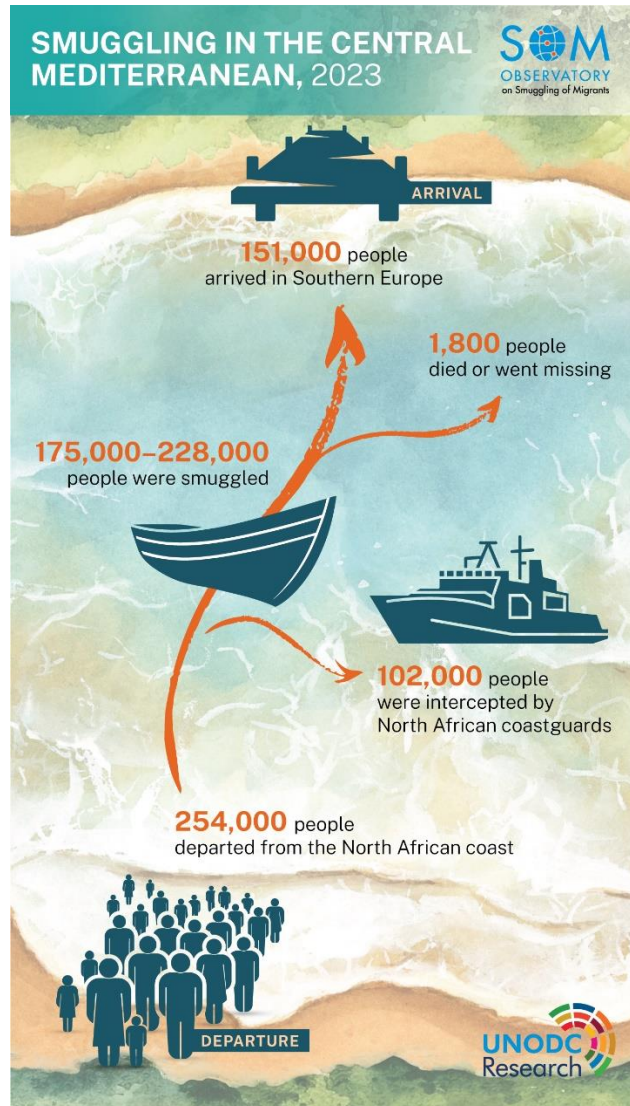


The Migrant Smuggling Market on the Central Mediterranean

UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants Update #2 - October 2024



In Brief

- Latest analysis on the Central Mediterranean Route by UNODC’s Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants indicates that **smuggling increased significantly in 2023 compared to 2022**, though in 2024 so far the incidence has decreased once again.
- In the absence of data on migrant smuggling offences committed, the number of people irregularly entering a country is often used as a proxy for the extent of

smuggling. But the number of people **attempting to irregularly enter a country** may be far higher than the number of people who actually arrive, particularly in the case of smuggling by sea.

- On the Central Mediterranean sea route in 2023, around **100,000 more people departed for Europe from North Africa than actually arrived in Italy and Malta**. 254,422 people departed from the North African coast on the Central Mediterranean route, while 150,653 people were registered as arriving in Europe.
- The Observatory estimates that **the majority of people using this route are smuggled**; estimates range from 77 to 93 per cent for people departing from Libya, and 66 to 89 per cent from Tunisia.
- This suggests that **smuggling offences were committed to facilitate the journeys of around 175,000–228,000 people**, representing between 69 and 90 per cent of all those who departed from North Africa on the Central Mediterranean Route intending to reach Europe.
- The total financial value of smuggling of migrants by sea on the Central Mediterranean Route during 2023 is estimated at **US\$290-370 million**.

One of the main objectives of the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants is to contribute to addressing the lack of systematic and comparable data on migrant smuggling. Estimating the number of people smuggled on a certain route is always challenging. For sea routes, the number of people arriving at destination is often used as the basis to estimate the number of people smuggled. But not all migrants who use smuggling services arrive at destination, so more people are actually smuggled than those who succeed in arriving.



