

Libyan Migration

Libyan migration is a dangerous process, where migrants are smuggled, killed, undergo various human rights violations.

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32,400

Refugees and migrants crossed the sea from Libya to Europe in 2021

Introduction

Libya is the country that migrants and refugees typically have to travel through to make it to Europe, as it is geographically closest.

Libya is a major migration hub, and the primary choice for African migrants making their way to Italy. While the majority of migrants come from East African countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, etc., with around 30% of all migrants coming from Sudan, migrants stem from all over Africa. There are over 850,000 reported migrants in Libya right now, however, this is probably a low estimate.

This journey is a dangerous one. While Libya is a preferred hub, it does not come without risks. Militias, smuggling networks, and detention centers leave migrants vulnerable to extortion, kidnappings, rape, and murder. Not only that, but the Central

Mediterranean route is one of the most dangerous sea crossings lasting around 3-6 days. As of April 7th 2026, there have been at least 756 reported deaths of migrants traveling across the Mediterranean Sea.

left: northwestern Global news AP Photo/Jamal Alkomaty
right: the Libyan heritage house

What migrates should consider before migrating :

In addition to socioeconomic factors, Libya's climate can make it a dangerous location for migrating through. Much of southern Libya is the Sahara Desert. Smugglers drive migrants through the desert for three days risking violence, extortion, nutrition deficiencies, and vehicle accidents. Migrants can wrap their heads in turbans for sun protection and brace themselves with sticks to keep from falling out of the truck because the driver will NOT stop for them. The Sahara Desert is also known for reaching temperatures under 4 degrees Celsius at night, leaving migrants vulnerable to freezing temperatures.

Another concern is the flash floods that sweep away neighborhoods and kill tens of thousands who reside as migrants and permanent residents. This leads to an increased number of missing migrants that are never found again.

Libya's Historical Background

Until 2011, Libya was under the control of the oppressive Gaddafi regime. Al-Gaddafi was an authoritative dictator who took power in 1969. Following protests during the Arab Springs, a series of protests that started in Tunisia and spread throughout most of Northern Africa and the Middle East. The regime became increasingly oppressive and violent towards any protestors, which is why the United States, with UN backing, decided to intervene and remove the regime. This intervention has left a political vacuum, that has allowed for militias to thrive and the people who reside and migrate through Libya to be left vulnerable.

Today, the government is split between the GNU based in Tripoli, and the GNS in South East Libya. Efforts to unite the two governments have repeatedly failed, and intermittent civil conflict is still common. Armed militias frequently work to suppress the civil and political rights of Libyan people. Even 15 years after the removal of the Gaddafi regime, Libya does not have a stable government in place and human rights violations and violent clashes are rampant.

In Libya, The Militias Rule While Government Founders: Abdel Magid Al Fergany/AP

The high number of illegal migration has led Libya's economy to erode. This can be seen through the 40,826 internally displaced individuals, that are many times fleeing crisis in their own countries. For example, the Sudanese conflict of 2022, has lead to 180,000 migrant to flee to Libya. The "International Conference on assistance to refugees in Africa in 1981" illustrates how increased illegal migration within Libya creates additional costs on the general budget, social welfare allocations, and obstructs economic growth, which causes the environmental conditions to deteriorate and raise conflict for host states.

Due to the instability in Libyan government, the smuggling network has been allowed to thrive. It has been reported that at the height of Libyan migration in 2016, the smuggling industry in Libya alone was worth almost 1 billion US dollars. This smuggling industry is exploitative of migrants, often charging very high rates for very dangerous journeys. Since higher rates of enforcement towards smugglers following 2016 due to European intervention, the route has gotten more dangerous and expensive for migrants. Despite this, smugglers are often still the best option for migrants when making these journeys, as there is no accessible or safe legal route.

> *"This is a country where there is no law, it completely anarchy."*
>
> - Anonymous Migrant

Why migrants choose Libya:

Despite the poor climate and geopolitical conditions of Libya, it is still the top choice for migrants attempting to cross to Italy. There are a few main reasons for this:

- Location
  - Libya's coastal border makes it an ideal place for sea-crossings to Europe.
- Lack of border enforcement and stable government
  - Libya's political vacuum has led to a porous southern border in contrast to some other North African countries, such as Algeria.
- Big smuggling network
  - Libya has a very established smuggling network, making passage to the sea easier for migrants.

