12. "No one talks about what it's really like" – risks faced by migrants in the Sahara Desert[1]

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GLOBAL COMPACT FOR MIGRATION OBJECTIVES

VULNERABILITIES

MISSING MIGRANTS

***Abstract**: This chapter explores the risks that migrants face when crossing the Sahara Desert. While data sources on the experiences of migrants in the Sahara are scarce, this analysis relies on data from IOM and the Mixed Migration Centre. The chapter finds that trans-Saharan migration poses risks, both inherent to the desert and human-caused. The risks posed by the inhospitable terrain of the desert are complicated and exacerbated by instability and violence in the region, harmful smuggling practices and the securitization of borders in the Sahel. More data are needed to adequately understand the experiences of migrants in the Sahara Desert, so that effective policy and programming responses can combat the many risks. Potential migrants need better access to information about the risks of the Sahara crossing to make informed and safe choices.*

In a workshop with Ghanaians who had lost family members during their migration abroad, one young man who had crossed the Sahara Desert spoke up: "No one talks about what it's really like", he said. Heads around the table nodded and returnees and family members began sharing stories of the terrible conditions they had faced in the desert crossing. One man spoke about adding gasoline to his water container before boarding the truck that would take him from the Niger to Libya, saying that it helped him feel less thirsty. Another said his smuggler abandoned 20 people in the desert after their truck ran out of fuel.

Experts have long agreed that the Sahara crossing is one of the most dangerous migration routes in the world, but evidence to support this claim is scarce. IOM's Missing Migrants Project (IOM, 2019a) has recorded nearly 2,000 deaths in the Sahara Desert since 2014, though many more likely go unrecorded. Qualitative research and anecdotal reports indicate that migrants[3] face risks due to both the inherent danger of crossing this desert vastness, as well as human-caused risks[4] linked to regional insecurity and the irregular means by which people travel.

This chapter seeks to shed some light on what the Sahara crossing is really like, based on the limited evidence currently available. Trans-Saharan migration has primarily been studied after the fact, in "destination" countries in North Africa, but the conditions on the journey in the desert itself are less frequently researched. This is mainly due to the

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[3] This chapter uses the term "migrant" to include asylum seekers and refugees. Although these two groups hold a particular set of rights under international law, they are generally exposed to similar risks as other migrants when transiting through the Sahara Desert.

[4] This chapter uses "human" risks to encompass factors migrants face during the Sahara crossing that are created by humans themselves.

difficulties of conducting empirical research on populations on the move through the desert's remote terrain, and partly to the simplification of migration routes into separate categories of departure, transit and arrival/destination. In the Sahara context, the delineation of "transit" becomes blurred, with many desert locales being simultaneously areas of origin, transit and destination, at least temporarily.

This chapter cannot claim to be a representative or comprehensive view of the risks faced by migrants: the political and geographical complexity of the enormous area covered means there is no one typical journey across the Sahara Desert. The lack of comprehensive data – or even much research examining the conditions migrants face on their journeys in the desert – necessitates reliance on small-scale research studies and eyewitness reports.

The main data set used in this chapter is on deaths and disappearances during migration across the Sahara, from the IOM's Missing Migrants Project. While deaths are a clear indicator of the risks migrants face – albeit the most "final, terrible indicator" (Singleton, 2018:339) – these data are highly incomplete due to the inaccessibility of the Sahara and a lack of reporting of migrant deaths.[5]

Data that could be used to quantify the non-fatal risks discussed in this chapter are largely unavailable. Most existing research focuses on trans-Saharan migration centres around the route between the Niger and Libya, meaning that this chapter will also primarily focus on this area. Both emerging routes, such as those to northern Chad's new gold mines, and shifts in established routes are reflected only insofar as these are covered by published research and data.

