

Migrations in the Mediterranean

2018: Migration in the Mediterranean; Situation, Context and Evolution

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An overall view of 2018 indicates a similar trend to almost a decade ago, in 2009, in terms of the number of people crossing the Mediterranean towards the European Union (EU). However, although the figures may be comparable, the context is very different, and so too is the way people are viewing this Mediterranean migration. As a consequence, the approach towards how it is managed has also changed. The institutional response to these flows has gradually mutated towards a perspective no longer exclusively related to control and security, but also based on a hostile rejection of managing migration and hosting arrivals to the EU from the south shore of the Mediterranean.

Since 2009, 2.1 million people have arrived in the EU after crossing the Mediterranean, a million of those in 2015 alone, a flow clearly dictated by the war raging in Syria. To understand the situation that unfolded during that year, we should recall that in October 2015 alone, more people crossed the Mediterranean than in all of 2018. Despite the reduced flow, the proportion of people who have died during the crossing has increased. In 2015, for every 269 arrivals, one person died, while in 2018, the ratio was one death to every 51 arrivals.

Also, throughout 2018, we can see a clear trend of most arrivals being concentrated in the western Mediterranean, with decreasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers from Syria or Asian countries, and increasing numbers with another migration profile, coming from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan countries.

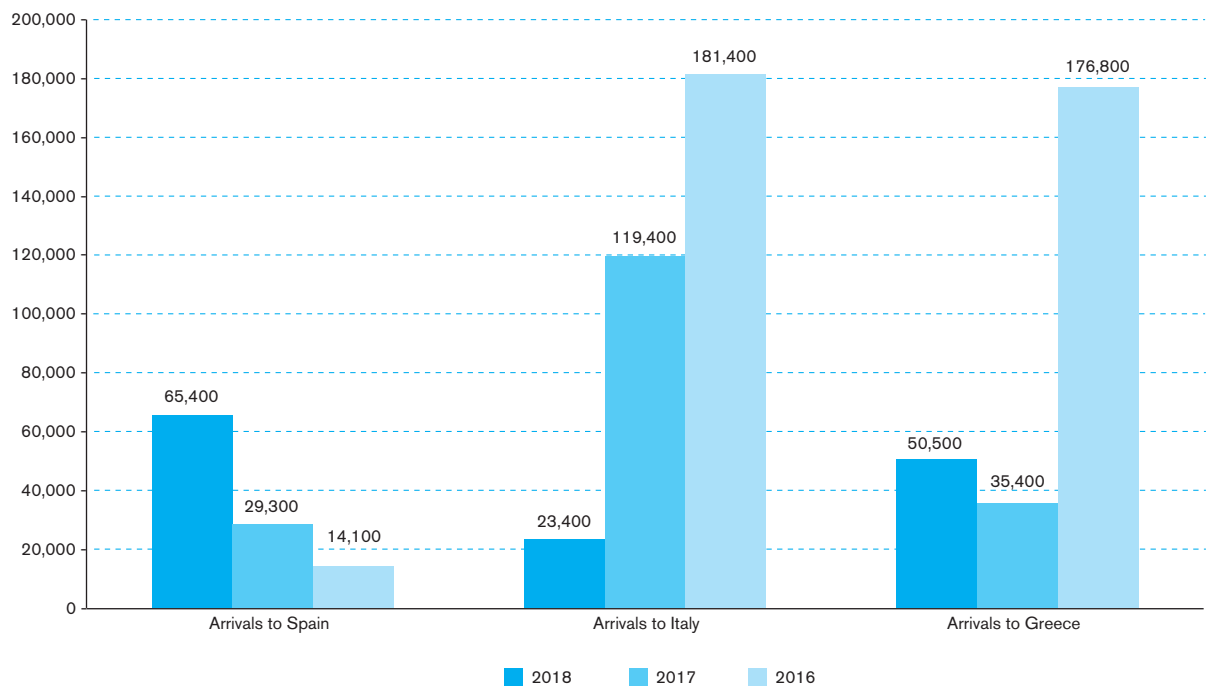
This situation has generated a complex scenario as there are currently a range of mobility types in the Mediterranean economic migrants, forced migrants or refugee, which are being managed using containment policies and programmes developed in response to a humanitarian crisis caused by a specific military conflict, i.e., the war in Syria. But this management does not seem to adequately take into account the migratory dynamics playing out in large areas of West Africa, the Sahel and East Africa, and which condition mobility in the Mediterranean.

