

The ‘Black Atlantic’ route off Fortress Europe – Boat people and large-scale extractive projects between Western Sahara and the Canary Islands

This article examines the ‘titanic’ offshore projects which, according to the Moroccan royal family, are intended to transform Western Sahara and its adjacent waters into an energy hub for Africa and Europe, and into a hub for rare earths for the USA. Five per cent of Germany’s electricity demand is set to be fed into the German grid one day via a Moroccan undersea power cable running from Dakhla, the port city in Western Sahara, to Emden. Morocco also intends to transport natural gas via an undersea pipeline from Nigeria to Dakhla and from there on to Europe. Preparations are under way for the future production of hydrogen for Germany and the Netherlands, based partly on nuclear energy. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) approved the construction of Moroccan nuclear power stations in 2016, with construction potentially beginning as early as 2030. In Dakhla, Morocco is building a giant data centre for the western Mediterranean region and West Africa: large quantities of rare earths are required for its construction and its ‘green’ electricity management.

Between the coast of the African continent and the Canary Islands lie veritable treasures. There are biodiversity hotspots, natural gas fields and a submerged volcano known as Monte Tropic / Mont Tropic / Jbel Tropic / Tropic Seamount (referred to as TS in scientific literature)¹ with an enormous wealth of rare earth elements. The volcano’s lithium reserves alone are said to be ten times greater than the world’s current terrestrial lithium reserves. But who owns the sea between the Canary Islands and Western Sahara? In many respects, Spain has held colonial sovereignty over the vast maritime area stretching from the 1,062-kilometre-long Western Saharan coast to the Canarian high seas (and over the airspace above Western Sahara) since the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the subsequent agreements. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) claims the sea as its own. The Moroccan royal family,

¹ The name refers to the volcano’s location on the Tropic of Cancer (Spanish: Trópico de Cáncer, coordinates: 23.89°N 20.72°W).

with its 'Greater Morocco' ambitions², claims not only economic sovereignty over the coastal waters of Western Sahara, but also over 500 kilometres of high seas from the coast to the aforementioned volcano. Spain, and with it the European Union, has asserted an economic claim to the same international waters 500 kilometres south of the Canary Islands. From 2027, Morocco intends to deploy three submarines and its own aerial reconnaissance in the waters hitherto controlled by the Spanish military, operated from the new Moroccan military base at Bir Anzarane in Western Sahara. The US has expressed an interest in expanding this outpost into a US military base, following its withdrawal from its Sahel drone base in Agadez (Niger) in 2024. On 20 April 2026, the US's largest military manoeuvre in Africa began in cooperation with Morocco and with the participation of forty nations, also involving Dakhla in Western Sahara³. The geographical location where strategic economic interests and their militarisation intersect is also the Atlantic route used by the mobile, impoverished populations of the Maghreb and West Africa to escape poverty and war. It is via this route that people from the Maghreb and West Africa reach the Spanish mainland via the Canary Islands. To date, they have been working in the well-known informal economy: in the hospitality sector, in plastic-sheet agriculture along the Mediterranean coast, on construction sites in Málaga, Alicante and Almería, and in retail in Barcelona. The regularisation of their residence status, which has been in effect since 16 April 2026 and was implemented by the current Spanish government, is likely to result in an immediate increase in their wages. When asking who owns the sea between Western Sahara and the Canary Islands, one must not forget the contrast that exists between appropriation and exploitation on the one hand, and flight and survival on the other.

Arms are also being built up with a view to controlling this Atlantic route: Spain has stationed 150 police officers in Mauritania and Senegal to intercept boat people in collaboration with the navies of those countries. Meanwhile, the majority of boat people setting sail from or passing through the area are returned to the African mainland and detained in temporary detention centres, where torture also takes place.

² In the concept of 'Greater Morocco', Western Sahara is a complementary term to Eastern Sahara (Sahara Oriental), which lies in Algeria and which Morocco sought to conquer in the 1963 war. During the Spanish colonial period, Western Sahara was known as Spanish West Africa (África Occidental Española). Since 1976, the territory striving for independence has been known as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), and its liberation movement as the Polisario Front (Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro).

³ Morocco – Kick-off for Africa's largest military manoeuvre, Maghreb-Post, 28 April 2026, <https://maghreb-post.de/marokko-startschuss-fuer-das-groesste-militaermanoever-afrikas> .

There are reports of serious human rights violations, particularly in Mauritania, where Spain operates two prisons for intercepted boat people using EU funds⁴. Morocco, on the other hand, does not accept large-scale pushbacks by the Spanish police, but it has significantly strengthened its own police and military checkpoints in Western Sahara. Since the summer of 2025, the EU agency Frontex has been offering to take charge of repelling boat people in the Atlantic and along the coasts of the Maghreb, West Africa and the Canary Islands with a large-scale police deployment. The Spanish government has so far rejected this European initiative, which resembles the Frontex-Libyan pushbacks in the central Mediterranean and would result in the creation of detention centres on the Canary Islands⁵. Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal also reject the deployment of Frontex units; only Cape Verde permits Frontex flights over the Atlantic route⁶. European practices akin to those of the ICE would lead to a police-led overdetermination of Spain's economic conflict with the 'Atlantic working class'. What, then, is the significance of the migrants' journey across the sea off the coast of Western Sahara, where so many boats 'disappear'? What class relations are we talking about here? How does a West African–Maghrebi–Spanish 'creolisation' of this mobile proletariat come about? And, last but not least: how will the Atlantic route and the European Union's external border there be transformed by the geo-economic confrontation centred on the TS volcano?

The pirogues of the boat people and the large-scale extractive projects appear to be separate entities in this maritime region. However, if we take seriously the socio-historical insights of Linebaugh and Rediker from 1990 and of Paul Gilroy from 1993, we should be asking about the pattern of a contemporary West African–Canarian 'Black Atlantic' – that

⁴ Pablo Fernández, José Bautista, Fundación porCausa, 'The Spanish Government Opens Two Migrant Detention Centres in Mauritania', El Salto, 5 November 2025, <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/fronteras/gobierno-espana-abre-dos-carceles-migrantes-mauritania#> ; Hans-Christian Rößler, 'Serious allegations against Europe's key partner', *faz*, 27 August 2015, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/missbrauch-von-migranten-vor-wuerfe-gegen-europas-schluesselpartner-mauretanien-110655454.html> ; Natalia G. Vargas, 'The causes of the decline in the number of small boats on the Canary Islands route lie on the other side of the sea: torture, prisons and abuse', El Diario, 10 November 2025, https://www.eldiario.es/canariasahora/migraciones/causas-descenso-cayucos-ruta-canaria--side-the-sea-torture-prisons-abuse_1_12751134.html .

⁵ Sara Toj, 'The archipelago is counting on state support to ensure the EU pact does not turn it into "a prison"', 28 April 2026, <https://www.canarias7.es/politica/archipelago-confia-apoyo-estado-pacto-ue-convierta-20260428165528-nt.html> .

⁶ Matthias Monroy, 'EU border agency launches surveillance service in Cape Verde – Commissioner for Fundamental Rights raises concerns', nd, 16 November 2025, <https://www.nd-aktuell.de/artikel/1195498.eu-migrationsabwehr-frontex-fliegt-jetzt-vor-westafrika.html> .

is, the contemporary interconnection between mobile poverty and imperial plunder⁷. Morocco was rocked by two weeks of unrest in the autumn of 2025. Young people in southern Algeria are regarded as chronically rebellious. In 2024, Senegal's youth overthrew the country's government; in February 2026, university unrest broke out once more, as the IMF sought to impose an anti-social structural adjustment programme. Mauritania's system is regarded as fragile. The people who board boats to travel from the Maghreb or West Africa to the Canary Islands are dissatisfied. This is another reason why the following discussion focuses not only on the exorbitant natural and social costs of extractivism, but also on the rebellious environment⁸.

1. 'Pax Americana'

For the US administration, the economic and political reorganisation of the Maghreb is a top priority. It is effectively acting outside the framework of the UN, which has recognised the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination for decades. This intervention, declared to be a 'pacification' effort, is in reality fuelling an unprecedented military build-up by Morocco and Algeria.