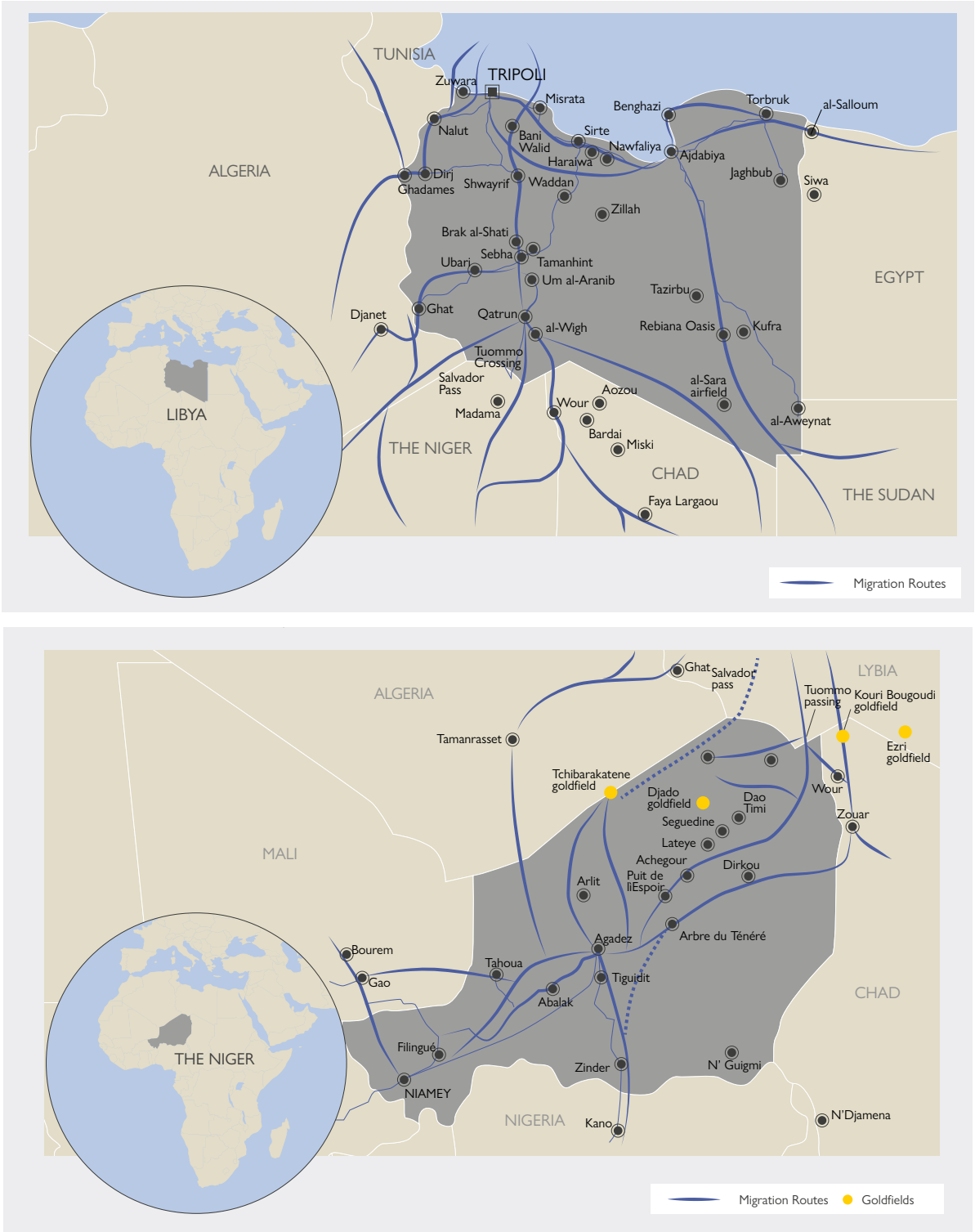
12.1. Trans-Saharan migration routes in brief

Trade and travel within and across the Sahara have existed for much of documented history, and the Central Sahara in particular has a long-standing history of migration, as well as nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyles. In the late 1950s, thousands migrated from the Sahel region to Northern Africa, seeking to fill Libya's and Algeria's need for labour after large-scale development policies were introduced for the southern regions of both countries (Brachet, 2011). These migration patterns were often short-term or circular in nature, as many migrants were employed in sectors affected by seasonal changes, such as agriculture or construction (ibid). While initially those who made the journey across the Sahara Desert were mostly younger men from the Sahel, in the 1980s and 1990s there was an increase in the number and diversity of migrants on trans-Saharan routes (Bredeloup and Pliez, 2011).

