

These governments address the issue of non-Maghrebi irregular migration differently, especially when migrants transit through the region. The governments of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia generally do not view migrants from outside the region (e.g., from sub-Saharan Africa) as a domestic security challenge. However, the three governments do not view their transit as beneficial to social stability. Transit migrants can now stay for months or years, due to Maghrebi states' increased border security operations. "One of the main impacts of the securitization of the borders is that sub-Saharan migrants are staying longer in Algeria," explained one international official. "They are becoming visible and becoming an issue for the authorities, which they weren't in the past."²² Increasingly long stays can fuel social tensions, due to locals' fears of increased competition for low-skilled jobs and stereotypes linking the newcomers to crime. As a result, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia are more open to controls against these populations.

3 Transnational Threats: Dynamics and Priorities

Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia have gradually focused more on managing their borders and dealing with various transnational issues, such as terrorism, illicit arms and drug trafficking, the informal cross-border trade in petrol and other commodities, and irregular migration. Few of these issues are new; the region's robust cross-border trade in consumer goods, in particular, dates back decades. But in recent years, these issues have become increasingly important domestic security priorities for Maghrebi governments.²³ Much of this increase stems from the 2011 Arab Spring, particularly the collapse of Libya, which sharply increased regional arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and cross-border terrorist raids. As a result, stakeholders began to perceive the region's borders, and what (or who) moves across them, as "the challenge and the threat," according to one Moroccan diplomat.²⁴

The Maghrebi states have criminalized arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and transnational terrorism. However, the degree of enforcement differs significantly based on the type of cross-border challenge. Enforcement is best seen as a continuum:

- ▶ **Transnational terrorism.** At one end of the continuum sits transnational terrorism. It is the dominant preoccupation of the Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian governments and drives border security efforts in the region. Concerns about terrorist infiltration are well founded in Algeria and Tunisia, where Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb- and Islamic State-linked groups operate in border zones, as well as in rural and remote regions, moving between the two and occasionally staging bloody attacks on border posts and security patrols.²⁵ Algeria and Tunisia have experienced sporadic large-scale terrorist raids from Libya, and far southern Algeria has witnessed a recent uptick in terrorist cross-border movement to and from Mali.²⁶

²² Interview with international organization representative, May 2016.

²³ Matt Herbert and Max Gallien, *Divided They Fall: Frontiers, Borderlands and Stability in North Africa* (Pretoria: The Institute for Security Studies, 2020).

²⁴ Querine Hanlon and Matt Herbert, *Border Security Challenges in the Grand Maghreb*, Peaceworks Report 109 (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, May 2015), 5.

²⁵ Matt Herbert, "The Insurgency in Tunisia's Western Borderlands," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2018.

²⁶ Previous raids from Libya targeted Algeria's Tigantourine gas plant in 2013 and the Tunisian town of Ben Guerdane in 2016. More recent examples of terrorist incursions from Mali include clashes with military patrols and a vehicle-borne IED attack on a military post in Timiaouine on February 9, 2020. See Zine Cherfaoui, "Grand Sud algérien: Les terroristes du Sahel testent les défenses de l'ANP," *El Watan*, February 11, 2020.

- ▶ **Illicit trafficking.** In the middle of the continuum is illicit trafficking, which primarily involves clandestine narcotics and weapons. Both have been heavily sanctioned for decades, due to the perceived risks they pose to regime stability in Maghrebi states. At a social level, traffic in such goods is often perceived by border communities as criminal, dangerous, and to a degree taboo.²⁷ However, despite this, the volume of both narcotics and arms trafficked has grown substantially since 2011. Rising instability in the central Sahara has led cannabis resin and, to a lesser degree, cocaine traffickers to route shipments laterally across the Maghreb.²⁸ The region's littoral areas have also become increasingly important for drug trafficking, with cannabis resin, in particular, ported in significant quantities along the Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian coastlines toward Libya.²⁹ This increase, in turn, has led to growing drug consumption among Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian populations, which has further propelled official efforts to halt trafficking. Arms trafficking is far less common, although it also surged in the early part of the 2010s, as pilfered weapons from Libya were smuggled into eastern Tunisia and southern Algeria to militant groups.³⁰
- ▶ **Commodity smuggling.** At the other end of the enforcement continuum is commodity smuggling. The irregular cross-border movement of everything from petrol to pasta is widespread across the region's borders and is a mainstay of many borderland populations' livelihoods.³¹ External analyses and reports on the high porosity of the region's borders often derive from observations of such commodity smuggling, which can be ubiquitous in border regions. Though such smuggling is nominally illegal, it is socially accepted by borderland communities, with one Tunisian borderland resident noting "smuggling legitimate products or goods is a normal trade and is practiced by everyone."³²

Finally, migration oscillates along the continuum. Absent external pressure, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia address irregular migration as akin to cross-border commodity smuggling and do not view enforcement as a high priority. At times, however, external pressure from the European Union and its Member States changes this approach, leading the Maghrebi states to be more proactive and try to crack down on the issue. But when domestic stability considerations become acute, the three states often revert to a more permissive stance on migration, including limited enforcement.

The Maghrebi governments' responses to cross-border challenges along this continuum illustrate their range of potential enforcement actions. Governments across the Maghreb take heavily militarized approaches to countering terrorist infiltration. In Algeria and Tunisia, perceptions of increased risk have led to open-ended and proportionally significant military deployments to high-risk border areas, and to the use of ground-based radar, drones, and surveillance aircraft.³³ Governments have also taken these actions in the region's littoral areas, with Tunisia in particular investing in new patrol craft and radar, thereby reorganizing

27 Herbert and Gallien, *Divided They Fall*.

28 Matt Herbert and Max Gallien, *A Rising Tide: Trends in Production, Trafficking and Consumption of Drugs in North Africa* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2020).

