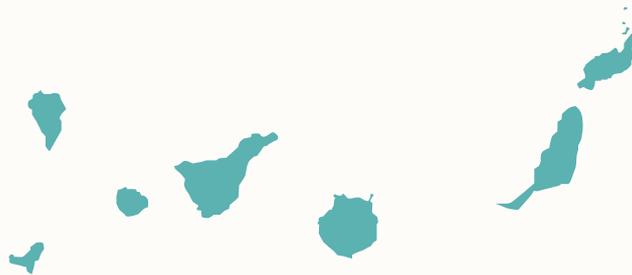


MARITIME MIGRATION TO EUROPE

Focus on the Overseas Route
to the Canary Islands



The opinions expressed in the report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout the report do not imply expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of IOM concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning its frontiers or boundaries.

IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental organization, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration; advance understanding of migration issues; encourage social and economic development through migration; and uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

This material has been funded by the Peace and Human Rights Division of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland; however, the views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the Government of Switzerland's official policies.

Publisher: International Organization for Migration
17 route des Morillons
1211 Geneva 19
P.O. Box 17
Switzerland
Tel.: +41.22.717 91 11
Fax: +41.22.798 61 50
Email: hq@iom.int
Internet: www.iom.int

Cover: The map is for illustration purposes only. It does not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

Author: Julia Black

Citation: Black, J., 2021. *Maritime Migration to Europe: Focus on the Overseas Route to the Canary Islands*. IOM. Geneva.

ISBN 978-92-9068-961-4 (pdf)
ISBN 978-92-9068-970-6 (print)

© IOM 2021



Some rights reserved. This work is made available under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 IGO License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/igo/legalcode) (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 IGO).*

For further specifications please see the [Copyright and Terms of Use](#).

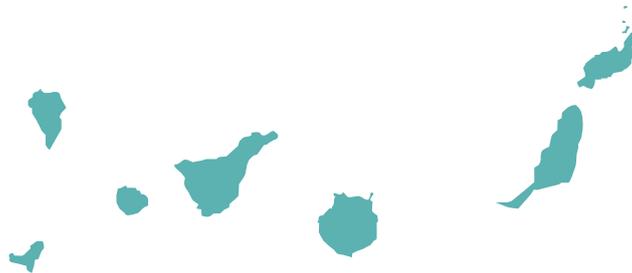
This publication should not be used, published or redistributed for purposes primarily intended for or directed towards commercial advantage or monetary compensation, with the exception of educational purposes e.g. to be included in textbooks.