These contradicting logics are especially apparent in Libya, which, in turn, serves as a metaphor for the region. It is a country with an unstable political, economic and social situation, with ongoing internal warring and migration routes controlled by smugglers. However, search and rescue actions have been handed over to the Libyan coast guard, which depend upon a weak state with a proven incapacity to control and eradicate people smugglers. Parallel to this, there is a dynamic being institutionalized that holds a mirror to European democracies: the criminalization of NGOs working in the Mediterranean to rescue people left adrift. In short, priority is given to these people's containment and return to a country that offers no guarantees for the most basic of their human rights.

The Figures in 2018

The element most worthy of note in 2018 is the continuance of the downward trend in arrivals to the north shore of the Mediterranean. Already in 2017, this figure was 50% less than in 2016, and in 2018 it went down by 24% as compared with 2017. In addition to this reduction in the overall figures for the region, geographical variations should also be noted. As indicated in Chart 1, in 2018, Spain became the main

CHART 1 Sea Arrivals to the EU from the South Shore of the Mediterranean 2016-2018



Source: UNHCR Desperate journeys 2018

entry point for arrivals, up by 131% with respect to the previous year, while Italy's arrival figures continued to plummet, with some 100,000 arrivals less than in 2017. In Greece the downward trend was reversed, with nearly 15,000 more arrivals, after the dramatic reduction in 2017 (see Chart 1).

The Regional Context

The figures for human movement in the Mediterranean are classified according to three geographic corridors, but each one has a specific geographic context and, in addition, differentiated dynamics which continued throughout 2018. The eastern corridor is closely linked with Syrian refugees and people from countries further afield like Afghanistan or Iraq. The border with Greece, with its geographic particulari-

ties, is the main gathering point, and the EU Turkey agreement¹ the main instrument implemented to manage these movements. The central corridor's main player is Libya and its dynamic is closely linked with the country's instability and the fact that it borders Niger and Sudan, which channel migration and refugee flows from Central and East Africa, respectively. EU-Libya relations² and the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) constitute the complex and fragile framework here for the management of these human movements. In this case, the geography gives Italy a leading role on the northern shore. Finally, the western corridor channels the flows from West Africa and the Maghreb towards Europe. This corridor is managed through the EU Trust Fund for Africa³ (which also affects the central corridor) and on a broader level within the framework of the 2013 Mobility Partnership Agreement, as well as the different

¹ On 18 March 2016, EU Heads of State or Government and Turkey agreed on the EU-Turkey Statement to end irregular migration flows from Turkey to the EU, ensure improved reception conditions for refugees in Turkey and open up organized, safe and legal channels to Europe for Syrian refugees.

² EUROPEAN COMMISSION. "EU Action in Libya on Migration," 2017. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20171207_eu_action_in_libya_on_migration_en.pdf.

³ In the framework of the EU Trust Fund for Africa, in July 2018, the European Commission approved three new migration-related programmes in Northern Africa totalling more than €90 million.

regional dialogues that jointly address migration, specifically the Rabat Process, where Spain and Morocco (and their bilateral relations) have a central role.

The Central Route as a Focus of Instability

In 2018, the central Mediterranean route saw a fall in arrivals to Italy, as well as a rise in deaths at sea. This change with respect to 2017 owes primarily to three factors. First, since the beginning of 2017, a series of migration policies have been implemented in Libya and in the Sahel region in cooperation with the EU, with the aim of lowering the number of arrivals to Italy. These include EU support for the Libyan coast guard on the country's west coast.⁴ Second, in mid-2018, the Libyan authorities declared that an area that had previously only been managed by the Italian coast guard would now be coordinated by the Libyan search and rescue service. This measure allowed the Libyan authorities to return people rescued from shipwrecks instead of taking them to the shores of Italy, i.e., EU territory. Finally, mid-2017 onwards saw an increase in legal actions and political condemnation against NGOs and private rescue ships, which were forced to stop a large portion of their activities in 2018, after governments from different countries, most notoriously Italy, seized the ships that were rescuing people at sea.

This context deserves special attention as, according to UNHCR estimates, in Libya there are around 670,000 refugees living in harsh conditions, with a multitude of abuses and human rights violations, registered by the United Nations and carried out by civil servants, armed groups, smugglers or traffickers. It should be noted here that the increase in arrivals through the western corridor is not a response to diverting flows from the central corridor to the western one. Although in the case of flows from West Africa (people from Guinea, Mali or the Ivory Coast) this diversion has been observed, for the main migrant groups, such as those coming from Eritrea, Nigeria or Sudan, the number of arrivals to Spain has been nil or negli-

gible. However, it is a dynamic worthy of attention as the short and mid-term effects of this rerouting are as of yet unknown, especially in light of Italy's current block on refugees.

