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MIGRATION POLICY PRACTICE

A Bimonthly Journal for and by Policymakers Worldwide

ISSN 2223-5248

Vol. XI, Number 3, October–November 2021



THE SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRANTS AND DISPLACED POPULATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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COVID-19 restrictions and smuggling of migrants in North Africa: Findings and policy implications from United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) research

*Fabrizio Sarrica, Giulia Serio and Claire Healy*¹

Based on the research brief entitled “How COVID-19 restrictions and the economic consequences are likely to impact migrant smuggling and cross-border trafficking in persons to Europe and North America”, prepared by the UNODC Research Team on Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants (2020a).

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic radically restructured the nature of social interactions and economic activities in all regions of the world. These changes affected all aspects of life in ways we have yet to fully understand, and smuggling of migrants is no exception. Demand for smuggling of migrants rises when: (a) people wish to, or need to, migrate for a variety of different reasons, including searching for better livelihoods, fleeing conflict and persecution, or reuniting with their families; (b) it is not possible for them to migrate regularly due to travel and immigration restrictions; (c) there are expensive and lengthy procedures to obtain regular travel documents; (d) migrant smugglers market their services and spread misinformation; and (e) smugglers recruit clients, and communities exert pressure to migrate (UNODC, 2018:6).

Restricting domestic and cross-border travel has been a key element of the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The intensification of measures to limit cross-border travel and immigration in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 may have increased the demand for smuggling services, as well as making migrant smuggling more difficult, more expensive and riskier. However, according to UNODC research on West African, North African and Central Mediterranean smuggling routes, the COVID-19 pandemic has not halted irregular crossings on smuggling routes from North African countries to European Union countries. Indeed 2020 saw an increase in people arriving in

the European Union along the Western and Central Mediterranean mixed migration routes (UNODC, 2021).²

This article focuses on the effects of COVID-19 on the smuggling of migrants and refugees from North African countries, particularly Morocco and Libya, to European Union countries, especially Spain and Italy. It highlights the relevant findings and policy implications emerging from the UNODC research published in mid-2020 on the impact of COVID-19 on trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants – part of a series of research briefs produced by the UNODC Research and Analysis Branch on how the pandemic has affected drugs and crime.³ It is also informed by the UNODC thematic brief on the impact of COVID-19 on trafficking in persons (2020b) and by the latest research findings of the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants, launched in May 2021.⁴

Migrant smuggling across the Mediterranean

Over the last 15 years, the Western and Central Mediterranean mixed migration routes from North Africa to Europe have seen significant fluctuations in terms of the numbers of people travelling along them. Due to the lack of alternatives for regular travel, the majority of people travelling along these mixed migration routes are smuggled (UNODC, 2018:144). Conflicts and violence, and bilateral agreements between origin, transit and destination countries and regions, are among the factors influencing changes in the numbers of people arriving along the three routes.

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² The UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrant’s research provides an overview of the main dynamics characterizing migrant smuggling operations, facilitating the movement of West Africans by land and sea along West African, North African and Central Mediterranean routes. It is based on field research conducted in 2019 with people smuggled from West Africa. Emerging findings are complemented with academic literature and other sources in order to account for the most recent developments along these routes. Other routes will be covered in future research by the Observatory.

³ See: UNODC, 2020a and n.d.

