Migration and Mobility in the Southern Mediterranean Region: Patterns and Drivers of Trans-Saharan Migration

Fella Djilaili

University of Algiers 3, (Algeria), fella.djilaili@lcdgankara.org

Abstract:

Historically viewed as countries of emigration, the Maghreb nations have experienced a significant shift since the 1990s, witnessing a notable increase in the presence of sub-Saharan migrants. While their impact on their socio-economic landscapes is evident, academic research has focused primarily on migration to and within the Global North. This paper addresses the Eurocentric bias toward migration mainstream academia by examining the new patterns of trans-Saharan migrants in the Maghreb region. Annually, 65,000 to 120,000 trans-Saharan migrants traverse the Maghreb, with only a small fraction successfully reaching Europe after surviving the perils of their long journey. To fill this knowledge gap, the research employs a qualitative methodology, analyzing textual data including policy briefs to provide a more inclusive and nuanced perspective on sub-Saharan irregular migration in the Maghreb.

Keywords: The Maghreb; Eurocentrism; Sub-Saharan irregular migrants.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, the world has experienced a hitherto unwitnessed shift in the direction of migration between and within the Global South and the Global North. Contrary to popular belief, the share of migrants from developing countries going to other developing countries was larger than the share going to the "North". South-South migration has increased compared to South-North Migration . In fact, eight of the ten major bilateral migration corridors worldwide are located in states countries of the Global South. The migrant stock in the South has outpaced the annual growth rate in the North by 2.3 percent. Furthermore, the number of migrants within Northern Africa and Western Asia has increased by 7.3 million between 2010 and 2019, experiencing the fastest growth in the migrant population across the world regions and time period . A report by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation has indicated that more than 70% of Sub-Saharan African migrants move within the continent, as they embark on perilous journeys in search of better economic opportunities and social and political security. In light of these economic and social motives, many more developing countries are becoming crossroads of migration flows, operating simultaneously as origin, transit, destination and return of migrants .

Alongside the global changes in migration patterns and trends, the countries of North Africa, known collectively as the Maghreb, have experienced since 1990s a shift in their migratory profiles. One cannot fully understand irregular migration in this region without properly highlighting the centrality of the Maghreb which is fundamentally an interlinked geopolitical region that acts both a gateway to Europe and a bridge with the rest of Africa. Thousands of sub-Saharan migrants, predominantly from West Africa and the Sahel, are embarking on treacherous overland journeys through the Sahara Desert with the ultimate goal of eventually reaching Europe .This rise in their number is attributable to such reasons as domestic conflict and wars, political instability, economic, environmental insecurities and eventual loss of livelihoods in sub-Saharan Africa and Sahel over decades.

From 2011 to 2017, more than 800,000 people crossed the Mediterranean Sea from Northern Africa to reach Europe. Nearly two-third of them were sub-Saharan migrants, and the majority passed through Libya, where militias rule most of the country following violent strife between groups vying for power . Maghrebi cities including, Tamanrasset, Tunis and Tandjer have emerged as new hubs of trans-Saharan migrants. According to Ali Bensaad, other urban cities have turned into African towers of Babel, where sub-Saharan migrants often constitute majority of

population panhandling at street corners and intersections. Hence added to the complexity of the region's existing geo-political hardships. the impacted countries now have a gargantuan problem, not of their own doing, on their hands. The political conflicts occurring across the region only exacerbate the plight of the millions of impacted human beings.

Due to imperial legacy, however, academic and policy debates on international migration continue to be focused on migration in Europe, North America and Australia, i.e., "Western" countries. Migration management regimes in MENA in general and in the Maghreb region in particular have been under-theorized. Intellectual and policy research has been invested in understanding and containing the migration movement from the developing countries. In other words, migrants in the Global south are "material of knowledge" for policy making rather than active owners of their lived-experience and their destinies. In this light, this research has been motivated by the conviction that non-Western countries like Maghreb countries are the new unwilling receptors of unregulated migrants, acting simultaneously as transit, emigration and immigration countries and arguably doing the most of the "dirty work" in terms of bearing the 'burden' of migration. Also, the research acknowledges that the plight of migration governance beyond the EU borders despite being critical, is less explored in the knowledge production of contemporary migration academic studies.

To understand the above highlighted conundrum, researchers such as Ali Bensaad, Salim Chena and Musette have examined the presence of sub-Saharan irregular migrants in the Maghreb region, They argued that cases of Maghrebi countries have been less discussed (or remained 'inpensé) (or inattended) in scientifc works and in local scientific activity in the southern shores of the Mediteranian. In this view, the present research aims to challenge the dominant Eurocentric perspective in migration studies and contribute to the decolonization of knowledge production in the field of migration studies. The study will delve into important questions, including those related to the patterns of sub-Saharan irregular migrants' mobility within the Maghreb region, further highlighting the interplay of forces that shape their mobility-immobility.To gain comprehensive insights, the research will analyze the exisiting official data on sub-saharan patterns, pathways, and threats in the southern meditreranian region.

