

Incidence of migrant smuggling on Central Mediterranean Route in 2021 is twice what was thought

UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants Update #1 - March 2022

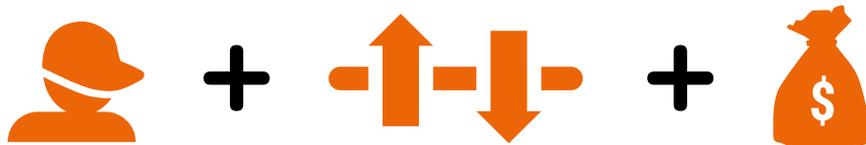
The latest UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants analysis of migrant smuggling on the Central Mediterranean route indicates that the number of smuggling incidents on this route is far higher than was previously thought. This is because existing data and research base the incidence of smuggling on the number of people registered as arriving in Italy and Malta, rather than on the total number of people departing from Libya, Tunisia and Algeria.

This has significant implications for counter-smuggling measures in this region, and for the assessment of their impact. In order to understand and respond to migrant smuggling, the number of failed smuggling attempts must be taken into account, in addition to attempts that are successful in reaching the intended destination.¹

One of the main objectives of the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants is to contribute to addressing the lack of systematic and comparable data on migrant smuggling. In the absence of smuggling data, the number of people irregularly entering a State is often used as a proxy for the incidence of smuggling, adjusted according to informed estimates of the proportion of these people who use smugglers. But the total number of people *attempting* to irregularly enter a country may be far higher than the number of people who actually arrive, particularly in the case of smuggling by sea. On the Central Mediterranean Route during the period January to August 2021, 69,628 people departed, while just 34,061 people were registered as arriving.

SMUGGLING OF MIGRANTS

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**FACILITATION OF IRREGULAR ENTRY
INTO A COUNTRY FOR PROFIT**

Smuggling Attempts on the Central Mediterranean Route

In order to investigate this, the Observatory focused on the Central Mediterranean route (from North Africa to Italy and Malta) during the period January to August 2021. During January to August 2021, a total of **33,597** people arrived in Italy, after departing from Libya (18,089 people), Tunisia (14,560 people), Algeria (780) and Egypt (168). **464** people arrived irregularly in Malta by sea during these eight months.² This means that a total of **34,061** people arrived on the Central Mediterranean Route during this period. But these figures do not account for people who departed the North African coast and were then intercepted at sea by the Libyan, Tunisian or Algerian authorities, nor for those who lost their lives or went missing at sea.

During these same eight months, a further **34,439** people were intercepted and returned to North African countries (see graph below). This figure comprises 22,474 people intercepted at sea by the Libyan Coast Guard,³ and 11,582 people intercepted at sea by the Tunisian authorities.⁴ In addition, a total of 5,472 people were intercepted by the Algerian authorities, and the Observatory estimates that around 14% of these people (383) were heading to Italy, while the other 86% were heading to Spain.⁵

During the same period, 1,128 people were reported dead or missing along the Central Mediterranean route.⁶

In analyzing the figures, it is important to note that the same person may in some cases make repeated attempts to cross the sea and therefore there are repeated smuggling attempts. This means that the number of individual *people* who arrived or were intercepted may be slightly lower, if some of these people were intercepted and returned at least once before successfully arriving during this same period, or they were intercepted multiple times during this same period. Based on the findings of qualitative research in relation to repeated smuggling attempts, interception and return, as well as time spent in detention and obtaining financial resources between attempts,⁷ however, the discrepancy for this eight-month period is likely to be low. Regardless of this discrepancy, the number of *smuggling offences and attempted smuggling offences* committed remains the same.

