

# Insecurity and irregular migration in North Africa

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## Question

- *What is the relationship between security on the one hand and regular and irregular migration on the other in North Africa, including the relationship to human-trafficking and people smuggling?*
- *How does North African migration policy, in particular the securitization of the EU's 'southern border' affect the livelihood and economies of border communities and localities along migration routes?*

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## 1. Summary

Irregular migration and insecurity interplay in complex ways in North Africa. Data covering this interaction is uneven. The literature, deriving from academia, multinational organizations, practitioner organizations and thinktanks, addresses this link less through data analysis – perhaps because of its scarcity – and more through a contextual, qualitative understanding of the political and socioeconomic situations in the region and how different actors, including migrants, smugglers, and militia react to changes in policies and incentives.

Insecurity as a cause of irregular migration in North Africa is expounded in the literature, but it is difficult to disentangle the impact of security given the interplay of other factors, including economic and environmental drivers. The extent to which security matters in determining the flow of irregular migrants is highly context specific, and depends, among other factors, on the source, destination, and transit countries.

As for the effect of irregular migration on security, the connection is more difficult to establish. It appears probable that there is a cycle of reinforcement between security and irregular migration in North Africa, arising from lack of border enforcement, rents to militia, and links to flows of illicit goods. Given the economic importance of the human smuggling business to border communities in the region, irregular migrants are viewed as a commodity that can be used to reinforce or secure the status quo.

Policies put in place by Europe and North African governments that try to curb the flow of illegal migrants have a direct effect on the livelihood of nodal and border communities in the region. In the case of the southern border in Libya, money paid by irregular migrants to smugglers are used in part to bribe militia, who in turn provide protection services and cash flows to their towns and tribes. This ‘necessary evil’ provides legitimacy for these groups, especially in the absence of a meaningful presence by the state. Similarly, the hardening of borders between Tunisia and Libya had a detrimental effect on Tunisian border economies that rely heavily on smuggling and trafficking for their livelihood.

## 2. Key concepts

Discourses and cartographies of migration are often polemical, speaking to the politicised nature of the topic. In addition, within academic or practitioner discourse, vocabularies vary to some degree. For these reasons, although this rapid review follows the definitions as set out in the IOM’s *Glossary on Migration* (2019), it is important to set out some basic concepts and indeed the limits of their use. In contrast to ‘regular’ migration, which is authorized, ‘Irregular migration’ refers to the movement of people outside the laws, regulations or international agreements governing the entry or exit from a state (IOM, 2019, p. 116). This movement is usually a mixed migration, comprising people of different needs and profiles (IOM, 2019, pp. 141–142), who may be part of Forced Migration, such as refugees, asylum seekers, or trafficking victims. Both smuggled persons/migrants *and* trafficked persons can be considered part of mixed migration. In principle, the former exercises greater agency in the decision to move, while the latter has been compelled in recruitment, transportation, transfer and other stages to move for the purposes of exploitation (IOM, 2019, p. 217); this can extend to slavery, where powers of ownership are exercised over an individual (IOM, 2019, p. 199).

'Security' is also a political and polyvalent term. In keeping with the assumptions of most of the academic and practitioner literature, the definition assumed here includes not just the lack of violent conflict (although that is important), but also requires a situation in which people have access to livelihoods, can live in a dignified manner, and can access basic needs of food and shelter, education and healthcare. This multidimensional definition of security is close to the commitment of the UN General Assembly Resolution 66/290 to support states in building 'Human Security' (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, 2020).

### 3. Data and knowledge coverage

The continental scale of the phenomenon of migration into, within, and out of North Africa challenges data collection. The nature of irregular migration, which can be clandestine, exacerbates this; unstable states furthermore tend to collect less data (Malakooti, 2016, p. 90). Likewise, the mutability of routes – and the fact that migration is a movement interspersed with pauses – is a problem for static cartography (Bacon, Clochard, Honoré, Lambert, Mekdjian & Rekacewicz, 2016). Added to this is the great variation in reporting and collection procedures across countries and organisations (Browne, 2015, p. 3).

