

Dossier: Mobility and Refugee Crisis in the Mediterranean

Irregular Migration to the EU and Human Smuggling in the Mediterranean. The Nexus between Organized Crime and Irregular Migration

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As 2015 came to an end, the number of migrants smuggled to Greece and Italy throughout the year exceeded the million mark. This has turned the Mediterranean into the deadliest route into Europe. A radical increase in the number of deaths has accompanied the rising number of clandestine migrants. Since 1988, around 20,000 of these migrants have lost their lives in the Mediterranean, the biggest spikes being in the last three years: in the first four months of 2015 alone, about 1,800 people died in their attempt to reach Europe. To this figure, we must add the, presumably very high, number of those who died but whose bodies have never turned up. This tragedy has generated a real state of emergency in Europe during the last few years, with public opinion confused and horrified by pathetic photos of corpses lying on the shores and outsiders trying to force their way through Europe's security fences. Dramatic photos of migrants crammed into wretched boats circulate in the media. These images accompany journalistic accounts that tell stories of poor and desperate individuals deceived by organized crime cartels. All this has persuaded political leaders and authorities to view clandestine migration as a war, in which the evil is represented by the smugglers. But who are the smugglers? And how do they operate? What convinces migrants to put their lives in the smugglers' hands?

In contemporary mainstream narratives on migration, the answer to these questions is straightforward: smuggling networks are mafia-like cartels of hardened and greedy criminals dedicated to the

systematic deceiving and conning of migrants. These facilitators of irregular migration have earned worldwide notoriety as orchestrators of human massacres, evil geniuses behind criminal trade, or amassers of untold riches made at the expense of their victims. The rhetoric that characterizes human smugglers as greedy, callous and immoral has accompanied one-dimensional understandings of migrants as infantile and ignorant. The potency of these narratives has in turn been effective at igniting the public's moral outrage against human smuggling and justifying the progressive criminalization of irregular migration.

While successful at activating public opinion and policy makers, mainstream narratives of smuggling networks have consistently failed to address the inner dynamics of the phenomenon and provide an adequate understanding of the relationship between smugglers and migrants. Of course, smugglers often constitute the only available option for those individuals who flee a situation of immediate danger and distress. However, migrants and asylum seekers' desperate need to find refuge and their difficulties in accessing legal channels of mobility are not enough to explain the resilience and strength of the bonds between them and the smugglers.

This is precisely why we urgently need a more nuanced understanding of smuggling and the actors involved. This aim acquires greater significance within the broader goal of reinforcing EU Member States' control over their borders and ensuring migrants' safety. With this task in mind, this paper will first consider the complexity of the phenomenon by looking at the evolution of human smuggling in the Mediterranean Sea. It will then focus on the structure and modus operandi of the smuggling networks operating in the area. In so doing, this paper will conclude by demonstrating that the control of mi-

gration and the safety of migrants are not at odds with one another. However, this twofold goal requires a response other than the mere militarization of borders.

The Routes

Smugglers channel migrant streams to Europe across three major sea routes. The *western Mediterranean route* has long been a major conduit for human smugglers moving migrants into Europe via Morocco. This route has been an important entry point for North African and sub-Saharan irregular migrants and asylum seekers since 2005. These migrants usually have two options for reaching the sea: the longest is to travel along the West African coastline; a shorter option consists in a short yet dangerous journey through the Sahara. The coastal route has often been preferred by migrants who judge the desert crossing to be too risky. According to the EU border control agency Frontex, migrants travelling along this route were originally labour migrants from Algeria and Morocco seeking employment in the richer markets of southern Europe. Over time, the nature of the flow progressively changed as growing numbers of asylum seekers fleeing political turmoil and warfare in Mali, Sudan, South Sudan, Cameroon, Nigeria, Chad and the Central African Republic joined the former group. Since 2010, the overall number of migrants using this corridor decreased significantly. Several factors can explain this drop in numbers. First and foremost, stricter law enforcement by the Moroccan and Spanish authorities seems to have played a decisive role in the termination of the route. However, the trend can also be explained by the fact that many migrants decided to depart from Libya, where the likelihood of being returned by EU border authorities is much less, and the shrinking of the migratory flow following the rising rate of unemployment in Spain.

