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THE CRISIS OF AFRICAN MIGRANTS PASSING THROUGH LIBYA AND EU POLICIES

Abstract: Every year a large number of migrants arrive in EU countries not because they want to reach voluntarily but because they are forced to flee, either from their countries of origin or from intermediate stops along the migration route. From sub-Saharan countries to Libya begins the journey of migrants where war, armed conflict, and lawlessness provide a fertile environment for human trafficking activities. The study combines fieldwork, semi-structured interviews with migrants, and desk analysis of EU strategies and agreements with Libyan authorities. The most important result shows that EU deterrence policies have reduced arrivals to Europe but simultaneously worsened humanitarian conditions in Libya, exposing migrants to systematic abuse and exploitation. In conclusion, the research emphasizes that addressing Africa's structural causes of migration and reforming EU policy frameworks are essential to reduce irregular migration while safeguarding human rights.

Keywords: African, migrants, Libya, EU policy

Introduction

The European immigration agenda, which focuses on deterrence, does not simply work with those who want to reach Europe. African migrants in Libya live between two options: fleeing to Europe on rudimentary boats where many drown in the middle of the journey, or being held in inhumane conditions and possibly sold in "slave" markets. On the other hand, European policies have contributed by preventing migrants from reaching the European coasts, which, according to lawyers and NGOs, has caused migrants to be subjected to widespread rape and torture by the Libyan Coast Guard, funded and trained by European taxpayers' money (Suleiman, 2024). Europeans are constantly asked about the causes of migration waves flowing to their countries, especially from Africa, and what are the root causes of this phenomenon and how to address it. At the closing sessions of several summits on curbing migration and asylum, the Europeans launched several billion euro funds to help African countries cope with irregular migration. If the EU realizes that the deep causes of irregular migration in Africa are the problem of the policies of African countries, some of which are due to the historical grievances committed by some

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European countries on the continent, they will save the money they intend to provide as assistance to Africa, which often ends in the accounts of the corrupt before it reaches the hands of its beneficiaries. Although the Trust Fund provides emergency assistance, it will not address the main problem in Africa, namely, development, low education levels, disease and poverty, governance policies, violence, political corruption, dictatorship and repression of freedoms.

Some of the main causes of migration include ongoing wars, the struggle for governance, dictatorship in most African countries, corruption at all levels, as well as economic hardship (Fofack & Akendung, 2020). Poor Africa, receiving international assistance, is rich in natural resources, but the problem is that citizens are deprived of their human rights and are oppressed, unable to receive subsidies, with a sense of powerlessness and inability to influence political regimes. The known traditional causes of migration in Africa have not been addressed, but other causes have increased, particularly those related to globalization. As an important influence in the process of political and economic transformations, these shifts opened a free market economy and slowed governments in sponsoring development programs, which caused low health services, education, and social welfare systems. All these reasons have led to a doubling of the number of people seeking freedom and a decent life in countries with better living conditions. In this context, the study aims to analyze the root causes of irregular African migration, map the main migration routes through Libya, evaluate EU deterrence policies and cooperation with the Libyan Coast Guard, and investigate the role of human trafficking networks. It also seeks to examine the humanitarian conditions faced by migrants in Libya and ultimately to provide evidence-based policy recommendations for both the EU and African governments to reduce irregular migration while safeguarding human rights.

Methodology and sources of evidence

This study combines secondary data analysis with field research conducted among migrants in Libya. Secondary data were drawn from official EU documents, agreements with Libyan authorities, and reports from IOM and UNHCR. Fieldwork was carried out between 2022 and 2024 and included 550 semi-structured and informal interviews with migrants of different nationalities, as well as discussions with volunteers, charities, and members of local NGOs. Interviews lasted on average 10 - 25 minutes, were conducted in Arabic and English, and were transcribed manually. Observations were also conducted in key localities such as Tajura reception center and informal camps in Bani Walid, Zawya, Sabha, and Zuara.

By distinguishing between these groups, the study ensures clarity:

- Migrants: the primary focus, irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa transiting through Libya.
- Volunteers and charities: secondary participants, providing humanitarian perspectives.
- Local NGOs: institutional actors offering policy and operational insights.

Challenges included security instability, restricted mobility between Libyan cities, and the control of armed groups over reception centers, which occasionally limited access to participants. Despite these constraints, the field research provided valuable insights into migrant routes, motivations, and humanitarian conditions, complementing the secondary data analysis.

Field Research Findings

The field research conducted between 2022 and 2024 provides direct insights into the experiences of migrants transiting through Libya. A total of 550 semi-structured and informal interviews were carried out with migrants of different nationalities, primarily from sub-Saharan Africa, who were either detained in government-supervised reception centers or living in informal camps outside state control. The interviews, lasting on average 15-25 minutes, were conducted in Arabic and English, transcribed manually, and supplemented by field notes.