However, data collection and availability has been improved in the past decade, partly because of the advent of data journalism (Bacon et al., 2016), and significantly because of the establishment of multinational initiatives (Malakooti, 2016, p. 93). The Migration Data Portal is run by the IOM's Global Data Analysis Centre and covers both general migration and forced migration (IOM, 2020). The North Africa Mixed Migration Hub brings together several INGOs in providing data (Mixed Migration Hub, 2020).

Therefore, the data and knowledge on irregular migration is uneven but improving. When it comes to the data addressing the causal link (or otherwise) between insecurity and irregular migration, there is a double challenge: not only is data on irregular migration problematic, but the literature addressing the question is quantitatively weaker. On the other hand, mechanisms through which insecurity and irregular migration are linked are easier to establish.

### 4. The shape and scale of irregular migration

Bearing in mind both the improvements to data collection and the challenges to data, it is possible to draw an indicative picture of the scale of routes of regular and irregular migration. This provides some necessary context to understand its connection to insecurity. Total numbers for irregular migration in North Africa were not found in this review and figures for migrant smuggling are "scattered and anecdotal" (UNODC, 2018, p. 71). However, the IOM (2020) draws on UNHCR estimates for 2019 to create figures for total migration for North Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia): at mid-year 2019, North Africa hosted an estimated 2.9 million international migrants, with around 59% from North Africa or the rest of Africa. Around 42.6% were refugees or asylum seekers. Sudan holds 41% of international migrants in North Africa, followed by Libya (28%) and Egypt (17%).

Other organisations give estimates of the scale of sub-sections of this mixed migration population. The Global Slavery Index (UNODC, 2018, p. 71) gives the following estimates per 1,000 people for those living in modern slavery: Algeria (2.65), Egypt (5.52), Libya (7.74), Morocco, (2.45), Sudan (12.04) and Tunisia (2.18). Not all of these slavery victims will be regular

or irregular migrants; however, the Global Slavery Index notes that the abuse of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa through forced labour and sex trafficking is becoming “systematic” (UNODC, 2018, p. 22).

In terms of direction of migrant smuggling routes, of the five major Africa routes, three originate in the Horn of Africa, where movements are mainly irregular because of the limited options for regular movement (UNODC, 2018, p. 71). From the Horn of Africa runs a northward route to Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, from where some migrants are smuggled to Europe along the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR). (Of the other two, one route connects the Horn of Africa to Yemen and hence to the Gulf; the other, southward route, continues overland to Southern Africa.) From West Africa, there is also the route to Libya, including through Algeria; in these countries, migrants stay seasonally or join the CMR (UNODC, 2018, p. 83). By 2018, Tunisia replaced Libya as the main point of departure for Europe on the CMR, and the Frontex reported 23,485 irregular migrant crossings on the CMR in 2018, an 80% drop on the previous year (FRONTEX, 2020).

The Western Mediterranean Route (WMR) to Europe is also significant in terms of numbers. Passing through Mali and/or Niger, migrants travel to Mauritania and from there to Morocco, or from Mali to Algeria. From Algeria, migrants continue to Libya or to a lesser extent to Morocco (UNODC, 2018, p. 84). For 2019, IOM (2020) reported 25,731, and for 2018, it reported 57,034 irregular migrant crossings.

## 5. Insecurity as a cause of migration

Conflict is an important factor in mixed migration (Browne, 2015, p. 7), an assertion corroborated by the Forced Migration figures for North Africa provided by IOM (2020) given above. Taking a North African scope, Browne’s (2015, pp. 6–7) evidence review for JACS provides an overview that remains highly relevant as it draws on sources that remain crucial. Without reproducing the whole source, its major points regarding conflict are an important baseline to consider the literature in the consequent five years. The source points out that conflict can trigger migration, and that the Arab Spring, instigated a sudden surge in irregular migration in 2010 and 2011. Destabilisation of Libya led to loss of state control of the shoreline, and migrant smuggling increased – with temporary spikes in migration from Libya and Tunisia.

