

LIBYAN REFUGEES' AND ASYLUM SEEKERS' IRREGULAR BOAT MIGRATION TO EUROPE

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In 2018, 399 Libyan refugees and asylum seekers reached Italian shores traveling irregularly via boat from Libya, 2.6% of all arrivals to Europe that year.² This trend builds on a proportional increase in Libyan refugees and asylum seekers arriving among boat arrivals in Italy since 2016: in 2016, 887 Libyans crossed the Mediterranean sea to arrive in Italy and in 2017, despite a 34 per cent decrease in overall arrivals, 1,234 Libyans made the journey across the Mediterranean and arrived in Italy (including 216 unaccompanied and separated children).³

At the same time, in the Multi-Sector Needs Assessment 2018, the most comprehensive assessment on the humanitarian needs of Libyans across the country, covering 18 mantikas,⁴ REACH found that 16 per cent of respondents reportedly had a household member who wanted to leave Libya.⁵ Most reported reasons for this were (1) intention to study abroad, cited by 41 per cent of households, (2) lack of work opportunities, cited by 33 per cent and (3) lack of security in the area, reported by 29 per cent of households. Considering the difficulty for Libyan nationals to leave the country through legal means,⁶ this raises the question whether more Libyans may be expected to embark on the perilous boat journey towards Europe in the future.

This brief aims to improve understanding of the phenomenon of irregular boat migration of Libyan refugees and asylum seekers from Libya to Italy in 2017 and 2018. More specifically, it aims (1) to provide an enhanced understanding of the decision-making process driving Libyans to embark on the irregular boat journey from Libya to Europe and (2) to investigate the smuggling dynamics which characterise Libyans' irregular boat journey from Libya to Europe.

Map 1: Data collection sites in Libya, Tunisia, Italy



It is based on 10 key informant interviews with policy analysts, humanitarian aid workers and researchers in Italy, Libya and Tunisia, as well as 11 in-depth open-ended interviews conducted with Libyan refugees and asylum seekers who arrived via boat in Italy between 2017 and 2018.

The assessment finds that the majority of Libyan refugees and asylum seekers who reached Italy irregularly via boat from Libya between 2017 and 2018 were young, well-educated men from medium to upper class socio-economic backgrounds. Most had taken the decision to leave quickly, in response to a sudden deterioration in the security situation, which had an immediate impact on respondents' lives, such as the death or kidnapping of a close family member. Contacting smugglers and organising the journey was reportedly very easy for Libyan refugees and asylum seekers interviewed, with respondents taking few days to weeks between deciding to leave and embarking on a boat. Considering that legal pathways out of the country remain limited and considering the ease with which respondents accessed smuggling networks, irregular boat migration from Libya to Italy of Libyan refugees and asylum seekers may continue in 2019.

Humanitarian needs and intentions to leave of Libyans in Libya in 2018

According to the United Nations (UN), in 2018 an estimated 823,000 people were in need of humanitarian assistance in Libya, including 248,000 children. Approximately 50 per cent of people in need were Libyans and 50 per cent refugees and migrants. Overall people with the most severe and multiple needs across all sectors lived in the regions of Sirt, Alkufra, Murzuq and Sebha. According to the MSNA 2018, the highest proportions of Libyan households with a family member intending to leave were in Sebha (66 per cent), Sirt (46 per cent), Al Jabal al Akhdar (29 per cent) and Misrata (27 per cent). No substantial differences were found between displacement groups, such as non-displaced, returnee or internally displaced persons (IDP) households.

Sources: UN-OCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019; REACH, Multi-Sector Needs Assessment 2018.

Decision making over migration

Personal profile

According to the majority of key informants interviewed, most Libyan nationals who reached Italy irregularly via boat in 2017 and 2018 were young men of middle to upper class backgrounds. This was confirmed by the sample of Libyan respondents interviewed, who were all male, with the majority aged 26 to 35, followed by 4 individuals aged 18 to 25. The majority of them had completed university, cited by seven respondents and, to a lesser extent, high school (three respondents) or middle school (one respondent). All Libyan refugees and asylum seekers interviewed had had stable jobs prior to leaving Libya, which included owning shops, working in the public or service sectors.