So the Observatory is presenting a new analysis with estimates of the incidence of migrant smuggling along the Central Mediterranean Route, considering the proportion who are smuggled among the total number of people *departing* by sea from North Africa, instead of among

people *arriving* in southern Europe. This has significant implications for counter-smuggling measures and for the assessment of their impact. Failed smuggling attempts, in addition to attempts that are successful in reaching the intended destination, represent the total

number of smuggling offences, allowing for counter-smuggling actors to target the entire crime rather than just smuggling incidents that are successful.

On the Central Mediterranean Route to Europe, in addition to people arriving on European coasts, people lose their lives *en route*, and are intercepted at sea by North African national authorities and then returned to North African countries. Such interceptions have been on the increase in recent years. This is particularly significant in the Central Mediterranean context, where the numbers of people arriving, intercepted and losing their lives increased substantially during 2023. As set out in this Update, the majority of these people were the object of smuggling offences and the smuggling market on this route expanded significantly.

Smuggling attempts in 2023

This Observatory update focuses on migrant smuggling along the Central Mediterranean Route (from Tunisia, Libya and Algeria to Italy and Malta) in 2023. During that year, 150,273 people were recorded as arriving in Italy irregularly by sea, having departed from Tunisia (97,667 people), Libya (51,986) and Algeria (620). 380 people arrived irregularly in Malta by sea, having departed from Libya (323) and Tunisia (57). Combining these figures, in 2023 a total of 150,653 people arrived in Europe along the Central Mediterranean Route.¹

However, smuggling offences may have already been committed when facilitating the departure of people who did not reach their intended destination. The smuggling travel services were already provided by smugglers and full or partial payments may have already been made to them. This means that the smuggling of migrants offence was constituted: *“the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident”* (Smuggling of Migrants Protocol. Art. 3).

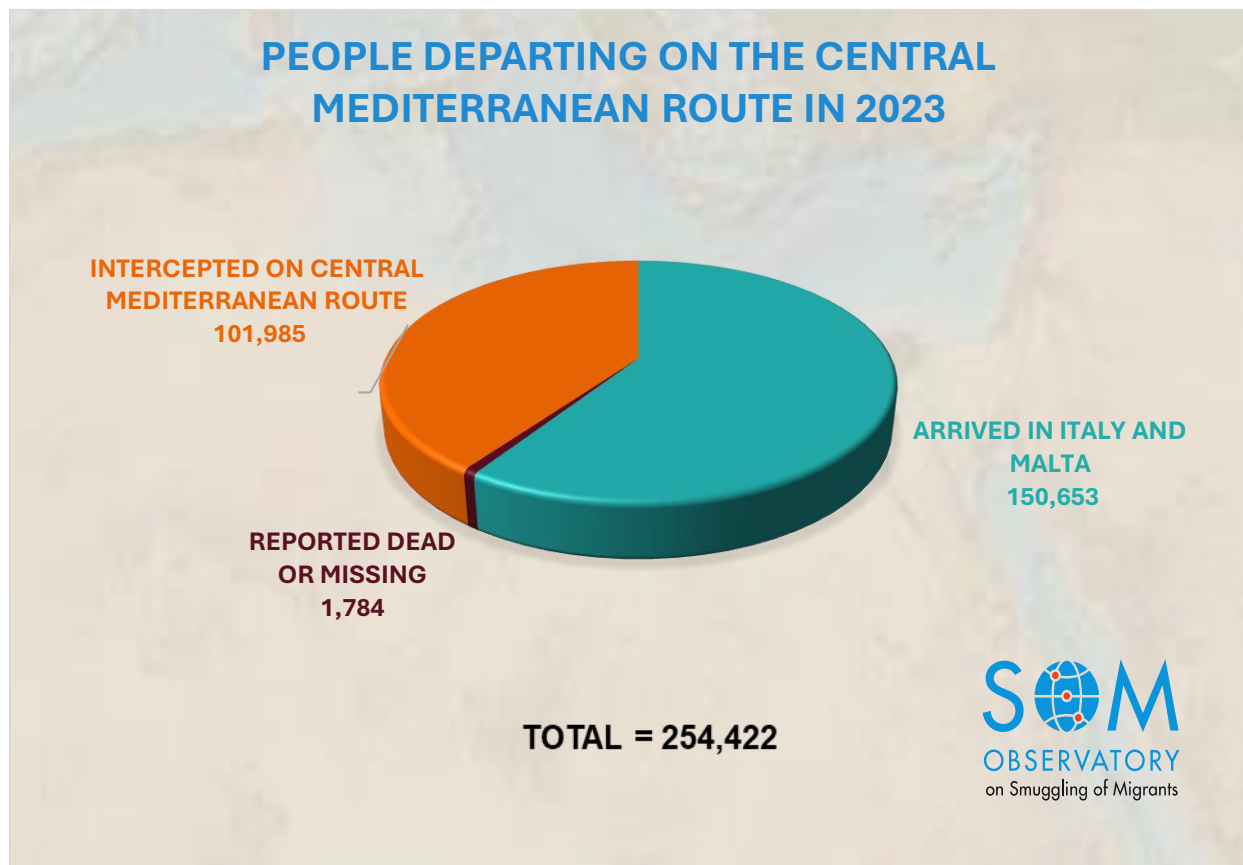
So smuggling of migrants offences need to be seen as a proportion of the total number of departures rather than arrivals. This includes the official national statistics on people intercepted at sea by Libyan, Tunisian or Algerian authorities and returned to North Africa, as well as those who lost their lives or went missing at sea.

