

Beyond restrictions:

how migration and smuggling adapt to changing policies across the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the English Channel

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Published on March 11, 2021. A blue and white boat on the water near city buildings in St. Louis, Senegal. Since 2023, crossings along the Atlantic route have increased, with many departing from the Senegalese coast, including St. Louis.

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MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

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Correction notice

A previous version of this report included an inaccurate description of the departure points used by migrants crossing the English Channel (page 25). The passage has been corrected to more accurately reflect the geographic range and context.



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Executive summary

Against the backdrop of increasingly restrictive policies, this study explores recent irregular migration dynamics to the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK). The study combined desk research with 43 key informant interviews and 52 in-depth interviews with migrants in Europe who had travelled between mid-2023 and the time of the interview in 2024. It focuses on three key routes into the EU, including the Central Mediterranean route (CMR), the two major routes into Spain – the Western Mediterranean route (WMR) and the Northwest African (Atlantic route) – as well as the English Channel crossing into the United Kingdom¹, to understand how migration and smuggling dynamics have shifted since 2023, as well as the impact of these shifts on people on the move. It also considers the trends and changes that may continue to emerge in the face of increasing migration restrictions in Europe.

Key findings

Despite a downturn in arrivals between 2023 to 2024, the demand for irregular migration remains strong

Overall, the numbers of arrivals into Europe in 2024 was lower than in 2023. However, the drivers of migration remain strong, and the hostile environment toward migrants in transit countries also continues to rise. As a result, demand for irregular migration continues, as do movements across the Mediterranean and Atlantic into the EU, and across the channel into the UK. The recent decline in numbers is likely indicative of a short-term fluctuation, rather than the beginning of the end of irregular sea movements to the EU. The push to attempt the Mediterranean or Atlantic crossing to the EU is likely to remain constant – if not grow.

There have been considerable fluctuations across the major routes into the European Union; as one route declines, others surge or re-emerge

An overall decrease in numbers between 2023 and 2024 was aided by decreased movements along the Western Mediterranean and Central Mediterranean Routes. However, simultaneously there were upticks in movements along the Atlantic route, English Channel crossing and Eastern Mediterranean route². Figures towards the end of 2024 on the CMR also suggest an upwards trend that may continue into 2025.

While politicians have claimed that the various agreements and policies implemented in 2023 and 2024 appear to have successfully reduced arrivals, along the CMR in particular, it still remains the most frequented irregular sea route into mainland Europe. Further, other routes, for example the Atlantic route, have (re)emerged. Historically the CMR has seen fluctuations indicating it could easily increase once more, exactly as it did from 2021 onwards after the previous big decrease post-2017.

Smuggling operations continue to adapt (and thrive) in the face of policy changes

Smuggling networks are agile and adaptable, deploying new strategies to circumvent counter-smuggling initiatives. Instead of extinguishing supply, stricter policies, particularly on the CMR, English Channel and Atlantic routes, have resulted in increasingly adaptive and professionalised smuggler operations.

1 This report does not include analysis of the Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR) as a separate report on this route was recently conducted by MMC. Please see [MMC, PRAB \(2024\) Mixed migration in the Western Balkans: Shifting policies, smuggling dynamics and risks](#)

2 According to [UNHCR](#), 62,022 arrivals reached Greece in 2024, a 27% increase from 2023 (48,721). This supports the argument made in this report that, while migration management policies have led to considerable fluctuations across major routes into Europe, the overall trend remains largely unchanged. As some routes decline, others surge or re-emerge, demonstrating the persistent demand for irregular migration.

While the WMR has been the least prominent route between 2023 and 2024, smuggling networks have not disappeared. Instead, they have diversified their operations, with evidence of involvement in other criminal activity, to ensure a continued income stream. This suggests that smuggler networks could easily be ready to return to, or expand migrant smuggling if demand returns.

Hardline policies have not prevented irregular migration and only heightened risks for migrants

Policy approaches across Europe continue to be led by political pressure to be seen as 'tough on migration', leading to prioritising the control of movement and anti-smuggling measures over the creation of legal pathways and the protection of those moving. From the perspective of migrants, there is little evidence to suggest that deterrence policies do, indeed, deter people from seeking to move to Europe irregularly. As demand for irregular migration remains, migrants are likely to be more reliant on smugglers, as a way to bypass restrictions.

The impact of restrictive policies on migrants is that sea crossings are taking longer, migrants are taking more circuitous journeys to avoid detection, and larger numbers are being crammed into boats lacking adequate safety equipment by unscrupulous smugglers. In addition to the risks at sea, migrants face increasingly hostile conditions when stuck in key transit countries, as those countries receive continued pressure from the EU to curb movements.

Key findings by route

Central Mediterranean Route (CMR)



Policy context

- **The EU and Italy have provided substantial resources to the Libyan and Tunisian Coast Guards** to stop boats from crossing. Restrictions on search and rescue from Italy have also increased since 2023.
- The EU's well-established partnership with **Libya** has continued; in 2023 the EU agreed to a 150 million euro deal with **Tunisia** to, among other priorities, stop migrant boats from leaving its shores; and in March 2024, a Euro 7.4 billion deal with **Egypt** was agreed in the wake of the outbreak of conflict in Sudan and the displacement of half a million Sudanese citizens into Egypt.



Shifts in migration dynamics

- Although crossings in 2024 have more than halved compared to 2023 (66,617 crossings in 2024 vs. 157,651 in 2023), **the CMR remains the most frequented sea route into Europe.**
- **Key nationalities embarking on the CMR have shifted, reflective of a disruption of routes through Sudan, and heightened hostilities faced by sub-Saharan African migrants in key transit countries.** Increased numbers of Bangladeshis have been seen along the CMR.
- **Risks along the CMR remain extremely high.** While crossing the Mediterranean remains highly dangerous, with widespread loss of life at sea, migrants stranded in transit along the CMR due to stricter border policies also face increasing risks



Shifts in smuggling operations

- **Smugglers have shifted their embarkation points to circumvent border patrols.** There have historically been multiple Mediterranean departure points along the CMR however due to crackdowns in Tunisia, departures are now primarily concentrated in Libya to the west of Tripoli.
- **Smugglers increasingly use migrants as pilots along the CMR to evade ramped up National Guard and Coastguard presence.**
- **Some authorities receive European support to intercept boats while also taking bribes from smugglers to allow safe passage,** further empowering corrupt officials. However, growing pressure on coastguards has made it harder for them to guarantee safe passage.

Western Mediterranean Route (WMR)



Policy context

- Morocco has significantly stepped-up enforcement mechanisms as a result of policy agreements with both the EU and Spain, although there is no guarantee this will last if the geopolitical situation shifts.



Shifts in migration dynamics

- Since numbers along this route spiked in 2018 with 60,000 crossings, **numbers have steadily reduced and then remained relatively stable.**
- The WMR has become increasingly inaccessible to sub-Saharan Africans in light of crackdowns by Morocco which has restricted them from entering the country. Sub-Saharan African migrants face serious abuse at the hands of authorities in Morocco, stemming from increased pressure from the EU to curb migration.
- **Algerians and Moroccans now make up the primary nationalities along this route.**



Shifts in smuggling operations

- Despite decreased movements **smuggling networks remain active, although they largely operate as poly criminal networks** in order to sustain revenue in times of slowed movement.

The Northwestern African (Atlantic) Route



Policy context

- A new partnership agreement was signed between the EU and Mauritania in February 2024, and Spain has sought to strengthen bilateral agreements with Senegal, the Gambia and also Mauritania with a 'carrot and stick' approach.
- Irregular migration into Mauritania, targeting Malians, has been criminalised.
- An agreement between the EU and Senegal was reached, with 30 million euros allocated to prevent irregular migration.



Shifts in migration dynamics

- **Numbers along the Atlantic route are at an all-time high**, with over 40,000 crossings in 2023 and 2024, a significant increase on previous years.
- This route has **risen in significance for sub-Saharan Africans**, as they are increasingly blocked from other routes.
- There an **increased number of Malians attempting the crossing** in response multiple drivers, including mounting insecurity and conflict. They face increased hostility and abuse at the hands of Mauritanian officials.
- Migrants interviewed reported that **Mauritania shares similarities with Libya** in terms of the abuses faced by migrants there.



Shifts in smuggling operations

- **Increased border and navy controls have led to smugglers multiplying departure points** in Senegal, and Mauritania.
- **As coastguard operations increase, so too has the sophistication of smuggler networks.**
- Of all the routes, the Atlantic route is the most dangerous crossing because of the length and remoteness, as demonstrated by the very high number of reported deaths at sea. **An already dangerous route has become even more dangerous as smugglers go to increasing lengths to avoid detection, resulting in heightened impacts on migrants.**

English Channel crossing



Policy context

- Despite the election of a new government in July 2024 in UK, **policy responses have continued to be dominated by a focus on anti-smuggling efforts by both the UK and France.** Yet demand for this route remains high, and three quarters of those that apply for asylum are successful.



Shifts in migration dynamics

- **Numbers are rising**, with 36,816 migrants crossing the channel in 2024, an increase from 29,443 in 2023. **However, they remain below the 2022 peak.**
- **Nationalities crossing the Channel have been relatively consistent. A higher number of Vietnamese nationals have been seen on the route.** There have also been reports of **more families attempting** to cross the Channel in 2024, as compared to previous years.
- **Demand for the journey to the UK remains high, despite the heightened risks** facing migrants during their crossing.



Shifts in smuggling operations

- **Smugglers continue using a range of departure points along the northern French coast, from areas near Berck to the Belgian border.** The choice of departure point can vary based on factors such as nationality, smuggler networks, and police presence.
- **Increased border controls, both within the EU and the UK, have resulted in a greater reliance on smugglers.**
- **Smuggling networks are well-organised, and consolidated, and new networks have emerged as demand increases.**
- **Migrants embarking on the Channel crossing enter the EU through various land and sea routes.** Migrants often rely on a loose network of smuggling nodes across Europe to reach northern France and Belgium, although some travel independently from Italy and through France.
- **Costs of Channel crossings have decreased**, although continue to differ depending on nationality.

1. Introduction

In 2024, politicians were quick to claim hardline policies as the reason behind a short-term decrease in irregular migration to Europe.³ In October 2024, the president of the EU commission, Ursula Von Der Leyen, closing a meeting of the European Council and looking at the external dimension of the EU approach to migration, said: “First of all, on the comprehensive partnerships with countries that are neighbouring the European Union, third countries, we see that these partnerships are working. If you look at the Central Mediterranean Route, which we have been working on intensively, overall, the arrivals are now down by minus 64% in the Central Mediterranean.” In the same speech she also called for renewed efforts to tackle people smuggling and human trafficking, “the triggers” of all irregular migration to Europe, in her view.

Meanwhile, across the Channel, British Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has made “smashing the smuggling gangs” a central pillar of his government’s strategy to curb irregular migration.⁴ At the same time, he has shown keen interest in the approaches of other European countries, including Italy’s controversial migration deal with Albania.⁵

In March 2025, Frontex reported a 25% drop in irregular migration for January-February 2025 compared to 2024. While crossings fell sharply in the Eastern Mediterranean and Atlantic, the Central Mediterranean Route saw a 48% increase. Frontex says this illustrates “the substantial effectiveness of its close cooperation with EU Member States.”⁶

However, fluctuations in arrivals are not a new phenomenon with peaks and troughs observed over time. Further, decreased movements have not been equally seen across all routes into Europe, and while numbers have reduced along some routes, they have surged on others. Thus, is there a sustained truth to claims that hardline policies are working in stopping irregular migration?

The dynamics of irregular migration, like other market-driven phenomena, can be understood through a lens of supply and demand. Demand for irregular migration emerges from sustained drivers such as economic instability, aspirations for better opportunities, conflict and persecution, alongside limited accessible regular pathways. The supply side of irregular migration refers to smugglers who provide services to enable irregular migration as well as the official corruption that facilitates it.

While there has undeniably been a decrease in arrivals in 2024 compared to 2023, irregular routes into the EU and the UK remain very much active. Key structural drivers such as economic insecurity, conflict and violence, ensure that overall demand for migration remains strong. Sustained demand for smuggling services to enable irregular migration, even in (or especially in) the face of increased restrictions, has been met by smuggling networks that are constantly evolving. In practice, for migrants, this means irregular journeys involving a greater exposure to a number of risks, including those posed by smugglers themselves as well as poorer conditions en route and upon arrival to Europe. So, have the EU’s current approach impacted the sustained demand for irregular migration? How, if at all, has irregular migration been impacted the supply side? To what extent is the current approach to anti-smuggling actually disrupting the business model of smugglers? How have these policies impacted the experiences of migrants?

This study builds on MMC’s previous research following irregular migration trends into Europe across all routes.⁷ It focuses on three key routes into mainland Europe, including the Central Mediterranean route (CMR), the two major routes into Spain - the Western Mediterranean route (WMR) and the Northwest African (Atlantic) route – as well as the English Channel crossing into the United Kingdom. This study considers how migration and smuggling dynamics have shifted since 2023, as well as the impact of these shifts on people on the move.⁸ It also considers the trends and changes that may continue to emerge in the face of increasing migration restrictions in Europe.