"The Maghreb is one of the most heavily militarised regions in the world," writes the *Maghreb-Post*, referring to the latest *SIPRI* report⁹. The aim is to break down the territorial blockade between Morocco and Algeria – closed borders and a lack of economic exchange – and the social blockade imposed by the Maghreb-West African proletariat. Both parts of Western Sahara – the area under Moroccan military occupation and the area liberated by the Polisario Front – would become an integral part of Morocco. Algeria would be required to dismantle the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf and would be granted economic access to the Western Saharan Atlantic port of Dakhla. Algeria's western border would be protected against Moroccan claims to great-power status by US guarantees. Morocco would become the main US

⁷ Peter Linebaugh, Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra. Sailors, Slaves, and the Atlantic Working Class in the Eighteenth Century*, in: *Journal of Historical Sociology*: Volume 3, Issue 3, 1990; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 1993; German edition: *Schwarzer Atlantik. Modernity and Double Consciousness, Leipzig 2025.

⁸ For an example of militant criticism of extractivism since the 1950s, see the collection of texts by Amílcar Cabral, *Estudos agrários de Amílcar Cabral*, Lisbon and Bissau 1988; see also Tiago Saraiva, *Fascist Pigs. Technoscientific Organisms and the History of Fascism*, Cambridge, Mass. 2016.

⁹ SIPRI, Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2025, SIPRI Fact Sheet, Solna, April 2026.

military base in the western Mediterranean, at Spain's expense. Algeria's rearmament would come under a certain degree of US control. Key objective: The new energy flows and the large-scale extraction of rare minerals in the Atlantic high seas would be directed by US companies¹⁰.

US and Moroccan interests in the natural resources of Western Sahara and its maritime waters bear historical parallels to Spanish colonialism. In the late 1950s, Franco's Spain crushed an uprising by the largely nomadic Sahrawi population and, under Admiral Carrero Blanco (later dubbed 'Ogro', meaning 'ogre', by the ETA), launched a social and economic development drive. It was then that both the rapid extraction of phosphate from Western Sahara – which fuelled the 'green revolution' worldwide – and the Canarian fishing industry off the coast of Western Sahara began. For the Canary Islands, this colony became a hinterland¹¹. Now, in the face of the looming 'Pax Americana', there are fears in the Canary Islands of a certain 'Greenland moment': Morocco will only legally recognise Spanish sovereignty over the Canary Islands if the sunken volcano is ceded to Morocco and the rare earths there are mined through joint international cooperation. This is reported by the quasi-official Moroccan portal *Antalayar* in November 2025¹². However, a US-Israeli front is first forming against the Spanish colonial enclaves in northern Morocco¹³. Overall, it is estimated that it will take between five and ten years for the aforementioned negotiation objectives to be implemented. There are doubts as to whether the negotiations will be successful¹⁴. Human Rights Watch made a policy statement: "UN: Western Sahara Peoples' Self-Determination at Risk. New Negotiations Framework Threatens to Undercut Right"¹⁵. On 27 April 2026, the

¹⁰ Kader Abderrahim, Western Sahara: towards a 'Pax Americana' in the Maghreb? Mediapart, 2 March 2026, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/histoire-coloniale-et-postcoloniale/blog/020326/sahara-occidental-vers-une-pax-americana-au-maghreb>.

¹¹ Enrique Bengoechea, 'The Western Sahara issue: Spain's troubled transition to a "post-imperial democracy"', La Haine, 9 March 2026, https://www.lahaine.org/est_espanol.php/la-cuestion-del-sa-hara-occidental-la-lastrada.

¹² Atalayar has since blocked public internet access to its statements.

¹³ Israel manoeuvres to endorse Morocco's claims to sovereignty over Ceuta and Melilla, Diario Socialista, 27 April 2026, <https://diariosocialista.net/2026/04/27/israel-maniobra-para-avalar-las-pretensiones-de-marruecos-sobre-la-soberania-de-ceuta-y-melilla>.

¹⁴ Ignacio Cembrero, 'Inside the secret US-led talks to resolve the Western Sahara conflict', MiddleEastEye, 8 March 2026, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/inside-secret-us-led-talks-solve-west-ern-sahara-conflict>.

¹⁵ HRW, 'Western Sahara Peoples' Self-Determination at Risk', 25 March 2026, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/03/25/un-western-sahara-peoples-self-determination-at-risk>.

French TV channel *France 24* broadcast a report showing that the Sahrawis in the refugee camps in Tindouf reject the Moroccan autonomy plan. Currently, in May 2026, Sahrawi prisoners are on hunger strike¹⁶. For the sake of completeness, the known stages of the negotiations over the past few months are listed here: since 3 December 2025, negotiations have been underway between the Spanish government and the Moroccan royal family regarding the redrawing of the boundaries of this maritime area¹⁷. On 4 February 2026, Morocco and the US signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Washington on cooperation and investment in the ‘exploration and extraction’ of rare minerals in the ‘waters of Western Sahara’. The agreement is intended to “strengthen supply chains for minerals considered essential for the energy transition, defence technologies and advanced manufacturing”¹⁸. On 8 and 9 February 2026, under pressure from and under the leadership of the Trump administration, negotiations began in Madrid on the international recognition of Morocco’s annexation of Western Sahara. Representatives from Morocco, the Polisario Front, Algeria and Mauritania were present at the talks. On 23 and 24 February 2026, these negotiations continued in Washington. The basis for the negotiations is the US-backed Moroccan ‘autonomy plan’ for Western Sahara. Among other things, it provides for the approval of the Moroccan central government – that is, the Royal House – for ‘strategic investments’¹⁹. Sources within the UN indicate that significant outcomes from the negotiations are expected before October 2026.

What maritime economic geography underlies the envisaged ‘Pax Americana’? Over the past one and a half decades, an open dispute has emerged over national Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). Published nautical charts show an area in which the proposed maritime EEZs of Spain, Morocco and the SADR overlap, specifically around the

¹⁶ Alfonso Lafarga, ‘Izquierda Unida brings the case of two Sahrawi students on hunger strike before Parliament’, *Rebelión*, 24 April 2026, <https://rebelion.org/izquierda-unida-lleva-al-congreso-el-caso-de-dos--saharaui-students-imprisoned-on-hunger-strike/>.

¹⁷ For the Sahrawi claim to the maritime zone, see SADR Law No. 03/2009 of 21 January 2009, https://wsrw.org/files/dated/2009-05-15/zee_maritime_rasd.pdf; see also Jeffrey J. Smith, *From the Desert to the Sea. The Maritime Jurisdiction of an Independent Western Sahara*, Medford and Somerville 2010.

¹⁸ US has its sights set on minerals in occupied Western Sahara, WSRW, 13 February 2026, <https://wsrw.org/de/-nachrichten/usa-haben-mineralien-in-der-besetzten-westsahara-im-blick>.

¹⁹ Khadija Mohsen-Finan, *Western Sahara. A settlement of the conflict in Morocco’s favour?* *OrientXXI* 25 February 2026, <https://orientxxi.info/Sahara-occidental-Un-reglement-du-conflit-au-profit-du-Maroc>.

TS volcano²⁰. Spain applied to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) in 2014 to extend its EEZ; Morocco followed suit in 2020; the SADR is not a member of this UN institution based in Hamburg²¹. In 1609, Hugo Grotius, in a legal opinion for the Dutch colonial state, declared the high seas to be a *mare liberum* for the first time. The EEZ, with a 200-nautical-mile range, was not established until 1982 under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. It is hardly surprising that EEZs are being newly designated and expanded worldwide. What is astonishing here, however, is the sheer scale of the project, which far exceeds the UN-stipulated maximum 200-nautical-mile radius (370.4 kilometres) for EEZs: The TS volcano is almost 500 kilometres away – from both the Canary Islands and the Western Saharan coast. This is a massive exploitation project on the high seas.

