



MMC West Africa

QUARTER 3 2023

Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: West Africa



This Quarterly Mixed Migration Update (QMMU) covers the West Africa region. The core countries of focus are Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Nigeria. Depending on the quarterly trends and migration-related updates, more attention may be given to any of the countries over the rest.

The QMMUs offer a quarterly update on new trends and dynamics related to mixed migration and relevant policy developments in the region. These updates are based on a compilation of a wide range of secondary (data) sources, brought together within a regional framework and applying a mixed migration analytical lens. Similar QMMUs are available for all MMC regions.

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs hosted in Danish Refugee Council (DRC) regional offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels. For more information on MMC, the QMMUs from other regions and contact details of regional MMC teams, visit mixedmigration.org and follow us at [@Mixed_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration)

MMC's understanding of mixed migration

"Mixed migration" refers to cross-border movements of people, including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking, and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people engaged in mixed migration have a range of legal statuses as well as a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Mixed migration describes refugees and migrants traveling along similar routes, using similar means of travel – often traveling irregularly, and wholly or partially, assisted by migrant smugglers.

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Jean-Baptiste Joire (2017)

Women watching boats in Joal-Fadiout, Senegal, February 2017.

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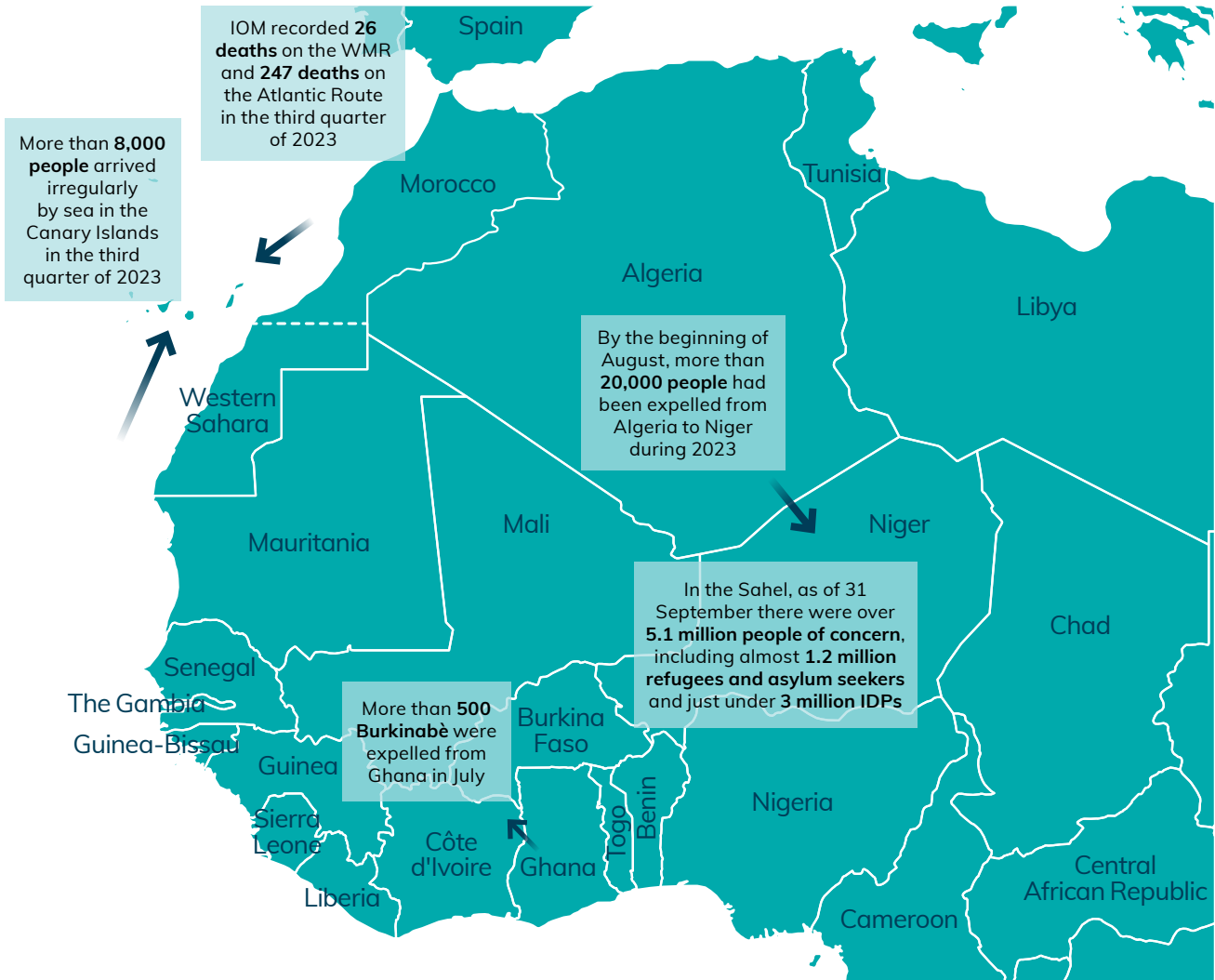
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Quarter 3 - 2023