Most respondents were young men aged between 18 and 35, though women and minors were also represented. The majority originated from Nigeria, Sudan, Eritrea, Chad, and Niger, and many had already experienced displacement within Africa before arriving in Libya, often moving through multiple transit countries. Migrants reported widespread abuse, exploitation, and violence, including forced labor, extortion, and sexual violence. Conditions in detention centers such as Tajura were described as overcrowded, unsanitary, and under militia control. Informal camps in Bani Walid, Zawya, Sabha, and Zuwara lacked basic services, with migrants often subjected to arbitrary detention, ransom demands, and trafficking networks. Interviews with volunteers, charities, and NGOs highlighted the humanitarian crisis faced by migrants. Local organizations reported limited capacity to provide assistance due to insecurity and lack of resources, while international agencies struggled to access certain areas. NGOs emphasized the gap between EU-funded deterrence policies and the humanitarian needs on the ground. Observation and mapping revealed that migrants typically move from southern Libya, particularly Sabha and Kufra, toward northern coastal cities such as Tripoli, Zuwara, and Zawya, where they attempt sea crossings to Europe. These routes are heavily influenced by smuggling networks, tribal militias, and armed group control. The research itself faced significant obstacles, including security instability, restricted mobility between Libyan cities, and the dominance of militias over reception centers and migrant camps. Armed conflicts around Tripoli further complicated access to participants and limited the scope of fieldwork.

Table 1. Field Research Findings

Aspect	Details
Target group	Irregular migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria, Sudan, Eritrea, Chad, Niger), aged 18–35, including women and minors
Sample size	550 interviews (semi-structured and informal) conducted 2022–2024
Locations	Tajura reception center (Tripoli), informal camps in Bani Walid, Zawya, Sabha, Zuwara
Key experiences	Abuse, forced labor, extortion, sexual violence, overcrowded detention, lack of services
Routes observed	Movement from southern Libya (Sabha, Kufra) to northern coastal cities (Tripoli, Zuwara, Zawya)
NGO perspectives	Limited capacity, restricted access, mismatch between EU deterrence policies and humanitarian needs
Challenges	Security instability, militia control, restricted mobility, armed conflicts around Tripoli

Causes and motives of illegal immigration to EU

Irregular immigration has emerged as a global phenomenon since the 1960s (Messina, 2017), prompting most governments to intensify eradication efforts, particularly in response to the rise of brokers who exploit migrants by charging large sums for unauthorized and perilous journeys. The main reasons for the illegal migrations of Africans to Europe include:

Young people sought to realize their dreams through immigration to Europe, they imagined that they will be wealthy in a short time. In that, countries many social networking sites run by smugglers have encouraged young people to emigrate.

- Economic factors: Due to the disparity in the economic level between third world countries and European countries, the per capita income is eight times higher in the EU compared to developing countries. This pronounced inequality fosters strong migratory pressures, as individuals seek improved economic opportunities and social mobility, often resorting to unauthorized migration channels when legal pathways are inaccessible.
- Political persecution and wars: Feelings of persecution, instability, fear of unknown fate, and lack of freedoms, as well as armed conflicts and civil wars, that forced many individuals and groups into emigration.
- Social Media: Technology and information have played a role in encouraging the youth of third world countries to emigrate, by looking at the lifestyles of the developed societies and comparing them to what they suffer in their countries. As well as the existence of marginal work in agriculture and construction, these jobs are not acceptable to Europeans and remain opportunities for migrants.
- Security reasons: Security-related factors represent a significant push element in irregular migration. The limited capacity of state institutions and security agencies to enforce stability, coupled with high levels of crime, persistent unemployment, and widespread lack of public awareness, creates conditions of insecurity that compel individuals to migrate in search of safety and improved living standards.
- Geographic Location: The geographical proximity of EU countries has contributed to the easy and fast movement of migrant.
- Social conditions: Poor social conditions are a cause of Irregular migration, weak social bonds and lack of social values, traditions and family disintegration within third world countries, as well as sectarian and ethnic discrimination. In addition, the presence of relatives or friends in the receiving country of Irregular immigration became motives for Irregular immigration.

After 2011 due to the political problems, armed conflicts and civil wars in Libya as well as the lack of border control, provided thousands of migrants to enter Libya and then to Europe. Sub-Saharan Africa hosts more than 26% of the world's refugee population (UNHCR, 2024). In the last five years, the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Africa has tripled, as conflicts, violence, and natural disasters have led to a significant increase in the number of people forced to leave their homes, reaching 35 million internally displaced persons in the mid end of 2025, this figure represents 35% of the total number of IDPs in the world (IDMC, 2025). As of 2021, over 19 million Africans lived outside their country of birth but still within the continent. An additional 17 million Africans have migrated from the continent since birth. The bulk of these emigrants have gone to Europe 55% and to Asia 26% mostly the Gulf States. While this inter-continental emigration is driven mostly by countries in Northern Africa, in both Eastern Africa and Western Africa, migration is primarily contained within the region: Around 70% of migrants in each area stayed within the same region (UNICEF, 2023).