29 Herbert and Gallien, *A Rising Tide*.

30 Hanlon and Herbert, *Border Security Challenges in the Grand Maghreb*, 26–27.

31 Herbert and Gallien, *Divided They Fall*.

32 Interview with a Tunisian merchant, Tataouine, September 2021.

33 Ashraq Al-Awsat, "Diplomat: Algeria Deployed 80,000 Troops on Borders with Mali, Libya," *Ashraq Al-Awsat*, June 21, 2018; Katherine Pollock and Frederic Wehrey, "The Tunisian-Libyan Border: Security Aspirations and Socioeconomic Realities," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 21, 2018; Herbert and Gallien, *Divided They Fall*.

its deployment of maritime security forces.³⁴ Terrorists and those who aid them face significant punitive sanctions. This pressure has limited smugglers' and traffickers' aid to terrorists in moving personnel or equipment across the region's borders. "If you work with one of the [smuggling] networks, and the security services find out someone in the network has helped DAESH, the entire network is taken down," explained one Algerian journalist. "Because of this, the heads of the Algerian networks are cautious and work to avoid association with terrorists."³⁵

In turn, Maghrebi states devote significant resources to targeting narcotics and arms trafficking networks, reflecting the social and security risks they believe these flows pose. However, there is a difference in governments' focus and severity on these issues, compared to how they address terrorism. There have been numerous cases of corruption linked to illicit trafficking across the region, including by high-level officials.³⁶ Such corruption enables the movement of these goods across the region's frontiers in a way that terrorist groups cannot emulate.

Finally, while the clandestine import and export of goods such as petrol or pasta is nominally illegal and regional states often publicly castigate the trade, in practice governments do little to limit it. One Tunisian security official noted that on one stretch of the Algeria-Tunisia border, "smuggling is not considered a crime and law enforcement has been given instructions not to arrest smugglers."³⁷ Governments launch significant crackdowns only when officials see the volumes traded or the networks involved as a political or economic threat to the state.

Maghrebi states tolerate significant cross-border smuggling and, in turn, irregular migration partly because of the need to ensure political stability in otherwise economically marginalized regions. Along Tunisia's borders with Libya and Algeria, for example, smuggling presents one of the few economic options for the population.³⁸ "The situation here is catastrophic," explained one Tunisian government official on the Algerian border. "There is a lack of development, employment, and agricultural investment."³⁹ When enforcement increases or smuggling declines for other reasons, social unrest often emerges as an acute if localized problem.⁴⁰ "I can go out and arrest the smugglers," explained one Tunisian security official on the Algerian border, "but then they protest and say that we don't provide them with jobs other than smuggling. So if I arrest them, I will be the one who's held accountable [by the local population]."⁴¹ A similar though often less acute dynamic prevails in littoral areas. One factor enabling

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34 Interview with a Tunisian security official, Tunis, March 2015.

35 Interview with an Algerian journalist, Algiers, May 2016.

36 Matt Herbert, "The Butcher's Bill: Cocaine Trafficking in North Africa," Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, September 21, 2018.

37 Interview with a Tunisian security official, Jendouba, October 2019.

38 Interview with a security official, Jendouba, October 2019.

39 Interview with a local government official, Jendouba, October 2019.

40 Jacques Roussellier, "Breaking North Africa's Border Security Conundrum," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 5, 2018.

41 Interview with a security official, Kasserine, November 2019.

the 2017 rise in irregular migration from Tunisia was the collapse of fisheries in the Gulf of Gabes, which led economically stressed fishermen to offer their vessels (and sometimes services) to human smuggling networks.⁴² At a national level, stakeholders view the potential for political instability as a far more pressing risk to the governments of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, compared to the risks resulting from smuggling contraband consumer goods or people.

Tolerance of the trade in goods also offers practical intelligence and security benefits to the three countries.⁴³ Governments allow low-level smugglers to operate in return for reporting on the presence of terrorists and networks trafficking in illicit goods. This allows overstretched security forces to defend the state against threats in areas otherwise difficult to access. The Maghreb's approach to migration also often reflects this tacit tolerance and wariness of the economic and social costs of curbing flows.

4 Challenges to Securing the Region's Borders

The enforcement continuum underscores the significant variation in the Maghreb's border porosity and why it exists. But there are aspects other than government control that limit efforts by Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia to maintain control over their frontiers.

A. Geography

The first impediment to effective regional border security is the sheer length and remoteness of the region's borders. Algeria's frontier, the region's longest, stretches for 6,734 kilometers.⁴⁴ Most of it falls in territory that is remote, difficult to access, challenging to monitor, and often significantly underdeveloped. While Algeria possesses the largest and most well-funded army in the region and has deployed many soldiers to its frontiers since the terrorist attack on the Tigantourine gas plant in 2013, it has struggled to continuously patrol and monitor the entirety of the frontier.⁴⁵

The borders of Morocco and Tunisia are significantly shorter than Algeria's, but the same challenge applies. In northern Tunisia, border checkpoints are spaced roughly ten kilometers apart and staffed by relatively small contingents of national guard officers, which is insufficient to cover the area's mountainous and forested terrain.⁴⁶ A similar dynamic exists in Morocco, where one official bluntly noted that despite increasing efforts since 2011 to buttress border security, lack of complete control remained, reflecting the reality that the country "can't put a soldier or officer every one kilometer; not all of our units can be deployed along the border."⁴⁷ Exceptions are Morocco's borders with the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, which together form the only European land border with a Maghrebi state. The frontiers are short and relatively well policed, allowing greater control compared to other areas of Morocco's frontiers. However, migrants' routine and sometimes successful efforts to breach the borders around the two cities underscore that even sufficiently monitored frontiers can struggle to handle clandestine crossings.