Since the mid-2000s, however, most migrants became increasingly unable to obtain the documents needed to enter Maghreb countries legally, due to changes in immigration policies (Brachet, 2011). Most countries in this region have long and porous borders that cross through remote areas of the desert, making it difficult to regulate transit. Therefore, migration has continued, albeit by irregular means (Awumbila et al., 2014). Available evidence points to the most-frequented route across the desert heading to Libya and, to a lesser degree, Algeria, via the northern part of the Niger (MMC, 2018; IOM, 2019b; Brachet, 2011). West African migrants also travel via Mali and Algeria (MMC, 2018) and those from both East and West Africa aiming to reach Libya also travel via the Sudan, and to a lesser extent via Egypt (Micallef, 2017).

[5] See Singleton et al. (2017) for a general discussion of the challenges of collecting data on migrant fatalities.

Figure 12.1. Maps of trans-Saharan migration routes through Libya and the Niger, December 2019



Source: Micallef, 2019.

Note: These maps are for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on these maps do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

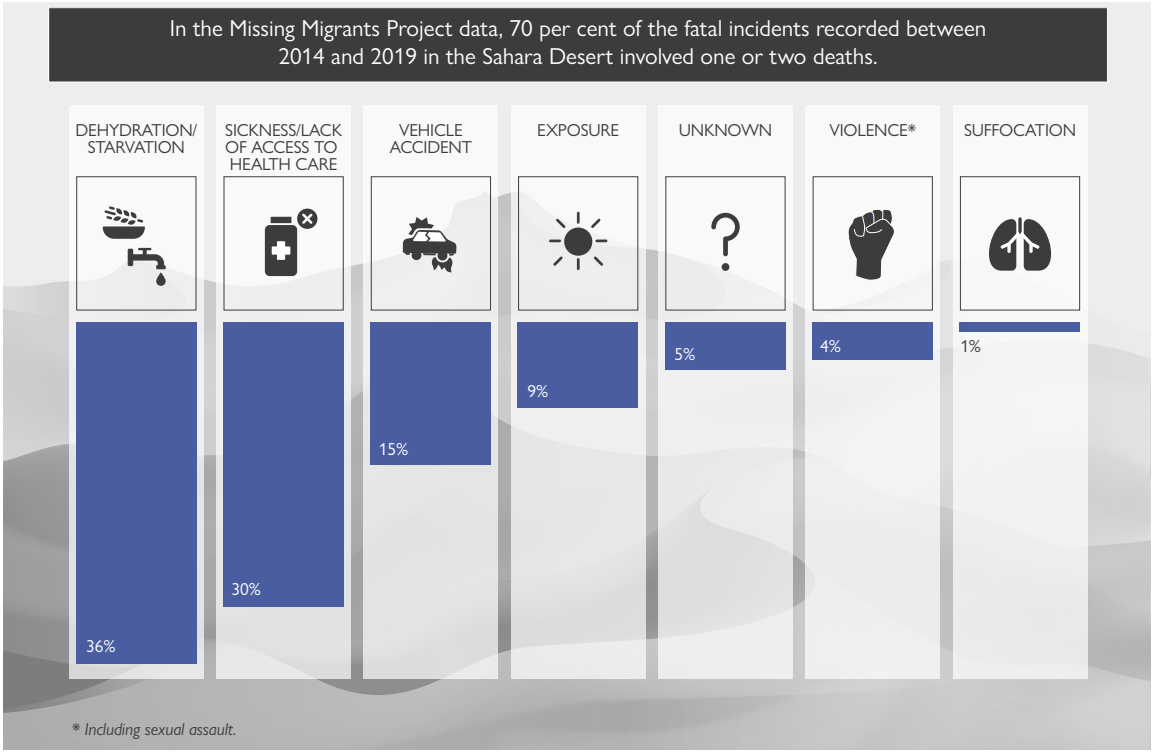
12.2. Risks of trans-Saharan migration

Several reports (MMC, 2014; UNHCR, 2019) have stated that more people die while crossing the Sahara Desert than in the Mediterranean Sea. However, while over 19,000 deaths have been recorded in the Mediterranean since 2014 (IOM, 2019a), far fewer fatalities have been documented in the Sahara. IOM (ibid.) has recorded 1,898 deaths across the desert since 2014, and the Sudanese Popular Congress, a Sudanese association based in Kufra, recorded 486 deaths on the journey from the Sudan to Libya between 1997 and 2004 (Hamood, 2006:47).

There are strong indications that data on migrant deaths in the Sahara are highly incomplete. Researchers consistently report that many interviewees witness people dying in the desert (see for example Médecins Sans Frontières, 2017; Reitano and Tinti, 2015; MHub, 2017). Almost every person interviewed reported having witnessed multiple deaths during the journey across the desert (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2017:25).