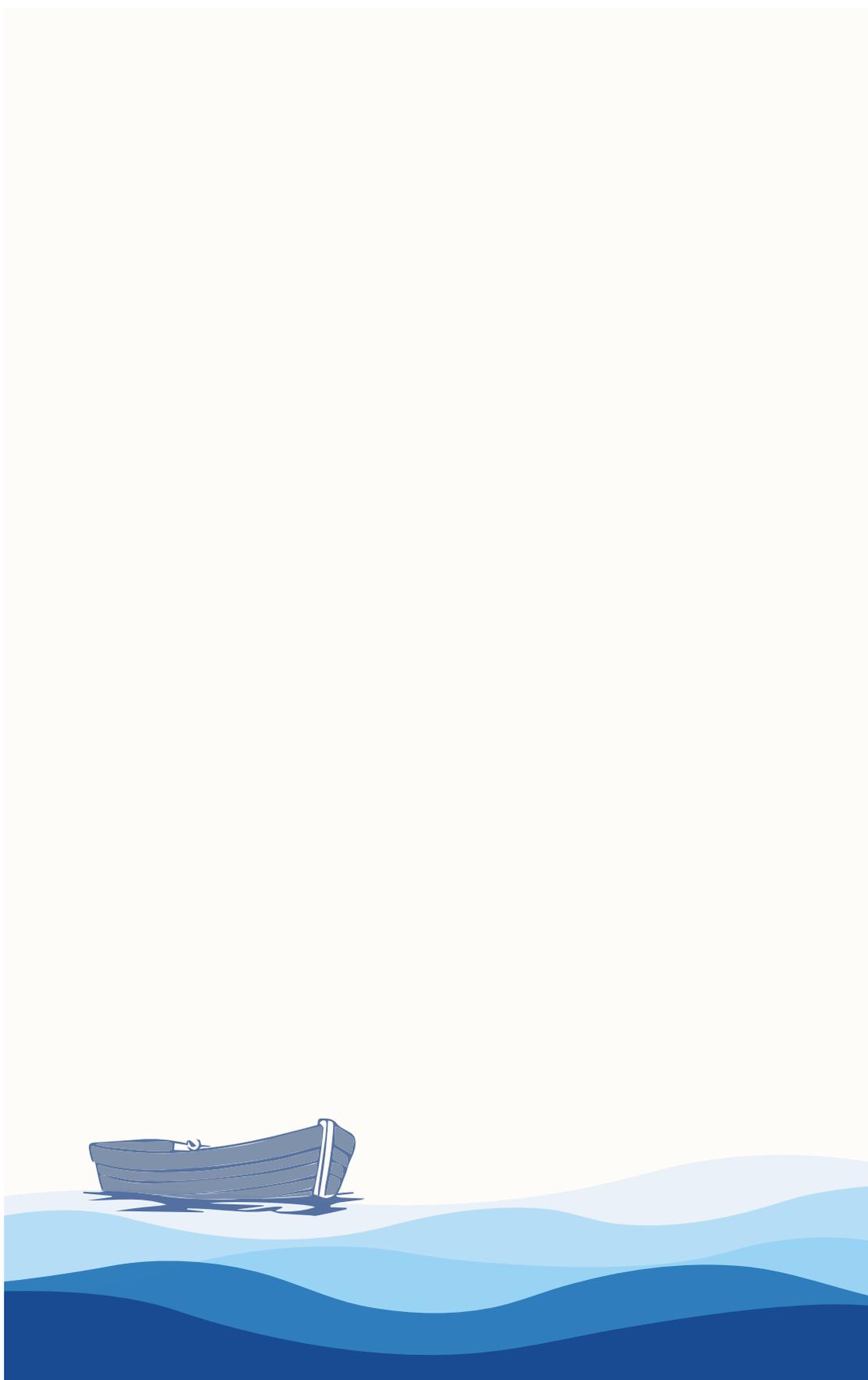
Permissions: Requests for commercial use or further rights and licensing should be submitted to publications@iom.int.

* <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/igo/legalcode>.

MARITIME MIGRATION TO EUROPE

Focus on the Overseas Route to the Canary Islands





INTRODUCTION

Irregular maritime migration to Europe, contrary to popular conception, is less an issue of migrant arrivals and rather a challenge of humanitarian dimensions. With more than 20,000 lives lost in the Mediterranean, and more than 3,100 en route to the Canary Islands,¹ the deaths on maritime migration routes to Europe have profound impacts on core values such as the inviolability of human dignity, not to mention on the tens of thousands of families in countries of origin, transit and destination affected by these losses. This right to dignity, as well as the rights to life and to asylum, is enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This background paper provides context on the main maritime routes to Europe, describing the three main trans-Mediterranean routes² in brief before describing key trends on the overseas route to the Canary Islands. Unless otherwise noted, the evidence provided throughout relies on data on arrivals from European authorities and IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), and interceptions at sea by Turkish and North African coastal authorities, which are included in an [annex](#) to this document. The paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers and practitioners seeking to respond to this humanitarian crisis, as well as for journalists and academics seeking to cover this issue.

¹ Based on the 1,385 documented by IOM's Missing Migrants Project from 2014 to 2020 (IOM, 2021a) and the 1,778 recorded by Cadena SER (Castellano, 2014) from 1996 to 2014.

² Though the Central, Eastern and Western Mediterranean routes as defined below are the most frequented migration passages across the Mediterranean Sea, not all attempted crossings fall neatly into these categories.