Table 2. Refugees and IDPs due violence and conflict in Sub-Saharan African countries

Country	Refugees	IDPs
Sudan	2.5 million	4 million
Somalia	520,000	1 million
Congo	811,300	6.5 million
Central African Republic	306,000	189,000
Chad	600,000	1,5 million
Nigeria	278,600	2.1 million
Mali	140,000	160,400
Ethiopia	204,000	1,1 million

Source: IDMC, 2025

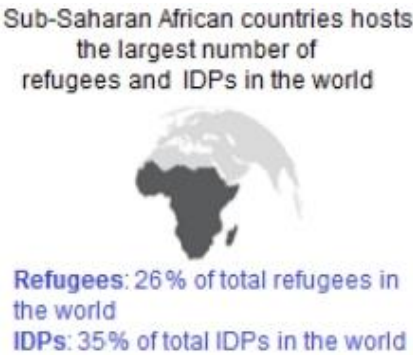


Fig. 1. Refugees and IDPs of Sub-Saharan African countries

Source: IDMC, 2025

The table 1 demonstrates that Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo record the highest levels of internal displacement, reflecting the severity of their conflicts. Somalia and Nigeria show how terrorism and civil wars generate both refugees and IDPs, creating dual pressures. In most countries, IDPs outnumber refugees, meaning populations remain trapped within national borders despite insecurity. Chad and Ethiopia illustrate how overlapping crises—security, economic, and environmental—compound migration pressures. Overall, the data confirms that violence and instability in Sub-Saharan Africa are the main drivers of forced migration, often spilling into irregular routes toward Europe.

Field Findings on Migration Routes and Motivations in Libya

This section maps the main migration routes used by migrants in Libya. This analysis is based on interviews conducted with migrants at transit points and migrant reception centers in Libya. From January to December 2024, the largest proportions of migrants had passed through Niger (41%), Egypt (20%), Sudan (14%), and Chad (13%), in addition to a small number of migrants who entered through Tunisia (4%) and Algeria (1%).

Approximately nine out of ten migrants (86%) reported that economic reasons, such as seeking job opportunities abroad or insufficient income in their country of origin, were the main motivation for their migration to Libya. A higher percentage of female migrants (22%) compared to male migrants (8%) cited security concerns such as war or conflict in their countries of origin as a primary motivation for their migration. A higher percentage of migrants from the

Middle East (39%) and North Africa, including Sudan (14%), cited security concerns such as war and conflict as a primary motivation for their migration to Libya, compared to those from Sub-Saharan Africa (5%) and Asia (3%). On average, migrants paid US\$752 for their journey to Libya. Although the price paid varied considerably depending on the route and means of transport used, the largest expenditure for 70% of migrants went to smugglers and facilitators. 95% of migrants primarily used the services of smugglers and smugglers to help them cross-difficult terrain and borders. About two-thirds of the migrants (65%) reported that they paid for their journey to Libya from their savings, and about two out of every five (45%) stated that they borrowed to finance their migration.

Profile and Nationalities of Migrants in Libya

Libya has long been associated with migration, serving both as a destination and as a transit country since the 1970s. Economic opportunities and relatively low living costs attracted large numbers of workers, particularly from Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa. By 2009, approximately 1.5 million Egyptians and 130,000 migrants from other African countries were employed in construction, agriculture, and industry (Libyan Ministry of Interior, 2009). The outbreak of conflict in 2011 marked a turning point, rendering thousands of migrants “irregular” and forcing nearly 700,000 to flee to Europe and neighboring states (Libyan Transitional Council, 2012). Around 600,000 Egyptian workers returned home between April 2011 and January 2012 (Embabi, 2012).

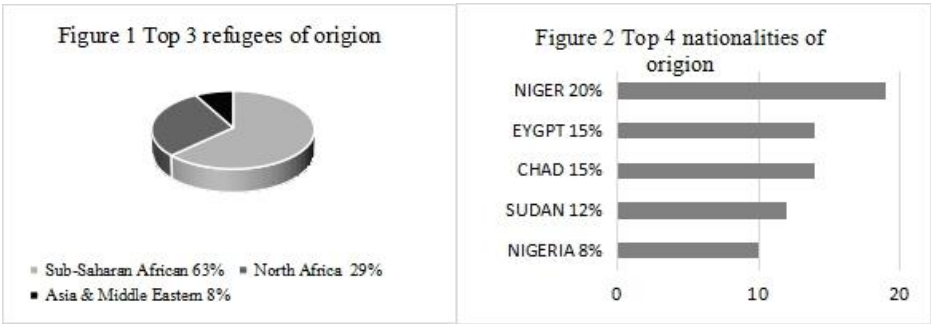


Fig. 2. Refugees and nationalitis of origion by country and region

Source: Author, based on data from IOM. DTM 2019

Continued political instability, civil war, and the presence of armed groups transformed Libya into a major transit hub for migrants from across Africa. By late 2017, international organizations estimated more than 400,000 migrants in Libya, including 45,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers, with the majority originating from sub-Saharan countries (UNHCR, 2017; Amnesty International, 2017).

Table 3. Migrants by gender and age categories

WOMEN	MAN
13 %	87 %
ADULTS	MINORS
92 %	8 %
ACCOMPMINORS	UNACCOMPMINORS
67 %	33 %

Source: IOM. DTM 2019

By 2018, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported 704,142 migrants in Libya, rising to 865,055 in 2025 (IOM, 2018; IOM/DTM Libya, 2025). Of these, 94% were Africans—29% from North Africa (Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria) and 63% from sub-Saharan Africa (Niger, Chad, Sudan, Nigeria, Somalia, among others). Migrants from Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Syria, Palestine, and Pakistan accounted for about 8% of the total.



Fig. 3. Nationalities of migrants arriving to Libya²

Source: IOM. DTM 2019

The demographic profile was heavily male-dominated, with men representing 88% and women 12% (IOM/DTM Libya, 2025).