2. Migration in the Mediterranean Region: A General Overview

The Mediterranean, as a heterogeneous and dynamically busy area has gained particular attention as an object of analysis in different fields including

anthropology, geography, political science, history among others. In his book "*The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II*" the French historian Fernand Braudel views the Mediterranean as the world's most complex-ridden region in both history and geography, his answers the rhetorically expressed question "What is the Mediterranean?" memorably with "It *is a thousand things at once, not a landscape, but countless landscapes, not a sea, but a succession of seas, not a civilization, but civilizations piled up on top of each other*.[1] Etymologically speaking the Mediterranean or *Mer Nostrum,* means *the sea in the midst of the lands.* this definition gives us impression of a peaceful and relatively homogeneous space. However, it is in fact, a deeper, darker and more fractured body of water, with eternally sorrowful coastlines. The Mediterranean is a geostrategic space has always been at cross-roads of civilizations and cultures-Berber, Persian, Mesopotamian, Semitic, Greek and Roman. It is the cradle for religions: Judaism and Islam. It is a sea that was and is the scene of economic, maritime and cultural exchanges at the heart of North and South, Occident and Orient, East and West.[2]

Lacoste described the Mediterranean region as segregated, fragmented space under three sub regions: the Maghreb (North Africa), Europe and Mashrek (Middle East), presently composed of 21 countries*. For centuries, this area has been known not only for its cultural and economic exchange but also its proneness to mutual destabilizing pressures, ideological rivalries, geopolitical constraints, unresolved regional and global disputes among neighbors such as Greece and Macedonia, Cyprus, Western Sahara, Libya, Syria, and Palestine. Added to this are conflicts linked to the flow of migrants and refugees that makes the Mediterranean the largest cemetery in modern history.[3]

Migration in the Mediterranean is by no means a new phenomenon. To cite a relatively recent example, on the eve of the Algerian independence 1962, approximately one million foreigners had been settled in Algeria, 95 percent of whom were French colonists. Further, the number of foreign people leaving in Tunisia during the same period of time had reached 243,000. In Morocco the French population has been estimated to 2.7 million inhabitants in 1955 and the number of Italians living in Libya reached estimated an average of 15,000 to 20,000 people.[4] However, following the independence, new postcolonial migration movements have been generated, Europe has become a patchwork of circular mobility mainly from

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* Albania, Algeria, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Spain, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey

the Maghreb[5], this migration was marked by the contribution of the Algerian, Tunisian and Moroccan countryside rural labor forces in the economic growth of European post-war during the "thirty glorious years" "Les Trente Glorieuses" 1945 to 1975.[6]

However, since the initiation of the war on terrorism in 2001, the EU has increased efforts to curb migration from the Maghreb region by reducing visa allocations and phasing out the guestworker system. Political actors have fabricated irregular migration from the "East" as a threat using alarming discourse and actions. The restriction of migrant mobility from the Maghreb and Sahel region has become a high priority for EU members. European media and public discourses have often portrayed the region as a source of terrorism, human trafficking, and porous gateways facilitating the movement of undesirable people aiming to reach Europe[7]. these perceptions of migration have been influenced by three significant processes: its politicization (where migration dominates public discourse and actions), its securitization (as it becomes associated with questions of insecurity), and its legalization (with laws harmonization to supervise it at the national, regional, and international scales.[8]

In fact, the north African countries and Sahel have been subjects to external pressure from the EU under the so called "Good Neighborly" which involves shifting the responsibility of securing the European borders notably, without extending invitations to the southern shore of the Mediterranean countries to join the EU. The EU essentially communicates to these countries, offering financial support, encouraging the adoption of EU norms, and practices, and urging the creation of a stable region that contributes to European stability. Yet, the Maghreb countries participate in these initiatives based on European perceptions of 'Maghreb', which the EU categorizes into three circles: Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, each having made institutional commitments with the EU. Besides, the states of Maghreb countries were not only asked to monitor their security and stability; irregular migration become a conditional clause for negotiations. According to the conclusions of European summits in Tampere (1999) and Seville (2002), The European Head of states declared their determination to combat 'illegal immigration' while favoring cooperation with the countries of origin.[9]

The above mentioned strategy involves "sharing responsibilities" through the convergence of legislation, the harmonization of immigration and asylum policies and penalizing exits of illegal immigration of foreigners and their nationals, these wide range of legal and technical tools were not necessarily used to better protect the

rights of migrants and refugees but instead, to control or even counter mobility at land, sea and air borders.[10] as it has been mentioned in the European Security Strategy of 2003, emphasizing that "in the face of emerging threats, the primary line of defense will often be abroad". the EU reinforce this approach through the adoption of security strategies such as Barcelona Process, European Neighborhood Policy, security dialogue on the European Security and Defense Policy among others. The impact of such policies varies, ranging from financial support to, at worst, allegations of a neo-colonialist agenda.[11]

