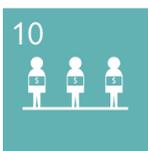


31.

The collateral damage of the war on smugglers along the Central Mediterranean Route

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VULNERABILITIES

SMUGGLING
OF MIGRANTS

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

Abstract: This contribution describes how migrant smuggling along the Central Mediterranean Route has transformed in the past half decade. Available data demonstrate that migratory flows along the Route have considerably shrunk in comparison with the levels seen in 2014–2017. It remains questionable, though, whether the demand for smuggling services has also decreased. Available ethnographic evidence suggests that the prospect of northbound migration remains attractive for many sub-Saharan Africans. The rise of the entry barrier into the market of irregular crossings has stimulated the criminal organization of irregular migration. Trends recently detected in the region point to the progressive conversion of smuggling activities into thriving trafficking businesses, involving the exploitation of migrants and asylum seekers, and the trade of narcotic drugs.

Available data demonstrate that migratory flows along the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) have considerably shrunk in comparison to the peak of the migration “crisis”² of 2014–2017. This observation holds true not only for the last leg of the journey, connecting Libyan shores to Europe via Malta and Italy, but also for the trans-Saharan routes used by migrants and refugees to access Libya from the rest of Africa.³

Reasonably, these changes can be at least partly attributed to the impact of European Union measures to tackle irregular migration in the region, including the support to African governments for enhanced border controls and greater criminalization of irregular migration. European Union institutions have largely framed these measures as a way to “fight against migrant smuggling and trafficking” (with the two notions being often problematically conflated) (European Commission, 2016); “disrupt trafficking networks” (Council of the European Union, 2015); “disrupt the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks” (European Union External Action Service, 2017); and even wage “a war on smugglers” (European Commission, 2015a), as the then-European Union Migration and Home Affairs Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos put it. In line with this approach, available evidence suggests that the supply of smuggling services to transport migrants and asylum seekers from sub-Saharan Africa to Libya (Tubiana et al., 2018), and from Libya to Europe (Micallef et al., 2019b), has considerably reduced in the last few years (Cusumano and Villa, Chapter 16 of this volume).

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² For a critical take on the notion of migration “crisis”, see Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins (2016).

³ IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix data corroborate this assessment. However, one should point out that data collection challenges along remote African routes mitigate the accuracy of cross-time comparisons of migratory flows. In this case, existing databases concur with qualitative evidence and anecdotal reports that migratory flows from the Sudan and the Niger into Libya, even if sustained, have declined.

It remains questionable, though, whether European Union policies have also contributed to curbing the demand for smuggling services in countries of departure and transit. Available ethnographic evidence suggests that, in spite of a growing awareness about harsh security and economic conditions in Libya, the prospect of northbound migration to North Africa or Europe remains attractive for many sub-Saharan Africans (Mixed Migration Centre, 2019). As the impact on migratory flows of the measures to “tackle the root causes of migration”⁴ is so far unproven, at least in the short term, the tightening of border controls and the criminalization of irregular migration risk fuelling the demand of smuggling services in order to circumvent the reduction of regular migration opportunities. In other words, the emphasis on enhanced border controls runs the chance of simply pushing underground the providers of smuggling services, who remain committed to meeting a steady demand of mobility.

From this perspective, the outsized attention to the supply side of smuggling appears to have prompted not only a quantitative reduction, but also a “qualitative shift” of irregular migration along the CMR. Regular and irregular migratory flows from sub-Saharan Africa (and especially West Africa) to North Africa have existed for decades. Until recently, however, the infrastructure of such flows has relied less on hierarchically integrated, professionally organized criminal networks than on highly opportunistic, poorly criminalized smuggling initiatives.⁵ Deeply woven into the texture of ordinary social life, these small-scale businesses essentially harnessed their own social capital, which contributes to explaining why abusive and exploitative practices against migrants were quite infrequent (Benattia et al., 2015; Sanchez, Chapter 18 of this volume). In the last half decade or so, though, the rise of the entry barrier into the market of irregular crossings has stimulated the criminal organization of irregular migration. Small-scale, “homespun” migrant smugglers have been progressively driven out of business, giving way to a few transnational but highly organized networks, straddling the boundaries of countries such as Libya, the Niger, Nigeria, Mali, Guinea, the Sudan and Eritrea. In a highly securitized and competitive environment, these managed to survive and consolidate by resorting to large-scale corruption schemes involving high-level politicians, tribal authorities, militias and members of the security apparatuses (Raineri, 2018; El Kamouni-Janssen, 2017; Stocker, 2017).