Key Updates

- **A sharp increase in deaths along the Atlantic Route:** Of the [424 fatalities](#) that have been recorded by IOM's Missing Migrants Project along the Western African route from January to the end of September 2023, more than half (247) occurred in the third quarter. Comparing it with the number of registered arrivals to date, for every 35 people who reach the Canary Islands, at least one person dies or disappears en route.
- **Increasing numbers of West Africans arriving on the Central Mediterranean Route:** Continuing a trend in the first half of the year, the proportion of nationals from West and Central African countries such as Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Mali and Cameroon now account for [more than 40% of arrivals in Italy](#) in the first eight months of 2023, compared to around 5% in the same period of 2022.
- **More deportations from Algeria to Niger:** Algeria continued to expel thousands of refugees and migrants to Niger, bringing the total this year to [more than 20,000](#) people by the beginning of August, including many nationals from West African countries such as [Guinea and Mali](#).
- **Expulsion of Burkinabè from Ghana:** Following the [expulsion of some 500 Burkinabè](#) by Ghanaian authorities earlier in July, UNHCR [condemned](#) these expulsions as “a violation of the non-refoulement principle.” It subsequently updated its [Position on Returns to Burkina Faso](#), asking states to refrain from returning Burkinabè nationals originating from an increasingly large part of the country.
- **Niger's government ousted by a military coup:** On 26 July, Niger's democratically elected government was overthrown in a [military coup](#). The situation threatens to aggravate the country's already fragile security and humanitarian context, placing migrant and displaced populations in particular at [greater risk](#).
- **Increased departures from Senegal:** Amidst [fears of a surge in migration](#) from the country, following increased departures, the spotlight is again on the [EU's proposed partnership](#) – though it remains unclear whether and how this will be implemented.

Regional Overview*



*Information on the map relates to selected updates and does not represent all mixed migration within and out of West Africa.

Mixed Migration Regional Updates

Northbound mixed migration

The Western Mediterranean and Atlantic Routes to Spain

- As of 1 October, [according to UNHCR](#), 27,220 arrivals had reached Spain in 2023, including 15,406 via the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands. This was up from [7,278](#) as of 2 July, indicating a jump of more than 8,000 in between these dates – meaning that the total number of 2023 arrivals on the Atlantic Route more than doubled during the third quarter.
- Though UNHCR does not currently release regular information on the composition of arrivals by nationality, [Frontex data](#) shows that while Morocco was the top country of origin among arrivals in Spain along this route, a larger overall proportion of arrivals are from countries in Western Africa. Over the first eight months of the year for which disaggregated data is available, [according to Frontex](#), out of 10,821 detected arrivals, besides Morocco the most represented countries of origin were Senegal (2,451), Côte d'Ivoire (905), Guinea (781), Mali (548) and Gambia (524).
- Though significant numbers of sub-Saharan African refugees and migrants have in the past attempted to enter Spain via the Western Mediterranean Route, whether by land or sea, the numbers are currently much lower. In August, [according to Frontex data](#), of the 1,982 registered arrivals entering Spain along this route, the large majority were from Morocco (826) and Algeria (987), with only a very small proportion originating from sub-Saharan African countries. This continues a [trend](#) evident throughout much of the year.