If the ITLOS recognises the proposed EEZ as Spanish or Moroccan, Spain or Morocco will be granted direct mining rights in relation to the TS. If the ITLOS does not recognise either of the two claimed EEZs, the TS will remain under UN supervision, in which case international mining permits would have to be obtained. Further insight into the workings of this ‘Pax Americana’ is provided by another theatre of extractivism in the waters off Western Sahara. On 24 November 2021, Morocco signed an agreement with the Israeli company Ratio Petroleum concerning exploratory drilling for oil and natural gas off Dakhla, at a depth of 3,000 metres and covering an area of 109,000 square metres²². The Israeli company NewMed Energy also signed an agreement in 2022, together with the Moroccan company Adarco Energy Limited, concerning exploratory drilling for oil and natural gas and natural gas production off the coast of Western Sahara. This was preceded by the Trump administration’s recognition of Morocco’s annexation of Western Sahara in December 2020 and, in return, the establishment of diplomatic, technological and military relations between Morocco and Israel.

²⁰ See, for example: Francisco Carrión, Morocco’s maritime expansionism threatening the waters of the Canary Islands, *El Independiente* 29 November 2025, <https://www.elindependiente.com/internaional/2025/11/29/el-expansionismo-por-mar-de-marruecos-que-amenaza-las-aguas-de-canarias/>.

²¹ [UN] Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). Outer limits of the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines: Submissions to the Commission: Submission by the Kingdom of Spain, Oceans and Law of the Sea, https://www.un.org/dep-ts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/submis-sion_esp_77_2014.html; Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Morocco to the United Nations, New York, NV/ATL/N°/114/2015.

²² The implications of the Israeli-Moroccan agreement on hydrocarbon exploration in the Atlantic Dakhla block, Hozint, 15 November 2021, <https://www.hozint.com/2021/11/the-implications-of-the-israeli-moroccan-agreement-on-hydrocarbon-exploration-in-the-atlantic-dakhla-block/>.

The Moroccan royal family also showed its gratitude to the US administration and Israel in military terms: Morocco's massive military build-up in recent years has been largely driven by arms purchases from the US and Israel; Morocco is one of the founding members of the Trump-led 'Peace Board' and is due to station troops in the Gaza Strip from 1 May 2026. Should the current negotiations on Western Sahara mentioned above yield the results desired by the US and Morocco, the division of the Search and Rescue (SaR) zone between the Canary Islands and Western Sahara would have dramatic consequences for the Atlantic route and even for the external border of the European Union. Although the Canary Islands have an excellent maritime rescue system in the form of Salvamento Marítimo, this cannot cover the local SaR maritime area, which is three times the size of the Federal Republic of Germany in terms of area.



Fig. 1: SaR zone of the Canary Islands, *sarcontacts.info*, edited by the author

On the Atlantic route off the coasts of Senegal and Mauritania, a large-scale pushback of boat people, financed and organised by Spain, is currently taking place. The European Union is

currently supplying new coastguard vessels to West African states²³. Morocco, on the other hand, does not accept pushbacks in the waters off Western Sahara. It is therefore important for boat people on the Atlantic route to avoid the risk of pushbacks off the coasts of Senegal and Mauritania by heading out to the high seas and reaching the

²³ Africa Intelligence, Maritime security: the EU finally delivers its patrol boats to coastal countries, 27 April 2026, <https://www.africaintelligence.fr/afrique-ouest/2026/04/27/securite-maritime--l-ue-livre-enfin-ses-ve--patrol-boats-to-coastal-countries,110711255-art>.

Spanish Search and Rescue (SaR) zone. If a Moroccan SaR zone were to be established off the Western Sahara, the Moroccan navy would have to intercept the boat people there, even though it is unlikely to be capable of doing so in the foreseeable future. The situation in the central Mediterranean serves as a warning: there, Libyan militias, coordinated by Frontex, intercept boat people, allow them to drown or abduct them to Libyan torture camps, sometimes whilst firing on civilian sea-rescue vessels. Faced with such a scenario, the Atlantic route would shift even further out to the high seas, where the coastal ocean current turns away towards the western open ocean. I will return to the details of this shift later. A Canarian newspaper aptly writes: “If the United Nations alters the existing paradigm [...], the Canary Islands’ SAR zone would **change dramatically**, producing an immediate effect on the Canary migration route and the archipelago’s role as the European Union’s southern frontier.” [Emphasis in the original]²⁴

However, the redrawing of the Canary Islands’ SAR zone and its implications for the European Union’s external border are otherwise not being publicly discussed – neither in Spain, nor within the SADR, nor in Morocco, nor in the European Union with its obsession with external borders. Even migration studies and ‘refugee studies’ remain silent on the subject. The situation is different when it comes to the history of fisheries agreements, overfishing, the objectives of mineral exploitation of the submerged TS volcano, and research into the extraordinary biological diversity of this marine region. There is a wealth of specialist literature on these topics, the findings of which are outlined below.

This peculiarity – the maritime rescue zone as a non-issue, whilst all other matters of state and corporate sovereignty are in the spotlight of the heralded ‘Pax Americana’ – leads me to the ‘Black Atlantic’ thesis. The static concepts of resource exploitation, great power and nationality obscure the cooperation and achievements of a ‘multiracial, multi-ethnic, international working class’, which manifests itself here, in essence, along today’s Atlantic route. The ‘multi-ethnic rebels’ of the pirogues do not fit into the fixed worldview of extractivism. Yet the prospects for deep-sea mining are extraordinarily fluid and, due to the technical difficulties involved, comparable to the fantastical projects of mining on the Moon. If we succeed in capturing this current contradiction – between the ‘non-issue’ of the boat people and the obsessive mining plans for the TS – in scientific terms, we can

²⁴ Will the UN resolution change the Canary Islands’ SAR rescue zone?, Fuerteventura Todo, 1 November 2025, <https://fuerteventuratodo.com/news/will-the-un-resolution-change-the-canary-islands-sar-rescue-zone>.

formulate a socio-historically grounded critique of this world of extractivism and the great powers.

2. Work, Mobility and the ‘Cayuco Crisis’

West Africa has the highest rate of mobility in the world²⁵. This is not solely a matter of internal migration within West Africa. Migrants’ movements extend from West Africa through the Western Sahara and Morocco to the Canary Islands, on to Barcelona and beyond. Since around the year 2000, most migrants and refugees from Mali, Senegal and Mauritania have no longer been heading for southern West Africa, but for Europe: on the fringes of the ‘titanic’ projects of Big Oil, Big Tech, Big Fish and Big Green – the green transformation industry of the major corporations – a new ‘Atlantic working class’ is emerging along the Atlantic route. In doing so, it is bridging one of the world’s widest social divides. Malian refugees who manage to make the crossing are fleeing a life without income. According to official figures, 7,500,944 non-Spaniards were living in Spain at the end of 2025. Just under half of them (almost 3.5 million people) have obtained residence permits. People of African origin account for 35 per cent of non-Spaniards with residence permits, with Moroccans topping the statistics. The number of Malians rose most sharply in 2025, with an increase of 33.5 per cent²⁶. It is well known that the majority of West Africans and Maghrebians without residence permits in Spain work in the informal sector, in the hospitality industry, in agriculture, in care work, on construction sites and in retail. There are repeated reports of severe exploitation or even murders of former ‘boat people’ working in Andalusian agriculture²⁷. The ongoing regularisation process is likely to bring about immediate pay rises and social security cover for those who entered the country before 1 January 2026; they will go ‘from 20 euros for 12 hours a day to the minimum wage’, as is often euphorically put. Young people are also hoping this will lead to further training and career progression. In the Canary Islands alone, 40,000 people are expected to be regularised. Sahrawi boat people are excluded from the regularisation process. They protest that whilst their parents and grandparents were citizens of the Spanish ‘Province 53’ and held Spanish identity cards, they themselves can now, at best, only attain

²⁵ Marie Angelique Diatta and Ndiaga Mbow, ‘Releasing the Development Potential of Return Migration: The Case of Senegal’, *International Migration* 37, 1999, pp. 243–266.

²⁶ Permanent Observatory on Immigration (OPI): Foreign nationals with valid residence permits, 31 December 2025, https://www.inclusion.gob.es/docu-ments/3976286/3995073/stock_docu-mentacion_nota, pp. 6 ff.