TRANS-MEDITERRANEAN MIGRATION: ROUTES IN BRIEF

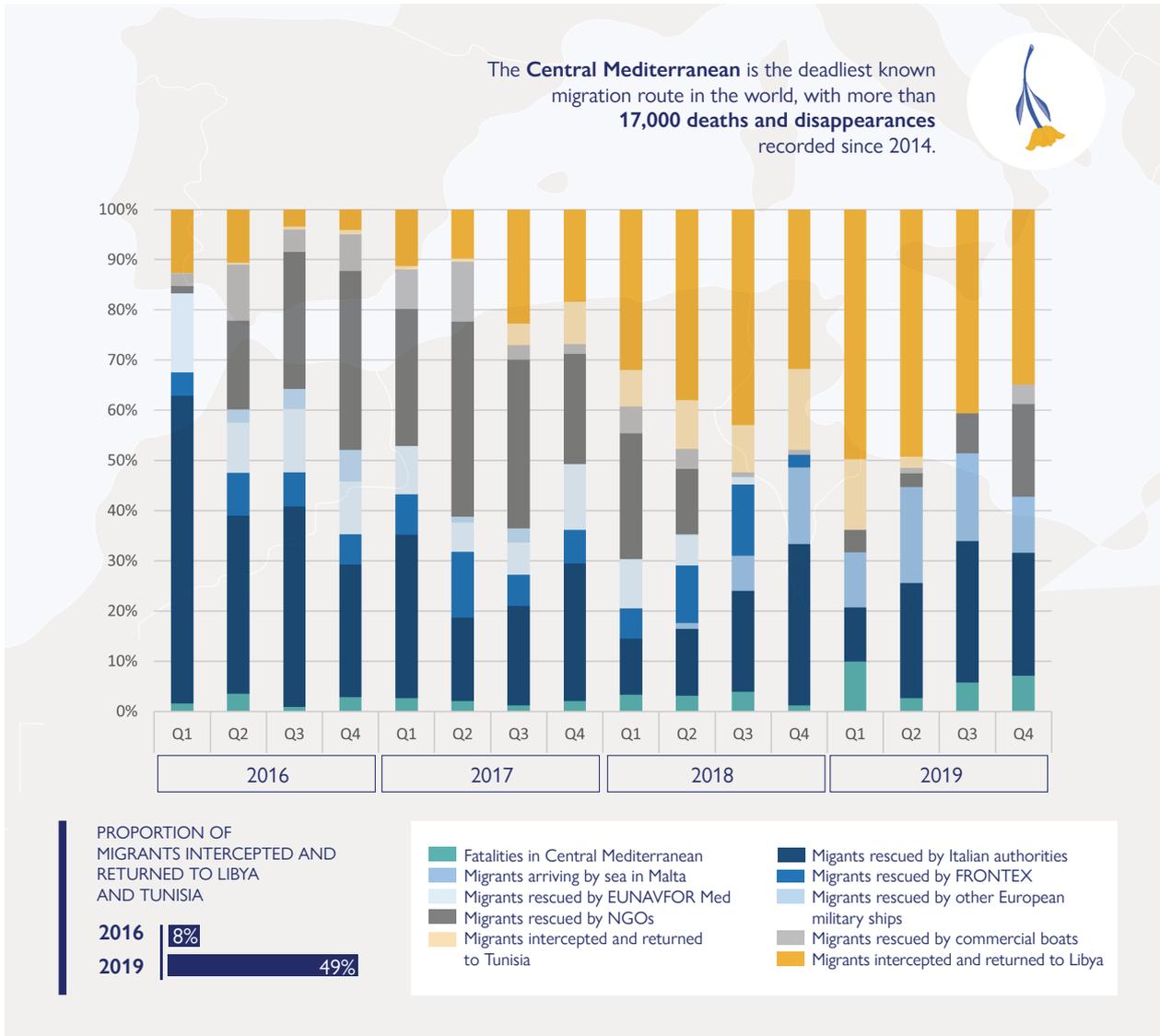
Central Mediterranean

The Central Mediterranean route involves the overseas crossing from North Africa to Italy and its islands and, to a lesser degree, Malta.³ Those migrating along this route generally aim to reach Italian shores but leave from a variety of North African countries bordering the Mediterranean. Though in past years, most migrants have departed from Libya, which is a destination for migrants as well as a transit country, there is also a proportionally small but growing number of departures from Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria. Tunisia in particular has seen an increase in departures, with Tunisian nationals comprising more than 60 per cent of Central Mediterranean crossings in 2020 according to IOM's DTM.

Between 1997 and 2010, an average of about 23,000 migrants arrived in Italy each year by crossing the Mediterranean, though the number of arrivals recorded dropped to less than 10,000 between 2009 and 2010. In 2011, the number of migrants arriving in Europe via the Central Mediterranean route rose dramatically: 62,692 sea arrivals were recorded in Italy, a 13-fold increase compared to the 4,406 recorded in 2010. Migrant arrivals in Italy remained high in the years following 2011 but dropped in mid-2017. However, it is unclear if this is a true reduction in flows or due to more deaths at sea and/or an increase in the number of interceptions of migrants at sea by North African authorities, as data on these factors is not available prior to 2014 and 2016, respectively. The latter is particularly the case, considering that the number of people being returned to North African shores has increased in recent years. Interceptions by the Tunisian and Libyan coast guards accounted for 8 per cent of all search-and-rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean in 2016, but by 2019, 49 per cent of the total number of people recorded attempting to cross were brought back to Tunisia or Libya. This shift can be attributed to several factors, including the decreased maritime patrol area of Italian authorities and the change in European Union/Frontex assets from maritime vessels to drones incapable of conducting rescue at sea.