42 Herbert, *'La mal vie'*, 17.

43 Hanlon and Herbert, *Border Security Challenges in the Grand Maghreb*, 30.

44 U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, "[World Factbook: Algeria](#)," updated July 29, 2021.

45 Hanlon and Herbert, *Border Security Challenges in the Grand Maghreb*, 31.

46 Interview with a Tunisian security official, Jendouba, October 2019.

47 Interview with a Moroccan official, Rabat, January 2019.

Similar challenges exist along the three countries' maritime frontiers, where relatively small coast guard and naval forces attempt to counter a broad range of threats, including maritime migration and human and drug smuggling.⁴⁸ While maritime security has reportedly increased since 2011, and the ability to survey and control known departure zones has improved, this has simply displaced maritime smuggling and migration into new areas.⁴⁹

While maritime security has reportedly increased since 2011, and the ability to survey and control known departure zones has improved, this has simply displaced maritime smuggling and migration into new areas.

To reduce the stresses on security and defense forces patrolling land frontiers, all three states have constructed various types of walls in recent years. Algeria has built the most elaborate series of fortifications, which cover significant stretches along the country's borders with Morocco, Mali, Niger, Libya, and Tunisia.⁵⁰ Morocco's and Tunisia's efforts have been more modest, as the former built a new wall only along its northern border with Algeria.⁵¹ Tunisia, with significant support from the United States and Germany, has built a 200-kilometer berm/ditch fortification along the northern portion of its frontier with Libya.

Walls, however, are a tactical tool rather than a strategic solution. They slow or displace cross-border movement, rather than ending it. "Programs to secure borders by closing off-routes [with walls] are not a lasting solution," noted one Moroccan security official. "Trafficking networks are able to adapt and thrive in their activities."⁵² Furthermore, barriers have proven to be a blunt tool, impacting commodity smugglers and traffickers and often breeding the sort of social frustration and tension that the states seek to prevent.⁵³ This reality has led to counterintuitive government responses, such as the Tunisian military's opening of the border to smugglers for several days to diffuse social tensions heightened by the border wall's completion and attendant fears that it would eliminate smuggling, the primary livelihood for many in the area.⁵⁴

B. Coordination

A second impediment, which exacerbates labor supply challenges along the frontier, is the difficulty of coordinating the various security and defense forces tasked with border security at a national level. In general, border management and security in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia is the purview of defense, law enforcement, and customs personnel. In some instances, a single dominant ministry, such as the Ministry of Defense in Algeria, which maintains operational control over all except armed customs patrols, aids coordination among these bodies.⁵⁵

48 Hanlon and Herbert, *Border Security Challenges in the Grand Maghreb*, 41–42.

49 Interview with a Tunisian military official, February 2019.

50 Hanlon and Herbert, *Border Security Challenges in the Grand Maghreb*, 34; Mark Micallef, Raouf Farrah, Alexandre Bish, and Victor Tanner, *After the Storm: Organized Crime across the Sahel-Sahara Following Upheaval in Libya and Mali* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2019), 41.

51 Hanlon and Herbert, *Border Security Challenges in the Grand Maghreb*, 37.

52 Interview with a Moroccan Ministry of Interior official, Rabat, January 2019.

53 Herbert and Gallien, *Divided They Fall*.

54 Interview with a Tunisian analyst, Tunis, August 2017.

55 Hanlon and Herbert, *Border Security Challenges in the Grand Maghreb*.

Frequently, however, either institutional rivalries or simply poor coordination exist among different security forces involved in border management. In Tunisia, for example, coordination is limited between the police and national guard, which are both components of the Ministry of Interior. These poor relations also impede information-sharing, as people share information on threats or cross-border challenges irregularly or via informal channels.

At a broader level, competition among different ministries in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia hobbles efforts to address various cross-border challenges, from smuggling to irregular migration, that stem from multidimensional factors such as poor economic opportunities, limited education, and gaps in health care. “There is simply a lack of coordination between agencies [on the border],” noted one Moroccan official.⁵⁶ Stakeholders in Tunisia echo these sentiments, despite the adoption of a national migration strategy in 2018. There, the challenge is building coordination and achieving strategic implementation, as one security official noted, “on the broader governmental level, involving not only the Ministry of Interior, but also the Education, Agriculture, Employment and Sustainable Development Ministries.”⁵⁷

Uneven coordination among Maghrebi states also hinders efforts to buttress border security. Coordination between Tunisia and Algeria is generally good at several levels, from interministerial coordination and joint commissions to field-based communication between security commanders.⁵⁸ Tunisian and Algerian field units routinely share information by fax, email, or in-person meetings. There have been efforts to formalize this engagement, but a strict hierarchy for sharing information has impeded them, as most data are shared via formal channels (either bilaterally or within each nation’s broader security architecture) and must first flow back to Tunis and Algiers before transmittal. As a result, most functional engagement in the field remains informal and heavily based on personal relationships between commanders on either side of the frontier.⁵⁹ Much of this focuses on counterterrorism, with little apparent effort to coordinate counter-smuggling or counter-migration initiatives.⁶⁰

Uneven coordination among Maghrebi states also hinders efforts to buttress border security.

The situation is very different at the Morocco-Algeria border, where longstanding political tensions between the two countries have led to the border’s long-term closure.⁶¹ These tensions also stymie efforts to coordinate border security. Some low-level, infrequent connection occurs between border security commanders along the frontier, but little meaningful information-sharing transpires.⁶²

⁵⁶ Interview with a Moroccan official, Oujda, October 2019.

⁵⁷ Interview with a security official, Sousse, February 2019.