²⁷ See the documentary by Sergio Rodrigo: **Jornaleros, el mal patrón**, EntreFronteras 2024.

the status of stateless persons²⁸. The formal labour market is being opened up in Spain, but racism – including, and particularly, that perpetrated by institutions – remains rife. There are many reports of dramatic cases of exploitation, routine targeted raids and short-term arbitrary arrests, such as that of Serigne Mbaye in March 2026, a former Senegalese fisherman who arrived in the Canary Islands in 2006 after travelling by pirogue and later became a Podemos city councillor in Madrid²⁹. On the other hand, members of the upper middle class from West Africa and the Maghreb have been granted visa facilitation in recent years. For example, around 20,000 Mauritians visit the Canary Islands each year for a stay of usually about a week to cultivate business relationships, go shopping or seek medical treatment³⁰. West African class society is mirrored in Spain's class society. But what role does this class-based transnational mobility play in the capitalist reorganisation of the region?

In Western Sahara and the neighbouring southern region of Algeria, as well as along the coasts of Mauritania and Senegal, a new cycle of investment has begun, responding to the breakdown of the old proletarian ties within the nomadic, oasis and fishing economies. Many young people no longer want to pick dates, but are flocking to the cities. Young nomads are swapping their donkeys for motorbikes and carving out hundreds of kilometres of new territory for themselves. Fishermen are expanding their pirogues and venturing further out to sea to fish than they did before.

At the same time, Algeria is currently expanding its railway network into the desert as far as the border region of Western Sahara, in order to transport iron ore and, with the help of the Italian 'Mattei Plan', to prepare south-western Algeria for the agricultural export economy. The desert is to be turned green (the Italian government has named its Africa initiative after Enrico Mattei, who led Italy's expansion into the

²⁸ Natalia G. Vargas, 'The Sahrawis in the Canary Islands excluded from the extraordinary regularisation: "It is humiliating and discriminatory"', *Canariasahora*, 25 April 2026, https://www.eldia-río.es/canariasahora/so-ciedad/saharauis-canarias-quedan-fuera-regularizacion-extraordinaria-humillante-discrimi-nacion_1_13170914.html.

²⁹ Mbaye was spokesperson for the Street Vendors' Union (Sindicato de Manteros) and is an activist for undocumented migrants in Spain. See: 'Podemos denounces the "racist" arrest of its former regional MP Serigne Mbaye', El País, 26 March 2026, <https://elpais.com/espana/2026-03-26/podemos-denuncia-la-detencion-de-serigne-mbaye-exdiputado-de-la-asamblea-de-madrid-y-miembro-de-la-direccion.html>.

³⁰ Government of the Canary Islands, The Canary Islands and Mauritania are committed to strengthening their trade relations as preferred partners, News Portal, 21 February 2025, <https://www3.gobierno-decanarias.org/noticias/canarias-y-mauritania-apuestan-por-intensificar-sus-relaciones-comerciales-como-socios-preferentes/>.

African oil market and died in a plane crash in 1962 under unexplained circumstances). A trans-Saharan pipeline is to deliver natural gas from Nigeria to the Mediterranean coast. To also gain access to natural gas from Nigeria, Morocco is constructing an extremely long offshore pipeline from Nigeria, running around West Africa³¹.

Morocco is experiencing a selective economic upswing thanks to major projects such as the TangerMed port. Now the ports of Nador (near Melilla) and Dakhla (in Western Sahara) are also being expanded into mega-ports. Sixteen per cent of Renault's global car production now takes place in Morocco. The 'oligarchs' of the Canary Islands have long since gained a foothold in Western Sahara and Mauritania. Large business delegations pay courtesy calls on Moroccan generals and business leaders in Dakhla. Whilst Spanish farmers' organisations are protesting against West Saharan tomatoes being illegally labelled as Moroccan produce and thus entering the European Union, major Canarian businesses are signing contracts for further large-scale agricultural export ventures in Western Sahara³². Despite repeated court rulings prohibiting such practices and criticism from the European Parliament, the European Commission is currently sending another delegation to Dakhla to negotiate an extension or even an expansion of the illegal export contracts³³. The people of the Maghreb and West Africa often perceive these multiple investment drives not as an opportunity to earn an income, but as an attack on the informal economy and as dispossession. Whilst under French colonialism a few socially segregated workers' towns emerged as 'gated cities' protected by the welfare state – such as Khouribga, the 'capital of phosphate mining' – there is currently hardly any social security or even social mobility associated with the emerging formal employment relationships.

³¹ Ali Idir, 'Over \$20 billion in investment: Algeria launches a railway revolution', TSA, 9 February 2026, <https://www.tsa-algerie.com/plus-de-20-milliards-dinvestissements-lalgerie-lance-la-revolution-ferro-viaire/>; Mattei Plan: Italy implements a sustainable agriculture project in the Algerian desert, L'Économiste Maghrébin, 2 July 2024, <https://www.leconomistemaghrebin.com/2024/07/02/plan-mattei-italie-im-plemente-un-projet-agriculture-durable-desert-algerie/>; Algeria: a meteoric economic rise bringing it closer to the club of world powers, Africa Inside, 9 April 2026, <https://africainside.net/09-04-26489-algrie-une-ascension-conomique-fulgurante-qui-la-rapproche-du-club-des-puissances-mond-iales5589617279.html>; Algeria – The revival of the Trans-Saharan pipeline, 7 April 2026, <https://ma-ghreb-post.de/algeria-the-revival-of-the-trans-saharan-pipeline-algiers-launches-a-cross-border-operation/>.

³² The EU avoids mentioning Western Sahara on labelling and admits to 'inconsistencies' in import data, 'Don't forget Western Sahara', 18 March 2026, <https://noteolvides-delsaharaoccidental.org/la-ue-evita-sahara-occidental-en-el-etiquetado/>.

³³ Mohammed Jaabouk, Sahara: The European Union conducts an audit in Dakhla, Yabiladi, 26 March 2026, <https://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/190969/sahara-l-union-europeenne-effectue-audit.html>.

This is most evident in the fishing industry. Whilst in the past the fishing industry in Western Sahara and in the coastal regions of Mauritania and Senegal provided a certain degree of food security for the poor across the country, and whilst fishing, the sale of fish at informal markets and traditional work in fish processing for resale inland generated a certain level of income for the coastal population, the once-enormous fish stocks off those coasts have now largely disappeared, meaning that fishing boats have to venture further and further out to sea. More and more fishermen and women are now working as low-wage labourers in fishmeal factories and on international trawlers.

Over the last three decades, the Moroccan royal family has concluded fishing agreements with the European Union, Russia and China, which are having a catastrophic impact on fish stocks. A division of labour has developed: whilst the trawlers off the coast of Western Sahara deliver frozen fish to Europe, Russia and China, vessels from EU countries and China off the coast of Mauritania send their catch to the new fishmeal factories there – in some cases illegally, exceeding the agreed quotas³⁴. In Mauritania, European and Chinese companies have sprung up a series of fishmeal factories that supply the raw materials for salmon aquaculture in Scandinavia, Turkey and the Far East. Bremerhaven is the main transshipment hub for this fish oil and fishmeal. In Nouadhibou, Mauritania's second-largest city, 550,000 tonnes of fish are processed into fishmeal and fish oil every year. There are 30 such factories in the city, and a further ten in the south of the country³⁵. The transition from fishing boats to assembly-line work in the fishmeal factories is not going smoothly. The neighbourhoods where the fishmeal factories are located stink to high heaven. And "It stinks!" consequently became the battle cry of the Senegalese youth, who overthrew the government there in a swift revolt in 2024.

If one places all these developments in a chronological context, the following becomes apparent: this Spanish and international investment drive targeting the Maghreb and West Africa gathered pace in

³⁴ 34 European Commission, Mauritania. Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement with Mauritania, Directorate-General for Oceans and Fisheries, Protocol dates: 15 November 2021–14 November 2026, https://oceans-and-fish-eries.ec.europa.eu/fisheries/international-agreements/sustainable-fisheries-partnership-agreements-sfpas/mauritania_en; The Moroccan Sahara enters a new phase of expansion of the Russian fishing fleet, Rue20, 27 March 2026, <https://es.rue20.com/2026/03/27/el-sahara-marroqui-entra-en-la-nueva-fase-de-expansion-de-la-flota-pesquera-rusa/>.