The second is the *central route*, which begins in Libya and travels across to the Italian and Maltese coastlines. After a brief interruption in irregular crossings in 2009, following a bilateral agreement between Italy and Libya, the route registered a peak in arrivals after the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, when almost 70,000 migrants – mostly Tunisians and sub-Saharan Africans – landed on Italian

and Maltese shores. The flow decreased steadily with the downfall of the Gaddafi regime in late 2011 and almost stopped completely during 2012. By 2013, however, political unrest in the region led to an increase in the number of people seeking asylum and favoured the consolidation of smuggling networks along the North African coasts. Smugglers typically put migrants aboard wretched boats heading for Italian coasts. These boats are equipped with poor engines and often have insufficient fuel to reach Europe. For these reasons, even though authorities disembark migrants mostly in Apulia and Calabria, detection of irregular migrants generally occurs at sea. Migratory pressure decreased again in 2014, falling to 154,000, about a tenth lower than the figures registered in 2014. This is likely due to the opening up of the eastern Mediterranean route, which is less risky and expensive for migrants. Traffic along the route, however, remains intense and smuggling networks continue to operate in Libya, where most migrants – largely Eritreans, Nigerians and Somalis – gather before the sea crossing.

The third pathway is the eastern Mediterranean route through Turkey and Greece, which came into frequent use during 2015. From 1991 to 2001, it was one of the most used points of entry for migrants – originally Albanians – fleeing economic and political turmoil. After a drop in the detection of illegal migrants throughout the 2000s, the route has recently regained popularity as a major arrival point. Since 2015, Frontex has registered record numbers in illegal border-crossings: almost 1,000,000 people – mostly Syrians, Afghans and other asylum seekers – entered Europe via Turkey and Greece. A large share of these migrants have made their way to EU Member States via the so-called Balkan route – i.e. the corridor that crosses the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia into Hungary and/or Croatia and then on towards western Europe. The escalation of the Syrian conflict and the recrudescence of political instability in the area substantially increased the number of migrants travelling along this route. However, this trend is not only related to political instability and warfare. Radical changes in transit countries' border controls and the proliferation of smuggling networks in Istanbul and other Turkish cities also played a major role in the dramatic increase of arrivals in Europe.

On 20 March 2016, the agreement between some EU Member States and Turkey almost completely halted the irregular migrant flow along the Balkan route. We are currently witnessing the resurgence of irregular migration along other routes – most notably the central one.

Smuggling Networks: Organizational Structure and Modus Operandi

Smuggling networks have earned worldwide notoriety as mafia-like cartels that run a number of other illicit businesses alongside human smuggling – most notably drug, human and arms trafficking. The available evidence, however, rules out the existence of major crime syndicates operating in the Mediterranean Sea. The considerable instability of the current irregular migratory flows explains the nature of the business. Human smuggling involves flexible and adaptive networks that can deal with a market characterized by fast-changing scenarios and great insecurity. As a matter of fact, smuggling networks active in the area consist of a system of flexible and independent – and largely family-based – organizations that enter into partnerships with one another for short periods. Furthermore, even though authorities have at times reported the overlapping of people smuggling with drug, arms and human trafficking, empirical evidence has shown that these groups do not generally run all these different ‘enterprises’ together.

Research undertaken in different parts of the Mediterranean has also shown that human smuggling involves a very different modus operandi depending on the origin of the smugglers, the client group, and the smuggling route. Ideally, smuggling groups can be situated somewhere in the continuum between single-service providers and multi-service networks. The former are small groups that run the sea crossing and often have solid roots in the local community. They do not have ties within the migrants’ countries of origin, and the recruitment happens through intermediary groups. These groups generally serve migrants who travel alone, mostly legally, for a large part of the journey. Migrants would recur to smugglers only to cross a specific leg of their journey. Between 2011 and 2015, thousands of Syrian asylum seekers going to Europe relied on smuggling ser-

vices almost exclusively for crossing the Turkish-Greek border. They travelled regularly to Turkey where smugglers arranged transportation to Lesbos or any other Greek island near the Turkish sea border. Once in Greece, Syrians continued their journey to Europe on their own.