⁵⁸ Interview with a Tunisian officer, May 2018.

⁵⁹ Interview with a Tunisian officer, May 2018.

⁶⁰ U.S. Department of State, “Snapshot of Border Security Programs in Algeria,” 2017.

⁶¹ Morocco and Algeria have implemented frequent, and often longstanding, border closures since the latter’s independence in 1962. These closures are motivated by broader political tensions over territory and influence in the Maghreb. The most recent closure of the border began in 1994.

⁶² Interview with Algerian official, Algiers, 2019.

C. Equipment

The third impediment is insufficient equipment, especially surveillance systems. Systems such as fixed and mobile radar; drones; and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems are essential for regional states to control long borders with minimal personnel. Deployment of such equipment has improved since 2011, either purchased directly by Maghrebi states or provided via donor aid programs. In particular, Algeria has expanded its ISR capacity, now fielding an indigenously developed and funded drone (the El-Jazaïr-54), both for surveillance and direct targeting of terrorist groups, and will soon receive new ISR aircraft purchased from the United States.⁶³ However, stakeholders view access to and deployment of surveillance equipment as insufficient given the magnitude of the territory to cover. Tunisian officials have flagged their shortage of advanced surveillance equipment, such as drones and radar, especially in the porous areas along the northern border with Algeria.⁶⁴

Border security forces in the three states also face gaps in other equipment such as vehicles and communications equipment, although the degree of need varies widely. Algeria and Morocco have specific equipment requests for donors, often including vehicles, communication systems, and specialized equipment such as global position systems.⁶⁵ However, their needs are generally less substantial than those of Tunisia, where one officer bluntly noted, “we don’t have [the] best equipment.” Communications gaps particularly impede Tunisian security officials’ efforts to rapidly check information about border crossers at remote posts against national and international databases.⁶⁶ Furthermore, lack of familiarity with new equipment is reportedly a problem in some field-based units.⁶⁷

Equipment gaps are a particular problem in the maritime domain. Patrol craft and maritime radar are sometimes in short supply, with the greatest gaps in Tunisia. “We need equipment like drones and zodiacs [boats],” explained one Tunisian security official. “Now, we are only able to intercept irregular migrants based on intel or direct patrolling.”⁶⁸

D. Corruption

The fourth impediment is corruption among security personnel posted to the frontiers. Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian soldiers, officers, and customs personnel are often poorly paid, and bribes from smugglers are sometimes twice the amount of an official’s salary.⁶⁹ “The police officers receive bribes to let [smugglers] pass, that’s the sad truth,” explained one Tunisian officer. “They coordinate with the smugglers, so they are not stopped by our patrols.”⁷⁰ In Tunisia, corruption has reportedly increased through the emergence of security force unions, which have successfully pushed for their members’ deployment back to their regions of origin; this push, in turn, has fueled collusion between smugglers and officers.⁷¹

63 Algerian Ministry of Defense, “Destruction de cibles terroristes avec des drones,” June 23, 2019; Maghreb Confidential, “Raytheon’s Spy Planes Ready for Final Descent to Algeria,” No. 1373, February 13, 2020.

64 Interview with a Tunisian security official, Tunis, September 2017.

65 Hanlon and Herbert, *Border Security Challenges in the Grand Maghreb*; interview with a Tunisian military official, February 2019.

66 Interview with a Tunisian security analyst, Tunis, April 2018.

67 Interview with a Tunisian security official, Tunis, April 2018.

68 Interview with a Tunisian security official, Sousse, February 2019.

69 Hanlon and Herbert, *Border Security Challenges in the Grand Maghreb*, 12.

70 Interview with a Tunisian security official, Jendouba, October 2019.

71 Interview with a Tunisian security analyst, Tunis, April 2018.

As noted, however, most corruption on the borders of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia involves commodity smuggling and, to a far lesser degree, drug trafficking. Low-level corruption also facilitates migration across the region's land and maritime borders. At land borders, this corruption in the form of bribes is often essential for migrants to cross the frontiers.⁷² At maritime borders, corruption is less salient. However, in some instances, smuggling networks employ individuals tasked with engaging local security personnel, to facilitate the networks' operations.

Heightened border security in the region has aided rather than deterred corruption, as smugglers and migrants are less able to evade security patrols than in years past, forcing them to engage with and pay security officials. "Using [official] border crossings is now easier and more secure [than cross-border smuggling]," explained a smuggler's assistant in the Algerian city of El Oued, "but in return, bribes must be paid to customs and security agents, and it can be said that smuggling is sponsored by the state."⁷³

E. Political Will

The final impediment to buttressing border security, especially regarding commodity smuggling and migration, is political will. The governments of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia struggle to offer youth in marginalized zones and border areas the economic opportunities and services they demand. Smuggling and migration have traditionally been coping mechanisms for these youth, providing livelihood options via irregular channels. Rigid enforcement of border security—on land borders and in littoral zones—risks exacerbating this discontent by removing irregular trade and migration as options.

In general, the governments have a poor record of creating jobs in the formal economy for young people who are most likely to migrate and in those areas from which many migrants come. Often, the jobs created are inaccessible to most young people, due to entrenched structural inequality. In the Maghreb, residents' access to education, government services, and economic opportunity often depends on their family and connections, which subverts even donor efforts to spark economic development in underserved areas. One Tunisian professional noted that personal connections, not objective need or potential, determined access to donor-funded innovation incubators in an underserved area.⁷⁴

The heightened salience of stability and politics in the Maghreb has not led to a wholesale repudiation of engagement with Europe on border security initiatives. Rather, it has led to security agencies adopting a two-level approach, engaging in some highly visible enforcement efforts intended to indicate action to international partners, while quietly adopting a far more nuanced and pragmatic approach when dealing with commodity smugglers and irregular migrants. This political will—and the importance of semiporous borders to domestic political constituencies—is the most important factor shaping border security in the Maghreb, and the one to which the European Union and its Member States seem least attuned.

