

The Central Mediterranean Migration Route: Rise, Fall, and Rise Again



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Introduction

It has become common to divide the south-north migratory movements across the Mediterranean in recent years into three main routes. These being, the Western Mediterranean route, which leads from West African countries to Morocco, and from there to either mainland Spain or the Canary Islands. The Central Mediterranean route, which passes through Libya to either Italy or Malta, and which has been used by migrants from both West and East Africa. Finally, the Eastern Mediterranean route, which (in recent years) has led through Turkey and the Greek islands, and which has been used mainly by refugees fleeing from the civil war in Syria, but also by migrants hailing from other countries such as Afghanistan or Iraq. Even though all three routes have existed for the last two to three decades, their (relative) importance has varied considerably over time, depending —apart from the ‘pull factor’ exercised by the EU— on conditions in the countries of origin and transit, as well as migration control efforts in the countries of destination (and transit). The aim of this article is to explore the evolution of the Central Mediterranean route, where —after Italy— Malta has been the main entry point into the EU.

Rise of the Central Mediterranean Route

In contrast to both the Western and Eastern Mediterranean routes, which have been used by migrants seeking to enter the EU since the early 1990s, the Central Mediterranean route through Libya is of a more recent origin, dating back to around 2000. While there was some limited boat migration from North Africa across the Central Mediterranean

throughout the 1990s, the main country of departure during this period was Tunisia. At that time, migrants travelling along this route came mainly from North African countries, in particular Morocco and Tunisia itself. However, as Tunisian authorities began to clamp down on irregular migration from its shores, the migratory flows moved eastwards, with Libya becoming the main country of departure towards Europe in the Central Mediterranean area (Monzini, 2007).

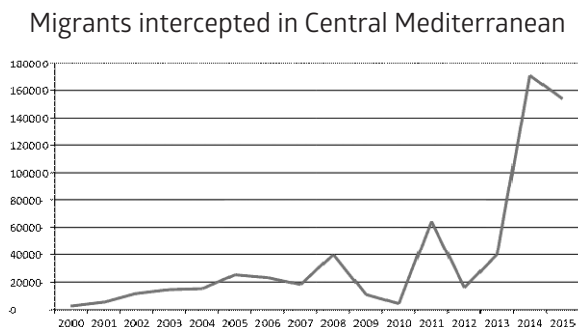
Apart from stricter border controls enforced by neighbouring Tunisia, several other factors have contributed to the emergence of Libya as a key transit country for irregular migration towards the EU. First, there seems to have been a diversion effect not only from Tunisia, but also from the aforementioned Western Mediterranean route (which passes through Morocco to southern Spain or the Canary Islands), as evidenced by the growing number of West African migrants travelling through Libya. As Spain stepped up border controls along its southern frontiers, as well as its cooperation with the Moroccan government in immigration control, migrants coming from West African countries increasingly seemed to have chosen the Central, as opposed to the West Mediterranean, route.²²

Second, Libya has since the 1990s practiced an ‘open door’ policy towards sub-Saharan African countries, and given Libya’s considerable prosperity compared to other countries of the continent, it has long been an attractive destination for African migrants. Libya has thus traditionally hosted a relatively large immigrant population, which towards the end of Qaddafi’s reign was estimated to range between one and two million. While many of these migrants have been living and working in Libya for long periods of time, it appears that at least some of them at one point decided to undertake an onward journey to Europe. Moreover, the presence of large immigrant populations has, in itself, facilitated migration into and through Libya towards Europe (see below). Finally, Libya’s geographical features, especially its vast desert borders and long coast line, have been further factors contributing to the country’s role as a key migration hub. The considerable rise in boat

²² The decline in irregular migration along the West Mediterranean route from 2006 onwards has coincided with a steep increase in migration along the Central Mediterranean route.

migration from Libya is shown in Figure 1 below, with an increase from around 5,000 migrants in 2000 to almost 40,000 by 2008.

Figure 1: The Central Mediterranean Migration Route



Source: Frontex; author's calculation based on media reports

It is noteworthy that Libya's role, with regard to these migratory movements from the African continent to Europe, has almost exclusively been one of a country of transit (and destination), and not of origin. Even though in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime in 2011 and the ensuing internal turmoil, a growing number of Libyans have fled the country, the large majority of these have left Libya by plane (often via neighbouring Tunisia) with valid travel documents and not by boat. Generally speaking, migrants travelling along this route have come from both the Horn of Africa (mainly Somalia and Eritrea) as well as West African countries, such as Nigeria, Ghana or Ivory Coast. Moreover, since 2013, refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war have accounted for a large part of migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean.