³ Migrants also arrive irregularly in Italy on maritime routes from Turkey and Greece, albeit less frequently.

Figure 1. Shift in proportion of migrants intercepted/rescued by European, North African and non-governmental actors in the Central Mediterranean, 2016–2019



Source: Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC)(2020); Missing Migrants Project (MMP)(IOM, 2021a); IOM Libya; IOM Tunisia; Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux (FTDES).⁴

Note: No data is available on migrant arrivals in Malta between 2016 and 2017. Data for 2020 is excluded as no data on rescues by various European and non-governmental actors is available from the Italian MRCC.

⁴ All data excluding the figures from the Italian MRCC (2020) cited in the reference section below are available in the annex to this paper.

The Central Mediterranean is the deadliest known migration route in the world, with more than 17,300 deaths and disappearances recorded since 2014. This is due both to the length of the overseas journey, which often takes days, as well as increasingly dangerous smuggling patterns, gaps in search-and-rescue capacity and restrictions on the life-saving work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Two recent trends in smuggling patterns are of particular concern. Migrants increasingly cross the Central Mediterranean in unseaworthy, overloaded inflatable boats; similarly, multiple boats may also be launched at the same time, which complicates search-and-rescue efforts significantly, especially in cases where more than one boat are in distress in the same area.

The Central Mediterranean is also the route where the most disappearances had occurred, though it is likely that many more deaths remain unrecorded. MMP data suggests that the bodies of more than 12,000 people have been lost at sea on this route. In cases involving such disappearances, the MMP methodology always uses the lowest estimate, so it is likely that many more people are missing whose whereabouts remain unknown. There is also strong evidence that many shipwrecks are “invisible” – boats in distress disappear with no survivors – and therefore unrecorded. For example, more than 86 human remains found on Libyan shores recorded by MMP between 2019 and 2020 are not linked to any known shipwreck.

Eastern Mediterranean

The Eastern Mediterranean route involves migration from Turkey to Greece and, to a lesser degree, Cyprus and Bulgaria. It was the main maritime route used for irregular entry to Europe in 2015, when nearly one million migrants attempted to cross⁵ the Mediterranean to reach the continent (IOM, 2021a, 2021b). The number of people using this maritime route dropped sharply after the implementation of the European Union–Turkey Agreement⁶ in late March 2016 and since then has remained far fewer than what was seen in 2015.⁷ The route is largely used by people from the Middle East and South Asia fleeing conflict and instability, notably Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans.

The deaths and disappearances of more than 1,700 people have been recorded on the Eastern Mediterranean route since 2014, with nearly half of these (804) recorded in 2015 alone. Compared to other Mediterranean routes, a higher proportion of people’s remains are recovered here – more than 1,200 since 2014. This means that the identities and profiles of those who die are better known: the deaths of nearly 500 children have been recorded on the Eastern Mediterranean route since 2014, many of whom were under the age of five. The deaths of 271 women and 273 men have also been documented on this route, most of whom were from the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq or Afghanistan.

Western Mediterranean

The Western Mediterranean has been a crossing point between North Africa and Spain for thousands of years. It encompasses several sub-routes, including the maritime journeys from Morocco and the western coast of Algeria across the Strait of Gibraltar and the Alborán Sea as well as the land route into Ceuta and Melilla, two autonomous Spanish cities located in North Africa. Irregular migration flows to Spain have been a common occurrence since the country introduced visa requirements for many North African countries in 1991 as part of the Schengen process. Migrants travelling on this route mostly depart from Morocco – the distance between Spain and Morocco is just 14.4 km at their

⁵ These include 853,650 irregular arrivals in Greece, 91,611 interceptions by the Turkish Coast Guard, and 804 deaths or disappearances documented in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2015.

⁶ This statement, also sometimes called the EU–Turkey Deal, was adopted by European States and the Turkish Government, who are seeking to limit the crossing of migrants from Turkey to the Greek islands.

⁷ This applies only for the maritime route; data on crossings via the Turkey–Greece land border indicates that flows may have increased in recent years.

closest points – though since the mid-2010s, there has also been a small but growing number of boat departures to mainland Spain from the western coast of Algeria. Moroccans have made up the majority of those who reach Spain via the Western Mediterranean among other nationalities, many of whom are young men.

