



## Migration, Refugees, and National Security in North Africa

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### Introduction

Migration and refugee movements have long defined North Africa's pivotal role as both a destination and a major transit hub on routes between sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Intense displacement, persistent economic challenges, and regional instability continue to propel mass movement, bringing opportunities and risks. This article analyzes mixed migration flows, refugee conditions, and the critical intersection with national security, governance, and human rights across North Africa in 2025.

### Migration and Refugee Trends

#### Scale and Dynamics of Movement

North Africa hosts significant migrant and refugee populations. By mid-2024, there were approximately 16.6 million forcibly displaced and stateless persons in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, with 1.3 million refugees and 353,000 asylum seekers in Northern Africa alone as of the end of 2023<sup>[1][2]</sup>. Libya, a major transit country, housed over 88,000 refugees and asylum seekers as of April 2025—a 12% increase from the previous year, driven by regional turmoil and shifting migration routes<sup>[3]</sup>.

Key patterns:

- **Rising departures:** Departures from Libya toward Europe increased by 116% in 2025, accounting for 91% of arrivals in Italy. Tunisia, once a leading point of departure, accounted for only 6%<sup>[4]</sup>.
- **Maritime dangers:** Despite a 54% decline in irregular migration attempts to Yemen and Europe compared to 2023, North Africa remains central to unsafe sea journeys, most notably along the Central Mediterranean route<sup>[5]</sup>.



- **Conflict-driven influx:** Civil wars and regional crises—such as Sudan’s ongoing conflict—have sent waves of refugees northward, straining the limited infrastructure in Libya and Egypt<sup>[6]</sup>.

**Table 1. Major North African Migrant and Refugee Populations (2025 Estimate)**

Country	Refugees/Asylum Seekers	Total Migrants (Incl. Undocumented)
Libya	88,000	719,000 <sup>[3]</sup>
Egypt	500,000+	9.1 million <sup>[3][1]</sup>
Tunisia	27,000	59,000 <sup>[1]</sup>
Morocco	8,000	101,000 <sup>[1]</sup>
Algeria	100,000+	244,000 <sup>[1]</sup>

## Drivers of Migration in North Africa

Migration drivers are deeply entwined with the region’s structural vulnerabilities:

- **Conflict and insecurity:** State fragility and violence (notably in Sudan and Libya) remain the primary push factors<sup>[7][6]</sup>.
- **Economic hardship:** Food insecurity, high unemployment, and lack of legal labor mobility fuel irregular migration especially via the Sahel<sup>[3][8]</sup>.
- **Climate change:** Droughts, flash floods, and disasters such as Storm Daniel in Libya exacerbate displacement, particularly among children<sup>[6]</sup>.
- **Governance gaps:** Fragmented migration management and the lack of legal migration pathways increase reliance on smuggling networks<sup>[3][5]</sup>.

**Figure 1. Departures to Europe from Libya and Tunisia, 2024-2025**

[image:1]

*Caption: The sharp rise in departures from Libya compared to the dramatic reduction from Tunisia reflects evolving migration corridors in 2025.*

## National Security Implications



Migration, especially in irregular forms, now sits at the heart of security and sovereignty debates within North African states.

- **Border control and sovereignty:** Governments view mass, uncontrolled migration flows as direct challenges to sovereignty and security, prompting increased investment in border surveillance and security technology (AI, drones, big data)<sup>[9]</sup>.
- **Terrorism and organized crime:** The region’s role as a migration crossroads has enabled the proliferation of smuggling and trafficking networks. Violent actors sometimes exploit migrant routes for illicit trafficking, contributing to links between migration, organized crime, and—in rare cases—terrorism<sup>[9]</sup>.
- **Militarization of migration policy:** Securitized migration governance, often influenced by EU partnerships, prioritizes border enforcement and containment over humanitarian management. These approaches have led to documented human rights violations, including arbitrary detention and violence against migrants and refugees<sup>[3][10]</sup>.
- **Regional instability:** The presence of large, unintegrated migrant and refugee populations—sometimes in poorly regulated camps or detention sites—can lead to social tensions or disrupt local economies.