In 2023, 101,985 people were intercepted at sea on the Central Mediterranean Route, according to national figures.² They comprise 79,905 people intercepted by Tunisian authorities and 21,612 intercepted by the Libyan authorities. A further 5,039 people were intercepted by the Algerian authorities, and the Observatory estimates that around 10 per cent of them³ (504) were headed to Italy, while 90 per cent (4,535) were headed to Spain. 1,784 people were reported dead or missing on the Central Mediterranean Route in 2023.⁴

In analyzing the figures, it is important to note that some people make repeated attempts to cross the sea within the same calendar year and therefore the total number of people departing by sea from North Africa may include double counting of individuals. The number of individual people involved could be lower, if some of these people were intercepted and returned at least once before successfully arriving during the same year or intercepted multiple times during the same year. This possible doublecounting, however, does not affect the number of smuggling offences committed, since each attempt to cross the sea is facilitated on a different occasion, and each attempt may involve separate transactions and different smuggling actors.

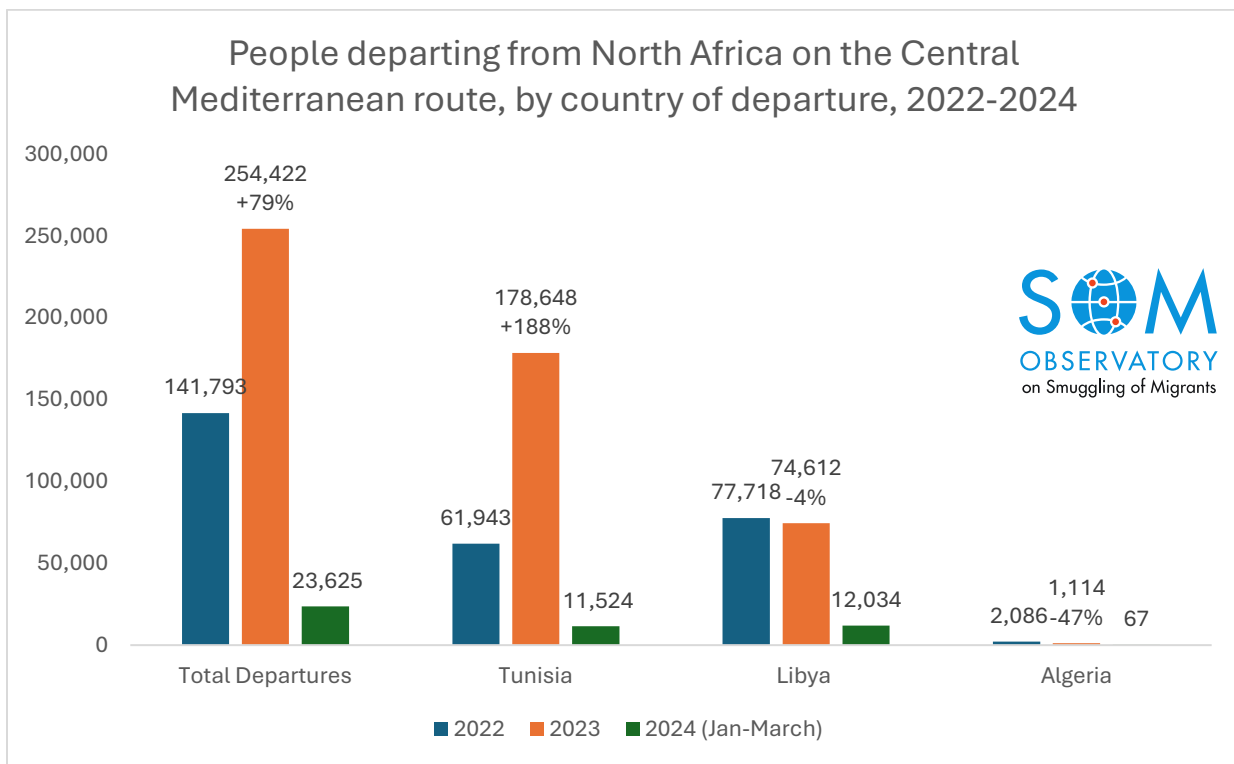
It is also important to note that all these figures relate to people who are recorded as arrived, intercepted, dead or missing. There may be other people who were the object of smuggling offences on this route, who never came to the attention of state authorities, international organizations or NGOs and therefore are not counted in the estimates provided here.