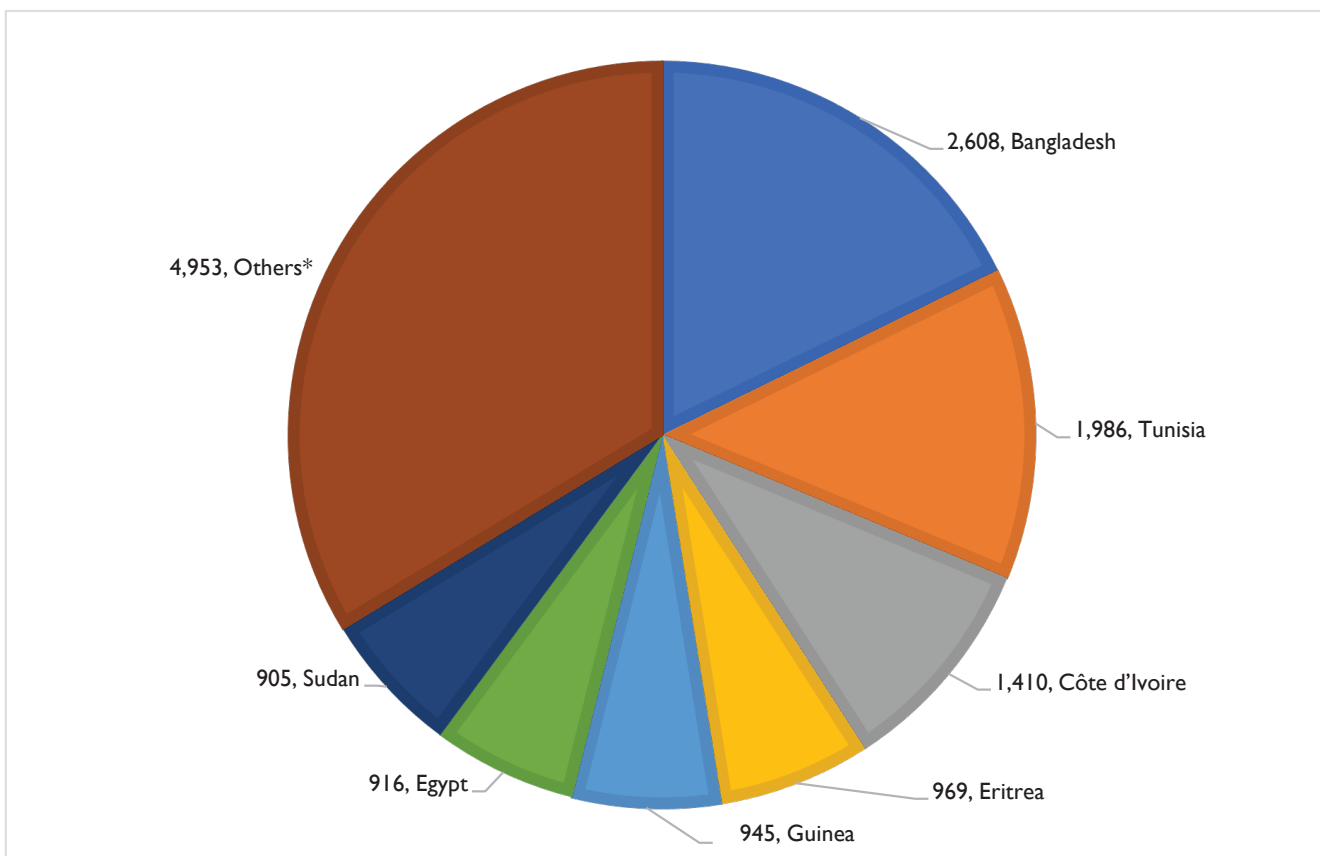
⁴ See: UNODC, 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged in the context of a steady decline in the numbers of people arriving irregularly on these routes, since the peak years of 2015–2016.

A significant proportion of people arriving along these routes are from countries with recognized refugees and beneficiaries of international protection