Libya as transit area

Libya remains the world’s busiest migration route, with migrants departing from it accounting for about 40% of all irregular migrants arriving in the European Union since the beginning of 2025. Reports from the European Union’s border and coast guard agency, indicate an increase in the number of migrants departing from Libya towards the Greek island of Crete during 2025 (Frontex, 2025).

As a result of political instability and military conflict in Libya and lack of border control, especially in southern Libya where about 69% of total migrants enter (Daw, 2018), as well as controlling border crossings by Militias and their smuggling activities, issuing visas for hundreds of peoples by Libyan embassy in Bangladesh, Pakistan and African counters to travel to Libya. As well as the geographical location of Libya near the southern European coasts, 340 km to Malta and 420 from the Italy, Sicily, that were main reasons for Libya to become a main transit area to reach Europe. In 2015 a report on the Tripoli government mentioned, many labor recruitment companies from Asia and Africa are involved with some Libyan embassy staff in those

² The researcher added in the map - percentages and arrivals from the Middle East and South Asia

countries by issuing work visas to travel to Libya for work in construction, agriculture and cleaning companies (Saleh, 2018). In Tripoli, there are 13 government-licensed labor recruitment companies, and about 11 companies operate illegally. Security reports in Tripoli indicate that around 15% of Irregular immigrants in Libya have arrived through some companies (Saleh, 2018) the journey of migrants through these companies is safer and less expensive, compared to the journey through the desert that could cost migrants their lives.

Table 4. The percentage of workers coming to Libya via airports (legal entry - visas), who have become migrants and Percentage of entrants to Libya by road (legal entry - by smugglers)

Year	Arrivals by plane %	Arrivals by other means - car – truck %
2013	7	93
2014	9	84
2015	14	93
2016	13	89
2017	8	92
2018	8	92
2019	3	97
2021	5	95
2022	2	98
2023	1	99

Source: 1- Libyan Ministry of Interior 2018. Foreigners entry statistics 2016, 2017 and 2018. Report.; Statistics for foreign arrivals Mitiga Airport. Tripoli Libya. Interview with the director of the Foreign Affairs Department at the airport. years 2015 – 2019.; S. Company for Labor and employment. Tripoli. The number of foreign employees coming to Libya, primary data 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2018. 2021 to 2023; Libyan Center for Human Rights (Report on the movement of migrants in western Libya 2023)

Many of those arrivals in Libya have entered legally and for various reasons, mostly for work. After arriving, they head straight to smuggling points on the Libyan coast to escape to Europe. Easy entry of foreigners through Tripoli / Mitiga airports encouraged many African migrants to contact labor companies to obtain a work visa to travel to Libya. At Tripoli International Airport from 2013 to September, 2014, the percentage of arrivals through these companies was not high. After the outbreak of the civil war in Tripoli and the destruction of Tripoli International Airport in the end of 2014, the proportion of arrivals through Mitiga International Airport - Tripoli in 2015 – 2016 increased due the cooperation of the militias that control Mitiga airport with labor companies and corruption. Also the tribal war in southern Libya and the danger of crossing into the north (S. Company for Labor and employment. Tripoli.) & (Libyan Ministry of Interior 2018). Because of tightened security measures at Mitiga Airport after 2020, smugglers resumed using land smuggling routes, which witnessed a noticeable increase in activity during the period 2021 - 2024. Between 2020 and 2024, following the opening of a direct flight route (Cham Wings) from the Syrian capital, Damascus, to Benghazi Airport in eastern Libya, the number of Syrian migrants increased. In recent years, and up until the beginning of 2025, the island of Crete, located 290 km from the eastern Libyan coast, witnessed large waves of migrants arriving from Libya, mostly of Syrian, Egyptian, Sudanese, and other Southeast Asian nationalities. Some of these migrants reached the Greek islands. IOM estimates indicate that 19,948 migrants arrived on Crete from Libya via what is known as the “Southern Route” between January and December 2025 (IOM, 2026).

Migrant's routes to / from Libya

Entry points

1. South and Southwest Libyan borders. Around 60% of migrants arriving to Libya came from Sub Sahara - West African countries passing through Niger and Chad to Libya (Mohamed Maigl, 2021). Most arrivals stop in the town of Murzuq and Sabha Sout of Libya to agree with the smugglers for continue to the north. From the city of Sabha to Shwayrif, Bani Walid, Tarhuna, to Al-Azizyah and from the city of Al-Azizyah to the coastal cities where the main starting points to Europe are Zawiya, Sabratah, Zuwara. This road is the most dangerous roads, many migrants lost in the desert or killed by bandits and human smugglers.
2. The city of Kufra in Libya's southeastern desert is the main entry point for migrants from Sudan and the Horn of Africa. From the city of Kufra to the city of Ajdabiya north, and therefore, to the northwest of Libya.
3. Through the Egyptian-Libyan border, legal entry or smuggling.
4. Migrants coming via Algeria most often enter through Ghat or Ghandames.