An equally important finding of Browne (2015, p.8-9) is that conflict and insecurity are interwoven in complex ways with other factors. Conflict can act as a “shock” or a “tipping point”, implying that much of the cause of migration was already operative. Here economic factors are important – covering poverty and lack of skilled jobs, youth bulges and inequality notably, the poorest are less likely to migrate than those with some education and the resources to travel. Securitisation of borders presents different results for mixed migration: restrictions on labour migration within the EU may have increased irregular migration, while border walls in Israel and Saudi Arabia have stopped migrants entering. Levels of border securitisation appear to be a mediating factor in decisions over routes, as does the duration, cost of journey, and presence of contacts along the route.

However, creating a clear general picture for North Africa of the connection between mixed migration and insecurity, and how insecurity interplays with other factors is challenging. Indeed, literature since Browne (2015) has shown the continued salience of economic layers (Dibeh,

Fakih and Marrouch, 2019 p. 4) in terms of migration from Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria into Europe. It has corroborated the complexity of the interplay with economic and environmental factors, and set out frameworks to try to order and relate drivers to each other, such as Hear, Bakewell and Long's (2018, p. 5) "predisposing", "proximate", "precipitating" and "mediating" factors. Insecurity can fit into each of these factors, depending on the particular context and changing according to source, transit and destination country.

A review of literature addressing migration across Africa and drawing on 53 sources, corroborates the complexity of factor (Borderon, Sakdapolrak, Muttarak, Kebede, Pagogna and Sporer, 2019). It also highlights a new trend in the literature – the concern of the effect of climate change on migration (Borderon et al., 2019, p. 528). Here, climate change *can* aggravate conflict, instability and insecurity and it can worsen economic conditions (Borderon et al., 2018, p.528), and it can have this effect on other drivers of migration (Borderon et al., 2018, p.492). With some caution, and a nod to the growing vogue in seeing climate change as a cause of conflict, a gravity model study on asylum seeking in Europe by people from Western Asia (in relation to the Syrian conflict) finds that climate change affected drought severity and the likelihood of armed conflict (Abel, Brottrager, Crespo Cuaresma, Muttarak's, 2019). However, this thesis remains controversial.

This situation points to the necessity for highly specified sources and an ongoing debate in terms of how to frame the interrelation of drivers. Turning to Libya, evidence from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime perhaps does not speak to root causes but gives such a picture in relation to the mediating factors of migrant smuggling in Libya (Micallef, 2017, pp. vi–vii). Prior to the conflict, the state monitored smuggling, run by smugglers based on the coast who had established relationships with agents in East Africa. The conflict liberalised the market, allowing more players; it also opened a new market of Syrians seeking to enter Europe. These developments then opened up an interplay between irregular migration and insecurity, which is discussed in more detail below.

## **6. The effect of irregular migration on security**

While the effect of insecurity on irregular migration is extensively studied in the literature, the opposite causal relationship is not as explicitly discussed. Most studies imply that there is a cycle of reinforcement between these two factors, perpetuated by the specific circumstances in North Africa. Interestingly, it is not completely clear if irregular migration negatively or positively affects security as it depends on what dimensions of security we are looking at as well as the channels through which this complex relationship is manifested.

### **Vetting at the borders: the direct link between irregular migration and security**

The most obvious link between irregular migration and security is that the lack of surveillance at the borders may allow foreign fighters and militia to enter or move between North African countries, giving rise to concerns regarding terrorism threats. While this is a popular talking point in the media, especially in the context of irregular migrants in Europe, it is not widely studied or acknowledged in the literature in the context of migration within North Africa.