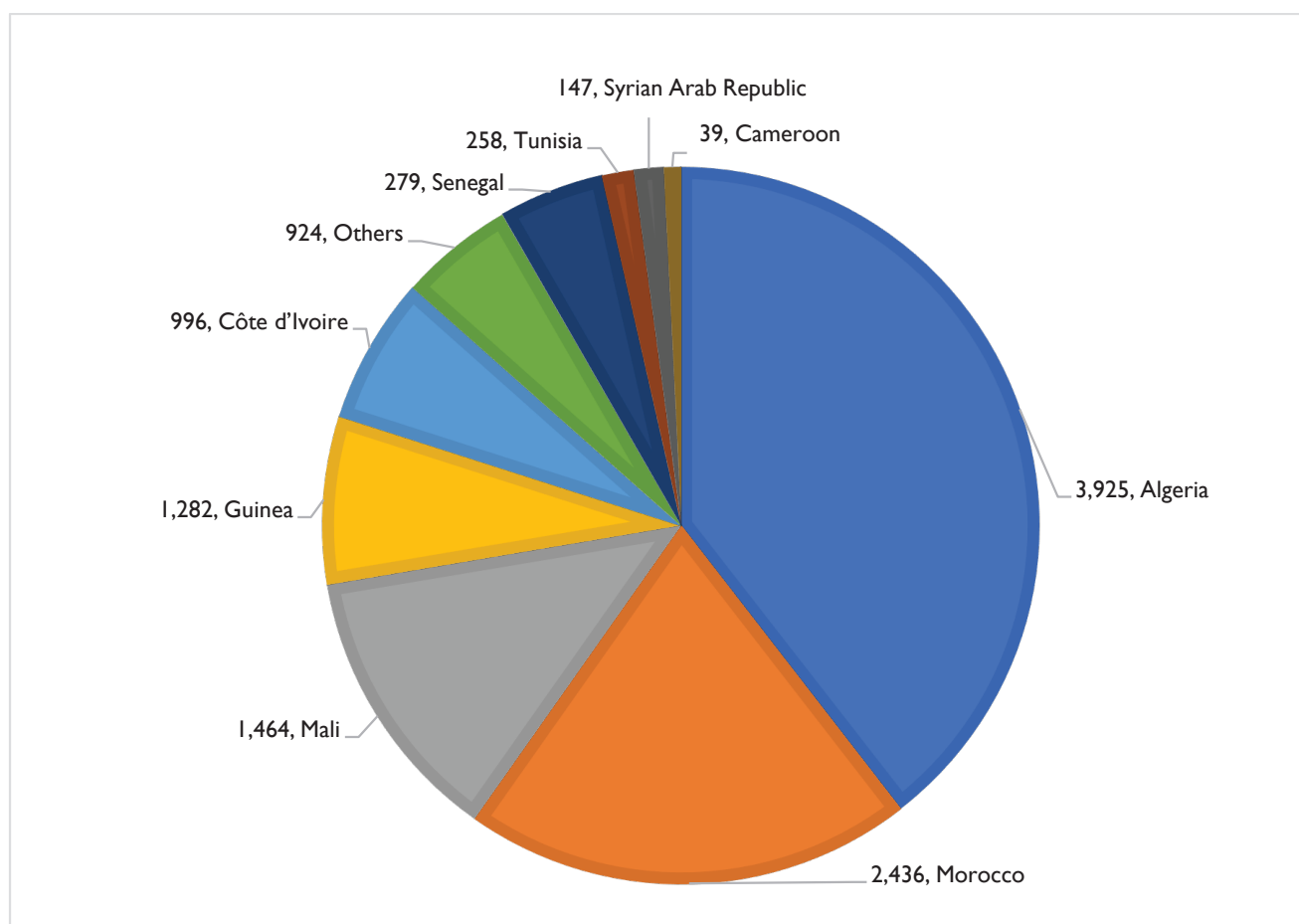
in the European Union, including Eritrea, the Sudan, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq and Afghanistan. This means that many of those travelling from these countries – as well as some people from other countries, depending on their situation in the country of origin – are forced migrants likely to be entitled to international protection.

Figure 1. Countries of origin of people arriving in Italy, January–May 2021



Note: “Others” includes 328 Somalians, 301 Syrians, 299 Iraqis and 179 Afghans. UNODC’s elaboration of UNHCR data is available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5226>.

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on: IPC-IG, 2021a.

Figure 2. Countries of origin of people arriving in Spain, January–September 2020

Note: UNODC's elaboration of UNHCR data is available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5226>.

Western Mediterranean route: Morocco to Spain

The Western Mediterranean route leads – for the majority of people travelling – from or through Morocco (principally in and around Tangier), across the Strait of Gibraltar and the Alboran Sea to Andalusia in Spain. For a smaller proportion of people, it leads overland from around Tangier in Morocco to the Spanish town of Ceuta, or from around Nador in Morocco to the Spanish town of Melilla. Migrant smugglers provide sea crossings by boat as well as assistance in some cases for those attempting to cross the fortified land borders around Ceuta and Melilla.

The first two confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Morocco were identified in Casablanca on 2 March 2020. On 15 March, the Moroccan Government closed the

country's land, sea and air borders, and the following day, all schools, universities and mosques were closed. The Government announced the "progressive confinement" of the population from 20 March 2020 (Nait Sibaha, 2020). Meanwhile, the Spanish Government imposed a state of emergency and a national lockdown on 14 March 2020, then closed its borders on 16 March, the day after its Moroccan counterpart did. From 29 March, all non-essential workers were ordered to stay home.

Throughout 2020, a total of 40,326 people arrived irregularly by sea and a further 1,535 people by land in Spain from Morocco, with 330 people reported dead or missing. An additional 11,174 people arrived by sea and

425 by land in 2021, and 130 more people were reported dead or missing (as of 6 June 2021).⁵ The numbers of people arriving in 2020 represent a significant increase compared to figures of 26,168 by sea and 6,345 by land in 2019, as well as 679 dead or missing, though the numbers are still lower than during the peak year of 2018.⁶ COVID-19-related restrictions have clearly not reduced the numbers of people smuggled along the Western Mediterranean route.