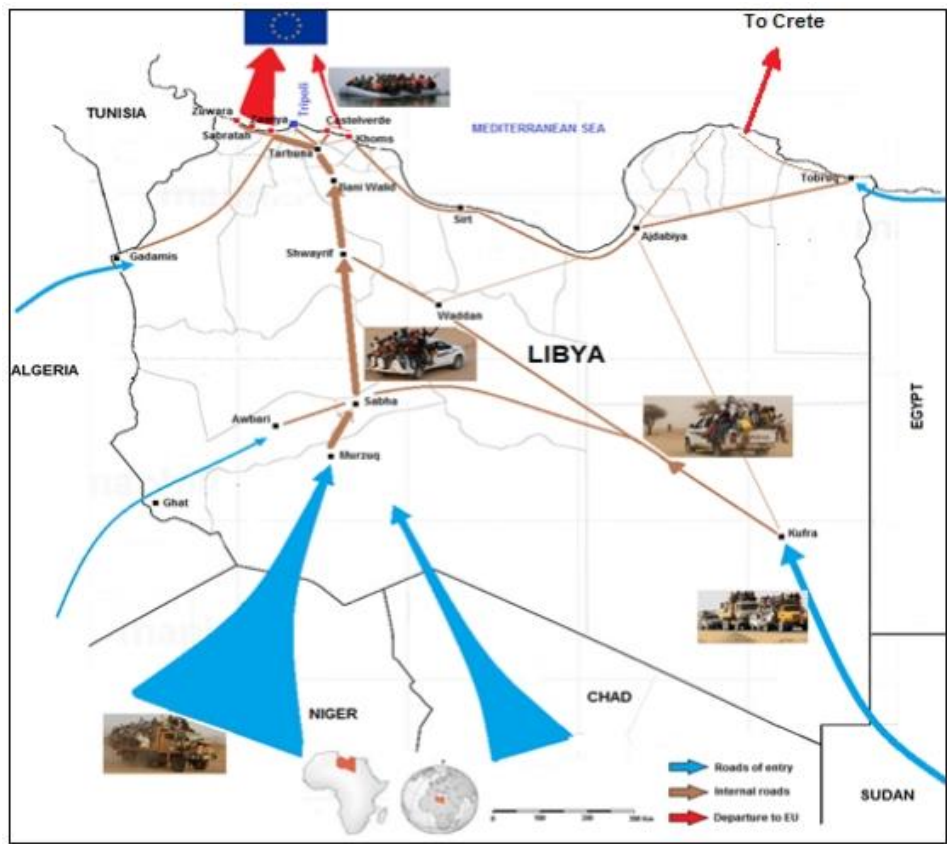


Fig. 4. Migrant's routes

Source: Author, based on data from field data, by tracking the movement of migrants in Libya

Having in mind the travel costs, 3% of migrants, on their journey, stop in cities with the aim of to earn money to cover the cost of their trip to northern Libya and then to the EU (Bashir, 2017).

From the south of Libya to the north - northwest along of the migrants route, before sailing to Italy, there are smugglers networks that manage the migration process, each sponsor part of the migrants journey, the majority belonging to the tribes of the Tabu which has good relations with sub-Saharan tribes in Niger and Chad, which is responsible for smuggling of migrants in the south with the participation of the tribes of Awlad Suleiman to the area of Shwayrif, and therefore other armed militias take them to the north through the city of Bani Walid and Tarhuna to the departure points on the northwest coast of Libya. The cost of transporting migrants from the south to the north Libya is 300-500 \$ per person.

Departure points and arrivals to Italy

Zawara, Sabratha and Zawiya cities are major smuggling points on Libya's northwest coast. From these cities around 85% of immigrants in Libya left to Europe. These points are managed by armed militias specialized in human trafficking. In Sabratha, 400 Libyans work in human trafficking with help of other smugglers to transport migrants from nearby cities and regions to the points of departure to Italy (Report, Office of Combating Illegal Immigration, Tripoli, 2018).The journey from the departure points on the Libyan coast to Italy costs between 800 - 1200 \$ per person.

Between January 1 to December 31, 2019, (11,471) migrants arrived to Italy by sea. This is a 51% decrease compared to arrivals by the sea in the same period last year 2018 (23,370) migrants (UNHCR Italy sea arrivals 2019). Total arrivals to Italy from January, 1 to 19 2020 (715) migrants total arrivals by the sea in the same period January 1 – Jan 19, 2019 was (142) migrants (UNHCR Italy sea arrivals 2020). UNHCR statistics show that 61% of arrivals in Italy 2018 - 2019 came through Libya (UNHCR, August 2019).

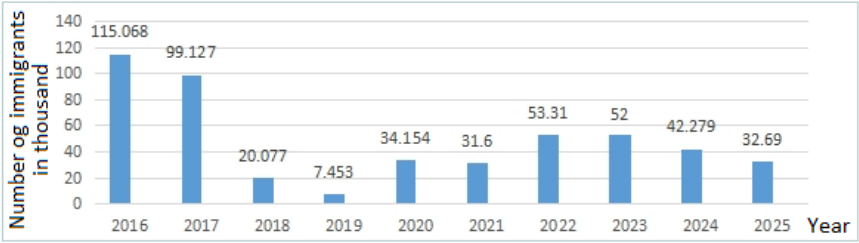


Fig. 5. Yearly sea arrivals to Italy from Libya

Source: UNHCR – IOM reports 2016/2025

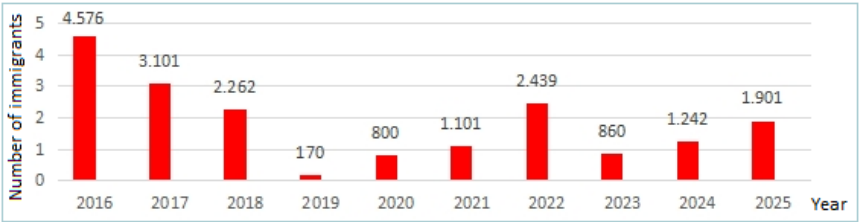


Fig. 6. Number of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea during the crossing from Libya to Italy/Malta