More than 2,200 migrant deaths and disappearances have been recorded on the Western Mediterranean since 2014, with the vast majority involving shipwrecks on the overseas route to the Spanish mainland. However, the land crossings to the Spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta are also hazardous, with several dozen deaths recorded by MMP attributable to violence, sickness and lack of access to health care. In several cases, accidental and violent deaths linked to attempted crossings have occurred at the border fences of these Spanish enclaves.

The number of migrants travelling on the Western Mediterranean route has fluctuated from year to year for much of the past decade, with a notable increase since 2017. Between 2000 and 2016, an average of 7,000 people crossed the Western Mediterranean Sea every year according to IOM's DTM. In 2017, 21,546 people arrived in Spain by sea via this route. In 2018, more people travelling across the Mediterranean opted for this path rather than the other two trans-Mediterranean routes: at least 56,191 people arrived in Spain using this route out of 188,849 attempted crossings recorded that year. In 2019, however, there was a 50 per cent reduction in the number of people arriving in Spain via the Western Mediterranean route (23,470).

OVERSEAS ROUTE TO THE SPANISH CANARY ISLANDS

The route from Western Africa and Morocco to the Spanish Canary Islands has been used by thousands of migrants since at least 1999, which marked the first deaths recorded on this route. On 26 July 1999, a boat carrying more than a dozen migrants sunk just 300 m from the coast of Fuerteventura, killing at least nine people (Vera, 2019). Since that first tragedy, more than 3,100 people have died or gone missing en route to the Canary Islands, according to estimates by IOM's MMP (2021a) and an investigation conducted by Spain's radio network Cadena SER (Castellano, 2014).

On 26 July 1999, a group of young men departed from southern Morocco in a boat just over 6 m long, with an engine of only 15 hp, in an attempt to reach the Canary Islands. Their boat went astray en route, arriving near the more populated dock close to Morro Jable. Hoping to disembark in a less busy area, the driver attempted to reverse course but struck a rock, destabilizing the boat and knocking one of its passengers overboard. The movements made by the passengers in their efforts to save the man who had fallen made the boat capsize. Just 300 m from shore, nine of the people onboard drowned. All of those who drowned were from the same area of Guelmim in Morocco, and at least one was a boy who “could not have been more than 14 years old”, according to one rescuer (Vera, 2019).

