



# Mixed Migration Trends in Libya: Changing Dynamics and Protection Challenges

Evolution of the Journey and Situations of Refugees and Migrants in Southern Libya

## Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by Altai Consulting in partnership with IMPACT Initiatives (IMPACT), for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Libya. It was written in February 2017 by Marie-Cecile Darne and Tahar Benattia of Altai Consulting, with the support of Hind Kinani and IMPACT.

Data collection in Libya was carried out by Istishari Research, Altai Consulting's local partner, and managed by Karim Nabata and Omar Hunedy. Marie-Cecile Darne conducted fieldwork in Algeria and Niger, while IMPACT conducted fieldwork in Chad and Italy.

We are grateful to UNHCR's Libya office for its role in designing and framing this study, as well as the organisation's offices in Algeria, Chad, Niger and Italy, and the International Organisation for Migration's Libya mission for their valuable input and assistance. We are also indebted to the numerous migrants, refugees, government representatives, humanitarian workers, academic researchers and community members who shared their time and their views with us on the various themes that this study covers.

Photographer Monder Haraga graciously provided the images on the front cover and section pages. All images in this report belong to Altai Consulting, unless otherwise stated. All maps in this report were created by Altai Consulting and IMPACT Initiatives. Layout and graphic design by Marie-Cecile Darne.

## Contact Details

IMPACT Initiatives: [geneva@impact-initiatives.org](mailto:geneva@impact-initiatives.org)

Marie-Cecile Darne: [mcdarne@altaiconsulting.com](mailto:mcdarne@altaiconsulting.com)

[www.impact-initiatives.org](http://www.impact-initiatives.org)

[www.altaiconsulting.com](http://www.altaiconsulting.com)

---

Please note:

For the purposes of this report the expression “refugees and migrants” refers to all people on the move along the routes studied, including migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and other populations (such as victims of trafficking or unaccompanied and separated children), unless a distinction is otherwise made. This study does not include the situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

When used separately, the term “refugees” encompasses all persons in need of international protection under UNHCR's mandate. This includes refugees recognised as such following a refugee status determination procedure as well as asylum seekers.

Altai Consulting and IMPACT Initiatives prepared this report for review by the United Nations High Commissioner Refugees (UNHCR). Opinions expressed in the report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the UNCHR.

---

# Executive Summary

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2016, UNHCR commissioned IMPACT Initiatives and Altai Consulting to conduct research on mixed migration patterns in Libya, with a particular focus on the south of the country and on communities of concern to UNHCR.

The objectives were twofold: 1) to track the evolution of mixed migration trends and routes to and within Libya; 2) to map out refugee and migrant concentrations in southern Libya, and to determine their vulnerabilities and protection needs.

This report's findings are based on qualitative data collected between October and December 2016 in Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Italy, Niger, Chad and Italy. In Libya, the research team conducted 72 interviews with key informants<sup>1</sup> and 140 with refugees and migrants in eight hotspots in the south of the country and in the capital Tripoli. Another 74 interviews were conducted with key informants, refugees and migrants in Algeria, Niger, Chad and Italy.