As the author (Lutterbeck 2013) has described elsewhere, the increase in irregular migration into and through Libya has gone hand-in-hand with —and has been facilitated by— the emergence and consolidation of relatively well organised migrant smuggling networks. In particular, for the crossing of the Sahara from Sudan or Niger to southern Libya, and the trip across the Mediterranean by boat to Italy or Malta, migrants have been resorting to human smugglers who have derived

a considerable profit from this activity. Even though these smuggling networks might not have been the highly sophisticated and professional transnational crime syndicates as which they are often depicted in public discourse, undeniably, migrant smuggling has become an increasingly organised and profitable business. Typically such smuggling networks are composed of individuals fulfilling different functions—brokers or intermediaries who ‘recruit’ migrants wishing to travel, owners of ‘safe houses’ where migrants are assembled before being transported, drivers, as well as individuals higher up in the hierarchy who ‘manage’ the smuggling process. As has also been shown by previous research, these migrant smuggling networks are often firmly embedded in the local economy of border areas, with numerous individuals deriving a profit from smuggling-related activities. In many cases, the smuggling networks have also been closely connected to Libya’s security structures, possibly at their highest levels, and Libyan security officers have directly benefitted from migrant smuggling. This may be in the form of taking bribes against turning a blind eye on irregular border crossings, or even through direct involvement in the transport of undocumented migrants into and from Libya (Lutterbeck, 2013).

The typical migrant smuggling pattern both in crossing the Sahara and the trip across the Mediterranean by boat has been roughly as follows: a first contact between migrants and smugglers is usually established through a ‘broker’ who is often of the same nationality as the migrants themselves. Brokers who offer a trip, are typically found in specific places, e.g. cafes or other meeting places where migrants congregate. The fact that Libya, as already mentioned, has traditionally had a relatively large immigrant population, has generally facilitated the establishment of contacts between migrants and smugglers (as well as irregular migration more generally). Once a price for the journey is agreed and payment is made, the migrants are taken to ‘safe houses’ where they must wait until the journey begins. For the sea crossing, these safe houses are usually located close to Libyan shores. Up until around 2009, by far the most important points of departure from Libya were the towns of Zuwarah and Zliten, both of which are located in the larger Tripoli area. The most commonly used boats for the crossings were fibreglass boats carrying around 30 passengers each, which most likely were fabricated in Libya for the sole purpose of transporting

migrants to Europe. The price for the trip by boat has varied according to the type of boat (and the place within the boat), but has usually hovered around 1,000 USD.

From the perspective of EU countries, the main problem in preventing irregular immigration across the Central Mediterranean from Libya, at least prior to mid-2009, was Libya's refusal to cooperate in stemming the flow of migrants across the Mediterranean. Since around 2000, there has been some collaboration between the Italian and Libyan governments in preventing migration, and Italy has also provided Libya with material and technical assistance in this area (European Commission, 2004; Frontex, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2006). Nevertheless, the Libyan government was generally considered to be turning a blind eye on the departure of irregular migrants from its shores, and many have—rightly—suspected the active involvement of at least some Libyan officials in the transport of migrants across the Mediterranean.

The Italian-Libyan Agreement and the Decline of the Central Mediterranean Route

A major turning point in irregular migration across the Central Mediterranean came in mid-2009 when the Italian and Libyan governments reached an agreement on cooperation in immigration control. This included a commitment on the part of Libya to enforce stricter controls along its coast, and to take back irregular migrants intercepted at sea (Human Rights Watch, 2009). As a result of this Italian-Libyan collaboration, and Italy's controversial 'push-back' policy, irregular migration in the Central Mediterranean was reduced sharply. As shown by Figure 1 above, from 2008 to 2010 the number of migrants travelling along this route dropped from around 40,000 to less than 5,000.

One conclusion that can be drawn, from the sudden decline in boat migration from Libya towards Europe, after the Italian-Libyan agreement is that irregular migration from Libyan shores is a phenomenon that can indeed be controlled, if there is a (political) will to do so. In the past, the

Libyan leadership had usually exculpated itself from being responsible for irregular migration from its territory, arguing that its long coastline was practically impossible to monitor. However, if this had indeed have been the case, the Italian-Libyan cooperation and stricter controls on the Libyan side would have hardly had such an immediate impact on the number of migrants seeking to cross. The almost instant decline in irregular migration after Libya's policy shift can thus be seen as (further) evidence of Libyan authorities'—active or passive—implication in the transport of migrants from its shores, as mentioned above.