Central Mediterranean route: Libya and Tunisia to Italy

The Central Mediterranean route leads from Libya or Tunisia to Italy. Migrant smugglers provide passage across the Mediterranean Sea to Italian ports on Sicily (Pozzallo, Trapani, Messina), Lampedusa and the mainland (Taranto). Information from Libya, where around 570,000 migrants and refugees are recorded as present (IOM, 2021), suggests that the COVID-19 public health crisis has not discouraged people from trying to reach Europe from Libya, due to the tense situation in Libya and the exacerbation of the conflict, even if it is more difficult to enter the country irregularly. In December 2019, before the outbreak of the pandemic, the United Nations Security Council expressed concern over the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Libya and called for the closure of migrant detention centres (UNSMIL, 2019). In March 2020, Libyan authorities put in place public health measures aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19, which include domestic and international travel and mobility restrictions, and specifically ordered the immediate closure of airports and points of entry along land borders and maritime boundaries. The first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Italy, and indeed in Europe, were identified on 31 January 2020 in Rome. The Italian Government imposed a state of emergency and a national lockdown on 11 March, closed its borders, and requested all non-essential workers to stay home.

On 7 April 2020, the Italian Government declared that due to the pandemic, Italian ports could no longer be considered safe harbours, and thereby prohibited search and rescue (SAR) operations conducted by foreign vessels, apart from the Italian SAR, from docking in Italy (MIT, 2020). Two days after the Italian Government declared that they would not allow SAR vessels to dock, the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) refused to allow a border control operation by Libyan Coast Guard vessels to dock, declaring that Libyan ports could no longer be considered safe harbours for the disembarkation of migrants due to the pandemic (IOM, 2020). In assessing this smuggling route, it should be noted that at the end of 2019, Italy and Libya renewed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) aimed at supporting border management in Libya, as well as increasing return operations for refugees and migrants from Libya to their countries of origin or to “safe third countries”.

Despite the limitations to the SAR operations and other COVID-19-related travel restrictions, almost three times as many people arrived along the Central Mediterranean route (Libya and Tunisia to Italy) in 2020 (34,154, with 983 people dead or missing) as in 2019 (11,471, with 1,262 people dead or missing).⁷ In 2021, as of mid-June, 16,819 people had arrived along the route, and the number of dead and missing was 679.⁸ In addition, more than 11,900 people were returned to Libya in 2020 after being intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard – a practice condemned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as Libya cannot currently be designated a “safe third country”.

The threat of COVID-19 has not stopped the ongoing conflict in Libya. Before the conflict, many West Africans migrated to Libya in order to find work. Since then, many of those working in Libya have tried to leave, boarding vessels at seaports on the northern coast of the country in order to arrive in Italy. The situation in Libya raises concerns on the conditions of stranded refugees and migrants. It is widely documented how

⁵ UNHCR data is available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5226>. IOM data on people dead or missing on the Western Mediterranean route is available at <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.

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they are exposed to systematic extortion, abuses and human trafficking, and the current crisis will likely increase these risks. Furthermore, in times of pandemic, refugees and migrants are also exposed to the health threat of the virus and often have limited or no access to proper treatment or basic sanitary conditions.

Effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the smuggling of migrants in North Africa

The COVID-19 crisis has had different effects on the smuggling of migrants, depending on whether people travelling are forcibly displaced due to conflict, persecution, or violence or for other reasons, such as securing economic livelihoods for themselves and their families. People who are forcibly displaced often have limited options and thus resort to travelling irregularly, which may be facilitated by smugglers, even in the context of restricted mobility – for example, those fleeing the violence and crisis in Libya. However, in the medium term, also for people travelling in search of better economic prospects, in the context of unequal economic recovery from the crisis,⁹ their journeys will be irregular and smuggler-facilitated if there are no legal channels. While the inability to pay higher fees may cause some people to reconsider embarking on the journey, this is often not an option, and so the desperate need for additional funds renders people even more vulnerable to violence, deprivation of liberty for extortion, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), exploitation and human trafficking (UNODC, 2020a).

Border closures and mobility restrictions also have the effect of shifting smuggler-facilitated journeys to alternative routes, which are generally riskier in terms of travel conditions; access to food, water and shelter; and abuses and exploitation perpetrated by smugglers or other actors. There were reports in 2020, for example, from Kufra in south-east Libya – at the border with Chad, the Sudan and Egypt – and from Sabha in central Libya, of migrant smuggling through these two hubs being temporarily suspended (GI-TOC, 2020). Furthermore, both an increase

in control along existing routes and the shift to alternative routes mean additional costs of operating for migrant smugglers, costs that are ultimately borne by the refugees and migrants contracting the smuggling services (INTERPOL, 2020).

Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis may itself encourage people to leave their country of origin or to move on from a transit country, and in the absence of regular opportunities to do so, the demand for migrant smuggling increases. In addition, irregular migration journeys facilitated by migrant smugglers often create situations that make refugees and migrants vulnerable to trafficking in persons (UNODC, 2020b). Traffickers may recruit victims by inducing them to contract a debt to pay for a migration journey or for recruitment fees. En route or at the destination, victims are exploited to pay back this debt (UNODC, 2014:47). Incidents of deprivation of liberty for extortion, abuse, violence, and trafficking affecting refugees and migrants stranded en route have been widely documented in many parts of the world in recent years and may increase as a result of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the major consequences of the pandemic is economic recession. This will affect the origin countries of migrants and refugees smuggled to Europe from North African countries as well as from sub-Saharan African countries. According to the African Development Bank, before the outbreak of the pandemic, economic growth in North Africa was projected at 4.4 per cent in 2020 and 4.5 per cent in 2021. Revised projections for growth in 2020 in North Africa indicated a loss of 6.7 per cent, with a growth rate of -2.3 per cent (AfDB, 2020). The combination of a global economic downturn and intensified migration restrictions creates a tension between increased interest among potential migrants in labour migration and limited options for regular migration. This may increase the demand for smuggling services and the risks of being trafficked (UNODC, 2020a). In the medium to long term, unequal economic recovery will increase labour migration, and without increased possibilities for regular migration, this is likely to increase smuggling of migrants towards countries that have faster recovery.

This suggests that COVID-19 travel and movement restrictions are not stopping the movement of people fleeing conflict, violence, and dangerous and inhumane conditions (as currently experienced by many refugees and migrants in Libya), who generally

⁹ The International Monetary Fund (2020) estimated that global economic growth in 2020 will decrease to -3 per cent. This is a downgrade of 6.3 percentage points from January 2020, a major revision over a very short period. This would make the Great Lockdown the worst recession since the Great Depression in 1929, and far worse than the Global Financial Crisis at the end of the last decade.

have no option but to use migrant smugglers. The closure of land, sea and air borders may increase the smuggling of migrants, because people have an even greater need for the services of smugglers in order to cross borders. Closures and restrictions often result in the use of riskier routes and conditions, along with higher prices for smuggling services, exposing migrants and refugees to increased abuse, exploitation and trafficking. Smugglers may also benefit from a situation of increased demand by raising the prices of their services.

Across the Mediterranean routes, migrants and refugees are caught between the need to flee conflicts, human rights abuses and poverty, dangerous open waters, the reduced SAR operations at sea and the risks of COVID-19 transmission. The living conditions of these migrants and refugees should be of primary concern for the international community.

The medium- to long-term economic consequences resulting from the lockdown measures introduced to reduce the spread of COVID-19 may have an impact on smuggling flows. This will be even more dramatic if the economic downturn is combined with continued stringent mobility restrictions. The potential human rights impact of COVID-19-related restrictions on travel, movement and economic activities – and of the consequent economic downturn – on smuggling of migrants may be severe.

Policy implications

The inclusion of migrant populations in the responses to address the effect of COVID-19 is critical, not only for humanitarian and economic reasons, but also as a sound public health measure and in order to build back better.

In the immediate term, the key issues arising from these findings are:

- (a) Provision of health care for migrants and local populations alike, including access to testing, vaccination and hospitalization if needed.
- (b) Protection of front-line responders from COVID-19 and ensuring adequate access to testing, vaccination and hospitalization. These will include, for example, law enforcement officials at border crossings, prosecutors, judges, labour inspectors and social workers.

- (c) Continuity in services, so that migrants in an irregular situation, asylum applicants, refugees and victims of trafficking can access health, social and legal services, and so that access to justice is not denied to these vulnerable populations.
- (d) Regular monitoring of the effects of public measures to mitigate the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable people, including smuggled refugees and migrants.
- (e) Advocacy efforts to combat stigma faced by migrants, asylum applicants and refugees, if they are “blamed” for the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- (f) Research to inform measures to protect the rights of smuggled refugees and migrants, and to combat migrant smuggling, in the context of the pandemic.

In the medium term (three to five years), and as there is a better understanding of the health and economic consequences of the pandemic, migrant communities need to be included in the considerations of a national response. These negative impacts can be mitigated by investments in job creation and economic recovery across both developed and developing countries.

The consequences in terms of increased crime, abuse, violence, exploitation and trafficking can be ameliorated by ensuring that providing avenues for safe and regular migration journeys for refugees and migrants, and regular immigration status in destination countries, is a key element of post-COVID-19 recovery plans. ■

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Required citation: International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Eurasyllum Ltd., 2021. *Migration Policy Practice* Vol. XI (3), October–November 2021. IOM, Geneva.

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