In the Missing Migrants Project data, 70 per cent of the fatal incidents recorded between 2014 and 2019 in the Sahara Desert involved one or two deaths. Typically, deaths that occur in small numbers are less likely to be reported, and the converse is also true: of the deaths recorded by IOM in the Sahara based on reports from news agencies, non-governmental organizations or international agencies, two thirds (66%) involved 10 or more dead. The vast majority of data recorded by the Missing Migrants Project in the Sahara are based on interviews with survivors: 87 per cent of records come from interviews conducted by the Mixed Migration Centre's Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi), while another 11 per cent come from the Mixed Migration Hub (MHub) surveys.[6] Though non-representative and unverifiable, these testimonies provide one of the few quantitative sources of information on risks faced by migrants attempting to cross the Sahara Desert. Considering that samples of migrants in irregular situations are not representative, survey-based data also may present a biased picture of the risks migrants face in the Sahara, as different populations may be more or less likely to witness and/or report deaths.

Figure 12.2. Primary causes listed for migrant deaths recorded in the Sahara, 2014–2019



Source: IOM, 2019a.

[6] The lower proportion of fatal incidents recorded from MHub surveys is due in part to the fact that no surveys were conducted after September 2017.

Similarly, reports of harsh conditions, violence and neglect are all too common across the Sahara Desert. An IOM survey with returnees in the Niger found that 80 per cent of migrants reported suffering from abuse, violence and exploitation during their journeys (IOM, 2016). However, it is not clear where such incidents happened, and returnees may be more likely to report such incidents, for example, due to the length of their journeys. Similar reports have existed for at least a decade: based on one of the earliest studies on the topic (Khachani, 2008), more than 70 per cent of migrants interviewed in Morocco said they faced exhaustion, hunger, thirst, violence and lack of hygiene during the Sahara crossing.

12.2.1. Risks inherent to the Sahara Desert crossing

Many of the risks reported by migrants in the trans-Saharan passage are linked to the vast, inhospitable terrain that people must cross. High temperatures, scarcity of food and water, and the long distances to cover mean that any desert crossing – whether by regular or irregular means – will pose some risks to travellers. More than three in four deaths recorded by IOM (2019a) are linked to the remoteness of the trans-Saharan journey: these include those due primarily to dehydration and starvation (36%), sickness and lack of access to health-care facilities (31%) and exposure (9%).

Most journeys across the Sahara Desert occur in convoys of trucks, and breakdowns can be deadly (Brachet, 2011). The fact that most trans-Saharan migration has been irregularized[7] means that routes often pass far from inhabited areas, with little to no possibility of accessing health facilities or resupplying.

12.2.2. Human-caused risks of crossing the Sahara Desert

The risks inherent to making the Sahara crossing are exacerbated by human-caused factors. These are generally linked to the irregularization of migration in the Sahara context, but can also be caused by the political instability and violence present in several areas in countries bordering the Sahara.

Risks posed by instability and violence in the Sahara region

Many of the human-caused risks migrants face during trans-Saharan migration are not attributable to a single actor or factor. The violence, robbery, kidnapping and sexual assault that have become common on routes across the Sahara Desert are perpetrated by many actors, from smugglers and border guards to militias, roving gangs and migrants themselves.

For those who attempt to reach Maghreb countries, ongoing conflicts and instability pose serious dangers. In the desert regions across Libya's South, tribal rivalries, primarily between the Tebu and Tuareg tribes, have been marked by violence and general lawlessness, though smuggling remains prominent (Micallef, 2017). This instability has not only had direct consequences for migrants – who may be abducted by criminals and held for ransom, forced into labour, or kept in detention centres marked by incredibly dangerous conditions – it has also shifted routes to less well-established paths. For instance, Reitano and Tinti (2015) documented Tuareg smuggling networks shifting operations to remote areas of Algeria, due in large part to the Tebu consolidating control over southern Libya.