While after the launching of the Italian-Libyan cooperation irregular boat migration from Libya towards Europe declined sharply in numerical terms, several travel modalities also seem to have changed as a result of stricter enforcement on the Libyan side. First, the points of departure of the boats have shifted further east. Up to mid-2009, the large majority of migrants, as mentioned previously, left from the Libyan towns of Zuwarah and Zliten, both of which are located near Tripoli. Subsequently, however, many boats left Libya from towns located (much) further East, such as Misrata, Sirte or even Benghazi, most likely because controls in these more remote areas remained less strict. Second, there has been a change in the type of boats used. In 2009, the previously predominant fibreglass boats disappeared almost entirely, and the most widely used boats in 2009 and 2010 were large rubber dinghies carrying between 50 and 100 migrants. The shift from fibreglass boats to rubber dinghies has most likely also been a consequence of stricter monitoring on the Libyan side, as rubber dinghies (if they are deflated) are easier to transport and conceal, given that they can be inflated at the very last moment before departure.

Whereas within Libya itself, the points of embarkation have shifted further east, alternative routes from Libya through other North African countries towards Europe also seem to have emerged as a result of Libya's crackdown on irregular migration. For example, there appears to have been a diversion from the Central to the Eastern Mediterranean route, with a growing number of migrants travelling from Libya to Egypt, from where the route to Europe continues to Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey towards Greece.

Apart from these shifts, however, the basic modus operandi of migrant smuggling from Libya to Europe seems to have remained largely the same. Migrants who left Libya by boat in 2010 explained to this author that, as a consequence of stricter monitoring, it was generally more difficult to find boats to make the crossing and that much greater care had to be taken to avoid being arrested. Nevertheless, the ways in which the trip was organized was largely the same as previously. As during previous years, the trip was arranged through a broker (usually of the same nationality as the migrants), the migrants were kept in safe houses prior to departure, and also the price for the crossing remained roughly the same.

The Libyan ‘Revolution’ and the Re-emergence of the Central Mediterranean Route

The (dramatic) decline of the Central Mediterranean migration route through Libya, as a result of the Italian-Libyan cooperation in 2009/2010, was reversed almost equally rapidly by the popular uprisings of 2011, which ultimately led to the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime. With the eruption of the popular upheavals, during which European (and Western) countries generally expressed their support for the anti-Qaddafi rebellion, and even took military action to protect the Libyan population against the regime, the Italian-Libyan cooperation in immigration control was also suspended. This resulted in a renewed increase in boat migration from Libya towards Europe, which by 2011 had climbed to roughly pre-2009 levels. To be sure, the main impact of the Libyan crisis of 2011 on migratory patterns in the Central Mediterranean was a large outflow of migrants and refugees from Libya across the borders to neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt, but it also led to a renewed rise in boat migration from Libya towards Europe (IOM, 2011). Departures from Tunisia — which witnessed the first anti-regime uprising in the region— towards European countries and consisting mainly of Tunisian nationals, also increased in 2011, but this migratory movement practically subsided by 2012, as Tunisian authorities re-established control over the country’s borders.

Apart from the termination of the Italian-Libyan cooperation, several other factors have also contributed to the increase in seaborne migration from Libya, which after a short dip in 2012, rose dramatically to more than 150,000 by 2013. First, it seems that the Libyan regime not only terminated its cooperation in the sense that controls which had been enforced in 2009 and 2010 were lifted, and individuals previously arrested for migrant smuggling were released, but also actively began pushing migrants out of the country (Attir, 2012). Indeed, Colonel Qaddafi himself, in response to the air strikes launched by Western countries against his regime, declared he would ‘unleash an unprecedented wave of illegal immigration’ towards Europe.²³ Many migrants who left Libya during the popular uprising, and who were interviewed by this author, spoke of Libyan police and military forces actively organising their journey by boat to Europe. The renewed increase in large boats carrying hundreds of migrants from 2011 onwards also testifies to the absence of border enforcement on the Libyan side and possibly also to the active involvement of Libyan officials in the transport of migrants across the Mediterranean.