3 EU commission (2024) [Opening remarks by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with President Michel following the meeting of the European Council of 17 October 2024](#)

4 The Guardian (2024) [Forget ‘stop the boats’, Starmer wants to ‘smash the gangs’ – but will it work?](#)

5 BBC (2024) [Starmer looks to Italy on how to stop migrant boats](#)

6 Frontex (2025) [Monthly irregular migration statistics - February 2025](#)

7 MMC (2023) Study on [Mixed Migration Trends and Dynamics in Northern France and Belgium](#) Mixed Migration Centre

8 This report does not include analysis of the Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR) as a separate report on this route was recently conducted by MMC. Please see MMC (2024) study on [Mixed migration in the Western Balkans Shifting policies, smuggling dynamics and risks](#).

1.1 Methodology

This study incorporated a combination of desk research, key informant interviews and in-depth interviews with migrants currently moving to and through the respective migration routes. Interviews were conducted between September and November 2024. All the interviews were transcribed and entered into an evidence matrix based on the key research questions. The subsequent analysis of key findings forms the basis for this report.

Forty-three key informant interviews were conducted with members of civil society, journalists, experts specialising in smuggling modalities, UN representatives and enforcement agencies with a minimum of 10 interviews relevant to each route, although many interviews focused on two or more routes. Interviews focused on potential changes between 2023 and the end of 2024 in demographics of migrants, routes taken, modalities of movement, smuggling dynamics and risks and harms.

Fifty-two interviews were conducted with migrants currently in Europe who had travelled between mid-2023 and the time of the interview. Interviews took place in Sicily (15), Madrid (25) and Calais (12) with a cross-section of nationalities (see Figure 1). The interviews were primarily coordinated with migrant reception centres, using trusted interpreters based in those centres where necessary. The large majority (50 out of 52) of migrants were men, primarily from the age ranges of 18-34 (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Migrant interviews by location and nationality

	Senegalese	Malian	Gambian	Mauritanian	Ivorian	Sudanese	Total
Madrid	8	8	4	3	1	1	25

	Bangladeshi	Egyptian	Senegalese	Pakistani	Nigerian	Total
Sicily	6	5	2	1	1	15

	Sudanese	Iraqi Kurdish	Iranian	Syrian	Ethiopian	Yemeni	Total
Calais	4	2	2	2	1	1	12

Figure 2. Migrant interviews by age range

18-24	25-34	35-44	45-64
27	22	2	1

Limitations

There were a number of limitations to the data collection. First, many migrants were reluctant to talk about the use of smugglers given the illegality of it. Second, challenges were encountered in Calais where there are almost no safe spaces to speak with migrants aside from one day centre that opens three times a week, making it harder to build rapport with interviewees. In addition, while migrants in Calais can reflect on their plans for crossing the English Channel, none have successfully crossed (yet), making it harder to draw conclusions on actual modalities. Additionally, while 25 interviews were conducted with migrants in Spain, almost all had travelled on the Atlantic route. Finally, the large majority of migrants interviewed were men, resulting in women being underrepresented in this study.

2. Key policy developments

At the start of her second term as president in July 2024, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, pledged to strengthen Frontex and expand border controls⁹ by tripling the number of officers and expanding surveillance technology. Her approach has been criticised by civil society, with fears it could lead to more migrant pushbacks to countries with authoritarian regimes where returnees face abuse;¹⁰ and because it prioritises border enforcement over (and almost to the exclusion of) rescue operations. Below is a breakdown of what these policy developments have meant along each of the four routes of focus.

2.1 Central Mediterranean Route (CMR)

Over the past two years there have continued to be ongoing transactional agreements between the EU, its member states and countries of departure along the CMR. The EU has continued its well-established partnership with Libya, which remains the primary point of embarkation for those making the journey across the Mediterranean to southern Italy. The EU and the Italian government have effectively outsourced patrolling of the Central Mediterranean to Libyan coastguards by providing speedboats, funding for a maritime coordination centre and training. They have continued to assist the Libyan Coast Guard to enhance its maritime surveillance capacity, providing financial support and technical assets, despite numerous reports about the coastguard's actions at sea and the conditions in which 'captured' migrants are kept after they are intercepted.¹¹ Heightened focus on Libya as a country of embarkation in 2022 has also resulted in increased departures from Tunisia to circumvent coastguard patrols along the Libyan coast. In 2023 the EU agreed to a 150 million euro deal with Tunisia to, among other priorities, stop migrant boats from leaving its shores. The deal included strengthening efforts to combat criminal gangs involved in trafficking and people-smuggling, in exchange for the promise of increased investment in business and education. Further East the EU has also targeted efforts in Egypt with a number of European leaders including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni travelling to Cairo in March 2024 to finalise a Euro 7.4 billion deal combining soft loans with grants.¹² This occurred in the wake of the outbreak of conflict in Sudan and the displacement of half a million Sudanese citizens into Egypt.¹³

Italy's passing of the Piantadosi Decree¹⁴ in January 2023 further exemplifies the EU and its members states increased emphasis on counter-smuggling. The law impacts Search and Rescue ships operating in the central Mediterranean and was seen by many of those interviewed to have increased levels of danger for migrants by reducing the ability for Search and Rescue operations in the Mediterranean.¹⁵ For instance, it states that civil rescue ships must navigate to an assigned place of safety without delay after any rescue operation and are unable to conduct further search and rescue operations until they have done so. In practice, Italian authorities have been assigning faraway ports of disembarkation, often in northern Italy, hindering NGO ships from patrolling and rescuing boats in distress for extended periods of time.¹⁶ Multiple interviewees expressed their disquiet at the impact of this law on the ability to save lives at sea.¹⁷

Italy has also signed a multi-million-dollar agreement with Albania to establish two offshore closed centres to hold people intercepted in Italian waters while their asylum claims are being processed. However, while the centres opened in October 2024, as of January 2025, not a single asylum claim has been processed in these centres because of legal challenges.¹⁸ Within a month of its opening, only 24 asylum seekers had been sent to Albania, but the courts ordered them to be returned to Italy.¹⁹ In February 2025, Italian judges for the third time suspended the implementation of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's plan to process up to 3,000 asylum-seekers monthly in Albania.²⁰

9 Nikolaj Nielsen (2018) [New EU commission seeks bigger Frontex and more cash-for-migrant deals](#) EU Observer.

10 Deutsche Welle (2024) [Rights groups criticize EU plans to strengthen Frontex](#) Info Migrants.

11 Amnesty International (2022) [Libya/EU: Conditions remain 'hellish' as EU marks 5 years of cooperation agreements](#)

12 Al Jazeera (2024) [EU announces \\$8bn package for Egypt as part of deal to check migration](#)

13 UNHCR (2024) Sudan emergency

14 EU Commission for Human Rights Open Letter (2023) [The Italian government should consider withdrawing Decree Law which could hamper NGO search and rescue operations at sea.](#)

15 KII, October and November 2024

16 SOS MEDITERRANEE (2023) [Piantadosi Decree: the price of disregard for maritime law](#)

17 KII, October and November 2024

18 Stefania D'Ignati (2024) [Why EU Offshore Migrant Centres can't work - for now](#)

19 The Guardian (2023) [Italy's Albania asylum deal has become a political disaster for Giorgia Meloni](#)

20 Politico (2025) [Giorgia Meloni's Albania migration plan blasted after third failure](#)

2.2 Western Mediterranean Route (WMR)

Morocco's ongoing role as both a transit and destination country for migrants has created significant opportunities for it to leverage its position in 'managing migration' between mainland Europe and Africa. As a result, over the past two decades there have been multiple deals signed between the EU and Morocco in the area of migration.²¹ Most recently, the EU launched an Anti-smuggling Operational Partnership (ASOP) with Morocco in July 2022, ostensibly to "tackle criminal networks, address irregular migration and save lives".²² Morocco has significantly stepped up enforcement mechanisms since, claiming to have stopped tens of thousands of 'illegal crossings' since early 2023.²³ This partnership sits alongside broader support to Morocco by the EU of 1.4 billion Euros for 'reforms and increased resilience' until 2027.²⁴ At the same time and following an incident in 2021 when approximately 10,000 people entered Ceuta in one day,²⁵ a reduction in diplomatic tensions between Spain and Morocco since 2022 has led to the two countries repairing and strengthening their 'strategic partnership' on migration through a series of agreements on 'migration management' in 2023.²⁶ An agreement between the EU and Senegal was also reached in 2024, with 30 million euros allocated to prevent irregular migration.²⁷

2.3 The Northwestern African (Atlantic) Route

Mauritania is a major point of embarkation on the Atlantic route, and its strategic importance for the EU has grown since 2023. This was reflected in a €210 million EU partnership announced in February 2024 and finalised the following month, with the stated aim of supporting "migration management including the fight against migrant smuggling, as well as [to] promote security and stability, humanitarian aid for refugees and support to host communities", along with investments in job creation.²⁸

At the same time, Spain has signed or strengthened a number of bilateral agreements with West African states – including Senegal, The Gambia and Mauritania – aimed at "stemming a surge in migrants" through a standard carrot and stick approach of supporting coastguards, putting in place a returns agreement and creating circular migration programmes to regularise labour migration from the respective countries.²⁹

2.4 English Channel crossing

Since a 2022 spike in arrivals, the UK government has continued to focus on anti-smuggling policies intended to deter people from arriving irregularly in the UK, specifically targeting those facilitating small boats across the Channel.³⁰ While there have been some shifts since Labour won the election in July 2024, including the termination of a 2022 deal with Rwanda to send people arriving on small boats to Rwanda to have their claims processed,³¹ Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government has continued to focus primarily on anti-smuggling approaches. Soon after his election, he announced plans to redirect savings to a new Border Security Command³² to "strengthen Britain's border security and smash the criminal smuggling gangs making millions out of small boat crossings",³³ alongside an investment of £84 million aimed at addressing the 'root causes' of migration in Africa and the Middle East.³⁴ There are also increased efforts to clear the backlog of asylum claims, including to speed up the processing of applications from

21 The EU devoted around 1.5 billion Euros to overall bilateral cooperation with Morocco between 2014 and 2020, including under the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), and allocated 631 million Euros between 2021 and 2022 under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI – Global Europe). Morocco is also a recipient of EU funding for migration under other financing instruments, including the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). [EU Migration Support in Morocco](#) (2023)

22 European Parliament (2023) [Answer given by Ms Johansson on behalf of the European Commission](#)

23 Reuters (2024) [Morocco Stops 45,000 Migrants crossing to Europe](#).

24 European Parliament (2023) [Answer given by Ms Johansson on behalf of the European Commission](#)

25 José Javier Olivas (2024) [How populist narratives fuel crises at the border between Morocco and Spain](#).

26 InfoMigrants (2023) [Spain and Morocco mend ties with migration agreements](#)

27 Le Monde (2024) [EU announces 30 million package to prevent irregular migration from Senegal](#)

28 The European Commission (2024) [The European Commission launches new migration partnership with Mauritania](#)

29 AP and Evelyn Ann-Marie Dom (2024) [Spain and Mauritania agree to stem Mediterranean migration flows](#) euro news.

30 A 'small boat' is defined as a type of vessel used by individuals who cross the English Channel with the aim of gaining entry to the UK irregularly. The most common small vessels detected making these types of crossings are rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIBs), dinghies and kayaks. Statistics on small boats include individuals who were detected on arrival in the UK, and those detected in the Channel and subsequently brought ashore. Walsh, P.W. & Cuibus, M.V., (2024) [People crossing the English Channel in small boats](#). Migration Observatory, University of Oxford.

31 Sam, F. (2024) [Starmer confirms Rwanda deportation plan 'dead'](#) BBC News.

32 Lizzie, D. (2024) [Forget 'stop the boats'. Starmer wants to 'smash the gangs' – but will it work?](#) The Guardian.

33 UK government (2024) [Home Secretary Announces new Border Security Command](#)

34 Becky Morton (2024) [UK pledges £84m to stop illegal migration 'at source'](#) BBC News.

migrants arriving from 'safe' countries such as India, Vietnam and Albania.³⁵ Safe, legal asylum routes to the UK are conspicuously absent from this approach.³⁶

The UK has also recently stepped up coordination with individual EU countries, including through the Calais Group, a diplomatic group of countries neighbouring the UK, which acts as a forum for tackling “the shared challenges of organised immigration crime”.³⁷ On 30 August 2024, UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz discussed a joint action plan to tackle irregular migration³⁸ through dismantling migrant smuggling networks and improving intelligence-sharing, especially concerning Channel crossings; in September, following the death of at least 12 people attempting to cross the Channel,³⁹ French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin called for a migration treaty between the EU and the UK;⁴⁰ and also in September 2024, Starmer announced strengthened cooperation with Italy to tackle irregular migration.⁴¹ These initiatives all have a core focus on dismantling smuggling networks particularly through efforts to disrupt the supply chain of boats, and sharing intelligence. For instance, the arrest in November 2024 in Amsterdam of a Turkish national suspected of being a significant supplier of small boats equipment to people smugglers was part of an operation involving the UK's National Crime Agency and Dutch and Belgian partners.⁴²

In addition, 2024 saw more border controls at internal borders than at any time since the Schengen Area was established.⁴³ These increased internal border controls within the EU are making journeys to northern France more difficult. As one interviewee said, “Borders inside Europe are much more fortified than we think. France and Italy have fortified borders, and people die in the mountains by crossing in the winter as a result.”⁴⁴