> ***"To go to Djanet, in Algeria, you never go on your own: you go through the desert and if a truck on its own breaks down there you are going to die."***
>
> ***Tuareg people smuggler, Agadez, November 2004 (Brachet, 2011:63)***

Other countries in the region – particularly Mali – are also marked by profound turbulence, which directly and indirectly poses risks to migrants in the Sahara, either through violent

[7] The term "irregularized" is used in this chapter instead of "irregular" to emphasize that, when it comes to migration, "irregularity" is determined by States. Irregularity refers to the legal status of a person at a certain point in time or during a certain period; the term does not refer to individuals themselves. Laws and policies determine the type of documentation required for migration and, as such, the status of migrants can change during their journeys and stays in the countries of transit/destination, as authorized by the State.

attacks or by forcing them to take more remote paths through the desert. Near Gao, a smuggling hub in Mali, Micallef (2019) noted the increasing frequency of so-called "taxation" by armed groups since the 2012 coup d'état in Mali, whereby convoys of migrants must pay a "tax" under the threat of violence. Such local bands are difficult to avoid near locations such as smuggling hubs, wells or restocking points, as local robbers know that migrants typically carry enough money to finance their trip and may even collude with smugglers to defraud their customers (Brachet, 2011). In Mali, the increased frequency of such robberies has displaced established routes, including difficult and lengthy desert crossings on foot, which pose risks "not normally associated with human smuggling" (Micallef, 2019).

Kidnapping, too, is unfortunately common for those who attempt to cross the Sahara Desert, particularly in the Sudan. Once kidnapped, migrants are typically either held for ransom or trafficked (MMC, 2018). The available evidence indicates that Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable to kidnappers, as they are perceived as more likely to carry cash and to have wealthier connections abroad, with families in the diaspora asked to pay large sums in order to avoid or stop violence against the person held and to secure his or her release (Ayalew, 2016). One in seven East African migrants interviewed en route to Libya, Egypt or Europe between May 2017 and January 2019 said that they had been kidnapped, primarily in the Sudan (44.2%), but also Egypt (22.6%) and Libya (18.9%) (Horwood and Forin, 2019). According to Médecins Sans Frontières (2017), kidnapped women and girls may be forced into prostitution.

> *"There is no one who will reach you at that desert area, so they can do whatever they like and want to do."*
>
> *26-year-old Ethiopian man interviewed in the Sudan, October 2016 (Horwood, 2018)*

While representative statistics are not available, sexual assault during trans-Saharan migration is frequent, and is particularly well-documented among those from Nigeria[8] and the Horn of Africa. Of 1,700 migrants of both sexes interviewed from the Horn of Africa, more than one in three (563) reported witnessing or experiencing incidents involving sexual and gender-based violence (Bartolini and Zakoska-Todorovska, Chapter 15 of this volume). Eritrean women interviewed by Médecins Sans Frontières (2017) reported seeking out injectable contraceptives prior to crossing the desert from the Sudan to Libya in order to prevent pregnancy due to the reported frequency of rape on this journey. A study by Human Rights Watch (2016) on the larger issue of the trafficking of Nigerian women made frequent reference to the sexual exploitation by traffickers on nearly every step of their journeys, including during the trans-Saharan crossing.

Risks posed by smuggling practices in the Sahara Desert

Since at least the mid-2000s, migration from sub-Saharan countries to the Maghreb has been largely irregularized,[9] meaning that the vast majority of migrants transiting across the Sahara use the services of smugglers to reach their destinations (Brachet, 2011). Journeys across the desert typically last from three to seven days and are largely impossible to complete without someone who knows the terrain (Reitano and Tinti, 2015). Indeed, smugglers in the Sahara context traditionally belong to nomadic or semi-nomadic groups which have travelled in the desert for centuries (ibid.). While graphic narratives painting smugglers exclusively as perpetrators of crimes against migrants represent only a small part of the reality of migrant smuggling (Sanchez, Chapter 18 of this volume), the criminalization of trans-Saharan migration has been marked by an increase in the risks migrants and smugglers alike must take in order to make the crossing (Reitano and Tinti, 2015).

Many of the risks linked to migrant smuggling across the Sahara Desert are linked to the forms of transit themselves. Typically, migrants are crowded into the back of small or large trucks, with as many as 30 people in the back of a standard pickup truck (Brachet, 2011). In such circumstances, it has become common for people to fall off and be left behind in the desert (UNODC, 2010), a practice which is a death sentence in remote areas. Reitano and Tinti (2015) reported that "nearly all"[10] of interviewed migrants who had made the Saharan crossing from Agadez spoke in horror at the

[8] For more information on the trafficking of women from Nigeria, see Human Rights Watch (2016).
[9] For an overview of recent migration policy changes, see Micallef (2019).
[10] The specific number of interviewees is not mentioned.

number of people abandoned by smugglers, and the dead bodies they saw in the desert. Some interviewees reported that those who became ill were forced to disembark from the pickups by smugglers for fear of spreading disease in the crowded quarters (ibid.). One stark example of abandonment occurred after migrants reported smugglers had forced people off their truck: 24 bodies were ultimately found in the desert near the Algeria–the Niger border between 30 September and 2 October 2019 (IOM, 2019a). Those who are abandoned in smaller numbers may never be reported, and these bodies are unlikely to be found.