Probably even more importantly, the growing internal instability within Libya, and the fact that Sub-Saharan migrants were often mistaken for pro-Qaddafi mercenaries, has made life for immigrants in Libya increasingly dangerous, thus creating an additional ‘push factor’ driving them out of the country. It seems that many African migrants who left Libya in 2011 had had no previous intention of leaving the country; they only got on a boat to Europe because they no longer felt safe in Libya. As explained by one Ethiopian migrant who had fled to Malta by boat with his family:

*“We had no plans of coming to Europe. I was living in Libya with my family, and we were doing fine. But one day, some Libyans came to the place where we were staying and told us we could no longer stay here. Africans were being attacked all over Libya, and we were being threatened; we had no choice but to take a boat.”*²⁴

23 ‘Italy is rocky shore for Europe’s boat people’, *BBC News*, 11.7.2011.

24 Author interview with Ethiopian migrant, Malta, 5.7.2011.

According to some observers, another potential factor driving migration across the Central Mediterranean has been the maritime operations carried out in this area, first by Italy —the so-called *mare nostrum* operation— and subsequently, on a more limited level, by the EU border control agency FRONTEX. Some have argued that these maritime operations, rather than deterring migrants from seeking to cross the Mediterranean, were acting as a ‘pull factor’ in that (inevitably) they have facilitated migrants’ journey by boat. While it is difficult to verify this correlation, it seems clear that these maritime operations have entered the calculus of the migrant smugglers and have thus affected travel modalities across the Mediterranean. Officials involved in these operations have reported that the quality of boats and equipment used for transporting migrants have declined even further. Assuming that boats carrying migrants will be picked up at sea and brought to Europe anyway, migrant smugglers have been providing boats even less suitable for the crossing than previously and equipped with even less fuel and food supplies.

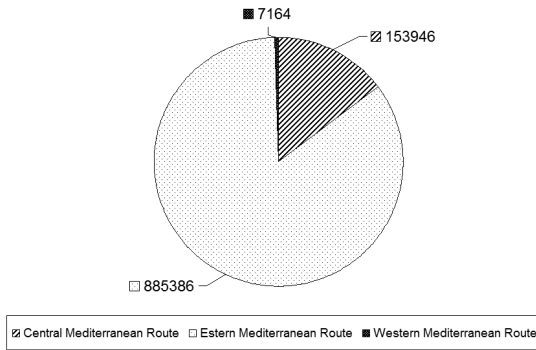
Arguably, the most important factor fuelling the steep rise in migration across the Central Mediterranean, however, has been the deterioration of the situation in many migrant sending countries. The most significant development in this respect in recent years has been the civil war in Syria, which too has been a consequence of the popular upheavals that have swept across the Arab world since 2011. As the deepening conflict has driven millions of Syrians from their homes, a growing number of them have sought to undertake the perilous journey to Europe via Libya, even though the large majority has sought refuge in neighbouring countries (in particular Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan). In 2013/2014 around a quarter of all migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean have been Syrians. The increasing repression in Eritrea seems to have been another push factor driving migration across the Central Mediterranean, in particular of young men escaping compulsory—and often practically unlimited—military service in the country.

While boat migration across the Central Mediterranean has risen to unprecedented levels, it should also be noted that in 2015 the Central Mediterranean route was overtaken by the Eastern Mediterranean route passing through Greece and Turkey. As can be seen from Figure 2 below,

in 2015 more than 800,000 migrants and refugees were intercepted along this route, more than five times the number of migrants travelling across the Central Mediterranean. In this respect as well, the deepening crisis in Syria has been a key factor, as the vast majority of migrants seeking to reach Europe via Turkey have been refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war. Moreover, it seems that the imposition of visa requirements for Syrians by many North African countries have made the journey via Libya increasingly difficult, thus leading many Syrian refugees to opt for the Eastern Mediterranean route instead. However, migration patterns in the Mediterranean remain highly volatile, and a shift back from the Eastern to the Central Mediterranean route can hardly be excluded. Indeed, as a result of the recent EU-Turkey agreement aimed at preventing migrants from reaching Greece via Turkey, the Central Mediterranean route might very well again become the most important gateway to the EU in the region.