## MIXED MIGRATION TRENDS ON THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE

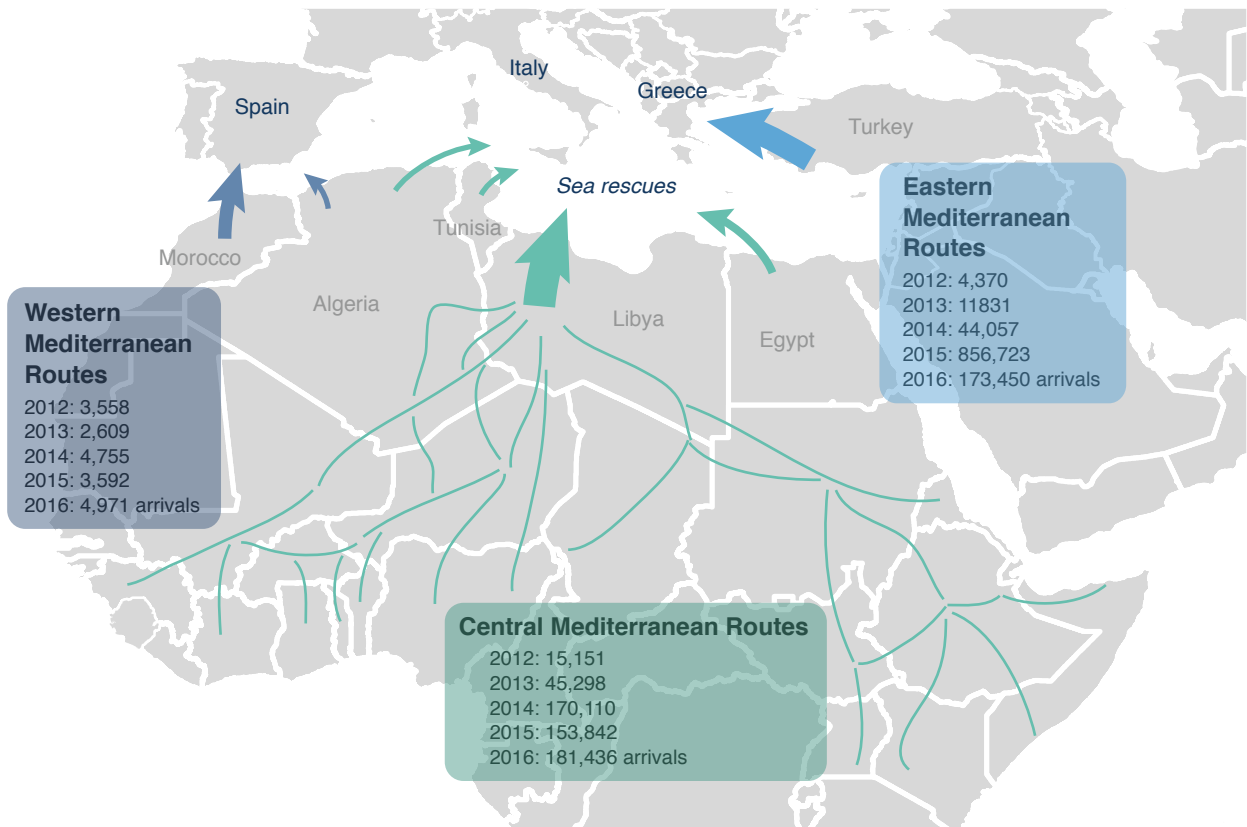
### Mixed Migration Routes and Flows to Europe

- Three main routes bring refugees and migrants to Europe: the Western Mediterranean Route (usually via Morocco to Spain), the Central Mediterranean Route (usually via Libya to Italy) and the Eastern Mediterranean Route (usually via Turkey to Greece).
- The Central Mediterranean Route is currently the most active and accounts for the largest number of people crossing by sea to Europe.
- Libya is by far the preferred jumping off point for refugees and migrants from Africa hoping to reach Europe; yet it is particularly unsafe.
- In recent years, movements by sea from Libya to Europe have increased and the indications are that it is likely to stay this way. In addition to Libya's strategic location, conflicts and instability in the country have hindered border control and created an environment where smuggling networks can flourish. At the same time, interviews established that instability has pushed refugees and migrants settled in Libya to leave, attempting to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe.
- Most refugees and migrants arrive irregularly in Libya through Sudan (for those from East Africa), Niger (for those from West and Central Africa), or, to a lesser extent, Algeria (for those from West Africa). Routes through Sudan sometimes cross into Chad and routes through Niger in some cases pass through Algeria.
- Regardless of the route used, those coming to Libya form mixed migration flows, meaning that people with different backgrounds and motivations travel together along the same routes.

.....

**1.** Key informants interviewed included smugglers, local and national-level authorities, civil society organisations (CSOs), and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) supporting refugees and migrants, diplomats, community leaders, detention centre managers, border guards and coast guards.