This political will ... is the most important factor shaping border security in the Maghreb, and the one to which the European Union and its Member States seem least attuned.

⁷² Hanlon and Herbert, *Border Security Challenges in the Grand Maghreb*, 13.

⁷³ Interview with a smuggler's assistant, Oued Souf, May 2016.

⁷⁴ Herbert, *'La mal vie'*, 25.

5 European Cooperation with the Maghreb on Border Security in the Region

Aligning the migration and enforcement priorities of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, on the one hand, and Europe, on the other, remains a challenge. As detailed above, the governments of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia have an ambiguous relationship with irregular migration, viewing it as a useful pressure valve during times of heightened unrest. In their cooperation with the Maghreb, European states have focused on curbing irregular migration and stopping transnational terrorism, although at a bilateral level the focus varies by country. The United Kingdom, France, and to a lesser degree Germany—all countries that have faced or lost nationals to terrorist incidents linked to the Maghreb—have focused their support on security sector reforms on counterterrorism.⁷⁵ Italy and Spain, in contrast, have focused heavily on irregular migration, reflecting their status as countries of first arrival for most irregular migrants departing from the Maghreb.

A. *What Has Been the Focus of this Cooperation?*

Curbing irregular migration has been the European Union's and its Member States' longstanding enforcement objective and was key in driving the bloc's outreach to Tunisia and Morocco on border security issues in the 1990s.⁷⁶ Central to this was the negotiation of the Schengen Agreement and the subsequent implementation of the treaty. The development of a common visa policy for the bloc affected Maghrebis' ability to obtain visas for travel to Europe.⁷⁷ One Algerian recounted that in 1991 "people began queuing at two or three in the morning near the French consulate to hand in their visa files; the queues were 40 meters long."⁷⁸ Limits on legal mobility drove increasing numbers of North Africans to migrate irregularly. Because the European Union's external borders were contiguous with those of the Maghrebi states after Spain joined in 1986, the issue of Maghrebi migration became central for the European Union and its Member States. The issue has remained a priority ever since, although public and political interest has been piqued by specific events, including a sharp rise in migrants arriving in Spain from Morocco in the mid-2000s and in migrants embarking from Tunisia to Italy in 2011.

The European Union and its Member States have sought to incentivize the Maghrebi states' greater border security control, to limit embarkations and ensure that Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia readmit their nationals arrested or detained on migration grounds in Europe. More controversial is European states' unsuccessful attempt to secure agreements from Morocco and Tunisia on the readmission of foreign nationals. One key incentive is aid. Significant amounts of aid, including training, equipment, and development assistance, have been disbursed bilaterally and multilaterally, via mechanisms such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF Africa). Stakeholders have used large amounts of aid to curb irregular migration from the region, by strengthening border security or the governance of legal migration, or by addressing the root

75 Anthony Dworkin and Fatim-Zohra El Malki, "The Southern Front Line: EU Counterterrorism Cooperation with Tunisia and Morocco," European Council on Foreign Relations, February 15, 2018.

76 Badalič, "Tunisia's Role in the EU External Migration Policy," 85.

77 Herbert, *'La mal vie'*, 4.

78 Herbert, *'La mal vie'*, 4.

causes of irregular migration in the region.⁷⁹ Another common incentive is visa facilitation agreements. The agreements aim to ease visa access to Europe for some groups of Moroccans, Algerians, and Tunisians, thereby meeting a central Maghrebi interest in increased mobility and economic opportunity in Europe for their nationals. Maghrebi states' perception that their nationals' irregular migration offers some benefit also informs their prioritization of greater legal migration opportunities to Europe. Governments in Morocco and Tunisia, and to a lesser degree in Algeria, focus on easing legal pathways for their nationals to travel, study, and work in Europe, including via structured guest worker programs.⁸⁰

Terrorism is the other key concern. Efforts to harden borders to counter the movement of terrorists and foreign fighters have continued since the early 2000s. However, these efforts assumed new salience given the high proportion of Maghrebi nationals who traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight with the Islamic State and the spate of attacks in Europe linked to the Islamic State (and to Maghrebi nationals) in the mid-2010s. In addition, terrorist attacks within the Maghreb resulting in many European fatalities have prompted specific bilateral counterterrorism efforts on border security, such as those between the United Kingdom and Tunisia. Similar to approaches to migration, engagement methods between European and Maghrebi states are expansive, encompassing intelligence-sharing, security force assistance, and efforts to counter violent extremism by addressing the drivers of such activity.

B. What Forms Does this Cooperation Take?

The European Union and its Member States engage and coordinate with countries in the Maghreb routinely, mainly on a bilateral level, although the European Union is attempting to forge a more direct role as a bloc. The degree of engagement differs dramatically by each country in the Maghreb.

The most significant operational coordination exists between Morocco and Spain. The two states have maintained relatively close relations on migration and border security issues since the early 1990s.⁸¹ This includes engagement on securing not only the two states' maritime border but also the land border between Morocco and the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. The enclaves have presented a complicated challenge to cooperation, due to Moroccan claims that they are occupied territory. However, both sides have a significant stake in positive bilateral relations, as Spain steers aid, labor migration opportunities, and diplomatic support to Morocco, and the latter offers vital assistance in limiting irregular migration and drug trafficking to Spain and in readmitting some third-country nationals expelled from the two enclaves.⁸²

The European Union and its Member States engage and coordinate with countries in the Maghreb routinely, mainly on a bilateral level, although the European Union is attempting to forge a more direct role as a bloc.