Source: UNHCR – IOM reports 2016/2025; UNHCR 2020

In 2016, the EU took a surprise decision to protect the southern border by outsourcing to prevent the arrival of migrants from Libya to southern Europe, the new partner was: Libyan Coast Guard, EU has sent money, boats and organized some training courses for the Libyan Coast Guard to prevent migrants of reaching EU. The reports of various international migration organizations revealed a marked decrease in the number of migrants arriving in Italy during 2018- 2019. Between January, 2017 and July 30, 2019, the Libyan Coast Guard intercepted more than 57,000 migrants and returned them to Libya (Immigration Office, Tripoli 2019). Also, Poor security conditions and armed conflict in northwest Libya since April 2019 have also affected the shortage of migrants arriving at departure points. As a result of decrease arrivals numbers to Italian coasts, the number of dead and missing in the Central Mediterranean region (the maritime area between the Libyan and Italian coasts) has decreased. The number of dead and missing 2016 was 4,576 and decreased to 170 in 2019. At the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, war broke out after armed forces from eastern Libya attempted to storm Tripoli, creating a significant security vacuum and posing a threat to migrant workers and other groups of immigrants. Consequently, as security forces and armed groups in western Libya were preoccupied with defending the capital, Tripoli, smuggling operations and smugglers from Libya's western coast to southern Europe flourished. According UNHCR statistics in 2020 number of dead and missing was 800, the number of deaths rose from 1101 in 2010 to 2439 in 2022 (UNHCR. 2019-2022). Throughout 2025, the ongoing displacement crisis in Sudan, instability in the Sahel region, and the lack of economic opportunities for young people in South Asian countries all contributed to a surge in migration towards the European Union. The Greek islands of Crete and Gavdos became key arrival points, with most migrant boats departing from eastern Libya. This route, which began in 2024, saw a significant increase in arrivals during 2025 (more than 17,200 people by December 11, according to the UNHCR, compared to approximately 5,100 for the whole of 2024). The majority of arrivals were Egyptian, Sudanese, and Bangladeshi. The Mediterranean Sea remains one of the world's most dangerous migration routes. By December 1. 2025, the IOM 2025 had recorded 1,901 migrants dead or missing this year on all migration routes in the Mediterranean, including 1,190 in the central Mediterranean. The actual number is likely to be much higher (InfoMigrants 2025).

Conditions of migrants in Libya

Although Libya is not a member of the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees and is not a signatory to its 1967 Protocol. The 1969 African Convention on Refugees states: Article 11 Convinced that the effectiveness of the actions recommended in this Convention to resolve the refugee problem in Africa inevitably requires the continued and close cooperation between the OAU and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Addis Ababa, 6-10 September 1969. African Refugee Convention, 1969). As Libya has signed and abided by the African Convention of 1969, Libya is obliged to cooperate with UNHCR under the provisions of the 1969 African Convention. According to UNHCR, 2019 there are about 60,000 asylum seekers in Libya (The Guardian International, 2019). Since the beginning of the war south of Tripoli in April, 2019, UNHCR has helped about 1,474 refugees leave Libya, of whom 710 have gone to Niger and 393 to Italy, while 371 others have been distributed to other countries in Europe as well as Canada. Many migrants who crossed into Europe from Libya suffered horrific attacks and witnessed at least one death. They were sold by militia / smugglers to another and tortured as part of a ransom demand to pressure them to contact their families to send money to secure their release (UNSMIL, 2026). They also suffered from sexual and gender-based violence, and were held without adequate food or water by armed groups for a year or

more. Reports of arrivals from Libya to Italy in 2017 to 2022 indicated that 75% of the more than 3000 people interviewed faced some sort of assault on roads leading to Libya and Europe (UNHCR, 2020). Reports of interviews of some migrants indicated that:

- 64% reported physical abuse, violence or torture;
- 45% reported that they were vulnerable to food deprivation and 41% to water deprivation;
- 30% reported that they were vulnerable to exploitative labor practices;
- 21% reported being blackmailed or corrupt;
- 11% reported that they had been shot or threatened to be shot;
- 3% reported being vulnerable to sexual abuse or exploitation, including 7% of women and 2% of men (UNHCR 2020).

Not only do militias or smugglers harass migrants, some locals also exploited African migrants, stole their money and phones and beat them. A group of migrants described known patterns taking place in the neighborhoods of Tripoli: “boys would be lined up waiting for us, their prey, at the end of our work day, sometimes near traffic lights. They would take all our stuff: mobiles, money, necklaces, even shoes and jackets. Sometimes, they would even hold us for ransom, until someone comes with more money to bail us out” (UNSMIL 2018). Migrants, refugees working in daily work and other manual labor are vulnerable to non-payment of salaries after completing their duties or receiving lower wages than agreed upon sums. To avoid paying wages, many employers handed over the migrants, refugees to migrant detention centers after completion of their work.