Ayari (2013, p. 29) discusses the movement of Tunisian Islamic fighters through the Libyan borders. They report an outward flow of jihadists who either go to Libya for training before they leave for Syria and Iraq or travel through Libya, Turkey, Jordan and Malta before travelling on to the front. The second group is more diverse and shares demographic and sociological profiles of irregular migrants to Europe making it difficult to identify them at the borders. There is also the challenge of the returning flow of fighters to Tunisia from Syria and Iraq passing through the Libyan borders, who may strengthen groups of traffickers and jihadis working together and increase their role in the smuggling networks.

Herbert (2016, p. 21) believes that efforts made by North African governments, especially Morocco, to strengthen border securities does not stem from the perception of migrants as a threat but to strengthen bilateral relationships with the EU. This is not only the case for migrants that come from North Africa but also those who travel through the regions and between countries in it. Saying that, Tunisia and Algeria's growing concerns about terrorism threats has led to tighter security around the Libyan borders to intercept the movement of foreign fighters and weapon smugglers. This, on some occasions, led to the arrest of economic migrants because of the similarities in demographic profiles. As Hanlon and Hebert (2015, p. 24) note, the migrants themselves do not pose a threat, but indicate the presence of an active network along the border that are willing to transport whomever can pay across borders without regard for why the individual wants to move. These networks can be used by terrorist organisations to move their personnel throughout the region.

## **Rents to militias, funding terrorism and jihadism**

In most of the literature, jihadist and terrorist organisations are more likely to be perceived as the ones doing and benefiting from the smuggling rather than the ones being smuggled across borders. In that sense, the security threats that irregular migration poses do not come from the migrants themselves but from the exploitation of these migrants for resources by militia. It is important to caveat that not all human smugglers or illicit traders are tied to jihadist groups, but an intersection does exist.

This is explicitly discussed in the case of Libya (Micallef, 2017, pp. 30–31), where militia entered the human smuggling business and other illicit activities post-revolution in 2012 and 2013. They would charge smugglers money for passage or take over the smuggling business themselves and use the cash flow to finance their operations, including buying firearms. In some cases, this was done with impunity from national authorities, leading to increased scale and efficiency of these illicit activities. Some of these militia were tied to or part of terrorist organisations, including ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Other works in the literature cite the importance of illicit trade in financing terrorist organisations but focus more specifically on the trade of cigarette and cannabis rather than human smuggling or trafficking (Ayari, 2013; Babuta & Haenlin, 2018).

Babuta and Haenlein (2018) touch on this topic, discussing smuggling in general in the Maghreb region (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia). They argue that porous borders, which allow human and contraband smuggling, have created a source of income for criminal organisations which directly and indirectly benefit terrorist groups. It also created an environment of lawlessness and chaos due to the erosion of state capacity that is exploited by jihadists to further their gains and movements. While the idea that illicit activities, including human smuggling and irregular migration, are financing terrorist organisations is strongly present in the literature,

the picture of lawlessness and absence of institutions across border communities is more debatable. This will be discussed in the next section.

## **Links to flows of illicit goods**

According to Babuta and Haenlein (2018, p. 2), the complex and invisible nature of the smuggling in the Maghreb makes it hard to understand and quantify. The evidence indicates a large network of illicit economies that are connected by groups and routes. Their activities often overlap with other forms of cross-border illicit trading, including human trafficking. In that sense, Babuta and Haenlein (2018 p. 4-5) believe that while small-scale trading in cigarettes, livestock, foodstuff, and household appliances is largely silent and not as violent, it opens up the pathways for trafficking illegal goods, including arms and drugs, as well as easing the way for irregular migration and the movement of terrorists across borders.

Gallien (2020) casts doubts on this view, especially on the assumption that the lack of state capacity in cross-border trade means indiscriminate smuggling. Based on his field work, he argues that illegal trade institutions have their own capacity and methods of regulating border porosity. While the study is mostly focused on illegal cross-border trade in goods, it touches on migration by emphasising that the situation is not one of “tomatoes and terrorists” passing along the same routes hidden from the state. Instead, the informal institutions that govern illegal trade are able to distinguish between licit and illicit goods and prohibit terrorists, foreign fighters, and weapon smugglers from passing through these nodes.