79 EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, *Annual Report: 2018* (Brussels: European Union, 2019), 14.

80 Commission of the European Communities, "Intensified Cooperation," 5; Luca Lixi, *Beyond Transnational Deals: Building Lasting Migration Partnerships in the Mediterranean* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2017), 11–12.

81 Lixi, *Beyond Transnational Deals*, 5.

82 European Council on Refugees and Exiles, "Spain: Two Persons Pushed Back to Morocco after 300 Attempt to Cross Border Fence in Ceuta," updated January 23, 2020.

At a functional level, both states have deployed liaison officers, and surveillance, information-sharing, and joint patrols occur regularly.⁸³ “We enter their territory and they enter ours,” explained one Moroccan officer. “We cooperate and share information.”⁸⁴ Around the two enclaves, Moroccan authorities directly guard the frontier, helping to thwart irregular migrants’ efforts to cross the border.⁸⁵

This relationship has been complicated, however, as Morocco frequently links the intensity of cooperation—and enforcement activities more broadly—to the country’s broader diplomatic demands or disputes with Spain or the European Union. Such links to issues beyond migration or border security, including disputes over fisheries off the Western Sahara, underscore the degree to which both migration and border security in the region are tied inextricably to other important Maghrebi government goals.

Coordination and cooperation with European states are more limited in Algeria and Tunisia. Officially, Tunisia and Italy have negotiated numerous agreements and joint statements since the 1990s.⁸⁶ Most recently, a 2017 joint declaration by the two countries’ foreign ministers committed the countries to cooperate on maritime border management and countering irregular migration.⁸⁷ Patrol craft and training have also occurred.⁸⁸ The functional impact of these agreements, however, has been limited. “[At the operational level] we don’t have effective communication with Italian forces,” explained one Tunisian security official. “The only real communication channels are at the central level at the Ministry of Interior.”⁸⁹ Much of this stems from the two states’ reluctance to share information with foreign governments, a trend that has also stymied cooperation within the region.

In addition to offering coordination, the European Union and its Member States have funded various programs to strengthen border security to address either terrorism or irregular migration in the Maghreb. In 2018, for example, EUTF Africa funded two projects totaling 95 million euros to build better border security and search-and-rescue capacity in Morocco and Tunisia alone.⁹⁰ Overall, one analysis from the U.S. Department of State found 93 separate border security programs funded by international donors in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia since 2014.⁹¹ Most of these programs focused on training, equipment, or aid in building physical infrastructure.

Training is the most ubiquitous form of aid for border security. Training occurs both multilaterally, with funding coming from EUTF Africa, and by individual European states, such as Germany, which has invested in border security training in Tunisia.⁹² The three Maghrebi countries also have access to the Border Security Management Staff College, run by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.⁹³ The training

83 Tasnim Abderrahim, “Pushing the Boundaries: How to Create More Effective Migration Cooperation across the Mediterranean,” European Council on Foreign Relations, January 15, 2019.

84 Interview with a Moroccan official, Rabat, January 2019.

85 Chloe Teevan, “Morocco, the EU, and the Migration Dilemma,” European Council on Foreign Relations, November 19, 2018.

86 Lixi, *Beyond Transnational Deals*, 11–12.

87 EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, “Border Management Programme for the Maghreb Region (BMP-Maghreb): (T05-EUTF-NOA-REG-07)” (action document, n.d.).

88 Herbert, “At the Edge,” 22.

89 Interview with a Tunisian security official, Sousse, February 2018.

90 EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, *Annual Report: 2018*, 41.

91 U.S. Department of State, “TSCTP and West Africa Border and Regional Security Program Matrix.”

92 Alex Walsh and Jana Treffler, “What Is Germany Bringing to Tunisia’s Security Sector?” Middle East Institute, August 13, 2019.

93 U.S. Department of State, “Snapshot of Border Security Programs in Tunisia,” 2017; U.S. Department of State, “Snapshot of Border Security Programs in Morocco,” 2017; U.S. Department of State, “Snapshot of Border Security Programs in Algeria,” 2017.

is expansive, including technical instruction on border security surveillance systems, close-quarters battle training for border security forces, and strategic planning instruction for upper-level government personnel.⁹⁴ Most of the training, however, is classroom-based with limited follow-up opportunities. Some donor overlap and duplication of training exists, especially in Tunisia, where numerous actors, such as the United States, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, are active in community engagement and policing and have slightly different approaches and national understandings of relevant concepts. Mixed donor coordination on this and other issues has led to security forces' limited absorption and practical application of skills.

Countries have also disbursed significant volumes of equipment, often on a bilateral basis. However, while regional security forces often voice their need for equipment, some officers privately express cynicism about such European programs. "European programs are very weak because it only focuses on offering [our] countries some pieces of equipment like boats and cars, and only visibly working on the security side," noted a Tunisian military official. "It's inefficient as it cannot be enough to stop irregular migration."⁹⁵ More pressing are development efforts or additional legal migration opportunities that could help address some drivers of irregular migration in the region. European diplomats tasked with overseeing the design and disbursement of equipment are similarly frustrated. "Whenever there is an incident involving migration," explained one, "we hear calls for more equipment."⁹⁶ Often, however, the requests are tied to nonmigration priorities, such as bulletproof vests and armored vehicles.⁹⁷

C. What Are the Results of This Cooperation to Date?

While European cooperation with the Maghreb has produced results on counterterrorism, the results on combating irregular migration are more mixed. For decades, Europe has provided aid to Morocco, Tunisia, and to a lesser degree Algeria to strengthen borders and deter migration. New EU instruments have been developed, such as EUTF Africa, to apply hundreds of millions of euros in programming. However, migration from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia to Europe rose substantially in 2017, and continued at high levels in 2020 and 2021.⁹⁸ One Tunisian security official bluntly noted, "[European] programs and measures only impact the routes the migrants choose."⁹⁹