Similarly, the states of Maghreb countries where not only asked to monitor their security and stability, the irregular migration was a conditional clause for negotiations. the migration issue into the "5+5 defense" framework, Europeans have positioned it as a security concern requiring preemptive measures. The subcontracting of migration security and the internalization of the European security process by Maghreb countries do not necessarily imply closer ties between the shores; rather, immigration remains a defining factor in the delineation of the European space. Consequently, the migration issue creates both distance and increased interactions. Criticisms arise regarding the EU's methods of discussion, negotiation, and dialogue with non-European countries in the region. Critics argue that these practices can be characterized as illiberal, hindering the achievement of mutually beneficial outcomes and placing significant burdens on third countries. Furthermore, the construction of migration crises in 2015, by the EU has electively served to reinforce existing power imbalances between the Global North and Global South.[12]

3. The Maghreb Region: a New Receptor of Trans-Sahara migration.

The Maghreb, encompassing Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania, holds a unique position at the crossroads of Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, making it a significant transit and destination for various migratory flows. The dynamics of migration in the Maghreb Region are deeply entwined with its geopolitical, socioeconomic, and historical factors, which have given rise to a rich body of academic literature. Certainly, since the 1970s, Algeria and Libya have been favored destinations for migrants from Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Chad in search of employment. The influx of workers was facilitated by the "Oil boom" during that period, enabling these countries to initiate significant development projects. Consequently, Algeria and Libya successfully attracted a substantial number of laborers from their neighboring nations.[13]

Further, Maghreb Region's strategic location between Africa and Europe has rendered it a critical transit zone for mixed migratory flows, particularly irregular migration. As Lensari and Bellal note, the region's proximity to Europe, the lure of employment opportunities, and the existence of well-established migratory networks have contributed to a steady influx of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. This has led to a variety of migration-related challenges that have sparked scholarly interest because of its immediate social and economic consequences. The Maghreb's historical ties to sub-Saharan Africa, colonial legacies, and post-independence policies have all shaped the current migration landscape.[14] Werenfels emphasizes the colonial-era labor migration patterns that connected North Africa with its sub-Saharan neighbors. These historical ties continue to influence migration dynamics and state responses.

There are various motivations for irregular migrants to settle indefinitely in the stepping-stone countries, strengthening controls on legal migratory corridors, the securitized policies implemented by the European Union at borders and the re-admission agreements signed with the southern Mediterranean countries created a new benchmark over which the old emigration countries have transformed into new hubs of migration. Migrants and refugees continue to depart from their home countries with the purpose of reaching Europe. in case of unsuccessful journey, the price of a return via the same migratory route is often too high and the opportunities available to return home are very limited. Consequently, many sub-Saharan irregular migrants, are forced to choose the best available solution: remaining within North Africa and Middle East for an indefinite period of time.[15]

Until recently, diverse historical, political, societal and economic factors such as agriculture and seasonal trade dynamism in the oasis and caravans within northern Mali, northern Niger and southern Algeria have facilitated easy human mobility in Trans-Saharan Route. Migration in the Touat region has been widely practiced in different economic and commercial activities such as palm cultivation, date production, textiles, handicrafts, and other commodities with neighboring countries to sustain livelihoods.[16] This dynamism reinforces social identities across generations and established relations among Arab and Tuareg communities, connecting North Africa with West Africa. for instance, before the 2000s, sub-Saharan communities could cross the Saharan borders without presenting any official documents to the border police. because these movements were not regulated or subjected to any legal restriction[17], thus, allowing the freedom of sub-Saharan movement between borders without concerned authorities perceiving them

as illegal or clandestine, including Algerian authorities. The fall of the Muammar Ghaddafi regime in 2011 and the flaring of upheavals in northern Mali in 2012. However, have resulted in a power vacuum, which facilitated the activities of human trafficking networks operating in the region. With weak governance, state failure and porous borders, irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa continue attempting to cross the harsh desert using the services of human smuggler and criminal networks.