Among the sample of Libyan refugees and asylum seekers interviewed in Italy, the majority came from northwestern Libya, with some originating from northeastern Libya. Only one individual reportedly originated from the south of the country, in this case, Sebha. Most key informants confirmed that to their knowledge most Libyans who reached Italy via boat in 2017 and 2018 were from northwestern or northeastern Libya. This was reportedly because the majority of Libyans who reached Italy via boat in 2017 and 2018 were of higher socio-economic backgrounds, more often found in northern Libya. Only one of the eleven Libyans interviewed in Italy had reportedly been internally displaced within Libya prior to leaving for Europe. According to key informants, few Libyan IDPs have taken the boat in 2017 and 2018.

Deciding to leave

All Libyan refugees and asylum seekers interviewed for this study reported that their lives had been profoundly changed by the first and second civil wars in Libya in 2011 and 2014. Still, the majority of respondents reportedly decided to migrate to Europe irregularly via boat quickly, in response to a sudden security-related event in Libya, which made respondents feel unable to stay in the country. Such incidents included a close family member being killed, a close family member or the respondent himself being kidnapped or other sudden deteriorations in the security situation in respondents' regions of origin.⁷ Overall, respondents held that migrating by boat irregularly to Europe was associated with shame in Libyan society and not well seen among respondents' families and acquaintances back home, which is why they had not taken the decision to leave lightly. Key informants interviewed confirmed that the majority of Libyans who had arrived in Italy via boat in 2017 and 2018 had left the country for security-related reasons, and often due to their affiliation to certain militia groups.

“When the war started I did not think about leaving. I started to think about leaving Libya when my older brother and some of my friends died. Then I started to think that the country was not safe anymore and that I needed to do something quickly. Then I received a phone call from my cousin who lives with me here in Italy. He told me that he was about to leave Libya and asked me if I wanted to go with him and cross the sea. After this call I thought about it for a long time. I left few days after having finally taken the decision, it was September 2017.”

Libyan man, aged 26- 35 years old, from Garyan

Health was also reported as an important driver for Libyan irregular boat migration to Italy by key informants, reportedly motivated by the poor health infrastructure in parts of Libya.⁸ This was confirmed by three Libyan respondents who held that they had severe health issues which they felt could not be treated appropriately in Libya. Economic considerations, presented in some secondary sources as drivers for the increase in Libyans departing Libya by boat,⁹ were cited mainly as secondary reasons by key informants.

“I was aware about regular channels to go to Europe and I tried to use them before considering irregular channels. I first thought of sending my documents to the American consulate but then I did not do it because the Embassy in Libya was closed, and the only one available was in Tunisia. In 2016 I have sent a request for a visa to the French consulate but it was rejected. This is why I accepted to leave Libya through irregular channels.”

Libyan man, aged 26- 35 years old, from Benghazi

When asked about their decision making process, the slight majority of Libyan refugees and asylum seekers interviewed had first considered migrating irregularly via boat to Europe when discussing informally with friends, or, in a minority of cases, watching TV reporting on boat departures or social media (mostly Facebook). All but one Libyan respondent reportedly made the decision to migrate alone, without consulting their family, usually only informing them upon respondents' immediate departure. Both key informants and Libyans interviewed reported that it was very easy to gather information about the boat trip to Europe, be it through word of mouth or online. Still, the majority of Libyans interviewed had reportedly not known someone personally who had done the boat trip before them, confirming that irregular boat migration by Libyan nationals is a relatively recent and not, as yet, a widespread phenomenon.

The majority of Libyan refugees and asylum seekers reported only spending few days to weeks between first deciding to leave to actually taking the boat. Most had not gathered detailed information about the situation in Italy prior to leaving, nor prepared extensively for the trip or for when they would arrive in Italy, suggesting the urgency with which they left.

Irregular boat migration as last resort?