Combining the numbers of people who arrived, were intercepted and who lost their lives or went missing, the total number of people who attempted irregular entry on the Central Mediterranean Route during 2023 is 254,422.



The bar chart below displays departures from Algeria, Libya and Tunisia.⁵ 2023 saw an increase in smuggling offences and major shifts in smuggling trends, with a 79 per cent increase in the number of departures (254,422) compared to 2022 (141,793). The primary country of departure for smuggling shifted from Libya to Tunisia. Compared to 2022, there was a 188 per cent increase in departures from Tunisia.

The number of people arriving by sea in Europe from the Tunisian coast increased by 202 per cent and interceptions by Tunisian authorities increased by 174 per cent. Departures from Libya remained relatively stable from 2022 to 2023 (77,718 and 74,617, respectively). Departures from Algeria to Italy decreased by 47 per cent (2,086 and 1,114).

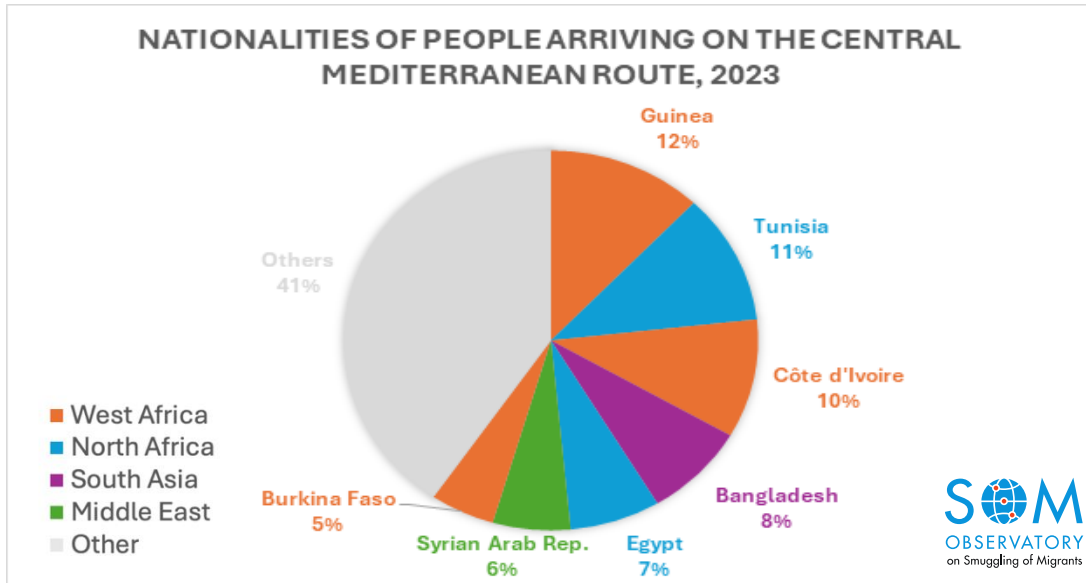


Source: UNODC calculations based on UNHCR, Tunisian Ministry of Interior, Algerian Naval Forces and IOM data