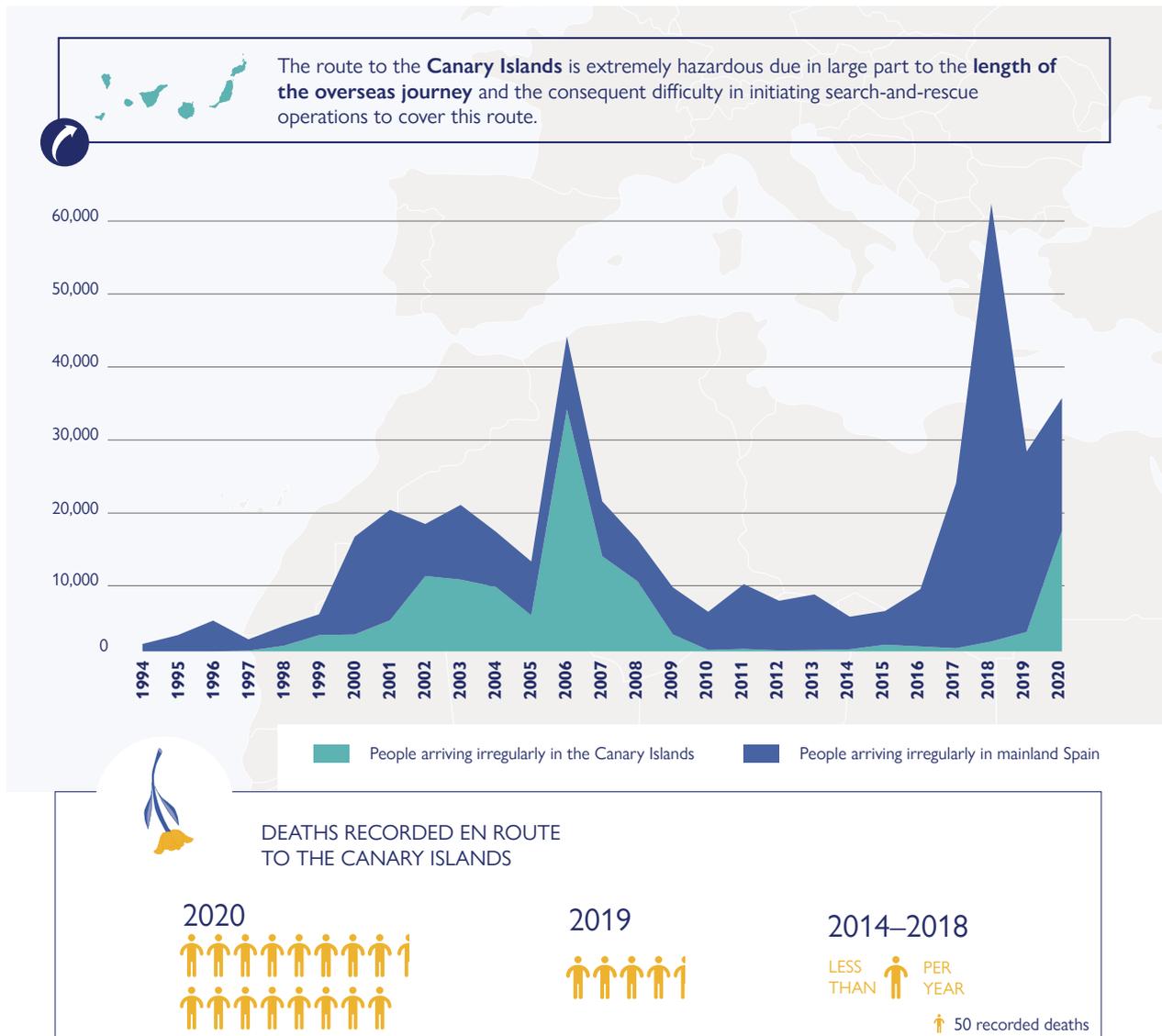
The route to the Canary Islands is extremely hazardous due in large part to the vast distances that migrants must cross on this overseas journey. Another consequence is the difficulty that search-and-rescue operations face to properly patrol and respond to boats in distress. The nearest crossing point from Morocco is approximately 95 km from the Canary Islands, but the vast majority of departures on this route occur much farther away: from Dakhla, Morocco, or Nouadhibou, Mauritania – overseas routes to the Canary Islands that are approximately 450 km and 775 km, respectively. These journeys can mean migrants are at sea for days or even weeks, and that boats may be unable to carry sufficient food and water for those on board.

The length of the journey and the fact that many migrants are believed to have lost their lives due to starvation or dehydration while at sea mean that the 3,163 deaths documented en route to the Canary Islands are likely a considerable undercount of the true number. For example, the Spanish NGO Asociación Pro Derecho Humanos de Andalucía (2007) estimated that in 2006, when more than 30,000 people arrived in Spain via this route, one in three boats disappeared during the crossing.

Boats used on the Western Africa route usually take one of two forms: *pateras*, small fishing boats which made up almost the entirety of arrivals in the Spanish Canary Islands until 2005; and *cayucos*, much longer boats shaped like dugout canoes which have become increasingly common since the mid-2000s (Spijkerboer, 2007). This shift in the means of travel was part of a strategy among smugglers to accommodate the increase in the number of people attempting this crossing beginning in 2006, with more than 50,000 arrivals documented between 2006 and 2009. The increase in arrivals, and

presumably attempted crossings,⁸ on the Western Africa route in the mid-2000s has been linked to the crackdown on migrants attempting to enter the Spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta (Spijkerboer, 2007). The number of irregular arrivals in Spain decreased steadily after its peak in 2006 due in large part to Spain's Africa Plan which led to bilateral agreements aimed at reducing irregular migration, with many countries⁹ of migrant origin and transit between 2006 and 2008 (López-Sala, 2009).

Figure 2. Number of people arriving in Spain via irregular migration routes to the Spanish Canary Islands and mainland Spain, 1994–2020*



Source: Spanish Ministry of the Interior (2020), MMP (IOM, 2021a) and DTM (IOM, 2021b).

Note: Data on people arriving irregularly in Spain via land routes to Ceuta and Melilla is excluded as this data is not available prior to 2018.

⁸ There is no data currently available that can approximate the number of people who attempt to reach the Canary Islands on this route, such as the data on interceptions at sea by North African and Turkish authorities, available for the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes.

⁹ These include formal agreements with the Gambia (2006), Guinea (2007), Cabo Verde (2008), Mali (2008), and the Niger (2009) and memorandums of understanding with Senegal (2006). Spain also funded the Migration Information and Management Centre in Mali in 2008 (López-Sala, 2009).

