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Analysis

Aid and Policy

# Libya's migration crisis is about more than just security

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LONDON, 11 September 2017

There's no shortage of news on Libya's migration crisis, but there is a serious dearth of policy solutions.

Late last month, the International Organization for Migration [announced](#) what passes for good news at the moment: no deaths on the Mediterranean for 20 days. This followed [reports](#), later [denied](#), that Italy

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had been paying militias to prevent people from leaving Libya's shores.

But the risk of drowning is far from the only [danger facing migrants](#) attempting the central Mediterranean route into Europe. Migrants are subject to arbitrary detention, arrest, harassment, bonded labour, slavery, and sexual exploitation.

And even as drowning numbers are down, IOM says there has been an [increase in trafficking](#) rather than smuggling on the central Mediterranean route – the former distinguished by the coercion and extortion that continues after arrival at the destination. This trend is partly because fewer Syrians (and migrants in general) are making the journey, so those plying the route are seeking ways to keep profits up – sub-Saharan African women appear to be paying a horrible price in this shift, finding themselves forced into the sex industry in greater numbers.

Human rights groups, humanitarians, and governments are naturally concerned, but some rights advocates feel the anti-trafficking policies of the European Union and others are more aimed at stopping migration entirely.

“The war on traffickers has been something that – time and time again – when politicians find themselves with the backs to the wall, they reach to,” Mark Micallef, a specialist researcher on the subject at the Global Initiative Against Transnational and Organized Crime, told IRIN.

## Fighting trafficking or fighting migration?

The EU's [Operation Sophia](#), which aims to disrupt the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks, in part by taking apart the boats themselves, has come under fire for muddling the fight on traffickers and smugglers with stopping



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migration altogether.

“Trying to stop slavery at the point of destroying boats in the middle of the Mediterranean doesn’t actually help people,” Claire Seaward, humanitarian campaign and advocacy manager at Oxfam, told IRIN. “As we are seeing, migrants will just use different types of boats. They used to be on large wooden boats and now they are on inflatable dinghies.”

Tim Eaton, a research fellow with the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House, believes one of Operation Sophia’s major flaws is looking at migration – and migrants – through a one-dimensional lens, when it’s really about so much more, like [economics and hope](#). “On a policy level, the problem comes when you look at this solely as a security problem,” Eaton told IRIN.

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Securing borders and clamping down on criminals including traffickers may be useful in some respects, but it won’t stop desperate migrants from coming, nor does it take into account the dangers they face while inside Libya.


### **Limited options**

But there don’t seem to be a whole lot of viable alternatives, especially when many parts of Libya are so dangerous it’s impractical to put aid workers on the ground.

Where NGOs can help is in assisting suspected trafficking victims and training law enforcement officers and emergency responders. Annemarie Loof, operations manager at Médecins Sans Frontières, said the charity gives “[migrants in Libya] a telephone number they can call anywhere from Europe. We talk to them about trafficking and the sex industry. We flag it to the [Italian] authorities.”

Izabella Cooper, spokeswoman for EU border agency Frontex, said it has trained staff to recognise signs of people-trafficking on the ships it deploys as part of Operation Triton, the EU naval mission that backstops Italy's own rescue operations. "In many cases these girls do not know they are being trafficked," Cooper told IRIN. "Many of these girls have no idea what they are heading for."

Fernando Calero/MSF

Smugglers have increased the number of  migrants they pack into a boat, making the journey even more dangerous

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But the reality is that many migrants are also not trafficked, at least not technically. They leave their homes by choice – driven by a variety of factors including poverty and conflict – and are now stuck in Libya's detention centres, trapped in what MSF called, in an open letter published 7 September, "a thriving enterprise of kidnapping, torture and extortion".

Andre Heller Perache, head of programmes at MSF UK, described the abuse in detention centres as "borderline between human smuggling and trafficking", a "weird system of exploitation".

To give migrants a chance to escape the abuse, IOM offers voluntary repatriations: It [sent 2,775](#) people home from Libya last year and is aiming for 10,000 in 2017.

Loof at MSF believes voluntary repatriation can be a welcome option for those trapped in the country's crime-ridden detention centres, but stressed this point: "I am against arbitrary detention to begin with."

IOM runs training sessions inside some of the detention centres aiming at introducing the staff to the principles of human rights. Maysa Khalil, one of the programme officers, told IRIN she had seen an improvement in health and hygiene awareness in the centres after the training. However, she admitted that the migrants don't report abuse while they're still trapped in the centre so it's difficult to accurately measure the programme's impact. Plus, IOM has no access to detention centres run by Libya's many militias.

Too much faith in training programmes like these would be misplaced in a situation where migrants desperately need help now, according to Sherine El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, a research fellow with the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute. Changing attitudes towards human rights, she told IRIN, "will take time, maybe a decade".

Chatham House's Eaton agreed. "[The training programmes] are certainly valuable," he said. "But, you've got armed groups that are making significant income off of it. Just telling them that they need to respect people's rights is not going to change people's minds. So, that's a challenge."

## Economics

Eaton said what's often lost in the discussion of smuggling and trafficking is money. "People still have to survive," he said, and that should be taken into account in policy decisions.

Tom Wescott/IRIN



Migrants travel across the Libyan desert from the border with Niger

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In the south of the war-torn country, moving human beings around and the extortion that involves – often across borders – has become big business. A

recent report from the International Crisis Group points out that European governments have turned their attention to the economic development of the south in an attempt to control people trafficking.

An EU official familiar with an Italian development project in the south told an ICG researcher: “if you want to peel away people from the human trafficking business you need to co-opt them and to do so you must buy them over”.

But the people trade generates such high profits and supports so many people that those involved are unlikely to give it up, even if offered alternative sources of employment.

Humanitarian agencies and development organisations are wary of methods to control migration, or trafficking, through development. Take Oxfam’s Seaward, who questions European motivations. “The EU is very keen to do work which is about livelihoods to stop migration. That’s something we’d be quite critical about. [It should be] about development [for development’s sake], not about [stopping] migration.”

For many aid organisations, the best way forward would be to open more legal channels for migration, including humanitarian visas.

“Anti-trafficking measures are not useful,” said Arezo Malakooti, an independent researcher and author of several recent IOM reports. “The way to combat the horrific trafficking stories that are happening is to create legal avenues for migration – and any other way has missed the point.”

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