35 Business Standard (2024) [UK to fast-track returns of illegal migrants to safe nations like India](#)

36 Lizzie, D. (2024) [Forget 'stop the boats', Starmer wants to 'smash the gangs' – but will it work?](#) The Guardian.

37 Policy Paper (2024) [Calais Group priority plan](#)

38 Sertan, S. (2024) [UK and Germany to cooperate to curb irregular immigration](#) Info Migrants.

39 Harding, A. and Wright, G. (2024) [Twelve die after migrant boat sinks in Channel](#) BBC News.

40 RFI (2024) [French minister says EU, UK need 'migration treaty' after Channel deaths](#)

41 Smout, A. & Amante, A. (2024) [UK PM Starmer pledges to work with Italy on migration](#) Reuters.

42 National Crime Agency (2024) [Joint investigation sees suspected small boat supplier arrested in the Netherlands.](#)

43 Bernd Riegert (2024) [Is the rise in internal border controls ending the EU dream?](#) DW

44 KII, on-line, November 2024

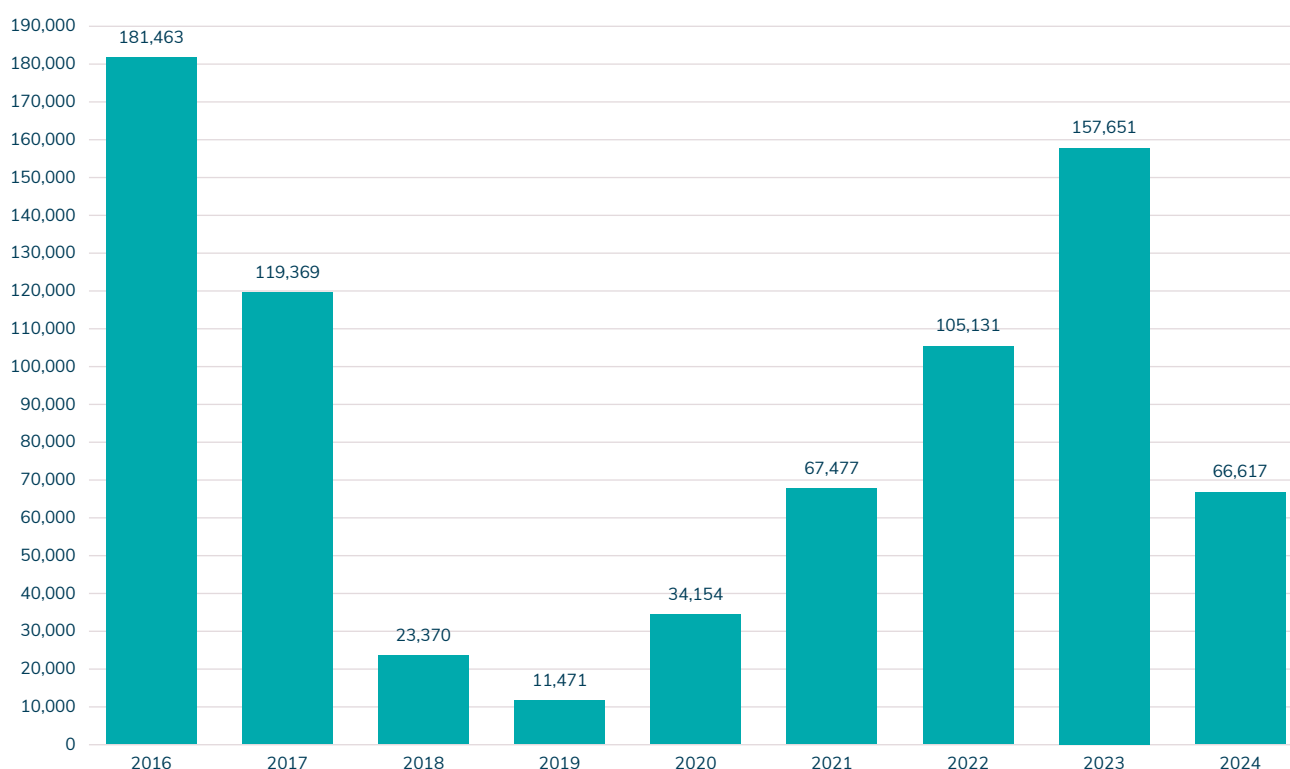
3. Shifting migration and smuggling dynamics

3.1 The Central Mediterranean Route (CMR)

Decreased numbers, but overall, the CMR is still the most active irregular sea route into Europe

The CMR has experienced significant fluctuation in recent years. The route spiked in 2016 with 181,436 crossings, then dipped to 11,471 in 2019, before increasing year on year until numbers reached over 100,000 again in 2022, followed by 157,651 in 2023. While numbers in 2024 dropped by 60% with 65,251 crossings, the CMR still remains the most active irregular sea route into Europe.⁴⁵

Figure 3. Arrivals to Italy via the CMR 2016 - 2024



Source: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/europe-sea-arrivals/location/24521>

Key nationalities embarking on CMR sea crossings are shifting

As of 2024, Bangladeshis are the primary nationality on the CMR, estimated now to be 20% of the total number of migrants, followed closely by Syrians (19%) and Tunisians (13%).⁴⁶ This marks a shift from previous years which saw much greater representation of Sub-Saharan migrants along the route.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ UNHCR (2025) [UNHCR Operational Data Portal](#)

⁴⁶ UNHCR (2025) [UNHCR Operational Data Portal](#)

⁴⁷ Top ten nationalities in 2024 in Italy besides Bangladeshi, Syrians and Tunisians (see next para) were: Egyptian (6.6%), Guinean (5.5%), Pakistani (4.2%), Eritrean (3.3%), Sudanese (3.2%), Malian (2.3%) and Gambian (2.4%) nationals also featured in the top 10 for 2024. See UNHCR Operational Data Portal (2023) [Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard](#)

A reduction in East Africans along the CMR can be attributed to a disruption in routes through Sudan due to ongoing conflict.⁴⁸ However, in the second half of 2024, there was an increased number of Sudanese refugees moving through Chad and Niger into Libya escaping violence and conflict. It is not yet clear as to whether these newly arrived Sudanese refugees in Libya will continue their journeys onwards to Europe via the CMR.⁴⁹ The number of West African migrants along the CMR has also decreased significantly since 2018. West Africans along the CMR travel overland, usually through the Sahel and into Libya.⁵⁰ While smugglers in Niger no longer need to evade authorities as the country repealed its 2015 anti-smuggling legislation in November 2023, as of yet, these changes have not resulted in higher numbers of sub-Saharan Africans accessing the CMR in 2024.⁵¹

The ongoing context in Tunisia has made it challenging for sub-Saharan migrants to move to and through Tunisia, and may also be a factor in reduced numbers seen in arrivals to Europe. Increased hate speech against sub-Saharan migrants in the build-up to elections in Tunisia in 2023, has also led to acts of violence, generalised discrimination, evictions from homes and loss of livelihoods. Reports of abuse against migrants, asylum seekers and refugees have continued, including arbitrary arrests, evictions and deportations into desert areas on the Libyan and Algerian borders.⁵²

Simultaneously, increased numbers of Bangladeshis have been seen along the CMR in recent years. Some Bangladeshis arrive in Libya with the intention of reaching Europe, however others interviewed had arrived originally intending to stay in Libya to find work to send home to their families, but as a result of being kidnapped in order to extort money from their families, decided to continue their journey onward.

Another factor that may impact the data on arrivals to Italy via the CMR is that certain nationalities face higher interception rates than others. This is likely linked to differences in smuggling networks, the cost of the journey, and the involvement of corrupt officials in smuggling operations. For instance, previous reports indicate that Sudanese and Malians have had an estimated interception rate of 71%, significantly higher than the 31% for Bangladeshis, suggesting disparities in migrants' ability to evade the Libyan Coast Guard.⁵³

Shifting embarkation to circumvent border patrols

Historically, the CMR has included departures from various points along the Libyan coast, as well as locations in Tunisia (see Map 1), shifting, in part, to avoid where border patrols are currently focused.⁵⁴ In 2023, more people departed from Tunisia than Libya. However, in 2024 Tunisia ramped up the systematic expulsion of migrants to either Algeria or Libya.⁵⁵ In Libya, eastern departure points between Tripoli and Misrata have diminished, partly due to increased control by the Libyan Coast Guard. According to one key informant interview there are also indications that the Turkish Navy is positioned in the area around Al Khoms and has been handing intercepted migrants over to the Libyan Coast Guard.⁵⁶ To note that there is an ongoing partnership between the Libyan Coast Guard and the Turkish Navy.⁵⁷ In addition, extortion along the highway increased, making it harder to access embarkation points.⁵⁸ Currently, departures are now primarily concentrated to the west of Tripoli.⁵⁹ Alongside these shifts there have been noted departures from Libya (and also Egypt) to Crete, although this route is not explored through this study.⁶⁰

48 Matt Herbet and Emadeddin Badi (2024) [Sudan: Conflict Drives Mass Refugee Movement and Fuels Migrant smuggling](#)

49 KII, on-line, October 2024; Matt Herbet and Emadeddin Badi (2024) [Sudan: Conflict Drives Mass Refugee Movement and Fuels Migrant smuggling](#)

50 Interviews with migrants, Sicily, October 2024

51 KII, on-line, October 2024

52 Amnesty International (2023) [Tunisia: President's racist speech incites a wave of violence against Black Africans](#)

53 Roberto Forin and Bram Frouws (2022) [What's new? Analysing the latest trends on the Central Mediterranean mixed migration route to Italy](#)

54 KII, on-line, October 2024

55 KII, on-line, October 2024

56 KII, on-line, October 2024

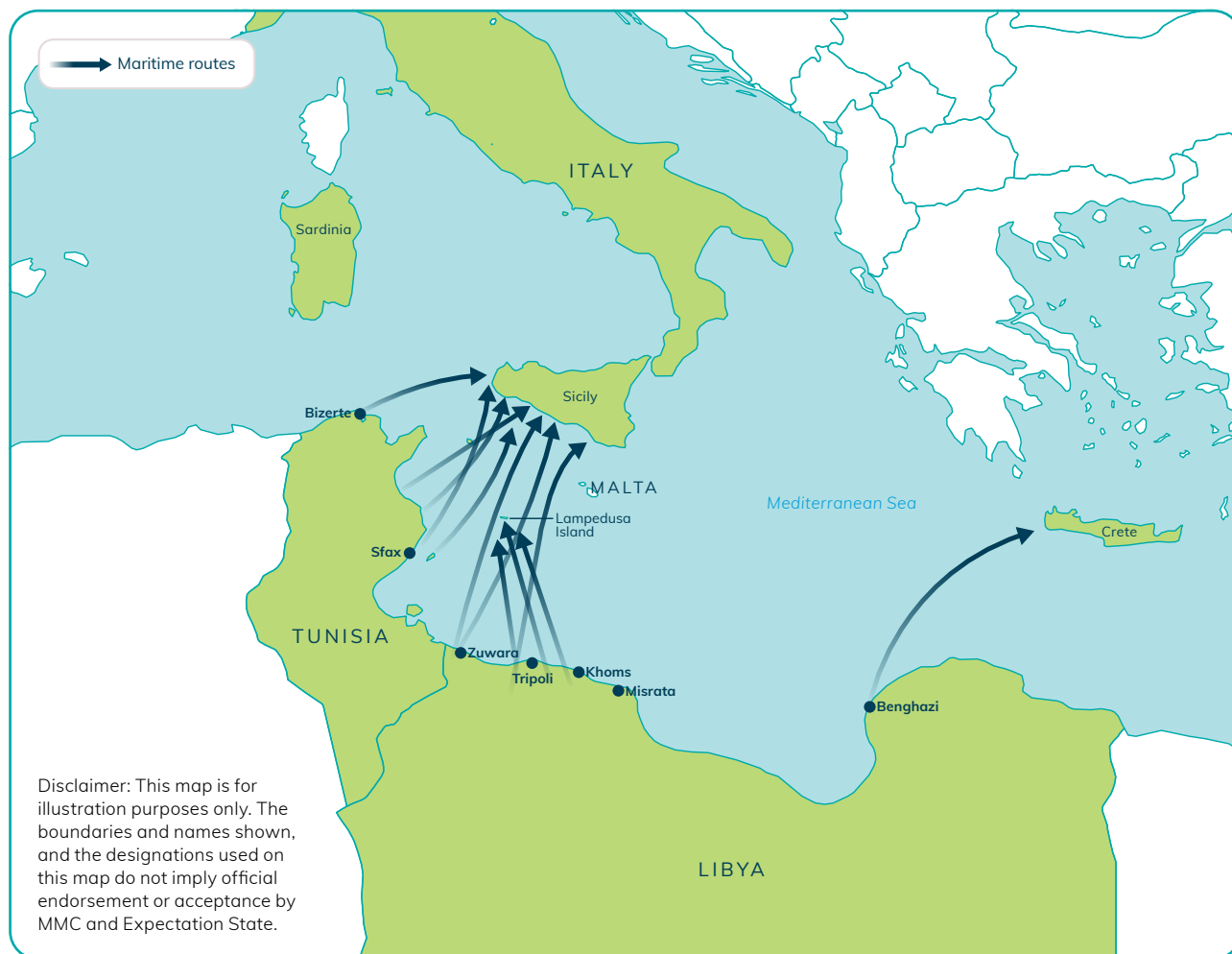
57 Libya Observer (2023) [Libyan naval personnel complete training on Turkish task force ships](#); Libya Observer (2023) [Turkish frigate conducts military training off the Libyan coast](#); Middle East Monitor (2021) [Turkey trains Libya coast guard to handle Europe migrant crisis](#)