## **Irregular migration as a factor in stability**

The literature indicates that illicit trade across borders, including irregular migration, is a key resource for communities living close to borders and nodes along migration and smuggling routes. Illegal activities in these areas have been sanctioned by authorities because it is in their best interest to allow a source of income flow to these otherwise neglected communities. In that sense, illicit trading and human smuggling are viewed as a key to maintaining the stability of the status quo.

Hanlon and Herbert (2015, p. 6), for example, mention that efforts by the Moroccan state to limit smuggling through heightened security across borders led to an increase in radicalisation because of the debilitating effect it had on people’s livelihoods. Yahia, Fabiani, Gallien & Herbert (2019, p. 3) discuss the role of organised crime in distributional politics in North Africa. Governments in the region have sanctioned smuggling and other organised crimes (including human smuggling) in order to placate economically deprived regions through the cash flow generated from these activities. This works by informally connecting these deprived communities to national political settlements and enriching politically connected elites.

Micallef and Reitano (2017, p. 2) emphasise that the EU’s focus on curbing irregular migration from Libya has caused an anti-smuggling business to emerge, as militia leaders realise that the status quo is coming to an end. They started accepting incentives to work with law enforcement partners of international donors to ‘launder’ their reputation. This obstructs the state-building process and puts irregular migrants at higher risks.

Micallef (2017, p. 30) also discusses how human trafficking and smuggling and other illegal activities were linked to Libya’s post-revolution protection market. Militias that were profiting from

these activities were tolerated and, in many cases, supported by the neighbourhoods, tribes, or communities that they were affiliated with. This is because they were seen as performing an essential function of the state by providing security against ‘threats’ coming from neighbouring towns and rival tribes. This was a phenomenon that was particularly present in periphery areas.

## **7. The effect of migration policies on nodal and border economies**

### **External European Union migration policies in North Africa and critique**

The European Union has a very broad and intense engagement with Africa on migration and mobility, with its priorities covering “regular migration, intra-African mobility, the fight against human trafficking, the protection of migrants, the promotion of asylum and international protection, capacity building in border control, the maximisation of the positive correlation between migration and development” (European Commission, 2016). In 2015, during peak irregular migration flow to the EU, the EU Emergency Trust Fund (EUETF) for Africa was established to address causes of migration and displacement. The EUETF includes a section for the North of Africa “to contribute to safe, secure, legal and orderly migration from, to and within the region and support an effective management of migration flows that protects human right”, marking an increase in EU support to North African states in migration management, with total spends to date reaching €742m (European Commission, 2018).

Results highlighted by the EU include 89,904 migrants and forcibly displaced persons protected or assisted, 15,279 migrants, or potential migrants, reached through information campaigns on migration and risks linked to irregular migration, and 77,704 people receiving basic social services. As a result of migration policies as a whole (i.e. including and beyond Africa), the European Council claims that these measures have reduced irregular migration to the EU by over 90% (European Council, 2020).

Because of the scale of the EU’s engagement on migration with North Africa and the wider continent, there are many ways to address it. One notable approach is the critique of EU’s “border externalization”, whereby the European migration policy is criticised for emphasising border control that places European borders outside of its territory, to be managed by non-European actors, and positioned out of sight and mind of Europeans (Moreno-Lax & Lemberg-Pederson, 2019). In addition to the legal and ethical criticisms, there is also a critique around its effectiveness. While the EU may not be causing forced migration, border externalisation does not meet the causes of displacement – be they conflict-induced or development-induced – but rather contains and circulates migrants (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2017, p. 53). In sum, the effect is not to prevent migration, but to make it unviable through legal and safe channels, pushing it towards more perilous routes (Moreno-Lax & Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019, p. 2). The effects of these policies on the economies of individual places (border towns) where mixed migration occurs, and places within networks of ‘nodes’ where mixed migration occurs is considered below.