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At the other end of the spectrum, there are larger and wider-ranging networks that have offshoots in migrants’ countries of origin. These organizations operate either land, air or sea routes and provide customers with a variety of services that range from border crossings to detention centre releases. These types of migrant-smuggling services are often used by migrants who are barred from legal entry in the transit countries. In such cases, the smuggling of migrants occurs through a ‘pre-organized, stage-to-stage’ process. A chain of independently but closely interacting ‘stage coordinators’ organizes the migration process by outsourcing certain smuggling activities to local coordinators – often individuals with solid ties in the local community of transit countries. The latter, in turn, subcontract the border crossing to the local service providers. Interestingly, recent studies have dismissed the existence of a mastermind or ‘boss’ who presides over the entire smuggling process. Indeed, it would hardly be possible for a single centralized organization to carry out all services alone along a route that com-

prises journeys of several thousand kilometres and in a market characterized by high levels of instability and unpredictability.

Empirical evidence has also demonstrated that smuggling groups have a highly distinct yet flexible structure with roles that are not integrated into rigid hierarchies and bound by long-term agreements. These flexible organizations have, however, a few recurring figures that can be pinpointed. Firstly, there is the group coordinator. Acting as a manager, this person is in charge of overseeing smuggling operations and the overall management of the organization. The recruiter, the person in charge of establishing contacts between smugglers and migrants, covers another important role. He or she often shares the same ethnic background of the majority as those being smuggled and may have the same origin. Another fundamental role in the organization is covered by the 'passeur' – the person responsible for escorting migrants across the border. A number of other figures participate in the business: forgers, enforcers, receivers, and drivers. Finally, around these relatively loose and small organizations gravitate a considerable number of people – often locals – who work as freelancers. They could work for a fee as lookouts by using lights to signal the presence of police forces patrolling the shores, as costly taxi-drivers by taking migrants to the point of embarkation, or also as landowners, if they have land near the shore that they can rent to refugees and migrants waiting to depart.

Migrants and Smugglers

Politicians, border authorities, and journalists usually portray the smuggler as a cruel and reckless criminal driven exclusively by profits. This understanding, however, offers very little indication of the reasons why smuggling begins or continues in a certain context. The resilience of smuggling networks, amid numerous attempts by nation states and border control agencies to crack down on them, speaks not only of migrants' determination to flee their countries, but also of the strong bond between smugglers and their customers.

My own research on smuggling networks operating in the eastern Mediterranean confirms the findings of other researchers who have questioned

over-simplistic depictions of the facilitator-traveller relationship and their community dimensions. As a matter of fact, smuggling has a rather positive reputation among many migrant communities. Smugglers represent themselves as service-providers who satisfy a need that people cannot satisfy through legal channels. Surprisingly, such self-representation is often backed up by irregular migrants who consider smugglers to be either philanthropists who save others or ordinary people who just want to make some money. In fact, the complex relationship between smugglers and migrants ranges from the altruistic assistance provided by family members or friends to dynamics of exploitation based on the intent of hardened criminals. Empirical research, however, confirms that trust and cooperation seem to be the rule more than the exception in the interaction between smugglers and migrants. Many authors have showed how the nature of the interactions between facilitators and migrants may well go beyond the existence of economic interests and rest on deep social ties spanning across countries.

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Smuggling requires a great deal of trust. It is unsurprising that current restrictive immigration and asylum policy measures in the Mediterranean Sea have not only been unsuccessful as a deterrent, but have also been counterproductive by redirecting migrant flows through illegal channels. Picking the right smuggler may depend on good fortune and migrants are certainly at the mercy of their smugglers during their journey to Europe. In this sense, the fact that migrant smuggling may at times be rooted in social ties between smugglers

and their customers does not necessarily protect the latter against exploitation and violence. Yet smuggling is a business, and like any other business it requires a certain level of trust. Indeed for migrants, smugglers constitute a valuable resource, the only escape from a situation of misery and extreme danger. At the same time, smugglers also depend in part on the migrants to find prospective clients. Those people who survive the journey can operate as a pull factor by tempting their kin and friends to embark on a similar journey. Successfully smuggled migrants who I interviewed favoured smuggling networks over legal channels of resettlement to reunite with their families who remained in their country of origin.

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Most importantly, however, the belief that human smuggling could not only be a legitimate – albeit criminalized – form of labour, but also even a moral duty can pave the way for migrants' involvement in the business. A situation that it is also favoured by the protracted condition of illegality experienced by many of them in the context of a European containment policy, aimed at preventing migrants and refugees from entering the territory of EU Member States. In this sense, refugees, asylum seekers and labour migrants may work as either recruiters, passeurs or intermediaries – positions that are often covered by the same person. They might escort migrants across the border because of their own first-hand knowledge of the route. They might recruit clients that share the same ethnic networks. They provide migrants with the different services they need (food, accommodation, etc.) thanks to their long-term relationship with the local communities in the transit

countries. They do all this in order to pay the required fees or make a decent living, or most likely because they do not find any moral contradiction in what they do.