Figure 2: Mediterranean Migration Routes in 2015

Irregular migrants travelling across the Mediterranean in 2015



Source: Frontex

As far as Libya is concerned, the currently most important challenge when it comes to controlling migration is not only the absence of functioning state institutions but also the fact that large parts of the country are now controlled by a multitude of militias with different political agendas. Even though in principle Libya has an internationally recognised government, the western part of the country including Tripoli

has come under the control of a rival (Islamist-leaning) government, and both governments have been sustained by different militias. Moreover, in the resulting chaos, Islamic State (IS) or DAESH also seems to have been able to gain a growing foothold in some areas of the country.

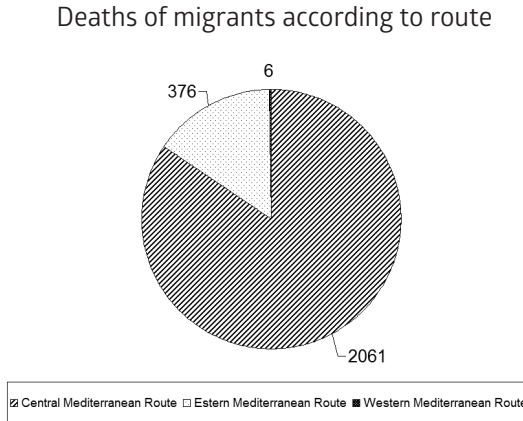
Little reliable information on the current migration situation in Libya is available at the time of writing, as the growing instability in the country has made research in this area increasingly difficult. Available accounts have highlighted the inability of Libya's remaining official institutions to prevent irregular migration —even if they had the will to do so, they seem to entirely lack the necessary equipment for controlling the country's borders. Moreover, Libya's various militias now also seem to have emerged as important actors in the 'migration businesses'. It is reported, for example, that Libyan militias have been raising funds by taking bribes from migrants and smugglers to allow them free passage, or by running migrant detention centres so as to create a 'market' for migrant smuggling. There are even indications that, not unlike the Qaddafi regime, Libyan militias might be using the 'migration tool' to put pressure on European countries by actively pushing migrants and refugees out of the country (Altai Consulting, 2015).

Death toll along the Central Mediterranean route

The Central Mediterranean route has not only gained notoriety because of the growing number of migrants and refugees travelling along this route but also because of the rising death toll of migrants who have perished on their way to Europe. Not only is the Mediterranean as a whole by far the most deadly migration border in the world, but of the three main routes across the Mediterranean, the Central Mediterranean one has accounted for by far the largest number of migrant deaths. While this area remains under-researched, it can be assumed that in recent years, several thousand migrants have drowned in the Mediterranean each year (Brian and Laczko, 2014). Needless to say, this has been the consequence of the long and perilous sea crossing, where weather conditions can change rapidly, as well as of the generally poor condition of the boats used for the journey.

Figure 3 below shows the number of migrant deaths along the three main Mediterranean routes during the first five months of 2016. As can be seen by far the largest number of migrants —more than 2,000— have died trying to cross the Central Mediterranean, even though around three times more migrants —150,000 as opposed to 45,000— have used the Eastern Mediterranean route during this period. Moreover, it also seems that this route is becoming increasingly deadly, despite EU countries maritime patrol activities. During the first five months of 2016, one in every 23 migrants is reported to have died along this route, whereas the ratio for previous years was 1/50 (GMDAC, 2016).

Figure 3: Migrant Deaths in the Mediterranean, 1/1 – 31/5/2016



Source: GMDAC

Conclusions

Even though of somewhat more recent origin than both the Western and Eastern Mediterranean routes, the Central Mediterranean migration route is nowadays one of the most important gateways for migrants and refugees seeking to enter the EU. And while its (relative) importance has varied considerably over time —and in 2015 was entirely overshadowed by the massive migratory movements along the Eastern Mediterranean route— it can be assumed that the Central Mediterranean route will

continue to play a key role when it come to migratory movements from the African continent to Europe. The continuous and ever growing instability in many migrant-sending countries —including Syria, Somalia or Eritrea— as well as the (increasing) turmoil in Libya itself, will have the effect that this route will continue to be used by large numbers of migrants and refugees. Apart from numbers, the dangerousness of the Central Mediterranean route will also continue to be an issue of key concern. Not only does the Central Mediterranean represent the most perilous crossing of the Mediterranean Sea, but the most recent figures seem to suggest that not even the EU's maritime patrol efforts might have a significant impact in reducing the death toll in this part of the Mediterranean.

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