A sharp increase in deaths en route to the Canary Islands

According to IOM's Missing Migrants Project, the [number of dead and missing](#) along the Atlantic Route to the Canary Islands rose sharply in the third quarter: of the 424 fatalities recorded by IOM between January and the end of September 2023, more than half (247) occurred in the third quarter of the year, which is more than twice the number in the previous quarter (120) and far exceeds the total in the third quarter of 2022 (38). These numbers are likely to be under-estimates: the NGO Caminando Fronteras, for instance, estimated that [778 people had died](#) on the Atlantic route in the first half of 2023, a figure several times higher than the [177 recorded by IOM](#) during this period.

Among the most deadly incidents occurring during the quarter was the [capsizing](#) off the North African coast of a vessel en route to the Canary Islands, resulting in at least 51 deaths. On 16 August, a boat that had departed from Senegal on 10 July was found near Cape Verde, with [at least 63 of the passengers](#) presumed dead or missing. The coordination of Spanish and Moroccan authorities concerning [search and rescue](#) along this route has also been scrutinized and criticized by civil society and the Spanish ombudsman alike.

The Central Mediterranean Route to Italy

- According to [UNHCR](#), Italy received 67,968 irregular sea arrivals in the third quarter of 2023, compared to 37,824 in the previous quarter and 44,157 during the third quarter of 2022.
- The composition of refugees and migrants has shifted significantly this year, with a far larger share of nationals from West and Central African countries than in recent years. The most [commonly identified country of origin between January and August](#) was Guinea (14%, up from 2% during the same period in 2022), Côte d'Ivoire (13%, up from 3% in January to August 2022), with Burkina Faso (6%), Mali (4%) and Cameroon (4%) also featuring among the 10 most represented nationalities. In sum, while only two West and Central African countries featured among the 10 most common nationalities of arrival in Italy between January and August 2022, counting between them for 5% of total arrivals in Italy, no less than five featured in the top ranking during the same period in 2023, accounting for over 40% of all irregular sea arrivals in Italy.

West Africans in North Africa

- Many refugees and migrants based in North Africa are from countries in West Africa. In Libya, for instance, where the many challenges they face are [well documented](#), of the [705,746 migrants residing there](#), 330,691 (46.9%) were from various West African countries: Niger (172,907), Chad (84,989), Nigeria (29,854), Ghana (14,448), Mali (13,507), Burkina Faso (4,056), Côte d'Ivoire (2,419), Guinea (1,211). In Tunisia, too, of an estimated [21,500 sub-Saharan African nationals](#) living in the country, around a third are from Côte d'Ivoire and a tenth each from Guinea and Mali. West African nationals are therefore likely to have been affected by the reported wave of [mass expulsions from the city of Sfax](#) from July onwards which resulted in the abandonment of as many as [2,000 migrants](#) in the desert near [Algeria](#) and [Libya](#) without food or water.

Continuing expulsions from Algeria

Sub-Saharan Africans, [predominantly from West Africa](#), make up a large proportion of the refugees and migrants entering Algeria. While Algerian authorities have for years expelled large numbers of undocumented Nigeriens and refugees and migrants from other countries such as [Guinea and Mali](#), there has been a significant uptick in the scale of expulsions since the beginning of the year, continuing into the third quarter. By the end of July, according to figures from Alarme Phone Sahara, [more than 20,000](#) people had been expelled by Algerian authorities in 2023, with the expulsions continuing even after the military coup on 26 July. The large scale of these expulsions [overwhelmed](#) humanitarian response capacity earlier in the year, and the situation for stranded migrants remained precarious in the third quarter (see section on Niger's military coup for more information).