The report of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) details the horrific series of violations and abuses committed by a group of state officials, armed groups, smugglers and traffickers against migrants and refugees, that includes unlawful killings, torture, arbitrary detention, mass rape, slavery, labor forced and extortion (UNHCR, Rport 2022). Based on 1,300 interviews with migrants in Libya collected by UN human rights officers in Libya, as well as migrants who have returned to Nigeria or arrived in Italy, the report tracks the entire journey of migrants and refugees from Libya's southern border, across the desert to the northern coast - a journey marred by serious risks of serious human rights violations and abuses at every step of the way. “The overwhelming majority of older women and adolescent girls interviewed by the UN Mission in Libya reported being gang-raped by smugglers or militias” (UNHCR Libya Report 2022). UN staff visited 11 detention centers, where thousands of migrants and refugees are held, have documented torture, ill-treatment, forced labor and rape by guards, and reported that women are often held in facilities without guards, increasing the risk of sexual abuse and exploitation. Those who were finally able to try to cross the perilous Mediterranean are increasingly intercepted or rescued by the Libyan Coast Guard, who then transports them back to Libya, where many are handed over directly to the pattern of violations and abuse. Around 29,000 migrants who have returned to Libya by the Coast Guard since early 2017 have been transferred to immigration detention centers run by the Anti-Illegal Immigration Department, where thousands are still held indefinitely and arbitrarily, without due process or access to lawyers or consular services (UNHCHR Libya Report 2018). Under Libyan law, foreigners who do not have permission to enter Libya (regardless of their age) are subject to detention and imprisonment (Libyan Law No. 19 of 2010).

Due the armed conflict in the capital Tripoli, more than 40 migrants were killed and about 100 were injured as a result of an air strike targeting a migrant center in Tajura in July 2019. Near the City of Bani Walid, along the smuggling route, residents found a total of 167 bodies from 2016 to September 2019, migrants died on their journey from south to north or died in illegal detention centers near the city as a result of illness and malnutrition, other died as a result of violence between migrants in these centers or killed by militias and smugglers (Al Salam Charity Association, 2019, Bani Walid). Libyan government in Tripoli estimated 20 detention centers in Libya. Excluding unofficial facilities estimated at 16 detention centers, run by militias and smugglers outside the control of the Libyan government, detention centers near the city of Sabha, Bani Walid, Zawiya, Sabratha and Zintan are among the most dangerous (Libyan Ministry of Interior, 2019). As a result of tuberculosis and other diseases at a detention center in Zintan 22 migrants died in September 2018. People in custody continue to die of disease, hunger, violence and rape by militias in those centers. On February 21, 2017, the bodies of 74 African migrants were found on Libyan shores northwest of the city of Zawiya, where they died after the boat they were trying to cross into Europe sank. (A long row of white and black body bags appeared on the beach in pictures posted by the Libyan Red Crescent's Zawiya branch on their Facebook page Libyan Red Crescent).

European Union Policy and Migration

European arrangements with the Libyan authorities caused mass expulsions and a sharp increase in detentions, creating what was described as one of the most damaging detention systems in the world. The EU launched “Sophia” operation (COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2015/778 of 18 May 2015) led by Italy in April 2015, a military naval operation, its mission to repel migrants from the Libyan coasts, not to save migrants from sinking at sea. Because of these arbitrary measures, the number of migrants coming from Libya to Europe has fallen sharply through the so-called “road of death”. This European policy has turned Libya into a firewall that protects Europe from refugees fleeing war and famine in Africa. This firewall offers refugees one of two options: either drown while trying to flee Europe, or arrest them on the sea to send them to the detention center in Libya.

Libyan coastguards by EU support have returned more than 1,000 people since the start of the recent conflict in Libya in April 2019 to Libyan territory, where they are being transferred to detention centers such as in Tajura, which have been bombed, the EU bear the responsibility for all these deaths and the suffering of migrants. “What we need are actions, that is, urgent evacuations of refugees and migrants stranded in very dangerous conditions in Libya” (MSF Libya, 2019). The EU is providing support to the Libyan coastguard to prevent migrants from migrating from Libyan shores to Italy. In 2017, an agreement was signed between Italy and Tripoli to train and equip the Libyan Coast Guard, since then, the immigrants arriving number to EU has fallen sharply. The list of charges against the Libyan coastguard goes on: human rights violations, including torture, abuse and obstructing volunteer efforts to carry out rescue operations. The Libyan coastguard consists of several armed groups, often former militias involved in human trafficking networks (Abdullah, 2017). The Europeans have for several years launched aid programs in African countries and concluded agreements to block irregular migration, at the 2015 Summit on Migration in Malta, the EU offered 1.8 billion Euro in aid, with other development assistance of 20 billion Euro every year to help the development of African countries as well as encouraging these countries to stop immigration and recover migrants who arrived in Europe (DW, 2015). On the other hand, smugglers from the Tuareg and Tabu tribes who control

the smuggling routes between Libya and Niger, to circumvent the Nigerian government's decisions to curb immigration to Libya, began offering large bribes to the Nigerian security forces to allow migrants to cross into Libya (Tobia, 2017).