In this regard, it is important to introduce a differentiation. If the smuggler-migrant relationship is informed by co-operative experiences and forms of conviviality, this does not presuppose an all-embracing harmony of interaction between smugglers and their customers. The strong social bonds that some researchers have witnessed may obviously be facilitated by the fact that smugglers and migrants share the same ethnic backgrounds or other social ties. In this sense, the establishment of smuggling networks on an ethnic basis serves to reinforce what some authors aptly call 'chains of trust' – ethnic solidarities between smugglers and migrants that tend to fade the further migrants travel from their country of origin. Smugglers would thus prioritize the transport of their fellow nationals and carry some of them – generally children, some political refugees, the elderly and the disabled – who cannot afford to pay the full fee. The establishment of a smuggling network works to protect fellow nationals from the systematic exploitation of smugglers of different ethnic backgrounds. However, when these ties of kinship and ethnicity fade, migrants' likelihoods of being abused and exploited are likely to rise dramatically.

Toward an Effective Response

In light of the need to develop an adequate policy response to human smuggling, a better comprehension of the phenomenon is pivotal to ensuring the stability of the receiving State and the security of the migrant. Empirical evidence shows that human smuggling across the eastern Mediterranean is the sum of highly heterogeneous organizations operating on a small scale and in a short time-frame; that these groups are characterized by the lack of solid hierarchies and the existence of interchangeable figures; that they provide a service that is in great demand without necessarily exploiting their clients; and that the smuggler and the customer may, at times, be the same person. An effective eradication of these organizations with-

out addressing the causes of clandestine migration may thus prove problematic when it comes to smuggling networks that are deeply enmeshed within migratory flows.

The first decisive step toward a more durable radical solution for the current crisis demands the opening of new channels of legal entry and the reinforcement of existing ones for refugees and asylum seekers, presumably the majority of people smuggled by sea

Nonetheless, EU efforts remain overwhelmingly focused on implementing a security-based policy. The creation of the European border agency Frontex in 2004 and the more recent EU-Turkish agreement of March 2016 have been clear steps in this direction. Border controls play a crucial role in restraining human smuggling activities. That said, a number of undesired outcomes ultimately outweigh the intended goals of a security-oriented control policy. First, sea border operations are often inefficient. The evolution of smuggling across the Mediterranean corridors demonstrates this with dramatic clarity. Not only has the vastness of the patrolled area hindered the extent of these operations and prompted spiralling financial costs, but also effectively blocking smuggling networks has redirected unauthorized migration flows along different routes. Second, the tightening of border controls generally exposes migrants to greater dangers. Wary of heightening the risks, smugglers seek to limit the chances of being apprehended by employing a variety of strategies – such as setting off on longer and therefore more dangerous journeys, choosing unsafe points of embarkation and disembarkation, adopting riskier manoeuvres to escape authorities, and abandoning their cargo on vessels in rough seas. Even in the case of successfully preventing migrants leaving transit countries (such as Libya, Mauritania or Morocco), we are left wondering whether this outcome would ul-

timately benefit them or aggravate their plight. Many accounts have reported how local authorities in these countries have arbitrarily arrested, mistreated and abused migrants. Third, the militarization of border controls may ultimately trigger a vicious dynamic. Researchers have demonstrated that the increase in the effectiveness of control policies has accompanied a growing tendency of these groups to specialize and to increase their capacity of delivering specialized services to would-be migrants in a systematic and standardized manner.

Does this mean that smugglers should be left undisturbed? Certainly not. However, the urgency of the sea crossing calls for a combination of policy measures. Security measures can be effective only if accompanied by other solutions. A truly effective answer to human smuggling would require the EU and its Member States to concentrate on reducing 'demand' more than curbing 'supply.' Accordingly, the first decisive step toward a more durable radical solution for the current crisis demands the opening of new channels of legal entry and the reinforcement of existing ones for refugees and asylum seekers, presumably the majority of people smuggled by sea. This should translate into: granting humanitarian visas; the creation of humanitarian corridors between transit countries and Europe; the expansion of European countries' resettlement programmes; and the development of alternative legal routes for refugees – such as family reunification, university fellowships and scholarships, training programmes, private sponsorships, and labour mobility.

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