Mixed migration and displacement within West Africa

The Sahel and Lake Chad Basin crises

- As of the end of September 2023, there were over 5.1 million people of concern in relation to the **Sahel crisis**, [according to UNHCR](#). The number of refugees and asylum seekers in the region stood at over 1.1 million refugees and asylum seekers as of the end of September, while the internally displaced population has slightly fallen to around 2.99 million IDPs as of 30 September.
- One of the worst affected countries in the region is **Burkina Faso**, with [more than 2 million IDPs](#) and [40% of its territory](#) controlled by armed groups. As of June, there were over [67,000 Burkinabè refugees](#) in neighbouring countries. In this context characterized by insecurity, human rights violations and a deteriorating humanitarian situation, [UNHCR](#) has called on all states to allow Burkinabè who are fleeing to access their territories. On 28 July it updated its [Position on Returns to Burkina Faso](#), specifically barring returns of Burkinabè originating from eleven of the country's thirteen regions. This follows the [expulsion of some 500 Burkinabè](#), including women and children, by Ghanaian authorities earlier in July. UNHCR [condemned](#) these expulsions, calling them “a violation of the non-refoulement principle.”
- In **Mali**, meanwhile, fighting displaced [30,000 people from Timbuktu and Touden](#) regions in August alone.
- The **Lake Chad Basin crisis** has also shown no signs of improvement, with around [11.1 million people](#) in the Far North region (Cameroon), the states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (Nigeria), Diffa region (Niger) and Lac region (Chad) in need of urgent humanitarian assistance as of the end of August 2023. The situation during the quarter has been aggravated by numerous security incidents in Cameroon's Far North, including attacks by the militant group [Boko Haram](#), and severe flooding that displaced [at least 7,000 people](#) in Nigeria's Jigawa province. While there are currently around 278,600 refugees in the Lake Chad Basin region, much of the crisis is characterised by internal displacement, with an estimated [3.2 million IDPs](#).

Niger's military coup

On 26 July Niger's democratically elected government was [ousted by a military coup](#). This development has particular implications for the estimated [710,000 displaced people](#) currently in Niger, as well as the [thousands of migrants expelled by Algerian authorities](#) in recent months who remain stranded in the northern town of Assamaka, where humanitarian conditions remain precarious. All told IOM has registered some [5,000 stranded migrants](#) at its transit centres across Niger, and an additional 1,400 remain outside of these overstretched centres. Most of these migrants are from West and Central Africa. On 1 September, IOM called for the [establishment of a humanitarian corridor](#) to allow for assisted voluntary return for these stranded migrants as well as for the delivery of emergency relief. In the wake of the coup, [border closures and suspended aid](#) create [additional challenges](#) for already vulnerable populations.

While there were a variety of forces driving the coup, one issue that may have played a role was [migration policy](#) - in particular, the government's cooperation with the EU around curbing irregular movement towards North Africa and Europe. Much of this discontent originated with the passage of legislation in 2015 to [curb human smuggling activities](#). This legislation, [Loi 2015-36](#), was enacted when the deposed president was serving as interior minister. It was [highly unpopular with some members of the military](#) who profited covertly from irregular migration through the country, as well as a sizeable number of lower-level actors and intermediaries who had also enjoyed a steady income stream directly or indirectly from smuggling. At the same time, the legislation was also [unpopular with many civil society activists, agencies and local authorities](#) who criticized the [potentially destabilising impacts](#) of this [highly securitised approach](#) to managing migration. In particular, the legislation was seen as imposing barriers on free movement in the wider West African region – despite this being a key principle among ECOWAS member states.

The future of Niger's external relationships remains unclear in the wake of the coup. Like its neighbours Burkina Faso and Mali, Niger has been a [major recipient of EU financial assistance](#), including the EU Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa. While the EU announced the [suspension of all cooperation with Niger](#) in response to the coup, whether this stance will be maintained indefinitely in the face of concerns around the [risk of deepening insecurity in the country and the wider region](#) remains to be seen. Already, individual member states such as Italy are seeking to reengage diplomatically to [avert the threat of military conflict](#) and the [additional displacement](#) this could create.