All Maghreb countries have chosen to criminalize irregular migration. The key aspects that can be drawn from the legislations of these five nations not only involve penalizing irregular migration. In 2008 and 2009, Algeria adopted the Law 08-1 and Law 09-01 governing foreign nationals' entry, stay and circulation. the section 303 bis 30 of the Penal Code provides a definition for networks, stating, "organizing the unauthorized departure of one or more individuals from the national territory with the aim of obtaining, directly or indirectly, a financial or any other advantage." The penalties for such offenses include imprisonment ranging from three to five years and a fine ranging from 300,000 DA to 500,000 DA. This penalty may be increased, resulting in imprisonment from five to ten years and a fine ranging from 500,000 DA to 1,000,000 DA.[18]

It is a classical overstatement to blame the Maghreb countries alone for the securitized responses towards sub-Saharan irregular immigrants. Bensaad blames the European Union for pressuring Maghreb countries including Algeria to adopt more securitized measures against irregular sub-Saharan migrants, a phenomenon he describes as 'Europeanization'. They have enacted new legislation on the rights of foreigners, which have been oriented more towards restriction and repression with a "normative" and standardized dimension of legal arsenals, largely inspired by the European context. This has led to engulfing the actors of this intense migratory movement that has developed between the Sahel and the southern shores of the Mediterranean into turmoil, generating artificial situations of irregularity and tensions between societal realities and legal frameworks. Informal immigration has thus become irregular. Repression, which was certainly recurrent and old, has experienced both an increase and international legitimization, as seen in the mass expulsions that became widespread throughout the Maghreb from the early 2000s.

The analysis of Italian legislation regarding irregular migration reveals a prevalent trend of employing securitized and criminalized measures for regularization by successive governments. The initial measures set forth by Law 189/2002 underwent further tightening through subsequent regulations, notably the

"security decree" (No. 92/2008) and, a year later, the provisions outlined in Law No. 94 of July 15, 2009, commonly referred to as the "security package." Many consider this legislative framework as the foundation for a "zero tolerance" approach towards irregular migration.

4. Conclusion

When examining the patterns of African migrant movement beyond the Mediterranean, it becomes apparent that professional engagement plays a crucial role in shaping migratory paths within a broader and intricate context. The pursuit of job opportunities serves as a central force driving migration, aligning with a strategy of social advancement. The aspects of residency, aside from employment, represent another noteworthy component of the migration endeavor. Alongside economic considerations, factors such as conflict, the resulting insecurity, and experiences of discrimination significantly influence the decisions made by migrants.

the restricted, securitized policies driven by the European Union as a whole, starting from the unfounded presumption that all migrants present in Maghreb wish to reach Europe, generates suffering inflicted on these individuals both during detention and expulsion, in Algeria as in outside the country. Paradoxically, these containment policies may end up encouraging African migrants to attempt the crossing irregular nature of the Mediterranean, since to the social, economic and security situation are added the traps of containment to these individuals. The spillover of migration from Maghreb will undoubtedly have the effect of increasing French and European attention in strengthening the containment of migratory flows in Maghreb region, with the risk of once again accentuating the insecurity of these African migrants instead of protecting and asserting their rights.

Finally, the immigration from sub-Saharan regions can serve as a fresh means of examining and challenging North African and Middle Eastern societies. This is advantageous due to an external perspective that offers a certain distance from the internal stalemates, protective measures, complexities, and compromises inherent in these societies.

5. Notes:

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[4] Boubakri, Hassen, "General Introduction." <u>Migration in North Africa: An uncomfortable position between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe</u>, Konard Adenauer Stiftung, (2021), p. 4-11.

[5] Adrian Favell, "Immigration, migration et libre circulation dans la construction de l'Europe." Politique Européenne. n° 31(2010), p.33.

[6] Jean-Luc Richard, "Trente glorieuses" : quand les immigrés devaient "rapporter"." Hommes & Migrations, (2009), p.12-23.

[7] Farrah Raouf, "The Governance of irregular migration in southern Algeria: politics, smuggling and migrant pathways. " (Master diss., University of Ottawa, 2023).

[8] Delphine Perrin, "Dynamiques juridiques et politiques autour des mobilités en Afrique méditerranéenne et sahélienne : inspirations, ambitions et contraintes. " Migration et Société. Vol. XXXII, n° 179, (2020), p.75-89.

[9] Federica Zardo, "The EU Trust Fund for Africa: Geopolitical space making through migration policy instruments." Geopolitics (2022), p.584-603.

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[12] Abdennour Benantar, "Complexe de sécurité ouest-méditerranéen : externalisation et sécurisation de la migration." l'Annee du Maghreb (2013), p.57-75.

[13] Louisa Dris-Aït Hamadouche, "Le Maghreb et la migration irrégulière post-révoltes arabes Incidences et scénarii d'évolution".Dirassat Abhath. n° 11, (2019) : 33.

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[15] Werenfels, Isabelle, "Maghrebi Rivalries Over Sub-Saharan Africa: Algeria and Tunisia Seeking to Keep Up with Morocco.", SWP Comment. n°. 54, (2020), p.5-8.

[16] Julien Brachet, "Migrations transsahariennes : vers un désert cosmopolite et morcelé." Insaniyat. (2011), p. 306-308.

[17] Hujo, Katja, and Nicola Piper, South-South Migration: Implications for Social Policy and Development. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p 1-6.

[18] Louisa Dris-Aït Hamadouche, op cit.

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