The contrast between the impact of cooperation on counterterrorism, on the one hand, and cooperation on tackling irregular migration, on the other, highlights the challenge arising when donor priorities do not match those of the partner state. Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia are deeply invested in the counterterrorism struggle, viewing groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State as significant challenges. As a result, they have readily engaged with the European Union on the issue. This degree of cooperation and engagement has arguably supported one European priority: limiting cross-border terrorism and the recurrence of bloody incidents such as the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris and the 2016 bombings in Brussels. Maghrebi security forces, specifically their specialized units and counterterrorism

94 U.S. Department of State, "TSCTP and West Africa Border and Regional Security Program Matrix."

95 Interview with a Tunisian military official, remote, February 2018.

96 Interview with a diplomat, Tunis, June 2018.

97 Interview with a diplomat, Tunis, February 2019.

98 Herbert, "At the Edge"; author tracking of migration data from European, Algerian, and Tunisian government sources.

99 Interview with a Tunisian security official, Sousse, February 2018.

efforts, have benefited from the provision of equipment and training. Falling numbers of terrorist attacks and declining government casualties in Tunisia particularly demonstrate the success of these international efforts.¹⁰⁰

But priorities between the two regions are far less aligned on the issue of migration and cross-border smuggling. For European governments, migration is highly politically salient, and reducing irregular migration is a top policy priority. In contrast, the emigration of Maghrebi nationals is politically sensitive for the governments of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. While the Maghrebi states' capacity to crack down on migration (and border security more broadly) grew significantly between 2011 and 2021, their capacity to address the systemic factors driving nationals' irregular migration and cross-border smuggling has not kept pace. The impact of this imbalance manifested in the surge of irregular migration from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia in the late 2010s. Economic, social, and governance challenges have grown in Maghrebi states—underscored by the rise of social protests in Algeria and Tunisia and of local protests in parts of northeast Morocco and Tunisia proximate to embarkation zones.¹⁰¹ These tensions, and the need to lessen them, have prompted heightened tolerance for Maghrebi nationals' irregular migration.

In turn, as economic prospects have worsened and social tensions have increased in Tunisia and Morocco, the salience of legal migration opportunities has increased but with few results. Expectations by Maghrebi governments of EU visa liberalization predicated on migration cooperation have gone largely unmet.¹⁰² While the number of visas issued by European states in recent years has increased, so has the rejection rate—38 percent of Algerian applicants for visas to Schengen states were declined in 2020, up from 26 percent in 2014.¹⁰³ This trend is likely to continue in 2022, with France reportedly planning to shrink the number of visas issued to Algerians and Moroccans by 50 percent, while dropping the number of visas for Tunisians by one-third.¹⁰⁴ Onerous access to European visas has prompted both popular frustration and Maghrebi governments' attempts to incorporate the visa issue into negotiations on other EU priorities, such as trade.¹⁰⁵

Expectations by Maghrebi governments of EU visa liberalization predicated on migration cooperation have gone largely unmet.

When the European Union has applied pressure, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia have attempted to limit migrant embarkations from their shores, through heightened patrols or more-focused efforts to identify and arrest migrants and smugglers. But as the sharp rise in departures by Moroccans, Algerians, and Tunisians demonstrates, these security efforts remain weak. This pressure has also driven heavy-handed activities,

100 Matt Herbert, "Warning Signs from Tunisia's Localised Terrorist Insurgency," *ISS Today*, Institute for Security Studies, January 29, 2020; Matt Herbert, "Terrorism in Tunisia: More than Just Foreign Connections," *ISS Today*, Institute for Security Studies, July 1, 2019.

101 Carlotta Gall, "Young and Unemployed, Tunisians Agitate for a 'Second Revolution,'" *The New York Times*, May 27, 2017; Lisa Bryant, "Algeria Marks One-Year Anniversary of Anti-Government Protests," *Voice of America*, February 15, 2020; Aida Alami, "Morocco's Stability Is Roiled by Months Long Protests over Fishmonger's Death," *The New York Times*, August 26, 2017; Micallef et al., *Conflict, Coping and COVID*, 58.

102 Tasnim Abderrahim, *A Tale of Two Agreements: EU Migration Cooperation with Morocco and Tunisia* (Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2019), 22–23.

103 European Commission, "2020 Schengen Visa Statistics by Third Country," accessed February 15, 2022; European Commission, "2014 Schengen Visa Statistics by Third Country," accessed February 15, 2022.

104 Alison Hird, "France Slashes Visas for Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco in Row over Illegal Migration," *RFI*, September 28, 2021.

105 Margaux Mazellier, "Visas: cette Europe qui ne veut plus de nous," *TelQuel*, February 11, 2020.

including Moroccan naval vessels firing on migrant boats and the internal deportation campaign targeting foreign migrants in northern Morocco.¹⁰⁶ Often, non-Maghrebi irregular migrants are the focus of such campaigns, likely because of their relatively powerless position in the three states and the ways in which their arrest or deportations may relieve social tensions. Foreigners also offer a low-risk means of satiating European demands for action against irregular migration.

Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia periodically take action against their nationals attempting to migrate irregularly, although doing so is more politically challenging for the three governments. The intensity and duration of rigorous enforcement against their nationals are closely linked to the governments' shifting perceptions of the intensity of social tensions among their population and the risk of political unrest. When the risk of unrest is high, the three governments seem willing to ignore international pressure on irregular migration or engage in pro forma enforcement against citizens who attempt to migrate irregularly.