- In need of foreign workers
  - Libya is in need of foreign workers to support their oil industry.

Memorandum of Understanding (2016)

Migration patterns shifted in early 2017, after hitting a peak in 2016. In 2017, Italy signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Libya. This shifted the responsibility of Search and Rescue (SAR) primarily to Libya, with Italy supporting through the training of the Libyan Coast Guard and other financial means. This shift in responsibility for SAR has made the already dangerous voyage across the Mediterranean Sea far more dangerous. The MoU has allowed for the Libyan government to be the one who intercept migrants traveling by sea, which presents with more certainty of being placed in detention centers (places where migrants are taken too once caught by militias), which are riddled with human rights violations. The boats and resources used by the government when intercepting is funded by Italy through this bill. The MoU allows for militias to grow in power because they are gaining unlimited supplies and no boundaries from outside powers such as Italy.

The European Union remains complicit in the human rights abuses occurring in Libya. Italy and Frontex, the European border and Coast Guard agency, use surveillance drones to find and report refugee boats to the Libyan Coast Guard, sending migrants to detention centers where they know they will be mistreated.

Libyan Citizenship

Libya although provides short term economic gain it still shows many risks in food insecurity which makes it a place of temporary residence. Libya has very restrictive nationality laws, such as the 1954 Nationality Law, which prohibits dual citizenship and deny Libyan citizenship to children born to Libyan mothers and foreign fathers. This doesn't allow for women to be able to excel especially

if they have children with a man who is non-Libyan. The barriers to citizenship decreases the already low amount of protection fore migrants and increases the chances of extortion and death. Many migrants who are unable to obtain citizenship are riddled with lack of basic services in health care and danger in their everyday lives. For example, usually the places they live in are overcrowded, dangerous, and unhealthy because they are abandoned sheds or building were there is more risk for contacting diseases

Internally Displaced People are also deeply affected by laws like this one, because they may be fleeing an economically deprived neighboring country to find work in Libya, but many times get detained and placed in detention centers to be sent back because of they are not "needed" in Libya. Exceptions to this would be highly classified engineers, or high profiled people who are depicted as helpful to Libya and its society.

Migration Journey

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1 Agadez, Niger

Most migrants traveling from West Africa opt to enter Libya through Niger. Agadez, a city by the Libyan border, is a major hub for migrants traveling into Libya. Agadez serves as a hot spot for finding smugglers and temporary work to fund the rest of their journey. At the height of migration in 2016, an estimate of 330,000 migrants passed through Agadez. In 2015 Law 36 was passed and began to criminalize migration leading to decreased migration, which made it harder for those who resided in Agadez as their economy relied on migration.

2 Kufra City, Libya

This is one of the main stopping points for migrants traveling from East African countries, primarily Sudan. Due to the crisis in Sudan, the population of Kufra city has more than doubled, making resources to be stretched thinner than it already was such as food and water. Migrants must make the dangerous journey through the Al Kufra desert, where two mass graves of asylum-seeking migrants were found.

3 Sabha, Libya

One of the first cities that migrants pass through mainly used as a resting point for the rest of their journey. This is a major migration hub for those traveling from South and West Africa.

4 Bani Walid, Libya

Bani Walid is emerging as a new major stopping point for those traveling through Libya. Many migrants stop here to work and save money for the rest of their journey. This is also a notorious hub for human trafficking and extortion from militias.

5 Tripoli

Tripoli is many times the last stop for migrants who are traveling through the Mediterranean Sea, but also serves as a place where for 31% of migrants is the last stop and they begin their new life there. For those who continue the journey, Tripoli serves as a transit hub to regather supplies and get temporary work to pay for the rest of their journey.

6 Mediterranean Sea

Many migrants travel by rubber, wooden, or fiberglass boat to Italy. Unfortunately, thousands of migrants who drown each year crossing the Mediterranean.

