



Migratory routes towards the central Mediterranean

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Research overview:

The research covered in this policy brief revealed the most extensive analysis on the dynamics and circumstances along the five main migration routes towards departure locations on the central Mediterranean coast, and beyond. It showed networks extending from Niger, Sudan, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, further, to Libya, Italy and Malta, interconnected with western routes to Morocco and Spain.

Routes are extremely dangerous, characterized by deaths, slavery, grave human rights violations, commodification, and prostitution networks. Refugees and migrants continue to rely on these routes despite being aware of the risks, because there are no alternatives.

Dangerous routes:

Refugees and migrants have become increasingly dependent on smugglers and human traffickers since 2016, mainly as a result of intensified crackdowns on smugglers and migrants. For instance, on the southwestern route (from Niger) the only way to cross the Sahara is through smuggling. Routes have further turned more underground, complex, long and dangerous, resulting in more deaths, abuse and incidents.

Containment policies have further placed many refugees and migrants in a state of illegality, often lacking any legal rights, facing systemic dehumanization and racism leaving them in a state of greater vulnerability. Along the journey, actors who hold power over them can easily exploit them without facing any consequences.

Crossing the Sahara desert usually takes weeks in complex routes under dire conditions, with extensive reports on killings by drivers; lack of food and water; starvation; sexual violence; vehicle crashes; abandonments; suffocation, and even organ trafficking.

Along migratory routes, survivors further testify about slavery in several places, prostitution networks and grave human rights violations committed mainly in Libya, the main country of departure. Refugees and migrants are commonly seen as commodities, with many being (re)sold, arrested, and kidnapped several times on their journey.

Summary

Migratory routes towards departure points on the central Mediterranean coast and beyond are extensive, complex, and dangerous. The journey is marked by deaths, slavery, human rights abuses, and commodification. Refugees are stripped of legal rights, dehumanized, and exploited across networks of authorities, armed groups, bandits, and traffickers. This has left them trapped in a cycle, being repeatedly passed between actors, with few options for return, viewing sea crossings as their only escape, despite being aware of the risks.

¹ The policy brief has been compiled on the basis of research by Wirtz, M. (2025). Researching what Words Fail to Describe. In: Wirtz, M. "They don't think we are humans" The Cycle of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya. Langaa, Bamenda. Pp. 221-262. : https://www.researchgate.net/publication/396743869_Routes_Hubs_and_Prisons_Mapping_Migration_in_Libya Additional external sources are listed below

Insecurity and detention

For much of their journey, refugees must remain in hiding from authorities, traffickers, and other actors, enduring profound insecurity and the constant fear of detention, kidnapping and abuse. In Libya, when refugees are arrested or captured at sea, they are usually detained indefinitely in detention centres enduring inhumane conditions. Most centres have evolved from a government responsibility into a means of making money, with refugees as their commodities. In practice, several centres are operated by armed groups. Detainees are regularly sold to human traffickers, used as free labour, sold into slavery, or compelled to purchase themselves to freedom.

Since 2014 a new modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom spread across Libya, further exacerbated by the 2016 crackdown policies. It has become commonplace for refugees to be kidnapped, sold or hustled by their 'connection man', and transferred to trafficking camps. Here, they face daily torture, forced to call relatives demanding large ransoms. Captives are held in overcrowded warehouses, spread across hubs in the country, each holding between 100 and several thousand people. In hotspot Bani Walid alone there are reports of at least 17 different camps.

Extensive criminal network

This commodification is sustained by interconnected networks of armed groups, traffickers, and authorities. Bandit groups and Chadian armed groups were reported to kidnap migrants and refugees selling them to human traffickers, and Benghazi security forces have been reported to arm human traffickers. These actors cooperate through systems where refugees and migrants are frequently bought, sold and transferred among them. Human traffickers furthermore often rely on on-the-ground control of Libyan armed groups for their operations.

Human trafficking cycle

Within this system, refugees and migrants become trapped in a cycle of trafficking. Often having limited to none options for return, nor for UN-facilitated resettlement, which hold limited capacities. This often pushes them to take higher risks to try to reach Europe; viewing sea crossing as their only means of escape, despite being fully aware of the risks. This strengthens the human trafficking cycle, and has turned migratory routes from largely linear, to more circular. Refugees and migrants are passed between actors in repeated cycles of: arrests, capture at sea, detention, kidnapping, getting sold, escaping, purchasing themselves to freedom, getting released after family members paid ransoms, and re-entering the system.

Key research findings:

- Migratory routes are overseen by criminal networks that have become more dangerous and complex, particularly following intensified crackdown policies of 2016. The routes are marked by deaths, slavery, grave human rights violations, commodification, and prostitution networks.
- Refugees often hold no legal rights, are dehumanized and viewed as commodities; maximally exploited, abused, and traded within networks of authorities, armed groups, bandits, and human traffickers across Libya and beyond.
- This system traps refugees in a cycle, with little to no options for return, viewing sea crossings seen as their only escape, despite being aware of the risks. They are repeatedly passed between actors, often taking advantage of their vulnerability.

Recommendations for Policymakers:

Promote safe migration pathways: Work towards creating safe and legal migration pathways for individuals fleeing conflict or persecution. This can help reduce the reliance on traffickers and decrease the number of people vulnerable to exploitation.

Stop supporting the return of refugees to Libya: Stop supporting Libyan authorities to stop migration and to return refugees to Libya. Ensure that refugees rescued in international or European waters are not returned to Libya in line with Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and other international conventions; expand search and rescue in the Mediterranean Sea.

Unhindered UN and INGO access: Work towards unhindered access to DCIM centres, equipping the centres with emergency services, female guards, special rules for minors, freer movement, and prevention of overcrowding.

Overturn/reshape anti-migration policies: Anti-migration policies have placed refugees and migrants in a state of illegality and forced to rely on human smugglers and traffickers,, holding no rights, while routes have turned more underground and dangerous leading to more abuse and incidents.

Recommendations for NGOs:

Support survivors: Provide support for victims that have been exploited and abused, including legal, psychological, and medical support.

Advocate for policy change: Engage in advocacy efforts to influence policymakers to decriminalize irregular migration, and focus on top-level traffickers and other perpetrators.

Document and share survivor stories: Document the abuses on migratory routes, and collect stories of the experiences of survivors to raise awareness and inform policy discussions. Sharing these stories can help humanize the issue and highlight the urgent need for action.

References

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