For the most part, migration management in the Maghreb appears to be an issue of both capacity and incentivization. The European Union seems to believe that if Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia receive sufficient training and equipment to secure their land and maritime frontiers, and if the European Union eases onerous visa rules for some categories of Maghrebis, then the Maghreb will agree to help Europe protect its southern borders. But stakeholders should not perceive Maghrebi states' decisions to step up or lessen border controls only as a means of pressuring Europe or extracting concessions. Rather, significant domestic factors—mainly linked to stability and politics—impact how Maghrebi states assess the relative prioritization of migration management compared to the risks it poses.

Ultimately, the Maghreb's cooperation on migration issues boils down to the reality that the three governments prioritize regime stability over international relations. This priority also reveals a savvy, and largely correct, calculation that the European Union and its Member States will ultimately forgive periods of heightened irregular migration in order to preserve broader relationships with Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.

6 Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Despite the mixed results of European cooperation with the Maghreb on migration and border security issues, the European Union and its Member States have little choice but to continue engaging with Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. The Maghreb is simply too close and connected to Europe for the latter to wall off or ignore.

European frustration that significant aid has not substantially reduced irregular migration is understandable. Simply put, the sort of zero-tolerance policies on migration and smuggling along many European and North American borders have not been replicated in the Maghreb. Rather, irregular migration continues at significant levels, albeit far below the crisis levels that Europe saw in the mid-2010s. Low-level smuggling remains economically central to many border areas across the region.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Savage and Omar Kabbadj, "Les circonstances de la mort de Hayat Belkacem," *TelQuel*, September 17, 2018; Zach Campbell, "As Spanish Rescue Policy Changes, Warnings over Migrant Drownings," *The New Humanitarian*, June 27, 2019.

The challenge of collaboratively addressing irregular migration stands in stark contrast to the successes achieved in European-Maghrebi cooperation against terrorism. Key to the latter's success is the shared view that terrorism poses a major national security threat for states on both sides of the Mediterranean. But European and Maghrebi states do not agree on the threat posed by irregular migration and the degree to which they should prioritize it compared to other security challenges. Maghrebi states view the issue as less of a priority, particularly compared to the risk of instability and potential social unrest arising from crackdowns at the border. Yet, the decision to promote regime stability and mitigate potential social unrest via somewhat relaxed migration and border security policies arguably also benefits European states.

These realities suggest three key lessons for policymakers:

- ▶ **Migration and border security are now more politically salient in the Maghreb than they have been in years.** To succeed, Europe's migration-focused interventions must incorporate this reality and seek new ways to build stability and security force capacity, including by according greater weight to their partners' migration priorities. For the European Union and its Member States, this may require potentially contentious policy choices, such as the implementation of more mobility options. These options include visa liberalization and the expansion of temporary guest worker programs for Maghrebi nationals or the disbursement of more development aid to border regions and other underdeveloped areas.
- ▶ **Border security is not a zero-sum issue, nor do Western approaches to border security transfer easily.** In the Maghreb, border porosity for some products is by design. The tacit acceptance of commodity smuggling is a de facto economic development scheme in underserved border regions, as well as a useful tactic for security forces' collection of intelligence. It also frees up security forces to better focus on threats the government perceives to be most pressing. Attempts to implement the sort of nominally zero-tolerance approaches seen in many European and North American states upset this system and leave both the state and border community members in a worse position. Rather than attempting to graft foreign programs onto new environments, policymakers and diplomats should engage local officials to better understand how traditional border security systems work and why. This engagement may mean that European policymakers need to modify their expectations of what effective border security in the Maghreb looks like and whether a certain degree of Maghrebi irregular migration to Europe is tolerable, in the pursuit of more-acute security goals.
- ▶ **Development efforts should complement security programs.** As one Moroccan parliamentarian emphasized, "securitized approaches make it more difficult to cross borders but do not stop cross-border flows."¹⁰⁷ The European Union and its Member States should target development aid to border regions and other underserved areas, zones where most EU support currently involves law enforcement. In combination with national programs by Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, donor development efforts can play a key role in creating viable alternatives to smuggling and in erasing the economic drivers of irregular migration. The Maghreb's entrenched structural inequality risks subverting the impact of donor development programs; therefore, efforts to counter such inequality should emphasize program design, implementation, and evaluation. Strategic coordination and

107 Interview with a Moroccan politician, Tangier, February 2019.

coherence are critical among programs designed to build security force capacity and to address social gaps in border regions. Ideally, the donor community as a whole should regularly coordinate on ongoing, planned border security and development programs, to ensure coherence among programs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored both the potential and the challenges around border security in the Maghreb. It has underscored that Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia can functionally halt a substantial amount of movement—both legal and irregular—across their respective frontiers.

However, the pandemic has also underscored the political and social challenges that exist for Maghrebi states in enforcing heightened border security. Throughout the region, border closures have led to economic deprivation for communities reliant on cross-border trade, heightening social and political tensions. Irregular migration by Moroccans, Algerians, and Tunisians surged to ten-year highs. Despite the ebbing of infection levels across the region at the time of writing, and a relaxation in border control approaches, little evidence has emerged to indicate a reversal in the dislocation caused by COVID-19 and the strict mobility controls mobilized to slow the spread of the disease.

European states should assess the lessons that can be learned from Maghrebi border controls in recent decades and during COVID-19 closely. While they have little choice but to engage with their Maghrebi counterparts on border security issues, European governments have great latitude in determining how they engage. If engagement is to be productive and sustainable for both the Maghreb and Europe, there is an urgent need to develop approaches that are strategic, predicated on addressing underlying drivers of border insecurity, and that recognize political exigencies linked to border issues. Ultimately, these must cater not just to European needs, but also to the needs and interests of governments and citizens in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.

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About the Author



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