Combining the numbers of people who arrived, who were intercepted and who lost their lives or went missing during January to August 2021, **the total number of people who attempted irregular entry across the Central Mediterranean route is 69,628.**

PEOPLE DEPARTING ON CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE JAN - AUG 2021



There is no consensus on the exact proportion of people who use smugglers among those departing along the Central Mediterranean, but assessments and estimates suggest that the proportion is high.⁸ Five years ago, Europol, for example, estimated that around 90% of all refugees and migrants arriving irregularly in the EU are smuggled, though the EU legal framework on smuggling does not take into account the constitutive element of financial or material benefit in the migrant smuggling crime.⁹ Since then, route dynamics have changed, as a higher proportion of people travelling on the Central Mediterranean route depart from Tunisia (30,769, with 41,283 departing from Libya), and Tunisian departures are less likely to involve smuggling.¹⁰

It is important also to note that all these figures relate to people who are recorded as arrived, intercepted, dead or missing. They do not include smuggling offences and attempted smuggling offences on this route, where the object of the offence (the smuggled person) never came to the attention of state authorities or international organizations. This unrecorded figure is extremely difficult to determine.

Nevertheless, it is clear that migrant smuggling along this route – and likely also on many other sea smuggling routes¹¹ – has hitherto been significantly underestimated. This is not because of a higher prevalence of smuggling among people using the Central Mediterranean route, but rather because the number of people departing is much higher than previously calculated.

Article 6.2(a) of the UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol¹² calls on States to also establish as criminal offences *attempting* to commit smuggling of migrants and smuggling-related offences (document fraud and enabling irregular stay).

For more information and analysis on the Central Mediterranean migrant smuggling route, see: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). *West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean*: www.unodc.org/res/som.

¹ As of December 2021, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Missing Migrants Project started to present data on "Attempted Crossings." This figure combines the numbers of people on all three Mediterranean routes (Western, Central and Eastern) who: arrived; were rescued or intercepted; and who died or went missing. IOM calculates a total of 176,406 attempted crossings on all Mediterranean routes during 2021. See: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.

² UNHCR data <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/90072>.

³ Libyan Coast Guard data via UNHCR: <https://data2.unhcr.org/>.

⁴ Tunisian Ministry of Interior: www.interieur.gov.tn. For the same period, the Tunisian NGO Forum tunisien pour les droits économiques et sociaux (FTDES): <https://ftdes.net/> records 16,209 people intercepted; 4,627 more than recorded by the Ministry of Interior.

⁵ Algerian Ministry of National Defence data. This estimate is based on the fact that during the period in question, 780 people arrived in Italy from Algeria (UNHCR, op. cit.), while 4,867 people arrived in Spain from Algeria during January to 27 July 2021 (police data cited in El País: <https://elpais.com/espana/2021-08-25/la-inestabilidad-y-las-mafias-impulsan-la-ruta-de-argelia.html>). The Spanish Ministry of Interior does not provide disaggregated data according to country of departure, but its Informe Quincenal sobre Inmigración Irregular - Datos acumulados desde el 1 de enero al 29 de agosto de 2021: www.interior.gob.es/es/prensa/balances-e-informes/2021 cites a figure of 9,075 people arriving by sea to mainland Spain and the Balearic islands during the months in question, so it is reasonable to assume that the figures cited in El País are correct.

⁶ IOM Missing Migrants Project: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.

⁷ UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). *West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean*. www.unodc.org/res/som.

⁸ UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). *West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean*. www.unodc.org/res/som.

⁹ MIGRANT SMUGGLING NETWORKS Joint Europol-INTERPOL Report (2016).

¹⁰ UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). *West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean*. www.unodc.org/res/som; Sanchez, G., K. Arrouche, M. Capasso, A. Dimitriadi & A. Fakhry. (2021). Beyond Networks, Militias and Tribes: Rethinking EU Counter-smuggling Policy and Response, Euromesco Policy Study, N.19

¹¹ On the Eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey to Greece and Italy, for example, during the same period of January to August 2021, 2,057 people arrived in Greece and 4,967 in Italy (UNHCR, Op. cit.). 17 people were recorded as dead or missing (IOM, Op. Cit.) and the Turkish Coast Guard intercepted 11,162 people (<https://en.sg.gov.tr/irregular-migration-statistics>). This means that the total number of people who departed Turkey was 18,203, over two-and-a-half times the number of people who were recorded as arriving.

¹² United Nations (2000) Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime: www.unodc.org/documents/middleeastandnorthafrica/smuggling-migrants/SoM_Protocol_English.pdf.