The number of arrivals in the Canary Islands remained low from 2009 until 2020, with more than 2,000 arrivals recorded in September and more than 5,000 recorded each month since. This increase, while still below the numbers seen on this route in the mid-2000s, is of particular concern as it has also led to a dramatic rise in the number of deaths at sea, with nearly 850 recorded in 2020, compared to 210 recorded in 2019 and less than 50 deaths recorded each year between 2014 and 2018. Most of these deaths occurred near the coast of mainland Africa, including 433 off the coast of Morocco, 195 near Senegal and 166 off the coast of Mauritania. Between mid-September and November 2020 alone, more than 472 deaths were recorded. Of the documented deaths on this route in 2020, the remains of only 185 people were recovered, leaving more than 660 people lost at sea. This means that hardly anything is known of the sex, age or nationality of those who lost their lives on this route in 2020, though at least 69 women and 6 children are known to have died.

Not included in these data are at least five additional shipwrecks reported to IOM's MMP in 2020 which could not be confirmed. These invisible shipwrecks – reported by NGOs in direct contact with those on board and/or with families searching for missing people – leave no survivors, and no search-and-rescue operation is known to have been conducted in response to the distress calls of those on board. Such cases are extremely difficult to detect, let alone verify, and are yet another indication that the true number of deaths on maritime routes to Europe is far higher than indicated by the available data.

While it is too soon to know whether these increases represent a long-term trend, there is preliminary evidence that border closures and the economic effects of COVID-19 play a role in the increase in the number of people attempting the crossing to the Canary Islands, who are primarily from Morocco, Senegal and Mali (MMC, 2021). Many of those arriving in the Canary Islands worked in the fishing or agriculture sectors, both of which were particularly hard hit by COVID-19-related measures. A recent study by the Senegalese Migration Observatory (2021) on the 1,338 would-be migrants arrested by Senegalese police en route to the Canary Islands between 1 September and 30 November 2020 indicated that more than half were fishermen (714) or fishmongers (79); another 23 were farmers. Similarly, a Mixed Migration Centre (MMC)(2021) sample of 46 key informants in Mauritania, Mali, Senegal and the Canary Islands reported that COVID-19 had not decreased motivation to migrate, but rather acted as a “threat multiplier”, exacerbating existing economic motivations to migrate.

It is tragically likely that thousands of families are searching endlessly for news of those lost en route to the Canary Islands. The thousands of people who have lost their lives on this route are too often buried without a name, when they are buried at all: the bodies of more than 1,000 people remain missing in the Atlantic Sea crossing, according to MMP data.

Ousmane's* nephew is one of the thousands of people believed to have disappeared or lost their lives on irregular migration routes to Spain. The loss of his nephew for more than two decades and the impact it has had on the family left behind is told in his own words below:

My nephew has been missing since 2000. He left five children behind. When he left, he said he was going to Mauritania. I think from there he wanted to travel to the Canary Islands. I was already living in Spain when his mother called me. He left with another kid from the village. The two boys, my nephew and his friend, left the village [in Guinea-Bissau] on the same day, and we never heard from them again.

My nephew's father passed away six years ago. One of my nephew's children has already died. He died two years ago. [My nephew's] wife, she lives from day to day – it was a very hard blow for her. ... When I go to my parents' village, his mother always comes to see me. I always tell her that I don't know [anything], but I actually think her son is not alive. Many [people with] dreams leave, but only a few arrive. Most of them remain underwater.

I did everything I could to search from here [in Spain]. In 2012, his mother privately asked me to file a complaint [in Spain]. She had already searched in Guinea-Bissau. The relatives we have in Mauritania also searched but did not find him either. But his mother keeps waiting. She still has hope of finding her son. She talks a lot about her son. She always talks about him in the present tense. But I haven't told her. I haven't told anyone that I think her son and the other kid [are] dead. He is the second member in our family who went missing. My uncle left our village when I was 12 years old, and we also never heard from him again. Four kids have disappeared from our village. It's a small village.

* The name has been changed. Ousmane's story was documented by IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre in February 2020, as part of a research project carried out in four countries (Ethiopia, Spain, the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe) with people whose relatives went missing along migration routes.

CONCLUSION

The humanitarian crisis involving the tens of thousands of deaths at sea en route to Europe remains unaddressed. The continued framing of this crisis as an issue of migrant arrivals ignores the fact that the number of people arriving irregularly in Europe is extremely small compared to the overall regular migrant flows from North and West Africa to Europe (IOM, 2019). The true crisis on maritime routes to Europe is the lack of unified European Union and African policy aimed at safe, humane migration management.