Article 16 of the International Law Commission's Articles of Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts provides that a state is accountable for human rights violations if it knowingly aids or assists another state to commit abuses. Explanatory notes clarify that assistance can trigger state responsibility if it contributes "significantly" to the commission of a wrongful act, when a state provides material aid subsequently used to commit human rights violations. Providing equipment and financial support to the Libyan Coast Guard units to intercept people in international waters, when EU known that they will return those migrants to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in arbitrary detention in Libya or for children, where there are substantial grounds for believing that there is a real risk of irreparable harm, can constitute aiding or assisting in the commission of serious human rights violations (Human Right Watch, Report, 2019).

Discussion

The integration of fieldwork findings with secondary data analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of irregular migration through Libya. While EU policy documents and international reports emphasize deterrence and border control, the empirical evidence from field visits and interviews reveals the lived realities of migrants, exposing the humanitarian consequences of these strategies.

Policy-Humanitarian Gap

The cooperation between the EU and the Libyan Coast Guard has succeeded in reducing arrivals to Europe; however, field evidence demonstrates that this has come at the cost of worsening conditions in Libya. Migrants interviewed in Tajura and informal camps consistently reported abuse, overcrowding, extortion, and violence, highlighting the contradiction between policy objectives and humanitarian outcomes.

Complementarity of Evidence

Secondary sources such as IOM and UNHCR reports confirm the existence of systemic abuse, but the field research adds granular detail: testimonies of forced labor, ransom demands, and sexual violence, which are often absent from official statistics. This complementarity strengthens the reliability of the study, showing how macro-level policy analysis and micro-level field data converge to depict a complex migration landscape.

Structural Causes and Routes

Mapping the movement of migrants from southern Libya (Sabha, Kufra) to northern coastal cities (Tripoli, Zuwara, Zawya) illustrates the resilience of smuggling networks despite EU interventions. These findings underscore that deterrence policies alone cannot dismantle migration flows without addressing structural drivers such as poverty, unemployment, political instability, and armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa.

Role of NGOs and Volunteers

Interviews with NGOs and volunteers revealed the limitations of humanitarian response in Libya. Local organizations operate under severe resource constraints and insecurity, while international agencies face restricted access to camps controlled by militias. This highlights the

disconnect between EU-funded deterrence mechanisms and the humanitarian needs on the ground, reinforcing the necessity of policy reform.

Challenges in Field Research

The difficulties encountered during fieldwork—security instability, restricted mobility, and militia dominance—mirror the broader challenges faced by migrants themselves. These obstacles not only complicated data collection but also serve as evidence of the volatile environment shaping migration dynamics in Libya.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Due to the poor political situation and growing insecurity in Libya, with the horrendous human rights violations, migrants and asylum seekers are ready to risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean, regardless of the danger the road presents and the possibility of a push-back that may exist. The policy of a push-back, carried out by the Italian navy in the open sea without knowing whether those on the boats were economic migrants or asylum-seekers, has been criticized as a violation of the principle of expulsion as set Geneva Convention, which stated that individuals cannot be push back in the countries in which it threatened their freedom, that is, if they cannot apply for asylum. Furthermore, despite the multiplicity of views, Europeans are still unable to cope with the actual causes and circumstances that lead thousands of Africans and others annually to leave their homelands and migrate to EU. The envisaged funds, which are announced to help curb immigration and asylum in the EU, are just a temporary solution that will be exhausted.

Given such a complex situation, as well as the lack of a credible national government in Libya, inefficient EU policies and all policy makers need to work together on better conditions for migrants and create a long-term halt to migration.

Libyan authorities should stop arbitrarily detaining migrants, improve the conditions and treatment of detention centers, also, release all migrants and refugees detained arbitrarily in Libyan detention center and develop viable human rights based alternatives to detention. Allow UNHCR to operate in full respect of its mandate, and hold state and non-state actors implicated in violations of the rights of migrants and asylum seekers to account. Effective and independent monitoring of human rights, conditions on the ground in Libya should be created, including ensuring that cooperation or support provided to Libya by the European Union does not contribute to human rights violations. Support effective search and rescue operations in the central of Mediterranean and monitor Libyan Coast Guard, to stop abuses and allow humanitarian rescue vessels to operate in accordance with relevant international law and stop a push-back policy or to returning the survivors to Libya. Imposing clear criteria for improving Libya's search and rescue capabilities and halting cooperation with Libya if these standards are not respected.

Further, UN agencies should make stronger pressure to the EU and the Libyan authorities to respect the rights of migrants and asylum seekers in Libya, and intensify cooperation among themselves and with the Libyan authorities to ensure that persons in need of protection are identified, registered and protected. Also increased resettlement of asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants outside Libya, especially children and unaccompanied minors. The EU must cooperate and assist the Libyan authorities on the basis of human rights, in line with their own obligations under international human rights and refugee law, and not directly or indirectly, to lock up men, women and children in abusive conditions without protection.

Additional, the EU should help set up a development fund to tackle unemployment in Africa. The goal is to create good jobs for Africans and alleviate poverty. Increased cooperation and coordination between the EU and African countries, especially those countries that migrants are coming. The need to plan effective development programs in the economic, social and political aspects addressed to African communities, to help improve the lives of Africans. Monitor the funds and assistance provided by the EU to African countries to curb migration, and ensure that such funds and aid are not disbursed by African governments outside their established objectives. The EU and the international community should focus on supporting democracy and human rights in African countries. The solution at the level of the African continent clearly lies in serious and comprehensive national programs and in the end finding solution for internal conflicts in States.

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