A slight majority of Libyan respondents interviewed reportedly did not know about legal channels to migrate to Europe from Libya. Among the four individuals who reportedly knew of the existence of legal migration channels, two individuals had applied for a visa to European countries before embarking on the boat journey, but had been unsuccessful. The other two individuals had reportedly not attempted to access these channels, as they were reportedly very slow, expensive and with little prospect of success. Key informants confirmed the view that irregular boat migration was seen as a quick and comparatively cheap way to leave the country among Libyans, crucial for Libyan refugees and asylum seekers interviewed, whose aim was to leave Libya as quickly as possible. According to one key informant, legal routes were particularly inaccessible to IDPs, due to their frequent lack of documents.

Smuggling dynamics

One of the aims of this assessment was to understand the extent to which the smuggling dynamics for Libyan nationals differed from smuggling dynamics for other nationalities aiming to transit irregularly via boat from Libya to Europe. Overall, Libyan respondents and key informants converged that the smuggling dynamics for Libyan nationals were different from the experiences of other refugees and migrants aiming to transit to Europe from Libya, due to (1) the ease of contacting and dealing with the smuggler; (2) the boat type predominantly used and (3) their ability to take a boat directly, with only a very limited time spent waiting to transit.

“I was put in touch with the smuggler by a friend- it was easy. Before leaving we agreed that I would give him 3.500 Libyan dinars and that the trip would be safe. I paid the smuggler cash. My older brother helped me to collect this money. When I called the smuggler to tell him I was ready, I went to Azzawya to wait for my departure. There I met with the smuggler. He took me by car to his private house, where I waited for embarkation. The smuggler left there two people to take care of me and the other people there. There were four Libyans and one Tunisian. I waited for 2 hours. Then we went to Zwara, to another house where I found 9 Libyan people and 1 Tunisian. I waited there for one night before embarking.”

Libyan man, aged 26- 35 years old, from Tripoli

Identifying and interacting with smugglers

Once respondents had taken the decision to leave Libya by boat, organizing the trip was reportedly very easy. The majority of respondents received the contact details of a smuggler through personal relations or, in a minority of cases, through specific Facebook websites geared toward Arabic speakers in Libya aiming to transit via boat to Europe. Most respondents held that the smuggler they had dealt with was a Libyan national, who treated them with respect. Key informants confirmed that reaching out and dealing with smugglers was easier for Libyan nationals compared to other nationalities in Libya. However, some key informants pointed out that smugglers may be reluctant to accept Libyans on their boats, due to fear of reprisals by the Libyan coastguard or a militia group the individual may be escaping from. This was confirmed by one respondent, who reportedly pretended not to be Libyan when negotiating the boat trip with a smuggler, out of fear that the smuggler would otherwise not take him onboard.

Boat types used, payment and embarkation

Libyan refugees and asylum seekers interviewed took three different types of boats. First, the most common were medium sized boats with only Arab, i.e. Libyan, Tunisian and Moroccan, individuals on board. Second, four respondents reportedly took large boats with more than one hundred individuals on board, of all nationalities. Third, in a minority of cases, individuals reportedly boarded very small boats with only 10 to 30 individuals. All disembarkation points used by Libyan respondents were along the western coast. Most frequently reported disembarkation points were Zwara, used by seven individuals and Azzawya, reportedly used by two individuals, with one individual each departing from Garaboli and Darbuzzi. All Libyans interviewed reportedly paid between 3000 to 4000

Libyan Dinar¹⁰ for the boat trip. This was reportedly potentially more expensive than what individuals of other nationalities were asked to pay, however, respondents held that they expected better quality boats for this money. All Libyans interviewed were reportedly able to gather the money almost immediately upon deciding to leave, confirming their middle to upper class socio-economic backgrounds.

Most respondents reportedly waited very little time between having agreed with the smuggler on their deal and departing. In the majority of cases, individuals were asked by phone to directly come to a gathering point along the coast, where they waited for a maximum of few hours before boarding the boat. In some cases, individuals spent one night in an apartment provided by the smuggler close to the embarkation point. Only one individual reported waiting more than one night in a connection house before being transferred to the coast. These dynamics were confirmed by key informants, who further held that, if boats were intercepted and Libyan nationals were found on board, it was unlikely for them to be detained, and, in case, they would be released almost immediately.