58 KII, on-line, September 2024

59 KII, on-line, September 2024

60 MMC (2024) [Quarterly mixed Migration Update: North Africa, Q3](#)

Map 1. Crossing via the CMR Route



Smugglers using migrants as pilots to evade authorities

As outlined above, in both Tunisia and Libya, the National Guard and Coastguard, respectively, have ramped up their response to smuggling as part of the deals with the EU and Italy. As a result, smugglers are reportedly increasingly forcing migrants to pilot the vessels, often in exchange for free passage, so that if it is intercepted the smuggler will not be identified, and the migrant rather than the smuggler will be arrested.⁶¹ For instance, an Egyptian man described how he had been forced to drive the boat: “We got to the beach and they said, you have to drive. Just go straight in this direction. I didn’t know anything about the machine, how to drive such a thing. But I knew I would die anyway. I preferred to drive and try my luck. And we survived.”⁶²

‘What they do, is when they first get onto the boat in Libya, one of the smugglers drives the boat, and another one drives a small boat next to them. Then once they are some way out, the smuggler in the boat points a gun at someone in the boat and makes them drive the boat. They just say, that way is Lampedusa – drive straight and you’ll get there, then the smuggler gets off the boat into the small one alongside it, and they return to Libya. Meanwhile the person who was forced to drive the boat is arrested as the smuggler on arrival’.⁶³

61 KII, on-line, October 2024

62 Interview with Egyptian man, Sicily, October 2024

63 KII, on-line, October 2024

Corruption no longer ensures safe passage

Corruption facilitates irregular migration and there are pervasive and long-standing links between smugglers and authorities. These links used to be a signifier of success – well-connected smugglers would be allowed to send boats across the Mediterranean.⁶⁴ Now, however, even though smugglers are still connected to authorities, this no longer guarantees safe passage, as the Coastguards have increased pressure to intercept some, but not all, boats crossing the Mediterranean. According to several key informants interviewed, the business model of smuggling gangs, the Libyan Coastguard and the Tunisian National Guard, therefore, is predicated on some people getting through in order to ensure migrants keep arriving.⁶⁵ This is because the Coast Guard and National Guard rely on the financing from smuggling – both for involvement in anti-smuggling activities, but also from smuggling networks. In Tunisia, there are cases of the National Guard taking the motors off boats, leaving the boats adrift, and then selling them back to the smugglers.⁶⁶ In Libya there have been reports of the coastguard escorting boats and directing them to Lampedusa before returning to Libya.⁶⁷

Risks along the CMR remain high

The risks migrants experience on the CMR have remained high through 2023 and 2024.⁶⁸ Interviews show that the well-established kidnap for ransom operations that have long targeted other nationalities, including Eritreans and Ethiopians, are now being used against the growing number of Bangladeshis arriving in Libya. One Bangladeshi migrant described how he was picked up by 'mafia' in Libya after arriving and taken to a large warehouse: "They were using violence. They would phone my family so they could hear me crying from the torture. When I paid, the mafia said now you are free. You can go anywhere. But where could I go? Every time I went on the road, they were wanting to capture me. So I felt scared. I couldn't work or do anything – it was really traumatising".⁶⁹ As a result, he decided to cross to Italy. Another man showed the scars on his wrists from being tied up and beaten and described how they were fed once a day with just rice.⁷⁰

Those who have travelled from West Africa have also had to navigate multiple areas of danger, including in northern Mali, Algeria and Tunisia. One Senegalese man described how he went to Mali, then Burkina Faso, then Niger, then Algeria, then Libya, then back to Algeria, then Tunisia, before arriving in Lampedusa: "It was dangerous everywhere. I was imprisoned several times in the desert; we had big problems with the police, especially in Algeria – when you meet with the Algerian police, they start beating you and then they start stealing from you. Nowhere was safe."⁷¹ Likewise a Nigerian man who travelled through Niger to Libya (which took him three years) said: "Once you leave home, you know the journey is life or death. I saw so many people lying with flies on them. They were dead".⁷²

Many of those interviewed also had stories of how they had been exploited when trying to work to pay for their journey. One man told of how he had done three jobs in Libya. In the first one, he was only paid for half a month despite working for two months; in the second, the employer threatened him with a gun when he asked to be paid; and in the third, he was never paid.⁷³ While crossing the Mediterranean is a moment of intense danger, being "stuck" or remaining in transit in countries along the CMR, due to increasingly restrictive policies at the borders of Europe, only increases the risks migrants face.

64 Rupert Horsley (2023) [Libya: Sophisticated Smugglers Thrive as Libyan Governance Stagnates](#). GI-TOC.

65 KII, on-line, October 2024

66 KII, on-line, September 2024

67 KII, on-line, October 2024

68 MMC (2024) [On this journey, no one cares if you live or die](#)

69 Interview with Bangladeshi man, Sicily, October 2024

70 Interview with Bangladeshi man, Sicily, October 2024

71 Interview with Senegalese man, Sicily, October 2024

72 Interview with Nigerian man, Sicily, October 2024

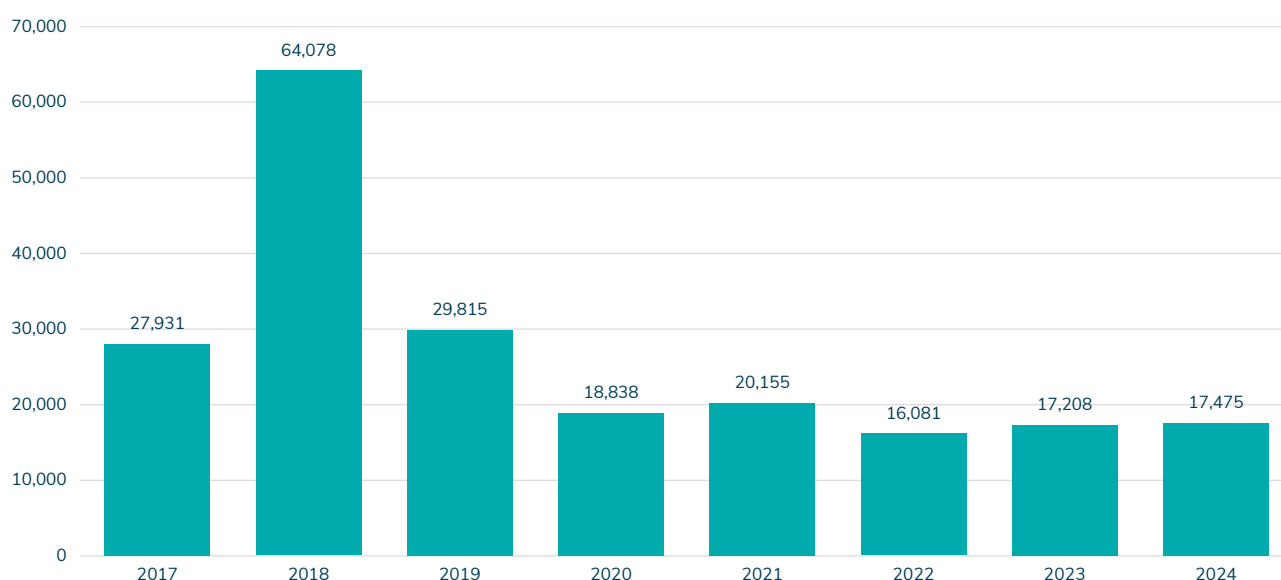
73 Interview with Bangladeshi man, Sicily, October 2024

3.2 The Western Mediterranean Route (WMR)

Numbers have decreased from previous highs, but remain relatively stable

Since numbers along this route spiked in 2018 with 60,000 crossings, numbers have steadily reduced and then remained relatively stable. There were 17,208 crossings recorded in 2023 and 17,475 in 2024.⁷⁴ According to Frontex, numbers along this route in 2024 (between Jan – Oct) reduced by 5% compared to the same period in 2023.

Figure 4. Arrivals to Spain along the WMR 2017 – 2024



Source: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/europe-sea-arrivals/location/24567>

The WMR has become increasingly inaccessible to sub-Saharan Africans with Algerian and Moroccans making up the majority of crossings

The WMR has become increasingly inaccessible to sub-Saharan Africans considering crackdowns by Morocco which has prevented them from entering the country. Algerian (56.7%) and Moroccans (31.8%) now making up most crossings, followed by Malians.⁷⁵

Following the tragedy in 2022, in which 23 migrants were killed by crowds rushing the barriers to enter Melilla, there has been racial profiling that prevents Sub-Saharan Africans from being in the area near the enclave.⁷⁶ As a result, since then it has been primarily Moroccans who attempt to enter Melilla, often by swimming (see Map 2).⁷⁷ In contrast, more nationalities attempt to enter Ceuta, including migrants from Sudan, Mali, Guinea and Senegal, but in small numbers.⁷⁸ These attempts are by small boat or swimming.⁷⁹

Arrivals on the Balearic Islands and the Spanish coast include Algerians, Moroccans, Syrians, and some Sub-Saharan Africans, including Malians and some Sudanese.⁸⁰ According to interviews, many migrants who arrived in 2024 had been in Morocco for some time, had moved into Tunisia when Morocco started relocating Sub-Saharan Africans, but as Tunisia became stricter, had returned to Morocco.⁸¹

⁷⁴ UNHCR Data Portal [Europe Sea Arrivals - Spain](https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/europe-sea-arrivals/location/24567)

⁷⁵ Tasnim Abderrahim (2024) [Moroccans drive an increase in migration through the western mediterranean route](#), Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)

⁷⁶ KII, on-line, September 2024

⁷⁷ KII, on-line, September 2024

⁷⁸ KII, on-line, September 2024

⁷⁹ KII, on-line, September 2024

⁸⁰ KII, on-line, September 2024

⁸¹ KII, on-line, October 2024

Map 2. Maritime and land routes to Spain (including the Spanish Enclaves)



Sub-Saharan African migrants face increased hostility from Moroccan authorities, with support from the EU

A key risk on this route continues to be the levels of hostility towards Sub-Saharan African migrants in Morocco. Key informant interviews highlighted that Moroccan authorities, in partnering with the EU on stopping migration, have resorted to enforcement mechanisms that create significant risks for migrants in the country, including harsh treatment by law enforcement.⁸² Interviews point to a clear racial dimension to this. As one interviewee said, “The Moroccan authorities treat people differently according to whether they are North African or Sub-Saharan. People from Sub-Saharan Africa know that Morocco is not safe for them.”⁸³ During the research, for instance, there were reports of undocumented Sub-Saharan African migrants who were living in Morocco being removed from northern areas and major cities to the central agricultural areas against their will.⁸⁴ For instance, a Malian man who had travelled to Morocco before crossing described how he was taken to a farm where he was forced to work and frequently beaten.⁸⁵

The situation has clearly worsened since 2022 alongside increased surveillance by Morocco. The same interviewee went on to describe how, in the past, he had travelled to Morocco for trade and had not had any problems. Likewise, a man from Cote d’Ivoire who went to look for work in Morocco described how he was never paid and was often refused

82 Klls, on-line, September and October 2024

83 Kll, on-line, September 2024

84 El Pais (2024) [Mass arrests and forced transfers: How migrants are exiled in North Africa with European money | International | EL PAÍS English](#)
Le Monde (2023), [Le Maroc repousse des centaines de migrants qui tentaient d’entrer dans l’enclave espagnole de Ceuta](#), Global Initiative
Against Transnational Organized Crime (2024), [Morocco: Moroccans drive an increase in migration through the Western Mediterranean route](#)

85 Interview with Malian man, Madrid, November 2024

food. Eventually he was offered some kind of deal to go to Spain by boat: “When we got into the boat around 2am they covered our heads with a cloth so we couldn’t see anyone else on the boat. It was so that if the marine people trapped us, we couldn’t identify anyone. Once we were in the middle of the sea, we could take them off. The police saw nothing. If they see you, you will be in prison for life.”⁸⁶

Smuggling networks remain active, although they largely operate as poly criminal networks in order to sustain revenue

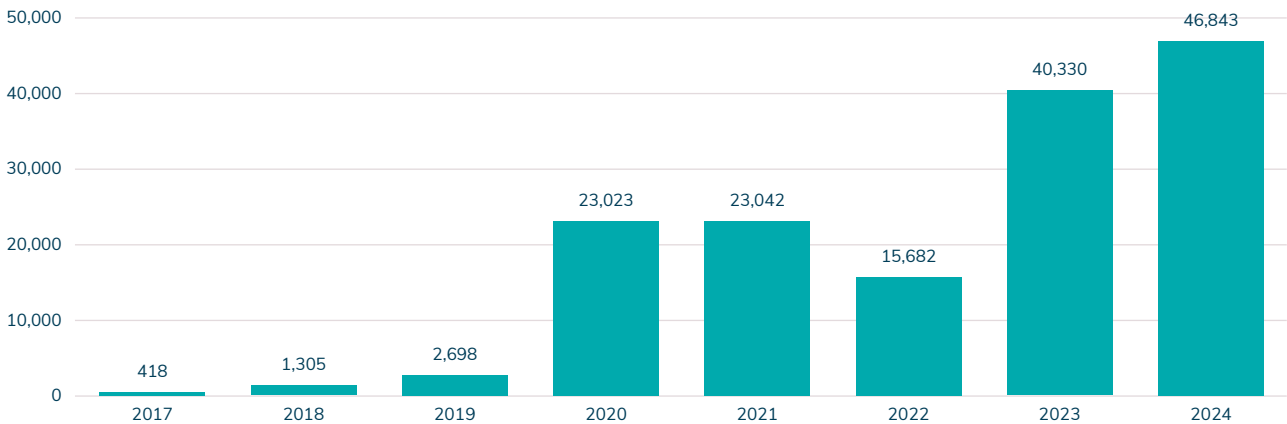
While the WMR has decreased in significance, there are still active smuggling networks. Smugglers along this route, in particular, are operating poly criminal networks with diversified income sources across a variety of different avenues including illicit drugs and other goods trafficking.⁸⁷ Accordingly, these networks are able to capitalise on different criminal markets to maintain revenue and remain active in case of an uptick in migration.⁸⁸