For policymakers and practitioners seeking to address this crisis, life-saving activities and respect of international law, including migrants' inviolable rights to human dignity and to life, must be the centre of any response. Improved search-and-rescue capacities on all maritime routes, but particularly for the long overseas journeys undertaken on the Central Mediterranean and Western Africa routes, are urgently needed and should be led by States and supported by shared European and African approaches. In the long run, reducing loss of lives requires structural, comprehensive approaches to improving migration governance in order to reduce irregular migration, and should include the provision of safe, legal migration routes and pathways for migrants' protection.

For journalists, academics and others seeking to cover maritime routes to Europe, the humanitarian nature of this crisis should always be emphasized, and dehumanizing language such as “waves” and “surges” of migrants should be avoided at all costs. A more holistic approach to data on migration to Europe should also be used – the use of only figures on irregular arrivals in Europe presents a very incomplete picture of these complex routes (to this end, relevant data is included as an [annex](#) to this paper). In addition, the long history of all four maritime routes should always be considered as context to stories about new trends, including in particular that the latest increase in people arriving in the Spanish Canary Islands remains far below the numbers seen in the mid-2000s.

For any and all actors working on maritime routes to Europe, the message that no one should have to risk their life to flee violence or instability, or to simply seek out a better life, should always be maintained. Prior to the 1990s, deaths on these overseas journeys were unheard of, and now they have become almost an everyday occurrence. All people, regardless of migratory status, are deserving of human dignity and are rights-holders under international law. Action is needed: even one death is too many.

REFERENCES

- Asociación Pro Derecho Humanos de Andalucía (APDHA)
 2007 *Derechos Humanos en la Frontera Sur 2006*. Sevilla. Available at <https://apdha.org/media/fronterasur2006.pdf>.
- Castellano, N.
 2014 20 años de inmigración en Canarias. Cadena SER. Available at <https://cadenaser.com/especiales/seccion/espana/2014/inmigracion-canarias/> (accessed 5 March 2021).
- International Organization for Migration (IOM)
 2019 African migration to the EU: Irregular migration in context. GMDAC Briefing Series: Towards safer migration on the Central Mediterranean Route. Berlin. Available at https://gmdac.iom.int/sites/default/files/03_-_residence_permits-bbb.pdf.
 2021a Missing Migrants Project database. Available at <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/> (accessed 5 March 2021).
 2021b Flow monitoring: Europe. DTM. Available at <https://migration.iom.int/europe> (accessed 4 March 2021).
- Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC)
 2020 Ricerca e Soccorso – Attività SAR Immigrazione. Italian Coast Guard, Rome. Available at www.guardiacostiera.gov.it/attivita/ricerca (accessed 5 March 2021).
- López-Sala, A.M.
 2009 Immigration Control and Border Management Policy in Spain. Spanish Council for Scientific Research (CSIC), Madrid. Available at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/36089999.pdf>.
- Mixed Migration Centre (MMC)
 2021 A gateway re-opens: The growing popularity of the Atlantic route, as told by those who risk it. MMC Research Report, February. Geneva. Available at www.mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/160_a_gateway_reopens_research_report.pdf.
- Senegalese Migration Observatory (Observatoire Sénégalais des Migrations)
 2021 Policy Brief – No 01.01.2021. Saint-Louis. Available at www.germ.sn/wp-content/plugins/pdf-poster/pdfjs/web/viewer.php?file=http://www.germ.sn/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Policy-Brief-Numero-Un-2021.pdf&download=true&print=true&openfile=false.
- Spanish Ministry of the Interior
 2020 Balances y Informes 2020. Madrid. Available at www.interior.gob.es/prensa/balances-e-informes/2020.
- Spijkerboer, T.
 2007 The human costs of border control. *European Journal of Migration and Law*, 9:147–161. Available at <http://thomasspijkerboer.eu/migrant-deaths-academic/the-human-costs-of-border-control-2007/>.
- Vera, E.
 2019 El drama de la inmigración: 20 años desde el naufragio de la primera patera en Canarias. *elDiario.es*, 18 July. Available at www.eldiario.es/canariasahora/sociedad/inmigracion-pateras-canarias-historia-naufragio_1_1437050.html.



International Organization for Migration
17 route des Morillons, P.O. Box 17, 1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland
Tel.: +41.22.717 91 11 • Fax: +41.22.798 61 50 • Email: hq@iom.int • Website: www.iom.int