One should point out that the more smuggling becomes organized, the less migrants’ agency and mutual trust relationships matter. This inevitably increases migrants’ and asylum seekers’ vulnerability to deception, abuses and exploitation. Facing the obstacles to northbound migration, smugglers seek to extract value from migrants through extortion in order to compensate the reduced turnout – for instance, with the promise of facilitating a journey that instead turns into an opportunity of exploitation.⁶ The smuggling of migrants can therefore turn into a human trafficking business. The growing scope of the trafficking of women is a clear illustration of this. With the curtailment of migration opportunities to Europe, whether regular or irregular, many girls and women have remained trapped in formerly “transit countries” along the CMR, and found themselves forced into prostitution in order to “buy” their passage onward, pay their debts, or simply make a living. As for opaque businesses and criminal matters in general, and most notably within fragile countries, ethnographic evidence compensates here for the intrinsic lack of reliability of statistical records. The rise of sophisticated schemes of trafficking of women has been observed in Gao (Mali), Agadez (the Niger) and all over Libya (Mixed Migration Centre, 2019; Micallef et al., 2019b; Women Refugee Commission, 2019). Under the radar and underreported, their rapid expansion suggests the structuring role of highly organized Nigerian criminal organizations.

This should not be seen as an isolated phenomenon. Emerging evidence suggests that, while mixed migratory flows are shrinking along the CMR, the scope of human trafficking is broadening. Corroborating this assessment, recent research has observed the rise of debt-bound travel schemes in the Sudan and Chad, often leading to forced labour in the Saharan goldmining sites (Tubiana et al., 2018; Boukare, Chapter 23 of this volume); the increase of extortions and kidnapping-for-ransom against smuggled migrants in the Niger and Mali (Micallef et al., 2019a); and the systematic exploitation of the labour of migrants trapped in connection towns, detention centres and credit houses in Libya (al-Arabi, 2018; Micallef et al., 2019b). According to a Nigerian smuggler and trafficker based in Agadez, “credit houses [where migrants who travel on credit are sold to employers in order to pay off their debts] are hell on earth; it is worse than slavery: people suffer daily torments, and tortures are systematic”.⁷

⁴ As per the stated objectives of the European Union Trust Fund for Africa. See European Commission (2015b).

⁵ UNODC (2011). For a more general framing, see Sanchez (2017).

⁶ Available criminological reports have abundantly illustrated the point with empirical evidence (Malakooti, 2019).

⁷ Interview with Nigerian smuggler, Agadez, November 2019.

At the same time, there are indications that many smugglers have simply shifted to the smuggling of other “commodities”, equally (if not more) profitable, but less politically sensitive, and therefore less subject to law enforcement. The rampant rise of drug trafficking along former migrant smuggling routes is a case in point. As recent research has highlighted, Libyan coastal towns that used to be among the main embarkation of irregular migration to Europe – such as Zuwara and Sabratha – are becoming drug trafficking hubs (EMCDDA, 2019). Similarly, one of the former migrant smuggling kingpins is also believed to have turned to large-scale drug trafficking after the fallout of migrant smuggling operations in Sabratha.⁸ In the same vein, the Niger is experiencing a dramatic surge of drug trafficking, especially of tramadol, a synthetically modified opioid. Many smugglers and drivers formerly facilitating irregular migration have reportedly switched to this emerging business, once they were driven out of business by the crackdown on migrant smuggling in 2016 (Micallef et al., 2019a). As a tramadol smuggler in Agadez put it: “I was working with migrants, until the implementation of the law 36/2015⁹ made my activity impossible and forced me to find another job to feed my family. That’s how I started trading tramadol!”¹⁰ Overall, while direct causal attributions are difficult to substantiate, these scattered pieces of evidence form a coherent picture, suggesting that individuals and criminal networks have invested in the field of drug trafficking to compensate the revenue losses brought about by the implementation of European Union-sponsored measures against irregular migration.

These outcomes are only partly surprising. It is, after all, a long-established trope of the criminological literature that criminalization often leads to criminogenic effects. The trends recently detected in the region point to the progressive conversion of smuggling activities into thriving trafficking businesses, involving the exploitation of migrants and asylum seekers, and the trade of harmful narcotic drugs. Despite the reduction in irregular migratory flows reaching Europe from Africa, this may lead one to legitimately question whether, overall, the European Union is being successful in its ambition to “disrupt human trafficking networks”.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ This refers to the law criminalizing migrant smuggling adopted by the Niger in 2015, and enforced since 2016.

¹⁰ Interview with Nigerien drug smuggler, Agadez, November 2019.

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