³⁵ 35 Daniela Gschweng, Fishmeal exports: Africa's fish and a global dilemma, infosperber 29 February 2024, <https://www.infosperber.ch/wirtschaft/konsum/fischmehl-export-afrikas-fische-und-ein-globales-di-lemma/>.

2006/2007. At that time, the so-called ‘Cayuco crisis’ (‘Pirogues crisis’), i.e. the arrival of several tens of thousands of West African boat people on the Canary Islands (2006: approximately 32,000 people; 2007: approximately 13,000 people), shook the foundations of Spanish society. An army of entrepreneurs, government representatives, consultants, experts, NGO activists, cultural mediators, journalists and academics travelled to Mauritania, Senegal and the Sahel to identify ways of ‘tackling the root causes of migration’. Surfers and tourists, too, transformed certain coastal towns, from Ifni to Dakhla and on as far as Conakry. They all came from a wide variety of political, economic and social backgrounds and, with their entrepreneurial spirit and soft power, complemented the harsh sealing off of the coast and at sea.

This economic, cultural and indeed civil-society-based force did not feature rigid hierarchies, but could rather be described as a colourful jigsaw puzzle. It settled in the new villa districts of West African coastal towns and brought about a certain degree of social modernisation, promoting the nuclear family through employment in fishmeal factories and through rudimentary housing schemes. Following Helen Tilley’s lead, from 2006/2007 onwards West Africa can be described as a ‘living laboratory’ in which ‘Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge’ converged in a new way³⁶. Ethnologists came to track down the ‘men behind the scenes’ of the boat people and their prices. But they discovered that the boat people’s journeys did not operate according to market-economy criteria. The prices for the journey varied according to ‘relational’ factors, such as friendship or the recognition of similar socio-cultural profiles – in other words, through a kind of grassroots cosmopolitanism based on familiarity and, at the same time, anonymity³⁷. Furthermore, ethnologists discovered that the growing social contradictions were reflected in people’s mindsets: Dakar became a hub for NGOs from the Global North; their Mercedes-Benz SUVs dominated the main roads; journalists conducted interviews and were never seen again afterwards – this gave rise to mistrust and a certain tendency to compare one’s own misery with the ostentatious displays of the new local power brokers. In short: the discovery of vernacular ‘agency’ was not, at first, useful for ‘combating people-smuggling’. The informal ‘communities of knowledge’ could not be penetrated or even regulated. It is only now, with the scrutiny of these

³⁶ Helen Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870–1950**, Chicago 2011.

³⁷ See Stephanie Maher, ‘Out of West Africa: Human Smuggling as a Social Enterprise’, *Annals**, AAPS 676, March 2018.

heterogeneous communities by smartphone algorithms and artificial intelligence, that dangers are emerging – but more on that later. It became clear around 2006/2007 that the boat people did not set out out of sheer desperation, but with the support of their families and neighbourhoods and through crowdfunding, so that they could provide financial support to their loved ones after a successful crossing. The preparation and the crossing were, and remain, a massive team effort.

The anthropologist Stephanie Maher shares vivid accounts of her experiences in Senegal. She travelled there as a student in 2007 to conduct research into the sharp rise in the number of boat people setting out on their journeys. Over the course of a decade, she became a specialist in the field and, through interviews with deportees, gained an insight into conditions on the pirogues during the gruelling crossings to the Canary Islands³⁸. Migration researcher Hein de Haas summarised in 2007: “Migration within and from West Africa to Europe is generally a deliberate choice and an investment by reasonably prosperous households and families to enhance their livelihoods. Household savings are often mobilised and assets such as land [are] sold to pay for the migration of one family member.”³⁹

3. Boatpeople

A regular ferry service from southern Morocco to Fuerteventura would take just four hours for a safe crossing (ninety kilometres). The dangerous journey by pirogue from Guinea to El Hierro (over 2,000 kilometres), by contrast, takes at least eleven days⁴⁰. The visa regime introduced or tightened by the Schengen states, and the police and military enforcement of the income gap, prevent the impoverished population from travelling legally. However, informal crossings between Western Sahara and the Canary Islands have always taken place; the first ‘irregular’ boat people to breach the new visa requirement were Sahrawis who landed on the beach at Caleta de Fuste on Fuerteventura in 1994. In the 2000s, the Atlantic route began to establish itself: Following an initial cycle around 2006 (the ‘Cayuco crisis’, see above), the second cycle of the Atlantic crossing surged in the autumn of 2020,

³⁸ Ibid., ‘Historicising “Irregular” Migration from Senegal to Europe’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 9, 2017, pp. 77–91.

³⁹ Hein De Haas, ‘The myth of invasion. Irregular migration from West Africa to the Maghreb and the European Union’, *International Migration Institute. Research Paper*, Oxford 2007, p. 27.

⁴⁰ Charlie Devereux, Borja Suarez, ‘Migrants using more distant, riskier departure points to the Canary Islands after Mauritania crackdown, Red Cross finds’, *Reuters*, 14 January 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/migrants-using-more-distant-riskier-departure-points-canaries-after-mauritania-2026-01-14/>.

when Covid-19 measures in Morocco restricted travel options there and low-wage labour markets partially collapsed. This second cycle is currently waning.

The largest groups among these boat people are Moroccans, Malians and Senegalese. It is noteworthy that, over the last five years, many boats have carried mixed groups of people. Previously, people from the Maghreb and West Africa travelled separately. From the Western Sahara, it is possible to cross to Fuerteventura or Lanzarote in one to two days using smaller fibreglass or wooden boats (Spanish: pateras) or larger inflatable boats (Spanish: cayucos). From Senegal and the more southerly coasts, people set off in modified dugout canoes, known as pirogues (Spanish: also cayucos), sometimes carrying over 300 people.

West African and Maghreb boat people, who set sail from as far south as West Africa on their way to 'Fortress Europe' in order to avoid being intercepted by the EU-funded naval forces of Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal, make use of favourable winds and ocean currents for the first 1,000 kilometres. The 'death zone' begins around 500 kilometres south of the Canary Islands. There, ocean currents coming from the north and the trade winds drive many boats out into the open Atlantic. Some wash up in the Caribbean after crossing the Atlantic, with desiccated corpses on board⁴¹. The Atlantic crossing is the world's most dangerous maritime escape route. The statistics from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reveal little about the number of deaths, because the IOM only counts registered shipwrecks and their passengers, but not 'invisible shipwrecks'. In contrast, the NGO *Caminando Fronteras* has established a network of contacts stretching from Morocco to southern West Africa and receives reports from relatives and neighbours of missing boatpeople. An estimated 200,000 boat people have set out from Morocco, Western Sahara and West Africa for the Canary Islands over the last five years. Approximately

⁴¹ 41 José María Rodríguez: The Caribbean returns two of the cayucos swallowed up by the Canary Route in 2024: another 127 are still missing, efe 2 February 2025, <https://efe.com/espana/2025-02-02/caribe-devolucion-cayucos-ruta-canaria/>, 2 February 2025.

20,000 to 30,000 have perished at sea in the process⁴². What happens to the survivors? Eight per cent of adult Moroccans who arrived in the Canary Islands were deported in 2025. The majority of those who arrived move on legally to the Spanish mainland within two weeks. Minors may not be deported and remain on the Canary Islands for a longer period⁴³. The number of Senegalese living on the Canary Islands is estimated at 50,000, 2,000 of whom are minors⁴⁴.

3a. Death Zone

In every country from Morocco to Guinea, there are now associations of relatives who are drawing attention to the fate of their dead and missing loved ones. They cannot report their search for missing relatives to the police, as doing so would expose them to the risk of criminalisation. One example is the report linked here on a committee in Guinea⁴⁵. Those who manage to reach the Spanish search and rescue zone find themselves in the ‘death zone’: the ocean currents that reverse direction and now turn from north to west. However, the seasonal variations are enormous. At times, the vortex – marked on the map (Fig. 2) as a ‘recirculation gyre’ – disappears. In the area affected by the vortex, not only do warm and cold ocean currents converge, but deep underwater currents also rise to the surface. The following ocean currents are relevant to the Atlantic route: the Canary Current (CC), the North Equatorial Current (NEC) and the North Equatorial Countercurrent (NECC).