Thematic Focus: Mixed Migration from Senegal: Drivers and Constraints

A history of migration

Since the outbreak of violent demonstrations in Senegal in June and the [harsh response of authorities](#) to these protests, which resulted in at least 16 deaths and included the [deportation of foreigners](#) who were scapegoated by some for the unrest, the country has been the focus of renewed attention. At times this discussion has focused on the implications of this growing instability for migration, with [some predicting a spike in movement from the country](#) in the wake of the demonstrations.

But while these predictions seem to be borne out by the figures – the [number of Senegalese arrivals in the Canary Islands](#) in July (1,258) exceeded the total for the previous six months combined (1,142) – it is not necessarily the case that the recent upheaval directly caused the migration so much as enable it. While the situation has certainly worsened since June, the political repression and economic malaise that drove the protests are [longstanding](#), and [economic factors](#) are a consistent driver. As suggested by one key informant, it is possible that the increased movement was also facilitated by security forces having to focus on the protests. Favourable weather conditions and evolving smuggling patterns have also likely [contributed](#) to rising departures.

Migration from Senegal to Europe has a [long history](#), building on colonial ties and then diversifying over time. In the 1980s the impacts of structural adjustment programmes and [sharp economic decline](#) drove increasing numbers of Senegalese to seek opportunities abroad. By 2006, when an unprecedented 31,678 refugees and migrants reached the Canary Islands by boat, it was estimated that [around half were Senegalese](#). From July 2006, when Spanish vessels and Frontex personnel began [maritime patrols to intercept migrant boats](#) departing from Senegal, the number of people arriving in the Canary Islands dropped sharply.

In the ensuing years, however, migration from Senegal has been dynamic and adaptive, constantly evolving in response to changing realities. While for some years afterwards, the Atlantic route saw much less movement, with Senegalese instead often choosing to travel through [Mali, Niger and Libya](#) before crossing on the Central Mediterranean route to Italy. Following the passage of Loi 2015-36 (described in more detail above) in Niger, the peak numbers travelling this route in 2015-16 [dropped again](#). The enforcement of the legislation had several [consequences](#), undermining mobility in a region that until then had enjoyed free movement between countries and forcing refugees and migrants to [pursue more dangerous alternative routes through the desert](#).

The situation today

In recent years, particularly since late 2019, the Atlantic route has seen a resurgence in the number of people travelling from Senegal and other West African countries to reach the Canary Islands. [MMC research](#) on this Atlantic route resurgence, drawing on the testimony of migrants who had attempted this route – among them Senegalese – found that a variety of issues were at play. These included the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, structural issues affecting livelihoods, social pressures and a perception that this route was the shortest and most accessible to reach Europe. Though the number of arrivals has fluctuated somewhat from year to year, dropping by almost a third in 2022 with a total of [15,682 arrivals](#) before rising again in 2023 to [15,406](#) from 1 January to 1 October, it has remained a popular route ever since.

The Atlantic route also remains one of the most lethal migration pathways in the world. Comparing the [number of arrivals in the Canary Islands](#) from January to the end of September with the [recorded deaths or disappearances](#) in the same period, the death rate is more than 2.7%. Put another way, for every 35 people who manage to reach the Canary Islands, at least one person dies or disappears en route. Furthermore, this ratio does not include the thousands of others who are intercepted and returned by coast guards, a process that at times has added to the dangers. On 24 July, for instance, [at least 16 people died](#) after a boat capsized on rocks near the shore of Dakar, the capital, after reportedly being chased by patrol boats.

The overland route to North Africa, on the other hand, also poses its risks: [hundreds of Senegalese](#) were reportedly among those expelled into the desert by Algeria, for example. Reflecting the continued adaptability of migration from Senegal, increasing numbers of Senegalese have reportedly been travelling via [Nicaragua](#), using it as a stepping stone before moving northwards towards the United States (US). This route enables them to [bypass the hazardous Darien Gap](#) and travel on towards the US-Mexico border, though even for those who [manage to cross into the US](#), the journey may not succeed: in mid-September, there were reports of [around 140 Senegalese being deported](#) by US authorities after crossing from Mexico.