Even without being abandoned in the desert, current smuggling practices in the Sahara Desert mean that many migrants face the challenges of traversing the hazardous terrain by foot. With the increased securitization of borders – largely through the introduction of checkpoints and increased patrols – trucks carrying migrants typically stop a few kilometres away from the desert in order to avoid interception, meaning that passengers must complete the last distance in the desert on foot (Brachet, 2011). Getting lost, too, is not out of the question: to reduce the chance of detection, drivers rarely take the same route twice and cannot rely on rescue by another truck passing by should they get off track (ibid.).

Risks caused by the securitization of Saharan borders

Since the mid-2000s, the tightening of immigration controls in Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia and the Niger have made travel to and residence in these countries more dangerous for migrants (see, for example, Micallef, 2019; Papademetriou and Hansen, 2014; Zaiotti, 2017; MMC, 2018; Brachet, 2011). Migrants and smugglers rightly fear detention and deportation, which have become increasingly frequent in Maghreb countries (Brachet, 2011). Arrest represents a major risk for migrants, as detention centres – particularly those in Libya[11] – are often marked by abuse and poor conditions. Multiple deaths have been reported in migrant detention centres in Libya, Morocco and Egypt in the past decade (Global Detention Project, 2019). Deportation, too, can pose a serious risk to migrants in Maghreb countries: Algeria has become notorious for its practice of mass expulsions into the desert, with 13,000 deportees abandoned on its southern border in 2017 and 2018 (Hinnant, 2019), and another 6,000 in 2019 (UNHCR, 2019; Alarm Phone Sahara, 2019).

> *"Witnessing the sexual violence done to our women and sisters was the worst. If you tell them to stop, they will kill you, or drop you off to die in the desert."*
>
> *Eritrean man speaking about the kidnapping of his entire convoy in the Sudanese desert (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2017:26).*

Increased border controls tend to displace migration routes to less visible and therefore more dangerous areas. At these locations, the probability of receiving assistance in an emergency situation is slim, and the likelihood of becoming a victim of violence or other abuse increases (Sanchez, 2017). This is particularly true in the Sahara, where the terrain is generally flat and travellers can easily be spotted from monitored roads. Consequently, drivers in the Sahara prefer to avoid stopping even for food, water or rest (Brachet, 2011). In Libya, the increased securitization of the country's southern border has shifted smuggling routes to several miles away from established highways and into the desert, in order to reduce the likelihood of detection (Micallef, 2019).

> *"You pray for death. You cry until you cannot cry any more. People die, faint, are beaten, raped. I would not advise even my worst enemy to travel by land."*
>
> *28-year-old Nigerian woman (Human Rights Watch, 2016).*

One of the starkest examples of this is the shift in migration patterns from the northern part of the Niger since mid-2016, attributed by several researchers to the enforcement of Law 2015–36 criminalizing human smuggling (Micallef, 2019; MMC,

[11] The conditions of Libya's detention centres are discussed in greater length in Global Detention Project (2020).

2018; Xchange, 2019). Since the increased crackdown on smugglers primarily operating out of the Niger's Agadez region, the modus operandi of irregular migration across the Sahara has shifted to more dangerous patterns. Micallef (2019) reports that far few smugglers are now in operation in the northern part of the Niger, and that they transport fewer migrants (meaning that there is a greater risk of being stranded), are more likely to depart at night and avoid city centres (reducing the chance for resupplying and medical care), and travel along more remote routes (reducing the chance of rescue should things go wrong). The caravans of overloaded trucks have largely been replaced by single Jeeps that depart Agadez under cover of nightfall, meaning that drivers are less likely to be able to call for help should a breakdown occur (Lucht and Raineri, 2019). People attempting to leave from Agadez must now walk several kilometres through the desert in order to reach new, more remote departure points (MMC, 2018). Those moving away from city centres and outside of established pathways must rely on even scarcer infrastructures, potentially increasing the risk of getting lost or of other harm.