3.3 The Northwestern African (Atlantic) Route

Numbers along the Atlantic route are at an all-time high

Record numbers have been witnessed along the Atlantic route with over 40,000 crossings in 2023, followed by 46,843 in 2024. This route has seen many fluctuations with previous highs recorded in 2006 with 31,000 arrivals, before seeing a steady decrease until another spike was seen in 2020 and 2021 spurred by rumours that deaths from Covid-19 in Europe had created demand for labour in Spain.⁸⁹⁹⁰ While there have been dramatic fluctuations in the numbers of migrants travelling along the Atlantic route, as one key informant stated it’s ‘a 20-year-old route.’⁹¹ Another remarked that the recent resurgence is ‘just reactivating what was always there’.⁹²

Figure 5. Arrivals to Spain along the Atlantic Route 2017 – 2024



Source: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/europe-sea-arrivals/location/24567>

86 Interview with Côte d'Ivoire man, Madrid, November 2024

87 Ibid

88 Ibid

89 MMC (2021) [A Gateway Re-Opens: The Growing Popularity of the Atlantic Route as told by those who risk it](#)

90 Reuters (2023) [Spain's Canary Islands on course for record migrant arrivals](#); Lucia Bird Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo (2022). [North-West Passage: The Resurgence of Maritime Irregular Migration to the Canary Islands](#); MMC (2021) [A Gateway Re-Opens: The Growing Popularity of the Atlantic Route as told by those who risk it](#)

91 KII, on-line, September 2024

92 KII, on-line, October 2024

'Once these migrant smuggling networks develop, even if they remain dormant, they can be readily resuscitated'.⁹³

Increased numbers of Malians driven by rising insecurity, conflict and the general deterioration of the situation

Migrants travelling along the Atlantic route are primarily West Africans and include nationals from the prime departure countries – Senegal, Mauritania and Morocco. There have been increasing numbers of Malians using the Atlantic route due to ongoing conflict and insecurity, with 10,000 arrivals between January and September 2024.⁹⁴ In 2024 Malians become the dominant nationality (36%), followed by Senegalese (27%), Guinean (9%), Moroccan (8%), Mauritanian (7%) and Gambian (6%) nationals.⁹⁵ There is also some anecdotal evidence of South Asian nationals increasingly travelling via the Atlantic route.⁹⁶

Multiple embarkation points related to increased surveillance

With the rise of popularity of this route, multiple embarkation points have emerged in Senegal and Mauritania. The cayucos (fishing boats) from Senegal are larger, and carry 180-200 people, whereas the cayucos from Mauritania are generally smaller and only carry around 80 people.⁹⁷ Within Senegal, there are departures along the whole coastline, with the greatest number from St Louis and Mbour.⁹⁸ In Mauritania, the key departure points are Nouadhibou, but also Nouakchott.⁹⁹ There have also been departures aiming for the Canary Islands from Western Sahara. These crossings are often using inflatable boats.¹⁰⁰ Dakhla and Laayoune are the primary departure points in Western Sahara. The UNODC highlighted that smuggling networks have shifted south to departure points in Senegal, the Gambia and Mauritania in response to increased border and navy controls in North Africa.¹⁰¹

93 KII, on-line, September 2024

94 KII, on-line, September 2024

95 See [UNHCR data portal](#)

96 KIIs, on-line, September and October 2024, MMC (2024) [Quarterly Mixed Migration Update West Africa Q4](#)

97 KIIs, on-line, September and October 2024

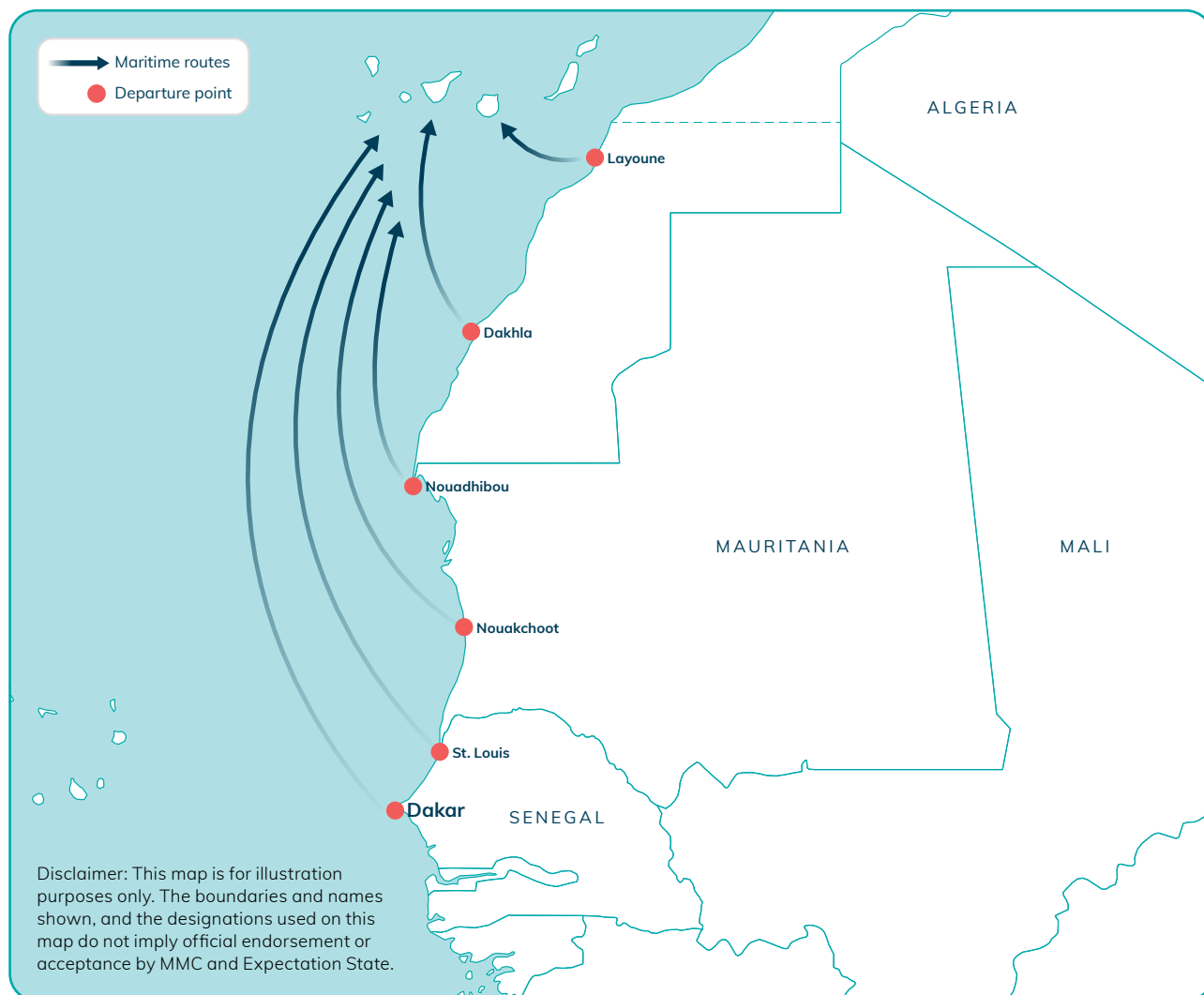
98 KII, on-line, October 2024

99 KII, on-line, September 2024

100 KIIs, on-line, September and October 2024

101 UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022) [Northwest African \(Atlantic\) Route: Migrant Smuggling from the Northwest African Coast to the Canary Islands \(Spain\)](#)

Map 3. Crossings via the Atlantic Route



The Atlantic route has risen in significance for sub-Saharan Africans, as they are increasingly blocked from accessing other routes

The rise of the Atlantic route is attributed to challenges on the more traditional routes.¹⁰² In particular, it has become more challenging for sub-Saharan Africans to enter Morocco, Tunisia has become more hostile and also the route through Algeria is becoming increasingly dangerous. As a result, migrants who would have travelled through the CMR are now being redirected—sometimes by smugglers based in Bamako—toward the Atlantic route. Meanwhile, the situation in many West African countries has become more complicated, and reaching Senegal is not difficult given the relative ease to move within the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS).¹⁰³ There are also cases of migrants moving along the north African coast, until they arrive in Western Sahara, where they are able to find transport to the Canary Islands.¹⁰⁴

102 KII, on-line, October 2024

103 KII, on-line, October 2024

104 KIIs, on-line, September and October 2024

Two systems of irregular migration: community-led vs. organized smuggling

Because of the 'newness' of the route, there is debate over how organised the movement of people is, and whether it is connected to other networks operating in West Africa. Some interviewees described two systems. The first is being driven by fishers from communities,¹⁰⁵ and the second is closer to the Libyan model or large-scale networks.¹⁰⁶ Vessels captained by fishers are usually the most successful, as they know the water and the routes.¹⁰⁷ Those that fall in the second category of more organised smuggling are seen to have, as one interviewee said, “bad boats, a lot of pressure to overload boats, with social networks on the coast. They go everywhere and attract people, saying it will be easy, but then on board they are not prepared, there is a high chance of problems and shipwrecks”.¹⁰⁸ There is a difference in the level of organisation between Senegal and Mauritania, with the reliance on smugglers seen to be higher in Mauritania creating more demand for organised smuggling.¹⁰⁹

In Senegal, the more organised groups are reactive to the presence of the Coast Guard – moving to different cities or different parts of the shore evade interception.¹¹⁰ More efforts by the Senegalese Coastguard to intercept migrants is likely to contribute to the further growth of organised smuggling groups, as this agility will be necessary to evade authorities.

'Smugglers are just trying to make money. It doesn't make it right, but it's also a job opportunity'.¹¹¹

Smugglers must go to increasing lengths to avoid detection, resulting in heightened risk

"The risk of dying at sea continues to be the biggest risk. This is a harrowing journey. The continent of Africa is in mourning, Senegal is in mourning. Everyone knows someone who has been lost at sea."¹¹²

The Atlantic route is one of the more dangerous routes due to the isolation and length of the journey. According to data from IOM's Missing Persons Project, a total of 1,062 people (up from 959 in 2023) died or disappeared along the route in 2024.¹¹³ However, other estimates suggest significantly higher numbers. For instance, the organisation Caminando Fronteras reported that as many as 9,757 migrants perished at sea on their way to the Canary Islands during the year (with data collection ending on 15 December), up from 6,007 the year before.¹¹⁴ The differences between these figures highlight the challenges in accurately tracking loss of life along migration routes.¹¹⁵

Risks associated with this route are centred on the boat journey itself more than the route to the coast. To avoid being intercepted, some boats go towards Cape Verde and then go north, in order to remain in places where they are less likely to encounter other vessels that might lead them to being apprehended. As one interviewee said, “It's a very rough part of the ocean to sail. When you reach Cape Verde, you begin to enter the Atlantic Gyre where there are heavy currents and winds. So we have found boats drifting to the Caribbean and Brazil with people who died inside – they are often mummified because they've been in the boats for so long. The bodies are completely dehydrated.”¹¹⁶

105 KII, on-line, October 2024

106 KII, on-line, November 2024

107 KII, on-line, October 2024

108 KII, on-line, October 2024

109 KIIs, on-line, October and November 2024

110 KII, on-line, November 2024

111 KII, on-line, October 2024

112 KII, Madrid, November 2024

113 IOM (2024) [Missing Migrant Project](#)

114 CaMinando Fronteras (2024) [Monitoring the right to life 2024](#)

115 For more information, MMC (2025) - forthcoming article: [Uncounted and Unknown: Tracking deaths and disappearances on the Atlantic and other irregular migration routes](#)

116 KII, on-line, October 2024. Associated Press (2024) [9 bodies found adrift in a boat off Brazil](#)

Many are told that the journey will only take one day, and are not prepared for the fact that it takes six to eight days – if successful. This takes a huge physical and mental toll. As a Senegalese man said, “At times people go crazy – they try to jump into the water, including my friend. We had to stop him. He didn’t know what he was doing. When he came here he had to go straight to the hospital as he was not well. We eventually arrived at Las Palmas. I think it took us 6 days, but I’m not sure.”¹¹⁷ A Gambian man described how the journey was significantly more dangerous than he was expecting: “This was my first time in a boat. I was always seasick and I didn’t have any extra clothes or anything to protect me from the cold. There were a lot of people in the boat, everyone made it, but it was a rough journey. I remember that three days of the trip were especially distressful, with people crying and screaming because we had no idea of where we were going.”¹¹⁸ Others described how some of those in the boat had died on the way, and had been thrown overboard as a result. As one man said, “A lot of people died in my dinghy.”¹¹⁹

Reports of exploitation of migrants in Mauritania

“It’s a bit like Libya. And in a country where slavery is seen as normal it’s only going to get more entrenched”.¹²⁰

While the sea crossing itself is excruciatingly dangerous, there are also challenges for some prior to departing for the sea journey. Most notably, there is evidence of exploitation specifically targeting Malian migrants in Mauritania. These migrants are already identified in Mali and smuggled into Mauritania, where they experience kidnap for ransom – they are put in apartments, their ID cards are confiscated and they are forced to watch movies about travelling to Europe until they decide to travel and call relatives asking for money, or accept to act as a fixer and recruit other migrants.¹²¹ As one interviewee said, “It’s a bit like Libya. And in a country where slavery is seen as normal it’s only going to get more entrenched”.¹²² Other interviewees talked of the risk of arbitrary arrest by the Mauritanian authorities. As a Malian man who had stayed in Mauritania for six months before boarding a boat said, “If you are from Mali, you are always terrified that security people will apprehend you and send you back to your country”.¹²³ Another interviewee talked about the discrepancy between the numbers of women recorded as leaving their home countries to migrate and the much lower numbers that arrive in Spain, suggesting that many are disappearing en route.