## Libya and routes to Europe

According to El Zaidy (2019), the EU continues to externalise border management and humanitarian assistance for displaced populations to Libya, with little concern for their human rights situation. Libya's policy regarding migration is constantly shifting in response to the actions of European states, namely Italy and France; Italy has adopted a full externalisation policy and keeps striking political deals with whoever controls the north-western shores of Libya to curb migrant flows. France's policy, on the other hand, is more concerned with fighting terrorism than stopping the flow of migrants.

The Libyan government's response is to appease EU countries by attempting to stop migration flows and to use it as leverage to receive support from Europe as part of its political negotiations. While the state succeeded in reducing the number of migrants reaching Europe from Libya by cracking down on some smugglers and increasing patrol boats in the sea, it did very little to tackle the root of the problem – the deteriorating security and socioeconomic conditions in periphery areas (El Zaidy, 2019).

Many communities rely on smuggling and illicit trade as a main source of income, meaning the crackdown on smuggling also takes on a socioeconomic dimension. This is especially true in the south of Libya; its distance from centralised Tripoli means lack of state control and marginalisation, which makes smuggling activities possible and necessary. Without a real shift in the socioeconomic conditions of these areas, it is likely that migrants, militias, and smugglers will continue to work together; the militia will continue to tax smugglers for passage as they facilitate the flow of migrants, who in return provide livelihood for a politically underrepresented and marginalised area (El Zaidy, 2019).

A similar theme is explored in Reitano and Shaw (2017, pp. 10–11), although with a focus on illicit trade generally. They argue that post-revolution Libya sees it as a necessary evil as it provides cash flow to militias who, in turn, provide protection to their town. Some of the money also goes to the community through employment opportunities and purchase of goods and services. This political economy model offers smugglers and militia local legitimacy, especially where the state has no meaningful presence.

## Economies on Tunisia's borders with Libya

Part of the EU's migration policy has been to support the strengthening of Tunisia and Libya's borders. The EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in Libya was set up in 2013 and in 2018, its mission was redefined to support Libyan authorities to disrupt organised criminal networks involved in smuggling of migrants, human trafficking and terrorism (European Union External Action Service, 2019). Member states, significantly Germany, have also bilaterally contributed to securing borders within wider security assistance and reform programmes in Tunisia (Walsh & Treffler, 2019)

In 2013, Tunisia established closed military zones along its Libyan border and security forces are more empowered to use deadly force against smugglers (Matt Herbert & Gallien, 2018). Tunisia's hardening of its borders has been significantly detrimental to the economy of its borderlands (Matt Herbert & Gallien, 2018; Meddeb, 2020; Pollock & Wehrey, 2018), including the Tunisian towns of Ben Guerdana and Dehiba on the Libyan border. These towns are highly dependent on cross-border informal trade – according to a 2016 survey, around nine in ten

inhabitants consider the border to be a source of livelihood (Pollock & Wehrey, 2018). This derives from smuggling of contraband and informal cross-border trade. Informal trade is not only important for the border towns, but also for the Tunisian economy as a whole: for instance, a World Bank Report in 2018 noted that smuggled fuel constituted 17% of Tunisian consumption in 2014 (Pollock & Wehrey, 2018).

However, the extent to which it is European policy that is driving this trend is not clear in the literature. North African states also have domestic and regional imperatives, even while support from external actors is useful. For instance, Tunisia has interests in preventing weapons smuggling from Libya, while it benefits from German, US and UK support in surveillance equipment on the border (Shah & Dalton, 2020). Libya's National Oil Corporation has an interest in reducing smuggling of Libyan fuel to Tunisia, estimating that it costs the Libyan economy US\$750m a year (Pollock & Wehrey, 2018). After the fall in oil prices in 2014, Algeria also had a renewed interest in reducing fuel smuggling to Tunisia (Masbah & Dahshan, 2020).

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