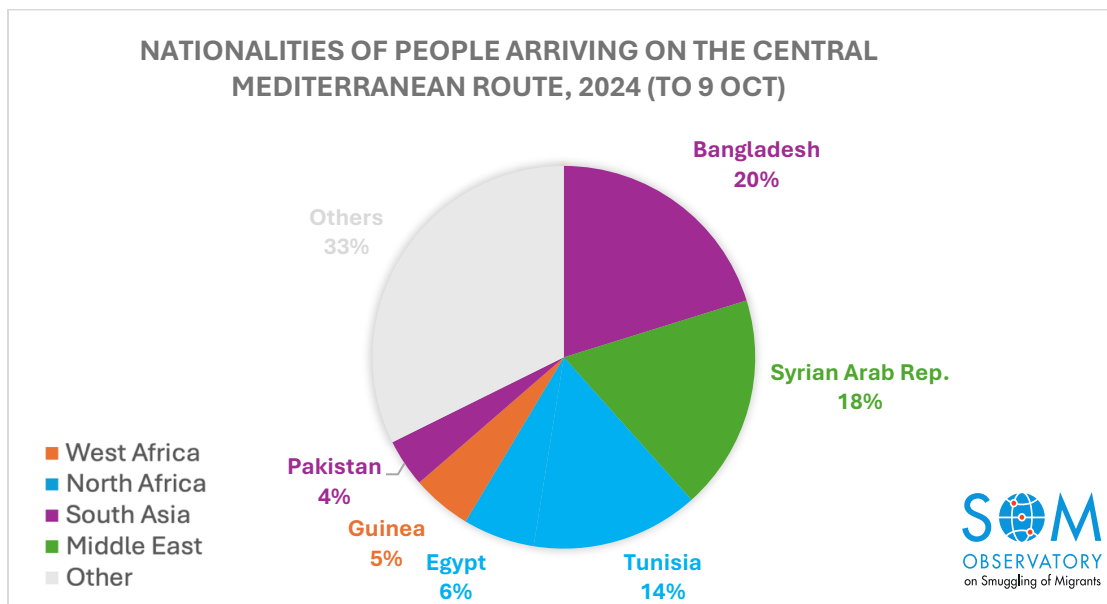
Figures for 2024 up to 9 October suggest that this increasing trend in departures from Tunisia has once again reversed, with significant decreases in total departures along the Central Mediterranean Route compared to 2023 and 2022, and more people once again departing from Libya.⁵ Arrivals in Italy decreased by 62 per cent in the first three quarters of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023.⁶

Figures from 2023 suggest a decline in the use of Algeria as a departure point compared to 2022. This trend continued during 2024 up to the end of July, with just 530 people arriving by sea in Italy from Algeria during that period, comprising 2 per cent of all arrivals.⁷

This has implications for the nationalities of people arriving in southern Europe during the first half of 2024 compared to 2023, as more West Africans and Tunisians typically depart from Tunisia and more South Asians, Syrians and Egyptians depart from Libya. While the top three nationalities of people arriving along the Central Mediterranean route in 2023 were Guinean, Tunisian and Ivorian, the top three in 2024, up to 9 October, were Bangladeshi, Syrian and Tunisian, followed by Egyptian.⁸



Source: Calculations based on statistics from Italian Ministry of the Interior. Others includes: Pakistanis (5% of overall total); Malians (4%); Sudanese (4%); other nationalities and nationality not yet determined.



Source: Calculations based on statistics from Italian Ministry of the Interior. Others includes: Eritreans (3% of overall total); Sudanese (3%); Malians (2%); other nationalities and nationality not yet determined.

Proportion who are smuggled among all those departing North Africa for southern Europe on the Central Mediterranean Route

There is no consensus on the proportion of people departing on different routes who are the object of smuggling offences. Surveys and interviews with migrants, intending migrants and other sources, suggest that this proportion can range between 66 and 93 per cent, depending on the points of departure and the countries of origin of migrants or refugees.