Many of those using the Atlantic route are refugees and asylum seekers, in particular those fleeing conflict in Mali. While the findings show that many Malians first try to live in Mauritania, increased challenges – including the need to renew migrant permits and growing harassment from security forces – are leading many to travel on. This was supported by the fact that an increasing number who travel on this route are applying for asylum once they reach Spain.

3.4 The English Channel crossing

Numbers are rising, although remain below the 2022 peak

The number of successful crossings of the English Channel in 2024 was 36,816 – higher than 2023, when 29,437 managed to cross.¹²⁴ However, this is still lower than the peak of 45,774 in 2022.¹²⁵ Compared to the other routes, irregular movement across the English Channel is more recent, only emerging in 2018.¹²⁶

117 Interview with Senegalese man, Madrid, November 2024

118 Interview with Gambian man, Madrid, November 2024

119 Interview with Malian man, Madrid, November 2024

120 KII, on-line, November 2024

121 KII, on-line, November 2024

122 KII, on-line, November 2024. For more on slavery in Mauritania see for example, The Inclusivity Project and Gfod (2023), [Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent in Mauritania and the Status of Modern Slavery](#)

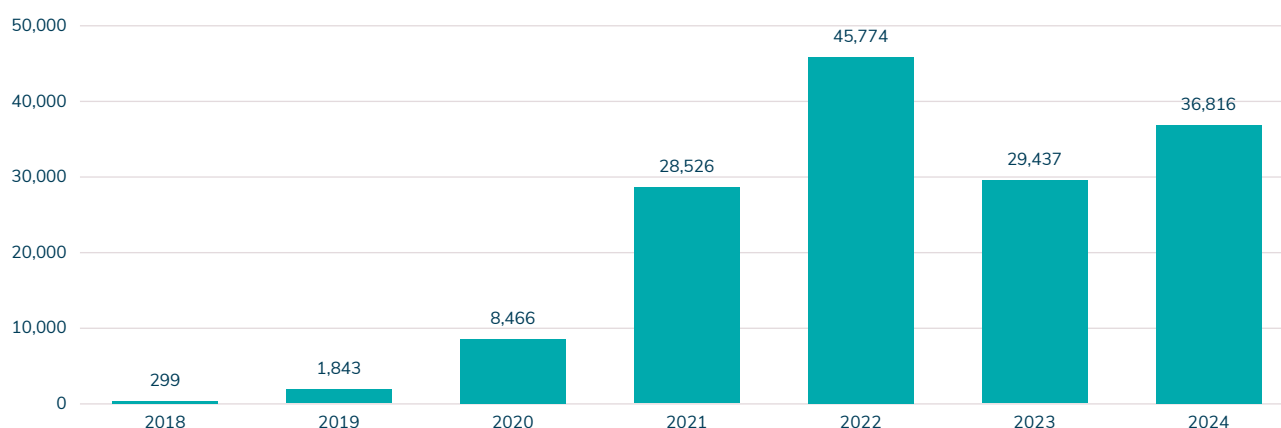
123 Interview with Malian man, Madrid, November 2024

124 Bob Dale and Simon Jones (2025) [Channel Migrant Arrivals in 2024 Totalled 36,816](#). BBC News.

125 Walsh, P.W. & Cuibus, M.V., (2024) [People crossing the English Channel in small boats](#). Migration Observatory, University of Oxford.

126 See <https://channelcrossings.org/home-2/timeline/>

Figure 6. Detections into the UK across the English Channel 2018 – 2024



Source: [Irregular migration summary: previous data tables](#).

Nationalities crossing the English Channel have been relatively consistent, meanwhile an increased number of families have been detected

Since 2018, two thirds of migrants making the crossing have been Iranian, Albanian, Iraqi, Afghan and Syrian nationals.¹²⁷ There have been some recent shifts, however, including an increase in Vietnamese migrants in the first quarter of 2024. Turkish and Sudanese nationals are also being detected, amounting to 3.8% and 4.8% respectively of all migrants since 2018, although this has increased since 2023.¹²⁸ Three quarters of those applying for asylum in the UK after crossing the channel are successful.¹²⁹

While the English Channel route is primarily used by men travelling alone, there has been an increase in families attempting the crossing. Usually, families are only present in the summer months, but they were recorded for an extended period of time in 2024.¹³⁰

Departure points have expanded to encompass a wider stretch of coastline, and vary based on nationality

Migrants cross the English Channel by small boat from the northern coast of France. Since the route gained prominence in 2018, the departure points have expanded from Calais to a broader stretch of coastline, including areas further south such as Berck and further north towards the Belgian border. Migrants congregate in Grand Synthe in France and in other locations in Belgium, and they typically travel to the French coast when they are ready to depart. The Belgian coast is considered too risky—not only because the crossing is longer, but also due to higher population density, which makes it more difficult to launch small boats undetected. Migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands are also seeking to access lorries to cross into the UK.¹³¹ However, crossings by lorry have decreased significantly, and in 2024 there were only 181 recorded detections at UK ports, a reduction from 327 in 2023.¹³²

The wide range of nationalities seeking to cross the Channel, often do so from specific areas on the coast. For example, through 2024, there have been Sudanese, Somali, Eritrean and Syrian migrants in Calais; and Iraqi Kurd, Iranian and Afghan migrants in Dunkirk.¹³³ Vietnamese migrants primarily arrive in Grand Synthe to prepare to cross the Channel.¹³⁴

127 Walsh, P.W. & Cuibus, M.V., (2024) [People crossing the English Channel in small boats](#). Migration Observatory, University of Oxford.

128 Walsh, P.W. & Cuibus, M.V., (2024) [People crossing the English Channel in small boats](#). Migration Observatory, University of Oxford.

129 Walsh, P.W. & Cuibus, M.V., (2024) [People crossing the English Channel in small boats](#). Migration Observatory, University of Oxford.

130 KII, on-line, October 2024

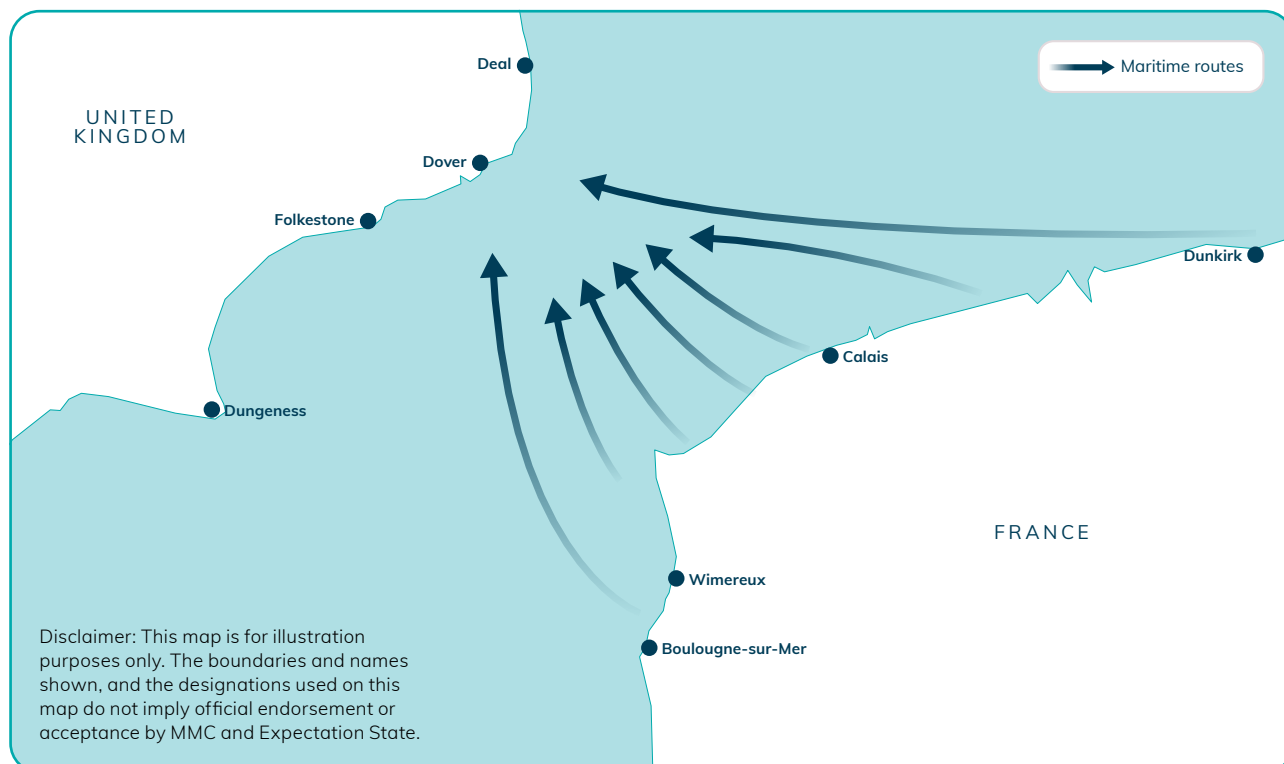
131 KII, on-line, October 2024

132 UK Home Office (2024) [Irregular Migration Summary](#)

133 KII, on-line, October 2024

134 KII, on-line, October 2024

Map 4. Crossing the English Channel



Migrants embarking on the Channel crossing seem to have travelled along various routes into Europe. There are multiple avenues for reaching the departure points for crossing the English Channel. The primary route used by those from the Middle East starts in Türkiye. For example, Iraqis can travel to Türkiye without a visa, while Iranian and Syrians nationals will need a smuggler for this initial leg.¹³⁵ Routes are then primarily overland into Bulgaria through the Strandzha Forest or to the Balkans from Edirne, on to Germany and then Calais.¹³⁶ There are also sea routes from Türkiye to Greece and Italy, the Eastern Mediterranean Route, followed by overland travel to Calais. For example, one migrant explained: “We started our travel in Iran. We went to Türkiye by foot and from Türkiye we took a Zodiac to Samos, one of the islands in eastern Greece. We then went to Athens by ferry. I can’t remember the details, but we then went through several Balkan countries, Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia. The smuggler took us on foot and by train. We arrived in Germany, where we applied for asylum”.¹³⁷ While the interviewees’ family received asylum, he did not and instead sought to travel to the UK.

Some migrants coming from African countries of origin use overland routes to Calais from their point of disembarkation in Europe. For example, one migrant interviewed in Calais had travelled to Moscow from Addis Ababa, then onto Belarus, Poland, Germany. After failing to get asylum in Germany, he travelled on to Calais with the aim of crossing the Channel.¹³⁸ Other African migrants cross the Mediterranean first and then travel on to Calais. These migrants are mostly Sudanese, who cross into Italy then travel independently into France and on to Calais.¹³⁹

Some of those from the Middle East, particularly Syrians, travel by air to Sudan and increasingly Libya, where they join the Central Mediterranean route, although this has been rare since war in Sudan broke out in April 2023.¹⁴⁰ For Iraqis, Tunisia has recently introduced a visa-free regime, which allows direct flights to Tunis before proceeding across the Mediterranean.¹⁴¹ However, it is not evident how well used this route is.