**Table 2. National Security Responses to Migration Challenges**

Country	Security Responses	Key Issues
Egypt	Military deployment to border with Libya & Gaza	Refugee influx from Sudan; fears from Gaza crisis <sup>[9]</sup>
Libya	EU-funded coast guard, militia involvement	Human rights abuses, trafficking, lack of oversight <sup>[3][9]</sup>
Tunisia	Tighter laws, prosecution for trafficking	Social tension, influx from Libya/Sudan <sup>[9]</sup>
Morocco	Intensified patrols, tech investments	Trafficking, EU cooperation <sup>[9]</sup>

## Human Rights and Migration

The securitization of migration has produced acute human rights concerns:

- **Detention & Abuse:** Migrant detention centers in Libya are notorious for abuse, disease, and lack of legal recourse<sup>[3][11]</sup>.



- **Discrimination & Xenophobia:** Sub-Saharan migrants face growing hostility, notably in Tunisia, where reports of violence have surged<sup>[11][12]</sup>.
- **Lack of protection:** National frameworks often conflate migration with criminality, overlooking asylum obligations and economic contributions migrants make to host societies<sup>[3]</sup>.
- **International scrutiny:** The EU's border outsourcing to North African states (e.g., funding Libyan coast guards) has been criticized for prioritizing containment over rights<sup>[3]</sup>.

## Figure 2. Migrant Deaths and Disappearances Attempting Sea Crossings from North Africa

[image:2]

*Caption: Despite increased interceptions and border controls, thousands die or disappear annually attempting to cross the Mediterranean, underscoring persistent dangers.*

## Regional and International Governance

### National Policy and Regional Cooperation

Migration governance in North Africa is characterized by a disconnect between national priorities and regional realities:

- **Fragmented frameworks:** Policies remain heavily shaped by security concerns and external (especially European) demands, rather than integrated regional approaches<sup>[3]</sup>.
- **Inadequate legal pathways:** Legal migration routes remain few, driving people to riskier, irregular journeys<sup>[3][9]</sup>.
- **Need for reform:** Experts advocate for harmonizing frameworks, supporting community-based care, and embedding human rights in migration policies to reduce abuses and unlock migration's developmental potential<sup>[3]</sup>.

### International Partnerships and Pressure

- EU, through bilateral agreements and funding, has strongly shaped North Africa's border management strategies, prioritizing security over humanitarian needs<sup>[3][9]</sup>.



- Humanitarian organizations stress the importance of balancing security with fulfilling international refugee protection obligations.

## Economic Impacts and Developmental Aspects

- **Remittances:** Migrant remittances to North Africa now surpass foreign direct investment, supporting families and local economies<sup>[3]</sup>.
- **Brain drain vs. labor mobility:** While outward migration can contribute to skills shortages at home, legal labor mobility pathways could transform migration into a force for development regionally<sup>[3][5]</sup>.
- **Local pressures:** Large refugee populations increase competition for scarce services—education, healthcare, housing—particularly in host communities struggling with economic hardship<sup>[6]</sup>.

## Figure 3. Main Nationalities of Migrants in Libya, 2025

[image:3]

*Caption: Libya remains home to diverse migrant groups, with significant populations from sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.*

## Policy Recommendations

To stabilize the region, maximize migration's benefits, and reduce risks, research highlights several priorities for North African governments and their partners:

- **Adopt integrated approaches:** Harmonize migration, security, and development policies, balancing sovereignty with regional realities<sup>[3][9]</sup>.
- **Expand legal pathways:** Invest in regional agreements and international partnerships that regularize migration, reduce trafficking, and protect rights<sup>[3]</sup>.
- **Build capacity and resilience:** Develop local infrastructure, border management, and migrant support services, especially for host communities<sup>[3][6]</sup>.
- **Protect human rights:** End unlawful detention, strengthen judicial redress, and combat discrimination to affirm core international obligations<sup>[3][11]</sup>.
- **Foster regional consultation:** Boost regional governance mechanisms to coordinate migration and refugee policy, share data, and address structural causes<sup>[3][7]</sup>.



## Conclusion

North Africa's migration crossroads brings opportunity—and acute risk. Flows remain driven by violence, poverty, and climate shocks, and are managed in an increasingly security-focused environment. Without urgent reform toward integrated, rights-based frameworks and regional solutions, both migrants and the states concerned remain vulnerable. Migration, properly governed, holds promise as a catalyst for regional stability and growth, rather than a perennial source of crisis.

**Note:** All tables and figures synthesized from official migration/trend reports and recent regional data where possible<sup>[4][1][3][9][5][6]</sup>.

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