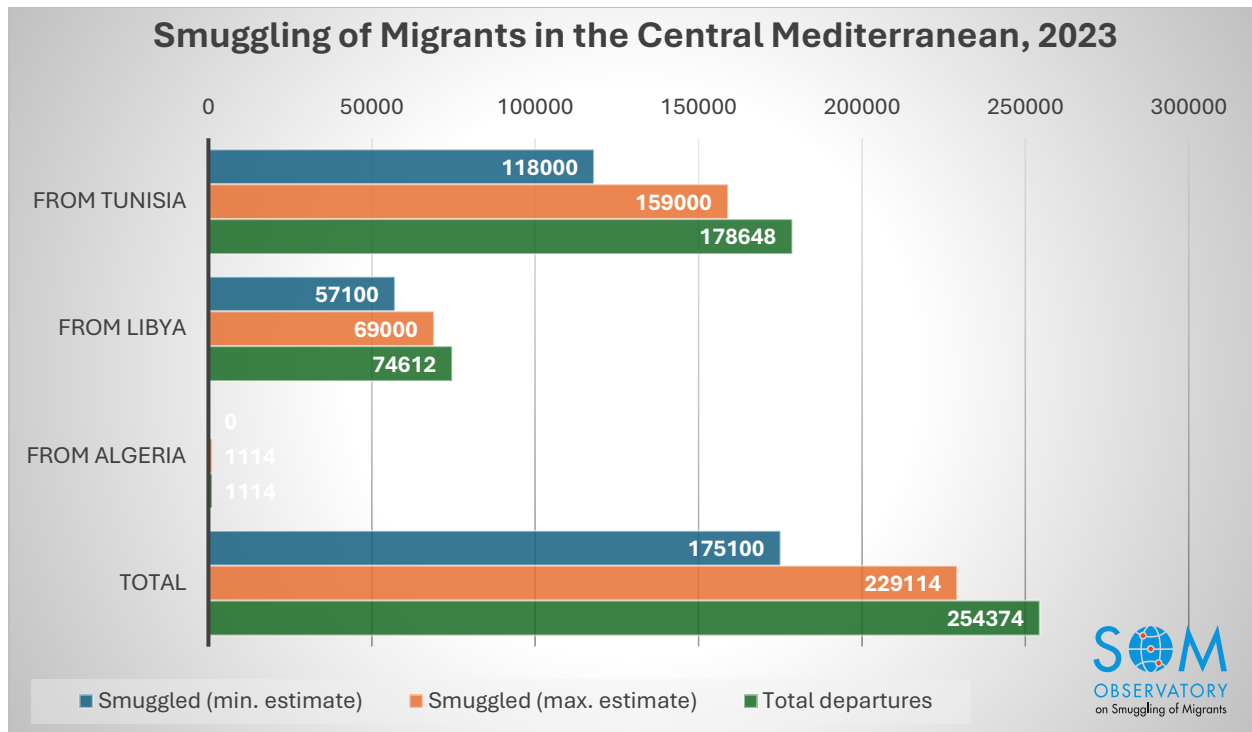
For example, people of all origins departing from Libya more commonly use smuggling services than Tunisians departing from Tunisia. 77 per cent of respondents to a survey of people in Libya who planned to travel on to European countries indicated that they intended to use a smuggler.⁹ Surveys and interviews with Nigerians and Sudanese in Italy indicated that 88 and 97 per cent, respectively, used smugglers, giving an average of 92.5 per cent.¹⁰ The latter is used as the upper limit of the range for people departing from Libya.

As there are few indications in the literature of people arriving by sea from Libya to Europe without using a smuggler, the proportion is likely to be at the higher end of the range. This would mean a minimum of 57,100 and a maximum of 69,000 people were smuggled from Libya on the Central Mediterranean Route in 2023, out of a total of 74,612 who departed.

Research by the Observatory and others has shown that a lower proportion of Tunisians arriving by sea in Italy from Tunisia are smuggled, compared to people of other nationalities, as many departures are independently or collectively organized, with no financial or material benefit to a third party.¹¹ People of other nationalities departing from Tunisia more commonly use smugglers. 66 per cent of non-Tunisian respondents to a survey carried out by the Observatory in Tunisia in 2021, who planned to travel on to European countries, indicated that they intended to use a smuggler.

The two proportions of non-Tunisians vs. Tunisians smuggled to Italy, 89 and 66 per cent, respectively, provides a range of the number of people smuggled by sea from Tunisia to Italy and Malta in 2023. This ranges between a minimum of 118,000 and a maximum of 159,000, of a total of 178,648 who departed. Due to the absence of data, the range for Algeria is included as between a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 1,114 (the total number estimated to have departed Algeria for Italy by sea in 2023).