> ***"No food, no water and no good transportation. Around 18 migrants were loaded on a Toyota car. When three migrants fell from the car no one could get back to pick them up and they remained there in the desert."***
>
> ***24-year-old Ethiopian female, interviewed in Egypt about experiences in the Sudan. December 2016 (MMC, 2018).***

> ***"They tossed us into the desert, without our telephones, without money. I couldn't even describe it to you... There were people who couldn't take it. They sat down and we left them. They were suffering too much."***
>
> ***Senegalese man who was abandoned near the Algerian border with the Niger (Hinnant, 2019)***

12.3. Conclusion

Though the risks of crossing the Sahara are clearly many, our understanding of the conditions on these journeys remains poor. Available data and research identify numerous risks, from those due to the natural hazards of the long and inhospitable desert crossing, which are exacerbated by smuggling practices, to instability and the securitization of borders in the Sahara context. Indeed, it can be (and has been) argued that a side effect of stricter immigration policies is to cause migrants to undertake such risky journeys (see, for example, Papademetriou and Hansen, 2014; Zaiotti, 2017), though this is outside of the scope of this chapter.

The risks inherent to the Sahara Desert and the "human" risks discussed above make for grim reading, but the context is important: we do not know how many people survive such experiences, nor do we know which areas and groups are most at risk. Without such information, protection measures cannot adequately address the many risks faced by migrants in the Sahara, including the terrors of dehydration, violence and death, nor can migrants adequately inform themselves of the safest ways to reach their intended destination. A Mixed Migration Centre (2019) survey of more than 4,500 migrants in Libya showed that the majority (62%) said they would not undertake the Sahara crossing if they knew what they know now: if no one talks about what it's really like, how can we make sure that those who most need this information have access?

There is an urgent need for better research into the experience of migrants in the Sahara Desert, including both monitoring the situation in the desert and understanding the experiences of those who have completed the crossing. More importantly, however, would-be migrants must have better access to information so that they can make informed, safe choices. Even so, the reality is that there are few safe options that migrants can choose: until States provide safe, legal pathways for migration, the Sahara Desert will continue to claim lives.

Impact of COVID-19 on the risks migrants face in the Sahara Desert

The emergence of COVID-19 and the ensuing mobility restrictions have had profound effects on trans-Saharan migration. Many countries with borders in the Sahara Desert have closed land borders or otherwise significantly tightened border controls, including the Niger, Mali, Chad, Mauritania, Algeria, the Sudan, Egypt and Morocco (IOM, 2020b). While it is too early to confirm trends, these changes have likely impacted the risks migrants face while crossing the Sahara in a number of ways:

- A decrease in flows across the Sahara has already been documented in West and North Africa (IOM, 2020c), though many migrants continue to pass through key transit points on a daily basis (IOM, 2020b).
- Given the irregular nature of many journeys, however, the increased border controls may serve to displace migrants to more remote, hazardous routes that are not monitored. For those who do cross the Sahara during the global health crisis, the cramped conditions in which they often travel puts them at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19. The lack of access to health facilities in the desert means that migrants who become ill are unlikely to be able to access adequate care.
- Border closures have stranded thousands of migrants across the Sahara, including at least 2,300 migrants in the northern part of the Niger (IOM, 2020d), 1,300 people at Mauritania's northern borders (IOM, 2020b), and hundreds of others in Chad and Mali (IOM, 2020a). Among them are many vulnerable individuals, including women, children and those with pre-existing health conditions (IOM, 2020d).
- Some incidents of forced returns have left migrants stranded in the desert, possibly linked to xenophobic notions of migrants as disease carriers. For example, 321 migrants were forcibly returned from Libya to northern Chad in April 2020 (IOM, 2020b).
- Migrants in destination countries, particularly those in irregular situations, may lose work due to mobility restrictions within countries or the associated economic downturn. Those who face a lack of income feel forced to return home and risk the trans-Saharan journey to do so.

"The migrants are exposed to a danger of death, because nothing is clear anymore. So that's what we're trying to explain to the European Union, the real dangers it represents… The law has blocked the official circuit. But the clandestine circuit continues. It is more dangerous, there are more deaths."

M. Anacko, President of the Regional Council of Agadez (Xchange, 2019)

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