135 KII, on-line and Madrid, October and November 2024

136 KII, on-line, October and November 2024

137 KII, Madrid, November 2024

138 KII, Madrid, November 2024

139 KII, on-line, October 2024

140 KII, Madrid, November 2024

141 KII, on-line, October 2024

New smuggling networks have emerged, while the costs for the journey have decreased amid heightened competition

The English Channel crossing has become well-organised and professionalised by smuggling networks, offering competitive prices and engaging in recruitment campaigns.¹⁴² GI-TOC describes it as an efficient business, with migrants kept in camps away from the coast until boats are ready to launch to evade law enforcement.¹⁴³ While Albanian smuggling networks were associated with the growth of the business, it is now dominated by Iraqi Kurds – although other nationality based smuggling networks continue to operate. For example, Vietnamese migrants are generally supported by Vietnamese smugglers.¹⁴⁴ Kurdish smugglers are more present in the camps, particularly in Grande Synthe.¹⁴⁵ Networks operating at the coast have clearly defined roles, including guiding migrants to the entry point, logistics, transporting equipment and fuel and providing security against both law enforcement and other networks.¹⁴⁶

Prior to 2018, the cost of small boat crossings was extremely high, with some reports estimating that crossings were 14,000 Euros.¹⁴⁷ However, the implementation of post-Brexit border controls and the impact of Covid-19, made cheaper lorry crossings from Calais to Dover less viable. At the same time, boat crossings became cheaper, bringing the price down to 2,500-4,000 Euros which increased attempted crossings.¹⁴⁸ More recent reporting from NGOs working in Calais and surrounding areas indicates that the cost has decreased further to 1,000-1,500 Euros, depending on nationality and the amount of safety equipment provided.¹⁴⁹ some nationalities such as Syrians, Afghans and Vietnamese are expected to pay 2,000-3,000 Euros per person, significantly more than other nationals.¹⁵⁰

Increased border controls within the European Union and the UK have resulted in an increased need for smugglers

'It was previously easy to coordinate a journey from Erbil to Berlin, and Berlin to the UK. Now, people have to rely on a smuggler every time they cross a border'.¹⁵¹

Increasing fortification of internal European borders that now require a smuggler, and frequent changes in where support is needed, have created more competition. Contact is generally made in refugee camps and informal shelters, train stations, and other places where people gather.¹⁵² Negotiations generally occur on WhatsApp, but Telegram is also a useful outlet.¹⁵³ When migrants arrive in Calais, they generally have an idea of who is active and who they can contact.¹⁵⁴ There are also reports of smugglers actively recruiting migrants in the areas near the French coast.¹⁵⁵

According to those involved in search and rescue, from 2019 to 2021 there were a number of individual attempts to cross the Channel, with migrants putting money together to buy a boat or kayak and cross.¹⁵⁶ However, it is now almost impossible to cross without the assistance of a smuggler due to the limited availability of boats and a need to know how to evade authorities. The exception to paying for passage is migrants who 'pirate' a boat – jumping on as it departs, a phenomenon associated with Sudanese migrants that are unable to pay.¹⁵⁷

142 Global Initiative (2024) [Small Boats Big Business - the industrialization of cross channel migrant smuggling](#)

143 Ibid

144 Harding, A., Luu, K. & Clahane, P. (2024) [Smuggler selling "fast track" Channel crossing speaks to BBC undercover reporter](#) BBC News

145 KII, on-line, October 2024

146 Global Initiative (2024) [Small Boats Big Business - the industrialization of cross channel migrant smuggling](#)

147 Global Initiative (2024) [Small Boats Big Business - the industrialization of cross channel migrant smuggling](#)

148 Ibid

149 KII, on-line, October 2024

150 Jérôme, T. (2024) [Refugee Chronicles: The Long and Lonely Road from Sudan to Northern France](#) Al Jazeera

151 KII, on-line, October 2024

152 KII, on-line, October 2024

153 KII, on-line, October 2024

154 KII, on-line, October 2024

155 Global Initiative (2024) [Small Boats Big Business - the industrialization of cross channel migrant smuggling](#)

156 KII, on-line, October 2024

157 KII, on-line, October 2024

Risks associated with the journey have worsened although demand to reach the UK remains high

Measures put in place by the UK and France to stop boats leaving French waters have failed to stop the boats but have succeeded in making it much more dangerous and much harder to cross. The extent to which those interviewed were utterly exhausted by the endless struggle to find a place of safety was tangible, and any risks involved in crossing the Channel were weighed against the risk of remaining where they are. As a Syrian man said, *“Nothing happened as I hoped. Neither my country, Syria, nor Europe took care of me.”*¹⁵⁸

Not only is the crossing itself dangerous, but waiting to cross, and the journey to northern France, is fraught with risk. Many of the migrants interviewed in Calais reported making their own way from Italy and France to the English Channel. While some reported trying different ways to cross without using a smuggler, such as boarding trucks or trying to jump into a boat just before departing,¹⁵⁹ none of those interviewed had successfully crossed the Channel, and many had failed multiple times – often with devastating consequences. An Ethiopian man talked of how his wife had lost their baby as a result of their attempt to cross: *“After months in Calais, living in terrible conditions, we tried to cross over to England but failed. My wife was pregnant, but she had complications. She had to be hospitalised because she lost the baby after attempting to cross. I feel terribly responsible for what happened to her.”*¹⁶⁰ Likewise a Sudanese man who fled the war in his home area in 2020 talked of the physical and mental toll that the journey has taken on him: *“This journey has been more than hard. It’s been a journey of violence and suffering. Moving from one country to another without documents, without papers, without visas. It’s a lot of problems... When I left, all I was looking for was a place where I could feel safe. I just want to seek asylum in a country where there is peace.”*¹⁶¹

Several interviewees referred to the fact that the number of those put into boats has increased, with over-crowding making the crossing more dangerous. As one interviewee said, *“People are asphyxiating in the boat because there are too many people there. They try to put more people in, which makes it so crowded, and those in the middle are very vulnerable. If someone falls onto those in the middle, they are suffocated.”*¹⁶²

Demand for irregular migration across the English Channel remains high and smuggling networks have capitalised on this, adapting their methods to circumvent increased security measures. Those who attempt the journey do so for a plethora of reasons. For some, it is as a result of the Dublin Agreement. Under the Agreement, arrivals to European Union countries should apply for asylum in the first country of arrival, where they are fingerprinted. This identification enables countries to return them to the first country of arrival under the Dublin Agreement if they are encountered elsewhere and/or if they try to apply for asylum in other EU countries. However, since Brexit, the UK is no longer part of the Dublin Agreement, and returns from the UK to EU countries remain extremely limited. For instance, a Syrian asylum seeker interviewed in Calais, who had been imprisoned in Libya for eight months before managing to escape and cross the Mediterranean, said, *“Italy has destroyed all my dreams. The Italian police took my fingerprints and now I am bound by the Dublin regulation. My initial wish was to join Germany, but I will not be able to study there because I risk being sent back to Italy... I didn’t come to Europe to enjoy myself. I came here to continue my studies, to make something of my life. But because of Dublin, I am condemned to stay in Italy, and I will not be able to continue my studies. That’s why I want to go to England. I know crossing the Channel is dangerous. But I would rather die than stay in Italy and do nothing.”*¹⁶³

158 Interview with Syrian man, Calais, November 2024

159 KII, Madrid, November 2024

160 Interview with Ethiopian man, Calais, November 2024

161 Interview with Sudanese man, Calais, November 2024

162 KII, November 2024

163 KII, Calais, November 2024

Others are trying to join family in the UK and are forced to move irregularly because there are no legal and safe routes to do that. The fact that similar nationalities continue to be seen on this route is one indication of this being a draw for many. As one interviewee said, “Broadly across the piece, we attract the same nationalities.”¹⁶⁴ Regardless and given that the majority have already undertaken exceedingly tough and often dangerous journeys to reach northern France, it is clear that the decision to cross another body of water is not reached lightly. As one interviewee said, “I don’t want to have to risk my life again. But what choice do I have?”¹⁶⁵

It is also important to note that a large majority of those who arrive in the UK on small boats apply for – and often receive – asylum, including a growing number of Sudanese asylum seekers.¹⁶⁶ As mentioned above, many are resorting to ‘pirating’ the boats of smugglers by jumping on them at the last minute, which exemplifies the levels of desperation and lack of resources that many are experiencing.¹⁶⁷ Therefore, the need to keep moving in search of safety as a result of diminishing alternative options likely plays a much higher role in decision-making than an awareness of policy shifts.

164 KII, on-line, October 2024

165 Interview with Sudanese man, Calais, November 2024

166 KII, October 2024

167 KII, September 2024. Pirating involves migrants waiting on the beach and jumping onto boats at the last minute in order to travel without paying

4. The bigger picture: the impact of policy on overall migration dynamics

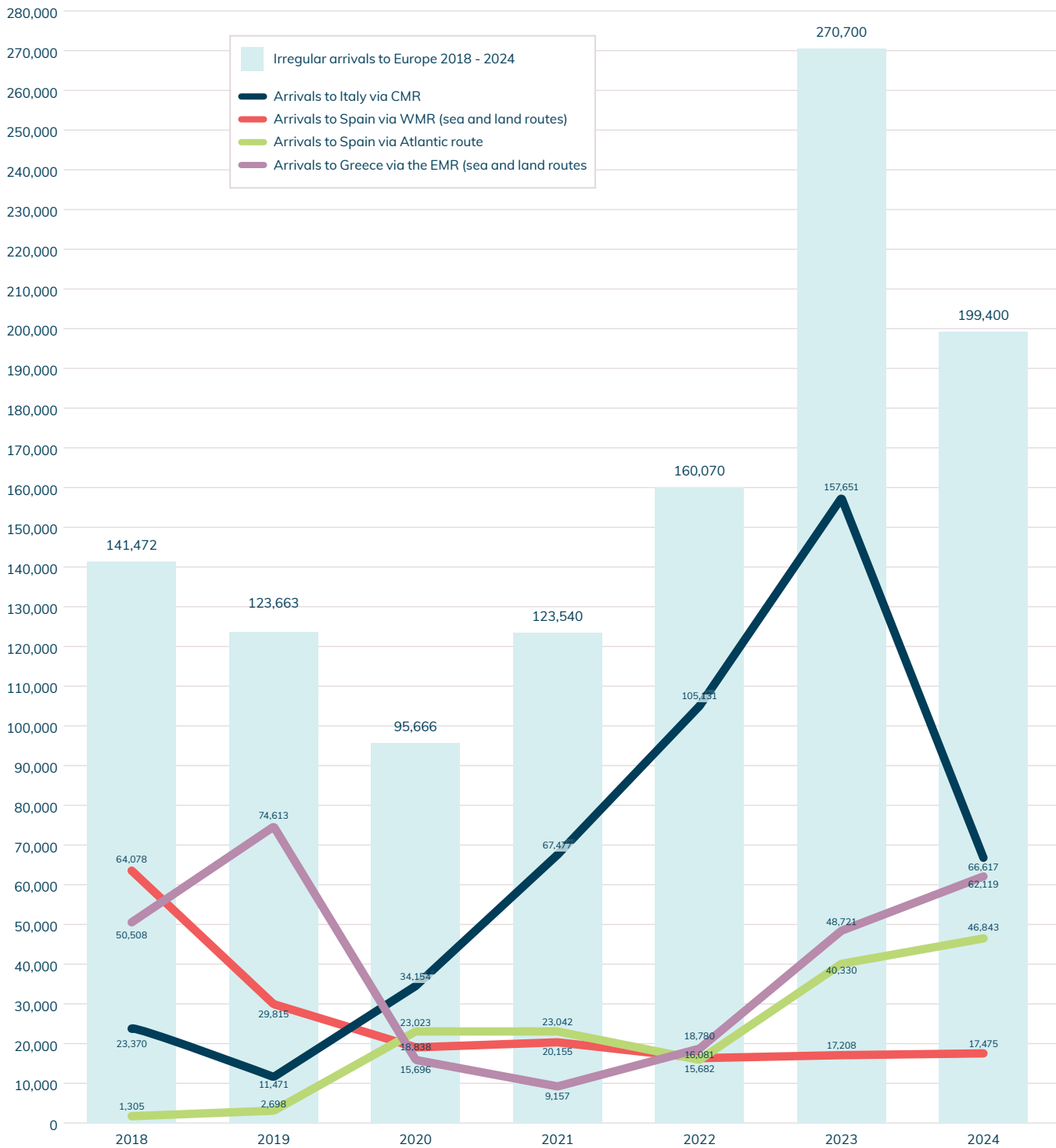
This study situates smuggling as a market with both demand (i.e. the demand among migrants to move) and supply (i.e. smugglers responding to that demand by facilitating movement). It is underpinned by the assumption that demand remains relatively consistent, albeit with some changes in the availability of regular migration channels and specific drivers for migration such as renewed conflict. As such, the research investigated whether and how the supply side adapts to changes in the policy environment, also seeking to understand how this influences migrant decision-making. This final section draws the analysis together from across the four routes on which the study was based. It considers overall findings on smuggling as a market, it looks at demand more widely, and then it considers how, if at all, this interacts with the policy environment. It concludes with reflections on what an alternative approach to migrant smuggling and irregular migration could look like.

Numbers remain constant, and demand for irregular migration is sustained

Overall, across all irregular sea routes into mainland Europe, the numbers of arrivals for 2024 were lower by approximately a quarter, compared to 2023, (see Figure 1).¹⁶⁸ However, while this is a considerable reduction, 2024 figures remain higher than all other years (excluding 2023) since 2016.

¹⁶⁸ This includes the three routes of focus in this report, as well as the Eastern Mediterranean Route

Figure 7. Irregular arrivals to Europe from 2018 to 2024, with route breakdown



Source: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/europe-sea-arrivals>

Despite policy changes, demand for irregular migration has remained constant. If anything, the findings indicate that drivers of movement have only deepened since 2023 onwards. There has been increased authoritarianism and ongoing failures to deliver reforms in governance in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Algeria;¹⁶⁹ security has deteriorated in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, generating new and growing complex emergencies;¹⁷⁰ and conflicts in the Middle East have continued to leave many displaced, unable to return to their homes.¹⁷¹ In particular, unresolved conflicts are seen as a major driver. For instance, there was frequent reference throughout the interviews to the fact that even though numbers of Sudanese arriving in Europe are not currently in the top 10 nationalities, demand among Sudanese to migrate to Europe is expected to increase in the near future. Already there are indications of what this might look like, including the desperate measures that many Sudanese are beginning to take, including ‘pirating’ of vessels on the English Channel route, and the ‘piloting’ of vessels on the CMR. Interviews described how these migrants are often given drugs to manage their fear; and letting migrants pilot the boats also provides an opportunity for smugglers to distance themselves from criminal justice consequences if the vessel is intercepted by authorities.¹⁷² It points to the fact that irregular travel, far from being a choice, is a necessity.

Many interviewees also pointed to concerns about the rising number of Malian refugees seeking to reach Europe. A series of military coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021, alongside the growth of Mali’s partnership with the Wagner Group (now Africa Corps), the withdrawal of French forces in August 2022, and the departures of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) at the end of 2023, have all led to increased numbers of people directly or indirectly affected by conflict and fleeing the country. While Malians arriving in the Hodh Chargui area of Mauritania, where UNHCR’s Mbera camp is located, are granted *prima facie* status as refugees, those arriving in other parts of the country are not.¹⁷³

Thus, with drivers of migration remaining strong, and the hostile environment toward migrants in transit countries increasing, the push to attempt the Mediterranean (or Atlantic) crossing to Europe is likely to remain constant – if not grow. As a result, while the various agreements and policies implemented in 2023 and 2024 appear to have successfully reduced arrivals along the CMR, other routes have (re)emerged or surged alongside this; and the CMR could easily increase once more, exactly as it did from 2021 onwards after the previous big decrease post-2017.