⁴² Even Spain’s official figures on the arrivals of boat people in the Canary Islands vary considerably. Vicente Zapata puts the number of arrivals between 2020 and September 2025 at 160,261 people and for the period from 1994 to 2024 at 250,970 people (Vicente Zapata, The Canary Islands and the Challenge of Migration, Moving Cities 21 October 2026, <https://moving-citi-es.eu/de/aktuelles/guest-article-i-the-canary-islands-and-the-challenge-of-migration-by-vicente-zapata>). If one adds the people intercepted by Mauritania and Senegal – between 30,000 and 50,000 people annually in recent years – the figures are much higher. For the year 2024 alone, Caminando Fronteras puts the number of deaths on the Atlantic route at 9,757 (Caminando Fronteras, <https://caminandofronte-ras.org/en/>).

⁴³ EP: PETI 2026, 12 February 2026, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/PETI-CR-782244_DE.pdf.

⁴⁴ Patricia Vidanes Sánchez, ‘Thousands of Senegalese hope to regularise their status in the Canary Islands’: ‘I’m here to seek a better future’, Canarias7, 17 February 2026, <https://www.canarias7.es/politica/buscar-futuro-mejor-20260215073000-nt.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fduckduckgo.com%2F>.

⁴⁵ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HzbvMDIirTIfGh5gc4cykRpnZ8CfV1GO/view>, February 2026.

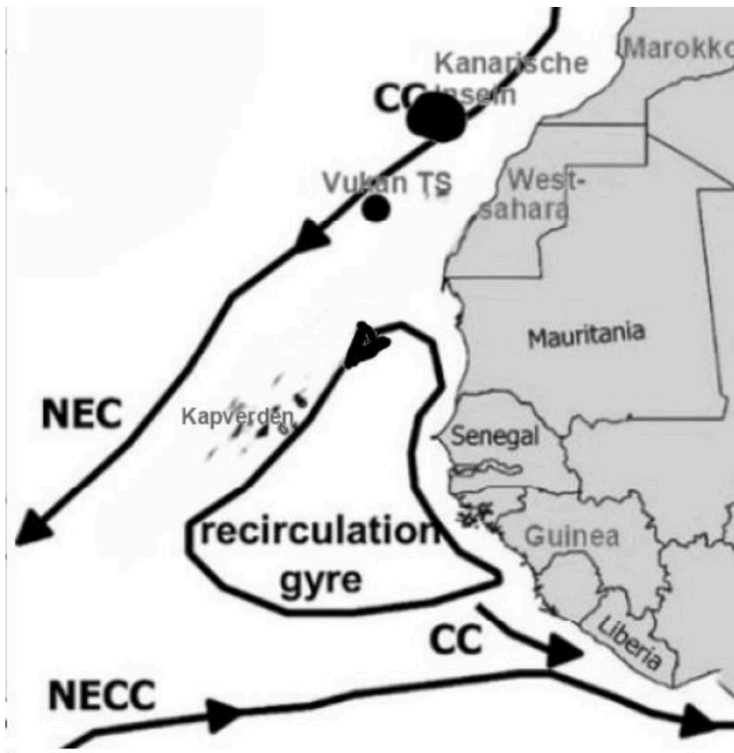


Fig. 2: Ocean currents at the sea surface: Philander, S.G., 'Atlantic Ocean Equatorial Currents', *Encyclopaedia of Ocean Sciences*, 2001, pp. 188–191, adapted by the author.



Fig. 3: Mid-depth and deep ocean currents at the TS, according to P. Jossen⁴⁶. The following ocean currents relevant to this study are shown: NADW Antarctic intermediate water (AAIW), Mediterranean outflow water (MOW). Adapted by the author.

⁴⁶ P. Jossen et al., 'Development of a Correlated Fe-Mn Crust Stratigraphy Using Pb and Nd Isotopes and Its Application to Paleooceanographic Reconstruction in the Atlantic', 2 October 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2020PA003928Di>.

The mid-depth and deep ocean currents rise up around the TS and carry the vortex with them. On the subject of maritime meteorology: at www.windy.com you can follow the development of wind conditions in real time. The winds between the Western Sahara and the Canary Islands generally follow the ocean currents in that region. As can be seen at www.marinetraf-fic.com/, the heavy traffic of container ships, tankers and trawlers runs relatively close to the coast and hardly ever through the ‘death zone’ for boat people around the sunken volcano TS.

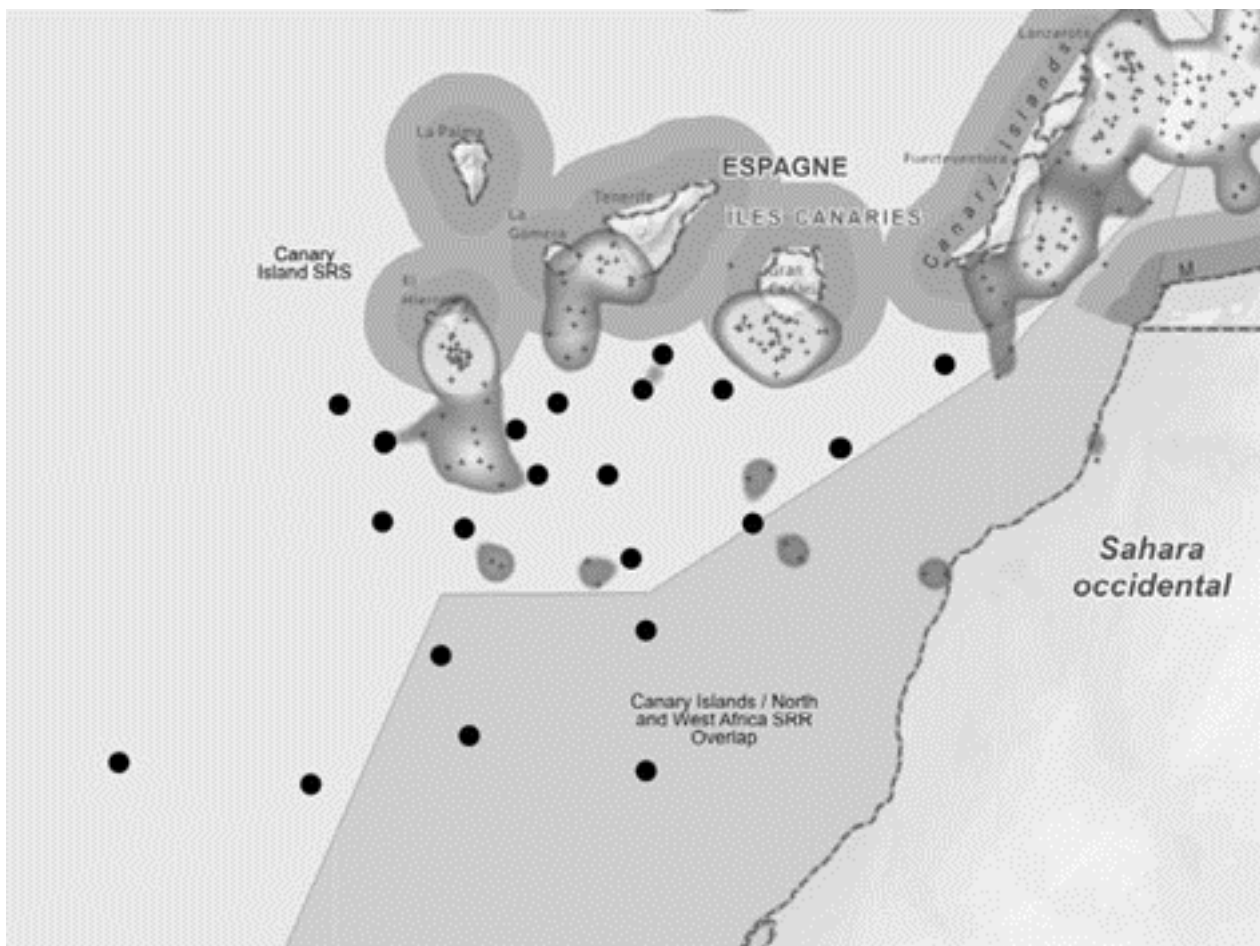


Fig. 4: Médecins Sans Frontières, search and rescue operations in the Canary Islands from January to November 2024, adapted by the author.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ On this map, MSF has already marked Morocco's potential future SAR region off the coast of Western Sahara as an area that overlaps with the current Canary Islands SAR zone, <https://relief-web.int/map/canary-islands-spain/operations-de-sauvetage-sar-de-sauvamento-sur-las-palmas-et-tenerife-en-2024-janvier-novembre>, 22 February 2025.