Outlook

According to key informants and Libyan refugees and asylum seekers interviewed, the majority of Libyans who embarked on the irregular boat trip from Libya to Italy in 2017 and 2018 were young, well-educated men of medium to upper class socio economic backgrounds. While their lives had been profoundly touched by the conflict in Libya and ongoing political instability, the decision to migrate was most frequently made in response to a sudden deterioration in the security situation respondents faced, which had an immediate impact on the individual's life, including being kidnapped or the death of a close family member.

Accessing smugglers, paying and embarking on the boat trip was reportedly easy for Libyan refugees and asylum seekers interviewed. Smuggling dynamics described by Libyan refugees and asylum seekers were found to be different from the experiences of many sub-Saharan refugees and migrants who attempt to transit via boat from Libya to Italy. While sub-Saharan refugees and migrants are often exploited by smugglers, waiting for weeks in poor quality connection houses until they are transferred to the coast,¹¹ the smuggling process described by Libyan respondents was much more like a business transaction, showing the different power dynamics at play.

Whether the trend of Libyan refugees and asylum seekers embarking on the irregular boat journey to cross the Mediterranean is likely to continue in 2019/20 will be based on several factors. First, as security-related reasons were the most reported reason for leaving Libya, (in)stability in Libya is likely to remain one of the key factors shaping irregular migration from Libya, of Libyans and foreign nationals alike. Second, the middle to upper class socio-economic profiles of Libyan refugees and asylum seekers who reached Italy via boat irregularly in 2017 and 2018, and their reported lack of personal contact with individuals who had done the journey before them, suggest that irregular boat migration by Libyan nationals is still a new phenomenon, used by those with the financial resources and the low risk threshold necessary to make the journey. However, considering that legal pathways out of the country remain limited, and considering the ease with which respondents were able to access smugglers and organize the boat trip in Libya, irregular boat migration by Libyan refugees and asylum

seekers could continue. In this context, Libyan refugees and asylum seekers who reached Italy in 2017 and 2018 could become 'pioneer migrants', i.e. individuals who paved the road for further migration by fellow nationals, particularly considering the lack of legal routes out of the country.¹² Finally, while in the MSNA 16 per cent of Libyan households reportedly had a family member who intended to leave Libya,¹³ it is not clear where respondents would like to leave to, nor the specific timeframe. As such, it remains unclear to what extent individuals at risk in Libya may also increasingly leave to Libya's neighbouring countries or be displaced within Libya, joining the 187,000 IDPs¹⁴ already in the country.

End notes

1. This brief was prepared by IMPACT Initiatives, in partnership with UNHCR. Please note that the term 'refugees and asylum seekers' is used in the present brief to refer to all Libyan nationals who reached Italy irregularly via boat in 2018, pending individual status determination.

2. This data is based on a review of all data available on refugee and migrant departures from Libya, interceptions, death and missing figures conducted by Matteo Villa, migration researcher at the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), based in Milan, Italy. Data sources include UNHCR, IOM; the Italian Ministry of Interior and relevant press sources. The dataset is available [here](#). The term 'refugees and asylum seekers' refers to all Libyan nationals who reached Italy irregularly via boat in 2017/2018, pending individual protection status determination.

3. UNHCR, [Mediterranean Situation Dashboard](#), accessed 13 January 2019; UN OCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2018, forthcoming.

4. Libya's districts, admin level 2.

5. REACH, [Multi-Sector Needs Assessment 2018](#), February 2019.

6. According to the Henley Passport Index, the Libyan passport ranks 97th in the global passport index, granting visa free access to 41 countries worldwide. In comparison, the Japanese passport, ranked first, grants access to 190 visa-free destinations worldwide. The Iraqi and Afghan passports are ranked lowest, at 104th, with access to 30 countries visa-free. Available [here](#), accessed 21 January 2019.