7 Libyan Detention Centers

Migrant boats intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard in the Mediterranean Sea are often taken back to Libya, and migrants are placed in Detention Centers, where they often subjected to human rights violations and many times deported to their home countries.

8 Italy

Boats often land in small islands in Italy, such as Lampedusa. These islands are often unprepared to handle the surges of migrants. Once migrants arrive at Italy they still face problems such as, uncertain legal status, unemployment, isolation, and trauma.

Hardships At Sea

Between 2014 and 2021, over 24,400 people have lost their lives or gone missing trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Many others have suffered unspeakable violations of their human rights - at a scale likely higher and more severe than the already alarming estimates. This is a widespread, longstanding and largely overlooked tragedy. (UNHCR)

Treatment of migrants on boats by both smugglers, as well as the Libyan government is abhorrent. One migrant reports,

"When they reached us, they threw themselves in our rubber boat with their guns. Started beating them with their guns. They asked who is the captain and the captain ran away to the tail of the boat and they started asking us where are our mobiles and money. We told them we don't have money and mobile phones. They started beating and clapping us and that was the time, the boat start sinking. While the boat was sinking, they were still beating them. They moved all of us their ship and took us back to Libya."

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Detention Centers

Libyan Detention Centers are home to a great deal of corruption and violations of human rights. Here, migrants are often tortured and extorted for money. There are well-documented instances of violence, torture, sexual violence, and rape.

Many migrants report being tortured while in detention facilities. One survivor from Cameroon claimed, **"They used to melt plastic over the head and back of people. It would drop and melt their skin immediately. They filmed everything with the person's phone so they could then send it to their family and ask for money to be released."** Others have reported instances of being burned, electrocuted and beaten. In addition, detainees are often kept in overcrowded rooms with no light and minimum access to food, water, or medical care.

Risk Factors for Women:

Woman in Abus Salim Detention Centre, Libya Robert Y. Pelton/MOAS.eu | August 2016

The journey for women through Libya is even more dangerous. While women make up just about 13% of all migrants in Libya, they face different risk factors. When asked, female migrants said they felt "targeted" because of their gender. One woman named Awa Ceesay says, "**Women suffered more. There was constant fear of harassment. Some smugglers took advantage of women, especially those who were traveling alone. You had to be alert all the time."**

This targeting does not just occur while on the journey, but in detention centers sexual abuse is prevalent for women. Many women have reported being subjected to violent and humiliating strip searches. In addition, women reported being raped and coerced into sex for their release.

Personal Experience

Testimony: From 18 year old “Amina”, kidnapped fleeing from Somalia, taken to a hidden building in the Libyan dessert, kidnappers demanded $8,000 dollars for her release, tortured Amina to increase the pressure on her parents as they were forced to listen on the phone

“They chained me up, hung me up, and tortured me with electric shocks, they tortured men with electric shocks to their genitals and women with shocks to their breasts, until they cried and screamed loudly, they did it so they would get the money faster. The torture is systematic, many other refugees describe similar methods.”

What the map can not show:

The condition for Libyan migrants has changed significantly over

time. Over time, the EU has become more complicit in rights violated by the Libyan government, even though it is known to be run by militias. U.S. involvement and intervention has left Libya in a political vacuum. The routes that migrants are now choosing to go through have changed because of interception in the Mediterranean. The map can't show the true distance and troubles that these migrants travel. Migrants travel thousands of miles in less than ideal conditions. What looks so small and simple on a map is completely different in reality. In addition, the mental struggle of having to leave your home and your family, beyond the abuse that migrants face on the journey, is impossible to quantify and hard to portray. The journey is long and dangerous. The people who are supposed to protect you, the government, the EU, smugglers, only care when they are benefiting. Migrants on this route are incredibly vulnerable and at risk.

Conclusion

We hope to convey how treacherous and corrupt the migration route through Libya is, and how outside powers like the EU are actively ignoring and contributing to the constant deaths and human rights violations.

If we had one chance to speak to migrants before they left, we would deeply encourage them to **stay**, and **don't risk your life for this journey**. We hope to increase people's knowledge of this treacherous path and bring light to the human rights violations that are happening to migrants by the corrupt Libyan government.

References

References