The grey areas around the Canary Islands are the main search and rescue zones covered by the Canary Islands Maritime Rescue Service; individual operations are marked with crosses. These numerous SAR operations near the Canary Islands are carried out following alerts from the radar-based Sistema Integrado de Vigilancia Exterior (SIVE), which monitors the nearby sea over a range of up to 15 kilometres, or following emergency mobile phone calls from boat people.

The more distant points, which I have marked in bold, result from distress calls made by passing freighters, tankers or trawlers that have spotted small boats on the high seas and, through their distress calls, triggered Canarian SAR operations.

The map shows that, from January to November 2024, not a single Canarian SAR operation took place in the 'death zone' surrounding the sunken volcano TS; this zone begins at the bottom left / south-west of this map.

3b. Technical swarm intelligence

It should be noted here that my rudimentary nautical knowledge stems from ten years' experience with the Alarmphone (<https://alarmphone.org/>) and from practical discussions with Beppe Caccia and Luca Casarini, who are currently among those standing trial in Ragusa as activists in the central Mediterranean and facing twenty-year prison sentences. They had taken 27 boat people from a cargo ship using their own sea-rescue vessel and brought them to Italy. The background to this was that the cargo ship had refused to return the rescued boat people to the torture camps in Libya, and the Italian government had prohibited the ship from docking in Italy for 38 days, despite medical emergencies⁴⁸. Over the past ten years, boat people and activists across the Central Mediterranean have developed a form of technical swarm intelligence: Every refugee boat is equipped with a satellite phone. When called in an emergency, the Alarmphone organises alerts to national maritime rescue co-ordination centres – which often remain inactive – and to cargo ships located near the stricken refugee boat. Using MarineTraffic, it is easy to contact the relevant shipping company and warn them against transferring the rescued boat people back to Libya. This technical swarm intelligence is

⁴⁸ The Italian government used spyware developed by the Israeli military – which is also used by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) – to criminalise them: Rosita Rijtano, 'Paragon has still not provided answers to the Italian judicial authorities regarding the use of its spyware, one year on from the scandal involving the spying on journalists and activists', Wired, 28 April 2026, <https://www.wired.it/article/paragon-spyware-risposte-indagine-italia-pro-cura/>.

now also capable of tracking Frontex aircraft that circle above the boat people and direct Libyan militias to intercept the boats. Meanwhile, Italian government agencies are also criminalising civilian sea-rescue vessels that have not contacted the Libyan militias (the so-called Libyan Coastguard).

This is the backdrop against which the social drama of the ‘invisible shipwrecks’ on the Atlantic route becomes clear. The Maghreb and West African boat people are so poor that they cannot afford a satellite phone. They possess the same technical know-how; they have GPS and can track exactly how far they are drifting. But they are unable to call for help.

3c. Alarming ICE practices

Boatpeople arriving in the Canary Islands are held in custody for two days and, amongst other things, interrogated by Frontex officers. If they have not thrown their mobile phones into the water before landing, these are confiscated and illegally accessed by Frontex⁴⁹. This reveals the police’s attempt to investigate the social structures of the ‘Atlantic working class’ – their networks stretching from Guinea to Barcelona – for the purposes of tracking them down. Frontex is currently still prevented from implementing a direct, ICE-style transnational community hunt in Spain. However, Spanish politicians, in collaboration with journalists, uncovered that Frontex had unlawfully passed on migrants’ personal data to Europol⁵⁰.

3.d. Cooperation during the crossing

The cooperation among the Atlantic boatpeople is evident in the lingua franca that has emerged, comprising elements of Wolof, Derija, Arabic, Spanish and French. Their short and concise phrases for communication are immediately understandable from Guinea to Algeria, and from the Canary Islands to Barcelona. Most prominent are the conceptual frameworks that have developed over the last twenty years around the words ‘barzakh’, ‘barça’ and ‘boza’.

⁴⁹ Martyna A. Wierzbicka et al., ‘Smart’ Borders, Negligent Democracies, porCausa, Centre Delàs d’Estudis per la Pau, Barcelona, January 2026, https://porcausa.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/In-forme_Fronteras_inteligentes_democracias_negligentes_porcausa_centre_delas.pdf.

⁵⁰ Lola Hierro, ‘A group of MEPs calls on Brussels for an independent investigation following revelations by EL PAÍS regarding the illegal transfer of data from Frontex to Europol’, El País, 11 July 2025, <https://el-pais.com/internacional/2025-07-11/a-group-of-MEPs-calls-on-Brussels-for-an-independent-investigation-following-revelations-by-El-País-regarding-the-illegal-transfer-of-data-from-Frontex-to-Europol.html>.

Organised street vendors in Barcelona sell a T-shirt bearing the slogan ‘barça ou barzakh’, which is usually translated – not entirely correctly – as ‘Barcelona or death’⁵¹. ‘Barzakh’ is a word from the Qur’an. It does not refer to death, but to the liminal stage between dying and resurrection. Today, one might translate it as ‘traumatic endurance’. The boat is such a liminal space. Ibrahima, whom Stephanie Maher⁵² interviewed, said: ‘To be in the boat is to be in a coma. You don’t know when you will wake up. Maybe one month, maybe two. You don’t know.’ (p. 182). The psychological stagnation experienced on the boat, in the face of one’s own physical immobility, hunger and thirst, is also frequently described as ‘fatigue’ (p. 201). Alioune said: “You must know that when you are on board, after 40 metres, you cannot be afraid anymore. I just had the mantra in my head that I repeated over and over: barca ou barzakh. Because if you’re there, you can no longer turn back. Neither your cries nor your seasickness will change the captain’s mind.” (p. 195)

A spirit of cooperation developed on the boat. „Labor was usually divided by assigning different équipes, or teams, to take care of things like cooking, fishing, or cleaning up“ (Ali, S. 196 f.). Alioune: „We were four [teams] altogether. We would take turns, each of us working for two hours at a time. There were eleven fishermen, others who steered the pirogue. Some commanded the motor; the specialists were in charge of the GPS“ (S. 197) Ibrahima described how they divided themselves into groups according to their work skills and physical abilities: „From the first day, we were organized – some cooked, others who were more athletic were in charge of emptying the water out of the pirogue. They also took care of the tarpaulins that provided shelter. Me, I was placed in the kitchen because I knew how to cook” (S. 197). For others, there was hardly any choice. Massamba said: „If you moved to go to the bathroom, for example, you would lose your place. That’s how crowded it was.“ „Sometimes, you were forced to urinate right there in your seat.” (S. 198).

“Barça” naturally stands not only for the city of Barcelona, but also for FC Barcelona, the football club with numerous youth projects in the Global South. FC Barcelona embodies the dream of social

⁵¹ Jorge Molinero López, ‘Barcelona or death’: The Top Manta ‘appropriates’ the Barça shirt to protest against forced migration, El Independiente, 1 July 2024, <https://www.elindependiente.com/socie-dad/2024/07/01/manteros-barcelona-denuncian-propias-camisetas-blaugranas-lacra-migracion-forzada/>.