This would mean that throughout 2023, **smuggling offences were committed while smuggling 175,000 - 229,000 people** on the Central Mediterranean Route to southern Europe.



Estimated financial value of migrant smuggling in the Central Mediterranean

The Observatory’s findings indicate that smugglers operating sea crossings from Tunisia charge on average the equivalent of US\$1,171 per facilitation of irregular entry by sea. Using this figure, the total market for smuggling of migrants by sea from Tunisia towards southern Europe during 2023 is estimated to be worth between \$138 and \$186 million.

Fees for sea smuggling from Libya vary significantly depending on the migrant’s nationality, therefore different average amounts were used for different national groups, ranging between \$850 and \$4,500 per crossing. In 2023, based on the number of people of different nationalities who were the object of smuggling offences, and fees estimated by the Observatory, the market size for smuggling by sea from Libya towards southern Europe during 2023 is estimated to range between \$152 and \$183 million.¹²

Combined, the market for migrant smuggling on the Central Mediterranean route during 2023 is estimated to be worth between US\$290 and \$370 million.

It is clear that migrant smuggling along this route – and likely also on many other sea smuggling routes – has hitherto been significantly underestimated. This is particularly important to measure accurately in a context where the numbers of attempted and successful smuggling offences – and the profits made from this criminal enterprise – fluctuate significantly.

For more information and analysis on migrant smuggling on the Central Mediterranean, see: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). *West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean*: www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/observatory_som.html.

End Notes

¹ UNHCR (2023), *Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard. (January – December 2023)*.

<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>; UNHCR (2023), *Malta Factsheet*: www.unhcr.org/mt/figures-at-a-glance.

² Libyan Coastguard via UNHCR Libya (2024), *Monthly Update on UNHCR's interventions at disembarkation points*: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106509>; Tunisian Ministry of Interior: www.interieur.gov.tn. For the same period, the Tunisian NGO Forum tunisien pour les droits économiques et sociaux (FTDES): <https://ftdes.net/statistiques-migration-2023> records 48,074 people intercepted; 31,831 less than the Ministry of Interior. Algerian Naval Forces (2023): www.mdn.dz/site_cfn/sommaire/actualites/an/communiqués_an.php.

³ See Methodological Note.

⁴ IOM Missing Migrants Project. <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.

⁵ UNHCR (7 October 2024), *Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboards July 2024*: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/111595>. Four per cent of people arriving in Italy during this period embarked in Türkiye.

⁶ Italy, Ministry of Interior (10.10.2024), *Cruscotto Statistico Giornalero*: www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornalero_09-10-2024.pdf.

⁷ UNHCR (7 October 2024), *Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboards July 2024*: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/111595>. Four per cent of people arriving in Italy during this period embarked in Türkiye.

⁸ Calculations based on: Italy, Ministry of Interior (10.10.2024), *Cruscotto Statistico Giornalero*: www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornalero_09-10-2024.pdf.

⁹ Little data is available on the exact proportion of people departing from Libya who are smuggled, though most qualitative empirical information suggests that it is high. Indeed, evidence suggests that it is extremely difficult to depart from Libya on the Central Mediterranean route without using a smuggler.

¹⁰ Surveys conducted in 2019–2021 in Italy by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) of 195 Nigerians who crossed the Central Mediterranean from Libya indicate that 88% used a smuggler. Surveys conducted in 2019–2021 in Italy by MMC of 77 Sudanese who crossed the Central Mediterranean from Libya indicate that 97% used a smuggler. MMC applies a broader definition of smuggling than the UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol. MMC (April 2022). “The journey towards Italy for Nigerians: drivers, routes and use of smugglers”: <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/the-journey-towards-italy-for-nigerians-drivers-routes-and-use-of-smugglers>; MMC (April 2022). “The journey towards Italy for Sudanese: drivers, routes and use of smugglers”: <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/the-journey-towards-italy-for-sudanese-drivers-routes-and-use-of-smugglers/>

¹¹ UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). *West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean*: www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/observatory_som.html.

¹² See Methodological Note.

All websites consulted on 10 October 2024.