7. On protection-related reasons for Libyan refugees and asylum seekers leaving Libya irregularly via boat please also see: Zammit Lupi, D., for Reuters, ['Libyans flee by boat amid 'terrible' violence at home'](#), 5 October 2017; Manocchi, F. for Newsdeeply, ['Why Libyans are turning to smugglers to escape'](#), July 2018.

8. The role of health in Libyans' irregular boat migration to Europe was also highlighted in a news article in 2018, see here: Albanese, F. for La Stampa, ['Viaggio della speranza per guarire dalla leucemia, recuperati in mare tre fratelli libici'](#), 10 March 2018, accessed 21 January 2019.

9. See, for instance, Manocchi, F. for Newsdeeply, ['Why Libyans are turning to smugglers to escape'](#), July 2018.

10. As of 9 January 2019 this corresponds to between 2157 USD and 2876 USD; REACH, [Joint Market Monitoring Initiative](#), 1-9 January 2019.

11. See for instance: REACH/UNHCR, [Mixed Migration Dynamics in Libya: the impact of EU migration measures on mixed migration in Libya](#), April 2018.

12. For the concept of 'pioneer migrants' please consult: Lindstrom, D. and Ramirez, A., 'Pioneers and Followers: Migrant Selectivity and the Development of U.S. Migration Streams in Latin America', published in *Ann Am Acad Pol Soc Sci.* 2010 Jul; 630(1): 53–77, available [here](#).

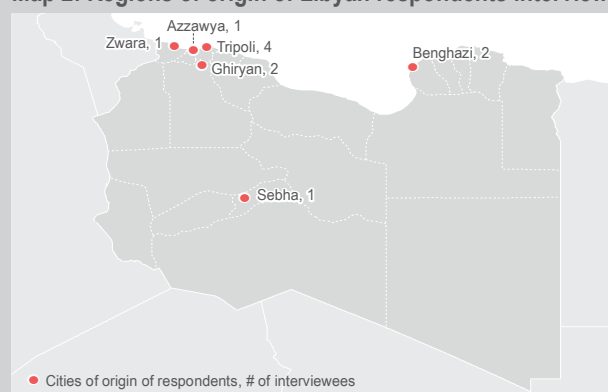
13. REACH, [Multi-Sector Needs Assessment 2018](#), February 2019.

14. IOM DTM, [Round No 22 Sept - Nov 2018](#).

Methodology

This brief presents findings from an assessment on the phenomenon of Libyan refugees and asylum seekers embarking on the irregular boat journey from Libya to Europe in 2017 and 2018, with data collection activities conducted in Libya, Tunisia and Italy between 12 and 25 December 2018. It is based on an extensive secondary data review, 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants and 11 open-ended individual interviews with Libyan refugees and asylum seekers who reached Italy irregularly via boat between 2017 and 2018. Key informants were selected on the basis of their expertise on Libyan nationals' migration to Europe and included policy analysts, humanitarian aid workers and researchers in Italy, Libya and Tunisia. Libyan refugees and asylum seekers were sampled purposively on the type and time of arrival in Italy, namely having arrived on a boat irregularly from Libya between 2017 and 2018. While the original sampling target of Libyan respondents was higher at the onset of data collection, the sampling target was reduced in the course of data collection activities, due to the difficulty to identify Libyan respondents who fit the set sampling requirements.

Map 2: Regions of origin of Libyan respondents interviewed



Data collection was carried out by field teams; all received tailored training on qualitative data collection and interview skills, as well as on ethical considerations around data collection with vulnerable groups. Data collection with key informants was conducted both in person and over skype, depending on the location of the key informant. Data collection teams in Italy who interviewed Libyan refugees and asylum seekers were composed of mixed gender mobile teams, who traveled across the country to identify respondents and existing community networks to access Libyan respondents. All primary data was triangulated with existing secondary data. Raw data was analysed using qualitative data analysis software Atlas Ti.

As this assessment employed qualitative research methods, results are indicative only and cannot be generalised to the entire population of Libyan refugees and asylum seekers who left Libya irregularly via boat in 2017 and 2018.