⁵² The following interview excerpts are taken from Stephanie C. Maher, *Barça ou Barzakh. The Social Elsewhere of Failed Clandestine Migration out of Senegal*, Washington 2015.

advancement as a footballer. ‘Barça ou barzakh’ would therefore, very loosely translated, mean ‘dream or trauma’, or ‘new beginning or standstill’. The third word may illustrate this social impact: for twenty years, it has not only been the successful fence-jumpers from Ceuta who have been shouting ‘Boza’, but the boat people arriving in the Canary Islands have also been shouting ‘Boza’⁵³. Countless home videos can be found on the internet showing their arrival accompanied by shouts of ‘Boza’. ‘Boza’ comes from the Wolof language and is often incorrectly translated as ‘victory’. It originally refers to a successful endeavour and is an exclamation. This euphoric exclamation can be placed within the social history of the cry of jubilation described by Peter Linebaugh in 1990: ‘Ever since, it’s been associated with music, a horn, a comet, a trumpet, and later with singing. The comet descends from the shepherd’s cornu; the trumpet and bugle from the Roman soldier’s buccina; these horns are instruments of gathering and militancy. In the West Indies and the South Sea Islands, the spiral conch emits a very loud sound. It was used by the Tritons of ancient mythology, and by the Haitian slaves on 21 August 1791 as a call to the war of liberation in the first successful slave revolt in modern history.’⁵⁴

4. The Submerged TS Volcano and Research

Numerous popular science YouTube videos about *Mont Tropic* are being posted online by Moroccan sources, promising a further technological and economic boom thanks to the mountain’s miraculous manganese nodules. The internet portal *Marokko.com* writes: “At the heart of the Tropic Seamount lies one of the world’s largest concentrations of phosphate, a strategic resource of enormous importance to the Moroccan economy. [...] Researchers believe that the Tropic Seamount [...] harbours an immense treasure trove of rare-earth minerals such as tellurium, cobalt, nickel, lead, vanadium and lithium. [...] The mineral density at the Tropic Seamount exceeds that of all terrestrial deposits by a factor of 50,000, making it a strategic asset and a potential game-changer in global supply chains. Experts estimate the reserves at around two billion tonnes, which is ten times the current

⁵³ For further discussion of these keywords, see also A. George Bajalia, ‘Doing Barzakh, Making Boza. Betwixt and Between Migration and Immigration in Tangier’, in: *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2023, pp. 17–33.

⁵⁴ Peter Linebaugh, ‘Jubilating’; Or, How the Atlantic Working Class Used the Biblical Jubilee Against Capitalism, With Some Success, **Midnight Notes**, 10, 1990, pp. 84–98, here: p. 84, https://archive.org/details/mid-night-notes_10_no_covers/page/97/mode/1up, 18 February 2026.

global lithium reserves”⁵⁵. Over ten years ago, with its *Raw Materials Initiative* (RMI), the European Union called on companies and research institutes to carry out feasibility studies for the extraction of cobalt from the area, which could be used to build millions of electric cars. Since then, the EU and the Spanish government have been reluctant to make public statements regarding the TS. In addition to the feared geo-economic confrontation, concerns regarding the protection of the deep-sea environment and the realisation of hitherto insurmountable technological difficulties in deep-sea mining – at least over the next ten to twenty years – are driving Spain’s and the European Union’s public reticence.

The submerged TS volcano is a cone-shaped massif with its summit missing. Its plateau, at a depth of 1,000 metres, is roughly the size of Berlin. The slopes extend on all sides for mostly 15 kilometres into the surrounding area, reaching depths of up to 4,500 metres.

Pioneering research is being carried out using echo sounder measurements, which have been mapping the seabed since the First World War in the context of submarine warfare. Over the last two decades, numerous new research methods have been introduced: palaeo-oceanography uses laser technology to determine the radiogenic composition of rocks; geoacoustic sensors are lowered into the depths; gliding probes explore ocean currents, remotely operated deep-sea robots collect the first manganese nodules. And a multitude of autonomous submersibles – which are no longer remotely controlled but navigate independently using AI – continuously photograph the ploughed-through surroundings of the TS. Meanwhile, AI is being used to analyse the photographic big data from past expeditions and to develop patterns for automatic rock recognition⁵⁶. Major research expeditions have so far come from the United Kingdom, but also from Spain and other countries. A good overview of the scientific exploration of the TS is provided by Josso et al., see footnote 46, as well as E.

⁵⁵ The Tropic Seamount: A discovery with global implications, marokko.com 11 July 2024, <https://ma-rokko.com/news/info/the-tropic-seamount-a-discovery-with-global-implications>.

⁵⁶ Kyran P. Graves et al., ‘Testing the transferability of AI models for cold-water coral detection’, **Ecological Informatics**, Volume 95, May 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecoinf.2026.103749>.

Marino et al.⁵⁷ and Berta Ramiro-Sanchez et al.⁵⁸ It is not known what environmental damage deep-sea mining would cause. The extraction models envisage the rocks being pumped up through enormously long pipelines to an offshore platform, where they would be processed. The sieved-out, unusable sediments would be returned to the depths and, carried by ocean currents, would contaminate the seabed over a very wide area⁵⁹. Alongside their research into the world of manganese nodules, marine biologists have discovered that there is a biodiversity hotspot around the submerged volcano. The convergence of cold and warm, salty and nutrient-rich ocean currents has turned the waters there into a habitat for fish populations, sponges and coral reefs that are still largely unknown, and migrating whales, dolphins and other marine life also like to gather around the volcano. Even a *Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals* (CMS) for the habitats surrounding sunken volcanoes is being drawn up within the UN framework⁶⁰. In the long term, raw, mining-oriented research and gentle biodiversity research do not clash, but rather converge in the development of UN conventions and conservation guidelines⁶¹. Even more remarkable is that their research methods and findings have a dual-use character: one can describe the research surrounding of the TS as a cluster in which military, extractivist and ecological practices coexist productively. Most astonishing of all are the ecological proposals for the G5 network on the high seas: buoys and permanent towed probes could be equipped with it – thereby enabling mobile stations around the TS to monitor whale migrations effectively⁶².

⁵⁷ E. Marino et al., 'Strategic and rare elements in Cretaceous-Cenozoic cobalt-rich ferromanganese crusts from seamounts in the Canary Island Seamount Province (northeastern tropical Atlantic)', in: *Ore Geology Reviews*, ume, July 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oregeorev.2016.10.005>.

⁵⁸ Berta Ramiro-Sanchez et al., *Sponge Ground on the Tropic Seamount (North-eastern Tropical Atlantic): Implications for Spatial Management in the High Seas*, in: *Front. Mar. Sci.*, 31 May 2019, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2019.00278>.

⁵⁹ *Why Deep-Sea Mining Could Destroy Ocean Life Before We Even Understand It*, Marine Biodiversity and Sustainability, 8 April 2026, <https://www.marinebiodiversity.ca/why-deep-sea-mining-could-destroy-ocean-life-before-we-even-understand-it/>.

⁶⁰ *Nature Knows No Borders: Governments Urged to Seize Landmark Opportunity to Protect Seamounts as Critical Habitat for Migratory Marine Species*, Ocean Care, 20 March 2026, https://www.ocean-care.org/en/stories_and_news/governments-urged-to-seize-landmark-opportunity-to-protect-seamounts-as-critical-habitat-for-migratory-marine-species/.

⁶¹ *The UN High Seas Treaty Has Just Changed Everything for Ocean Protection*, Marine Biodiversity and Sustainability, 16 March 2026, <https://www.marinebiodiversity.ca/the-u-n-high-seas-treaty-just-changed-everything-for-ocean-protection/>.

⁶² *How 5G Is Transforming Ocean Monitoring in Real Time*, Marine Biodiversity and Sustainability, 10 February 2026, <https://www.marinebiodiversity.ca/how-5g-is-transforming-ocean-monitoring-in-real-time/>.

Furthermore, internet connections on the high seas via Starlink will facilitate new observation tools.

Over the next decade, boat people, their families, activists and possibly eco-researchers will adopt innovative communication technologies around the TS in a subversive manner to save the lives of the 'Atlantic working class' in the death zone, just as has been achieved over the past decade in the central Mediterranean using existing communication technology. The Maghreb and West Africa will remain in a state of unrest due to selective modernisation and large-scale extractivism. And once their residency has been legalised, the boatpeople who have reached shore will fight against exploitation and for a better life, even within Fortress Europe. Once their status has been regularised, and as migration increases, they will be able to travel more frequently back and forth between West Africa, the Maghreb and Spain – and also from the countries to which they have migrated further afield – thereby combating the social divide that 'Fortress Europe' perpetuates. And a new chapter in the struggles in Europe will begin: against racial profiling on the streets and against racialised wage hierarchies.

Whether 'Pax Americana' will be imposed across the Maghreb and as far as the Canary Islands remains an open question. Big Tech, Big Oil, Big Fish, Big Green and militarisation will be recognised as forces of social oppression and will be fought against. The Black Atlantic Route is one path of this resistance.