Likewise, during 2018 a double dynamic can be observed. On the one hand, Libya, as a country with a fragile and limited rule of law, remains a destination country for people looking for work, which is easier to find than in the EU, albeit under deplorable conditions. It is also preferred as a transit country to Tunisia, Algeria or Egypt, where borders are increasingly militarized and there are ever greater difficulties in reaching the Mediterranean coast and boarding a ship. It is also highly significant that Libya has a weak state and porous borders with Niger and Sudan, and increasingly so with Chad, channels through which the country is often accessed. The second dynamic that has been observed is that efforts made by the EU to contain the flow of people on Libya's southern borders have had a destabilizing effect in these areas.⁵ Traditional inter-border trade relations have been affected and people-trafficking rings have set up new routes that are both less stable and less safe. Since April 2018, it has been observed that migration routes towards Libya, as well as those within the country, have become more diverse and there has been an increase in the number of smuggling centres in the country's east as a result of these migration measures.⁶

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The Eastern and Western Routes: Shared and Externalized Management

Morocco and Turkey are the countries most involved in these two corridors. They are also transit countries,

⁴ REACH/UNHCR. "Mixed Migration Dynamics in Libya: the impact of EU migration measures on mixed migration in Libya," 2018 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach_lyb_so_mixed_migration_routes_and_dynamics_in_libya.pdf.

⁵ TUBIANA, J., WARIN, C., MOHAMMUD SAENEEN, G. "Multilateral Damage: The impact of EU migration policies on central Saharan routes," Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2018, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2018/multilateral-damage/>.

⁶ REACH/UNHCR (2018). "Mixed Migration... *op. cit.*

but, unlike in Libya, these are countries with a strong state and close ties to the EU, and can thereby establish cooperative ties both bilaterally with neighbouring countries on the north shore, and multilaterally with the EU.

The situation of the western corridor has specific traits as, in this case, the management of these flows has become a political bargaining chip between the Moroccan government and Spain, and by extension the EU. For West African nationals to reach their embarkation point in the north of Morocco, they have to cross the entire country, and the State may have a greater or lesser degree of control over these people, not forgetting that at the embarkation points there are Moroccans (the main group) and Algerians (the fourth biggest group). In fact, Morocco has been a country of transit and origin for migration flows for more than a decade. The region is no stranger to the use of migration as a political bargaining chip; this was also the case with Turkey during the negotiation of the 2016 agreement with the EU. The response from Brussels always takes the same line: to offer neighbouring countries in the south support and financial incentives to control migration and thereby externalize part of this management and control. In the case of Morocco, in July 2018, the European Commission approved a programme to improve maritime border management in the Maghreb worth 55 million euros.

The eastern Mediterranean corridor is basically a flow of refugees, and, as such, its management and control is different. Simply looking at the profile of people arriving in Greece from Turkey shows that almost 40% of them are children (almost quadrupling the figure for the other two paths), 23% are women (twice as many as arrive in Spain or Italy), leaving 40% men (half of those arriving by the central and western routes). Furthermore, the main countries of origin of these people are Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, where the reasons for leaving the country are closely linked with political instability and violence. According to official figures, in Turkey there are almost 145,000 refugees in camps, and an additional million and a half (two million depending on the source) that live outside the refugee camps. The EU gives support to these people, who, as a rule, have settled in big cities through the Emergency Social Safety Net. For the management of refugees look-

ing to arrive in the EU through Greece, the EU-Turkey agreement is still effective, under which, during 2018, 7,000 refugees in Turkey were transferred to different countries of the EU, while a further 5,000 in hotspots on different Greek islands were “returned” to Turkey on the grounds that they failed to meet the requirements for asylum application. According to UNHCR, there are still around 12,000 people in Greek hotspots waiting to either be given refugee status in the EU or, if they are unsuccessful, transferred to Turkey. The approved funding within the agreement, 3 billion euros transferred to date (out of a total budget of 6 billion) is to help Turkish hosting communities.

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To sum up, throughout 2018, there was a marked trend to increase containment measures in the eastern and western corridors through cooperation on matters of management and control, with particular emphasis on the externalization of management towards the transit countries of Morocco and Turkey. Supported by the EU Member States, these measures are aimed at restricting access to the Union’s territory, while in turn allowing the EU to disregard the potential failure of transit countries to respect people’s basic rights. The same model applies to the central corridor, in addition to which is the hostility with which Italy rejects any kind of management not within the established externalization frameworks. This increases the defencelessness and vulnerability of people in Libya, where in 2018, unlike in Morocco or Turkey and despite the work of international agencies and EU cooperation, migrants were reportedly still the victims of basic human rights abuses and violations, if not casualties of the sea crossing.