Smuggling: a market that continues to thrive

The findings show that smuggling networks have continued to play an essential role in the movement of people across all four routes of focus in this study, with most migrants using smugglers at some point in their journey. Overall, these networks have continued to adapt and operate and even expand.

Across all routes of focus, smuggling networks continue to operate as a business, responding to demand from migrants and evading interception. The business model relies on there being some level of successful crossings to maintain demand – a factor recognised not just by smuggling networks, but also by the maritime forces receiving funding to stop migration, some of whom also receive payment from smugglers according to the key informants conducted for this study.¹⁷⁴ As a result, countries bordering Europe are engaging with EU requests to the extent that it meets their own political objectives of building their internal legitimacy by cracking down on migrant smuggling, while turning a blind eye to smuggler-facilitated movements when and where it benefits individuals or the state. For example, interviewees described how coastguards in Libya accept payment from smugglers to allow boats to leave Libyan shores, only to inform authorities once the boat has departed. Accordingly, the smuggling market encompasses more than just smuggling networks. It also involves a broader political economy of smuggling, in which various local actors and authorities at different levels might play a role, including potential collaboration with state authorities in states that stand to benefit from European-driven policies that aim to reduce irregular migration and fight migrant smuggling.

The findings also demonstrate that smuggling networks exist on a spectrum, from ad hoc networks that fill a gap in the market, to strong consolidated businesses. The level of organisation and consolidation depends on the level of migration, the level of activity by authorities, and available equipment. Smuggling networks in Libya are the most consolidated: the route is longstanding, smugglers have adapted to multiple changes in the dynamic with state actors, and despite a reputation for violence in the country, migrants continue to arrive, seeking passage across the Mediterranean. By contrast, networks in Mauritania and Senegal are less organised, with fishers often meeting the

169 LSE IDEAS (2012) [After the Arab Spring Power Shift in the Middle East?](#)

170 LSE (2024) [The political and security problems in the Horn of Africa have implications for global security](#)

171 Amnesty (2023) [Middle East and North Africa Regional Overview](#)

172 Migrant and KII interviews, Sicily, October 2024

173 KII, on-line, October 2024

174 KIIs, October and November 2024

demand from migrants. However, the level of organisation is increasing in response to the resurgence of this route. Many people smugglers are involved in the movement of multiple commodities, which means that they have other income streams if certain routes reduce in popularity.¹⁷⁵ At the very least, they remain ready to re-open routes and reinvigorate networks (in this case, along the previously dormant Atlantic route) when there is demand.

In addition to very organised smuggling, there are also cases of do-it-yourself crossings, where migrants organise their journey independently. This is more likely for nationals of the embarkation country, such as Algerians, Tunisians and Moroccans departing their own country, but some of these crossings have included other nationals.¹⁷⁶ This approach, quite common until 2023, was, as of 2024, much harder on the English Channel crossing, where it has become extremely difficult to purchase small boats in order to cross the Channel, increasing the reliance on smuggling networks that are bringing boats from further afield, including the Netherlands and Germany.¹⁷⁷

Smugglers will use a route and modus operandi until they see it is not working, and even once interceptions increase, if migrants are still seeking their services, they will continue to offer the route.¹⁷⁸ This indicates that adaptation by smugglers depends more on changes in source countries and the local operating environment where smugglers are based than changes in the destination country. As one interviewee said, *“The smugglers – there are no limits for them. There’s plenty of money and they have no moral or economic limitations. With any other economic activity, when people die you may have a problem. But strangely, for smuggling, when people die it’s just a side effect, there’s no consequence on the demand”*.¹⁷⁹

Does policy impact supply?

Where does this leave Europe’s policies, which are intended to deter this movement? As outlined above, the trajectory of policy approaches across Europe is led by political pressure to be seen as ‘tough on migration’. This has led to a growing accumulation of policies that prioritise measures to control movement over the protection of those who are moving, through multiple deals with authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states. These deals, which are worth millions of Euros, typically combine externalising or outsourcing border security alongside ‘sweeteners’ in the form of development assistance (channelled primarily through UN agencies) ostensibly to address ‘root causes’ of migration. They have been widely criticised by civil society and other experts¹⁸⁰ for representing, at best, short-term, precarious alliances motivated by political expediency with minimal long-term, structural impact. By striking deals with undemocratic regimes, which often then leads to an increase in human rights violations against migrants, this undermines the image of European countries who have long claimed the higher moral ground. It also hands countries with questionable human rights records more negotiating power in future dialogues.

Europe is being manipulated as a result. As one interviewee said with reference to the way in which Morocco controls levels of migration leaving its territory: *“Spain and the EU have paid Morocco a lot of money for migrant control, so that has reduced the numbers coming through that route. But at any point Morocco could decide to change that.”*¹⁸¹ Europe, by seeking to ‘look tough on migration’, may well be able to generate short term successes, such as the temporary reduction of movement along a specific route for a specific time, but it does not lead to any permanent changes.¹⁸² Instead, new routes are opened, more questionable deals are needed, and maintaining old deals becomes increasingly costly, both financially and politically.

175 KII, on-line, September and October 2024

176 KII, on-line, September 2024

177 KII, on-line, October 2024

178 KII, on-line, September 2024

179 KII, on-line, September 2024

180 Clingendael Spectator 4 – (2018) [Between sticks and carrots: The future of EU migration deals](#)

181 KII, Madrid, November 2024

182 Jennifer Vallentine, Bram Frouws and Roberto Forin (2024) [Power dynamics, arm twisting and migrant rights: the many \(ugly\) faces of migration diplomacy](#) Mixed Migration Centre

What role does this play in migrant decision-making?

From the perspective of migrants, there is little evidence to suggest that deterrence policies do, indeed, deter them from seeking to move to Europe irregularly. Prospective asylum seekers often know little about the policies that will face them when they arrive.¹⁸³ Instead, drivers,¹⁸⁴ the draw of friends and family, as well as safety and the prospect of income generation, are all viewed as more important in decision-making.¹⁸⁵ As one interviewee said, “When you’re choosing a destination country, the details of asylum policy that await you are hardly a consideration. Family members, community, language – not to mention the reason you left in the first place – are far more important.”¹⁸⁶ In this context, Europe needs to have a more realistic understanding of the impact that it does and can have on migrant decision-making.

What policy change does have an impact on, however, are the levels of risk that migrants face. The findings demonstrate that policy changes have led to longer sea crossings, more circuitous journeys to avoid interception, and larger numbers crammed into boats lacking adequate safety equipment. In addition to the risks at sea, many migrants fail to make it to the coast or face additional risks on arrival in the intended destination country. As one interviewee said, “The Mediterranean Sea is a dangerous place, but the desert is even nastier. There are no eyes in the desert.”¹⁸⁷ Additional challenges crossing borders – whether on land or sea – only increase the business of smuggling networks, as irregular migrants need more support to navigate the fortifications.

The interaction between policy and risk can be seen most starkly in relation to the way in which levels of safety often correlate with the amount of money a migrant can pay for their journey. For those who have the money to pay significant sums for their journeys they can opt for better (often less crowded) means of transport, which can lessen some of the dangers. Migrants who have less resources and pay less, by contrast, might be forced to drive the boat as part payment for their journey (which then potentially leads to them being prosecuted under anti-smuggling legislation),¹⁸⁸ or be put on more crowded, less sea-worthy boats. In these instances, arrests are likely to do little to act as a deterrence.

That said, however, migrants who pay more are also vulnerable to becoming victims of kidnap for ransom, a modus operandi that has continued to thrive in Libya and is potentially developing in other locations.¹⁸⁹ As outlined above, most of the Bangladeshi migrants interviewed in Sicily, many of whom had paid significant sums to get as far as Libya, spoke of how they had been imprisoned, often in harsh conditions, until their families paid for their release. Furthermore, if a boat goes down in bad weather or for other reasons, the cost of the journey becomes moot.

Future outlook for migration?

In a context in which smuggling networks remain robust, and demand for their services is unlikely to shift, the ongoing failure to engage with why people move in the first place, relative to the investment in stopping migration, has had a devastating, and often deadly, impact on the lives of many. It has created a one-dimensional approach to understanding migration that fails to grapple with the complex conflicts, inequalities and labour demand in Europe that continue to drive the need to move. As one interviewee said, “European governments and policy makers are not spending any effort on researching longer-term solutions to displacement... It’s easier to control what’s on your doorstep than taking the longer-term view in terms of geostrategy on migration and development”.¹⁹⁰ People will still arrive in transit hubs because of ongoing drivers, the need for protection, and Europe’s labour demand regardless of policy developments; but enforcement-heavy approaches are creating an increasingly ‘hostile environment’ along the routes, which is only exacerbating insecurity and the compulsion to move on towards Europe, as well as leading to failures in integration on arrival.

183 Crawley, H (2010) [Chance or choice? Understanding why asylum seekers come to the UK](#) Refugee Council

184 Walsh, P.W. & Cuibus, M.V. (2024) [People crossing the English Channel in small boats](#). Migration Observatory, University of Oxford

185 Bouhenia M, Farhat J B, Coldiron M E, Abdallah S, Visentin D, Neuman M, Berthelot M, Porten K and Cohuet S (2017) ‘[Quantitative survey on health and violence endured by refugees during their journey and in Calais, France](#)’, International Health, 9(6); Robinson V and Segrott J (2002) [Understanding the decision-making of asylum seekers](#). Home Office. Cited in Migration Observatory, ‘People crossing the English Channel in small boats.’ University of Oxford, 28 June 2024

186 KII, on-line October 2024

187 KII, on-line, September 2024

188 A study on arrivals to the UK across the Channel, for instance, showed that 1 person for every 7 boats was arrested for their alleged role in steering the boat in 2023. Victoria Taylor (2024) [Report Launch: “No Such Thing as Justice Here”](#) The University of Oxford

189 <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/a-sharper-lens-on-vulnerability-north-africa/>

190 KII, on-line, October 2024

Conclusion

Migration remains an intensely political issue. Policymakers face growing pressure to appear tough, especially amid rightward political shifts across Europe. Yet, this has led to short-sighted responses that may temporarily reduce flows but fail to address the political economy and infrastructure of irregular migration.

An approach focused primarily, or even exclusively, on enforcement and deterrence is unlikely to significantly curb irregular migration. While it may bring short-term reductions along certain routes, this often comes at a high financial, human, and ethical cost. Moreover, as argued in this report, as long as demand for irregular migration persists, smugglers will adapt, routes will rebound, and numbers will rise again.

This is not to say enforcement or the prosecution of criminals—especially violent smugglers and human traffickers—should be abandoned. On the contrary, targeting those responsible for aggravated smuggling, extreme violence against migrants, and loss of life is essential. However, simplistic narratives about "disrupting the business model of smugglers" or "smashing the gangs" fail to account for the supply-and-demand dynamics driving the smuggling market. As MMC has previously argued, consider a scenario where Ukrainian refugees lacked regular pathways into the EU. Like Afghans, almost 100% of whom rely on smugglers to reach Europe, they too would have turned to smugglers, creating a multi-billion-euro business opportunity. Instead, offering Ukrainians free passage disrupted the smuggling model on an unprecedented scale.¹⁹¹

Thus, enforcement must be part of a broader, more comprehensive approach to irregular migration, combining multiple elements.

This includes:

- A whole-of-route strategy providing assistance and protection along migration corridors, through centres that offer access to, or at least information on, regular migration channels and return assistance (e.g., an expanded version of the Safe Mobility Offices in the Americas)¹⁹².
- Fair but efficient asylum processing at Europe's external borders, coupled with equitable relocation among EU countries for those granted asylum.
- Viable resettlement programmes beyond token numbers.
- A substantial expansion of regular labour migration pathways (beyond small-scale pilots) to address labour shortages in destination countries.

Scalable, dignified return processes for those without a legal right to stay, ensuring reintegration support.

Expanding regular migration channels could also unlock cooperation from origin countries on returns, improving Europe's ability to facilitate faster repatriations. If genuine, accessible alternatives exist, and if irregular migrants without protection claims face return, fewer people will risk their lives or pay thousands to smugglers.

Crucially, these measures must be implemented in parallel—not sequentially. A common belief among European leaders is that irregular migration must first be controlled before expanding regular migration. This approach is flawed, as these strategies are interdependent and cannot be pursued in isolation.

Additionally, a comprehensive migration strategy must align with policies on trade, development, subsidies, and visas. This would reduce Europe's vulnerability in migration deals with third countries and help uphold human rights standards. Currently, political fear of increased arrivals has shifted the balance of power in these deals toward transit countries, despite Europe's far greater economic leverage. Demanding non-negotiable adherence to human rights should be central to any migration governance partnership.

Though politically challenging—particularly in a divided Europe—this holistic approach is ultimately necessary to reduce irregular migration and disrupt smuggling networks on a meaningful scale.

191 Forin, R. (2024) [How to break the business model of smugglers](#). Mixed Migration Centre

192 MMC (2024) [The influence of Safe Mobility Offices \(SMO\) on mixed migration in Latin America](#)



MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.



MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

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