The role of the EU

Reports of a potential collaboration between Frontex and Senegal around managing migration have been on the table for a while, further catalysed by [details released in February 2022](#) of an agreement for Frontex staff to be based in the country and assist in the detection of attempted sea crossings. However, thanks to [significant public opposition](#) in Senegal, the proposed partnership has still not materialised more than 18 months on, despite “increased bilateral cooperation” between Frontex and both Senegal and Mauritania being stated as a goal in the June 2023 [EU Action Plan for the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes](#).

For Frontex, the unrest in Senegal appears to have added to the urgency of the situation, with the agency predicting that it would likely result in [an uptick in movement along the Atlantic route](#). This assessment appears to have prompted Frontex to review the possibility of increasing its presence in parts of the Canary Islands where it currently has no staff in place, such as Tenerife. However, the future of Senegal’s partnership with Frontex remains uncertain, given its [widespread unpopularity in the country](#).

Given that the EU has reportedly channelled hundreds of millions in financial assistance over the past two decades to Senegal, it is worth interrogating how future disbursements will be capable of delivering transformative change. One [recent in-depth investigation](#) on the impact of EU funding and the accompanying conditionalities it has imposed in Senegal critiqued the criminalisation and securitisation of mobility that has resulted from the EU's externalisation policies. These measures, the author argued, "do little to address the reasons people migrate—but a lot to erode fundamental rights, national sovereignty and local economies in African countries that have become EU policy labs."

Conclusion

In the meantime, there has been little improvement within the country, with authorities [dissolving the main opposition party](#) at the end of July, prompting [another wave of protests](#). Around the same time, the government also announced its 10-year [National Strategy to Combat Irregular Migration](#), with a stated focus on prevention, border management, protection and reintegration. Though it is uncertain how effectively it can be implemented in the present conditions, Senegalese authorities appear to be monitoring and intercepting vessels in their waters, including the reported apprehension and return of [over 600 passengers on four boats](#) between 28 and 30 September. What is unclear is how this will deliver a deeper resolution of the complex, well-established drivers of migration from Senegal. Unless the underlying drivers are addressed, with pathways in place to facilitate safe and regular migration from the country, it is likely that irregular migration will only continue – and potentially at an even greater human cost.

Highlighted New Research and Reports



[What does the regime change in Niger mean for migration cooperation with the EU?](#)

ECDPM | September 2023

This study provides a detailed historical overview of the EU’s interventions in Niger around migration, including the unintended consequences that this engagement has had through its securitized approach to human mobility in the region. It also examines the impact of the July 2023 military coup on the partnership between the EU and Niger and the possible implications this could have on migration in future.



[How Europe Outsourced Border Enforcement to Africa](#)

In These Times | July 2023

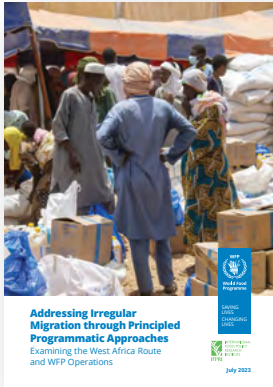
This article provides insights into the EU’s outsourcing of border enforcement to African countries, using Senegal as a case study and exploring EU-funded border stations, surveillance equipment and training to control migration flows. The author warns that these investments could ultimately be misused to facilitate deportations, human rights abuses and persecution of political opponents.



[Niger: Regional Migration and Gold Mining Consolidate as Smuggling to Libya Stagnates](#)

Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime | July 2023

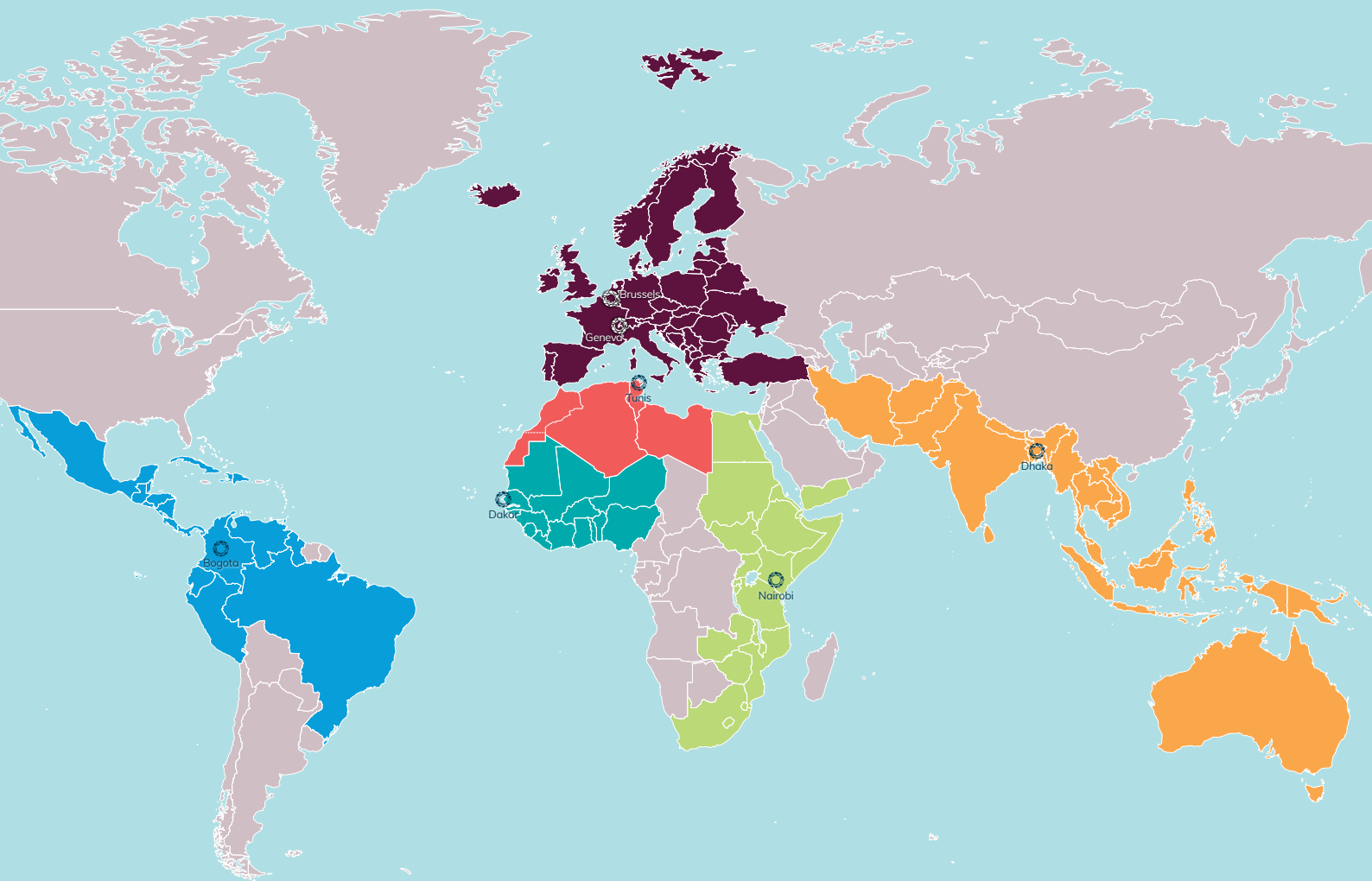
This study analyses human smuggling dynamics through Niger in 2022, building on key developments including the criminalization of human smuggling in 2015, the subsequent collapse of Agadez’s smuggling economy and more recently COVID-19 related disruptions. While the reorganization of networks to Libya and Algeria appears to have stabilized and is likely to continue in the long term, rising insecurity across Niger’s borders with Burkina Faso and Mali could affect the inflow of migrants from West Africa.



[Addressing Irregular Migration through Principled Programmatic Approaches: Examining the West Africa Route](#)

WFP and IFPRI | July 2023

This paper profiles the current drivers and dynamics of irregular migration in West Africa, examining countries of origin, transit routes and destinations or endpoints. It also examines the role of economic pressures, food insecurity and social networks in driving movement, and includes case studies on Libya and Mali.



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MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

For more information visit:
mixedmigration.org and follow us at [@Mixed_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration)