## Overview of the main migration routes to Europe



## Profiles of Refugees and Migrants Passing Through Libya

- The total number of refugees and migrants in Libya (whether in transit or settled in the country) does not appear to have decreased in recent years. Ongoing conflict since 2014 might have pushed numerous refugees and migrants settled in Libya to leave, but increasing numbers also seem to be arriving.
- The profiles and nationalities of arrivals in Libya have evolved in the past few years. There seems to be a decrease from East Africa but an increase from West Africa.
- While Syrians used to transit through Libya on their way to Italy,<sup>2</sup> this was no longer the case in 2016. Most Syrians now take the Eastern Mediterranean Route to reach Europe.
- Foreign nationals coming to Libya are predominantly young, single men with a low level of education. A majority reports moving to or migrating through Libya for economic reasons. However, profiles vary. Refugees and migrants can be grouped into four loose categories:
  - Nationals of neighbouring countries (Niger, Chad, Sudan, Egypt and Tunisia) mostly report travelling to Libya for economic reasons. They often intend to stay in Libya as opposed to crossing the Mediterranean to reach Europe. Their migration is often temporary (a few months to a few years) and they may come and go several times.

.....

<sup>2</sup> Syrians were the first nationality to come to Libya and travel on the Central Mediterranean Route in 2015.



- Nationals of West and Central African countries come mainly from Nigeria, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Senegal, Ghana, Mali and Cameroon. Most of them report having left for economic reasons. They are young and vulnerable to ill-treatment.
  - Nationals of East African countries (Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan),<sup>3</sup> report having left their countries of origin because of political persecution, conflict and economic distress. They tend to transit quickly through Libya on their way to Europe.
  - Nationals from outside Africa usually originate from non-neighbouring Arab countries. They are often fleeing conflict and are more prone to travel as family units. They tend to be skilled and have a higher level of education. Syrians, Palestinians and Iraqis form the bulk of respondents from this group.
- Trafficking for sexual exploitation seems to be increasing, affecting Nigerian and Cameroonian women in particular.
  - The number of Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC)<sup>4</sup> travelling alone in Libya is rising, now representing some 14% of total arrivals in Europe via the Central Mediterranean Route, mainly from Eritrea, The Gambia and Nigeria.
  - Dire economic circumstances, a lack of job opportunities, the political and security situation and human rights abuses are the main reasons for refugees and migrants in Libya to leave their countries of origin.
  - Not all those coming to Libya intend to go to Europe: about half of them claim they wish to remain there either permanently or temporarily, before returning to their countries of origin. Most of those who intend to stay are drawn to the country's job opportunities. However, the lack of stability, security and rule of law, the economic crisis and widespread abuse and exploitation pushes some of these to also attempt to reach Europe.

## Smuggling

- Almost all refugees and migrants coming to Libya irregularly seek the help of smugglers or criminal networks. Only migrants from Sudan, Niger and Chad traveling to Libya for seasonal work sometimes cross the border without.
- Smuggling can take very different forms, from highly-structured, hierarchical transnational organisations to loosely-connected, informal, horizontal networks.
- The smuggling industry is currently undergoing rapid expansion in Libya. Smuggling networks are dynamic, in constant evolution and, it would appear, increasingly professional.
- Smuggling networks can involve a variety of stakeholders and intermediaries. Sea crossings are often organised from coastal areas by different smuggling networks than those who help people to move up through the country on land.
- Armed groups dominate the smuggling and trafficking business. Their profiles and tribal backgrounds vary according to the region and specific leg of the journey.

.....

**3.** Note that Sudan also falls into the category “neighbouring countries”. Some refugees and migrants from Sudan intend to cross to Europe and can be found along the same smuggling routes as refugees and migrants from East Africa, while others come as neighbours to work in Libya for a while before going back to their country. **4.** UASC refers to children (persons under the age of 18) who are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for them.

- Smuggling costs for refugees and migrants fluctuate based on factors including nationalities, perceived economic status, the level of service required and the smuggling network itself.
- Respondents indicated that smuggling prices to and through Libya have increased (reportedly by at least 30%) in the past couple of years, due in part to the clear deterioration of the security situation in Libya, the multiplication of smuggling intermediaries and the high inflation, liquidity and foreign currency crises in Libya.

## The Journey

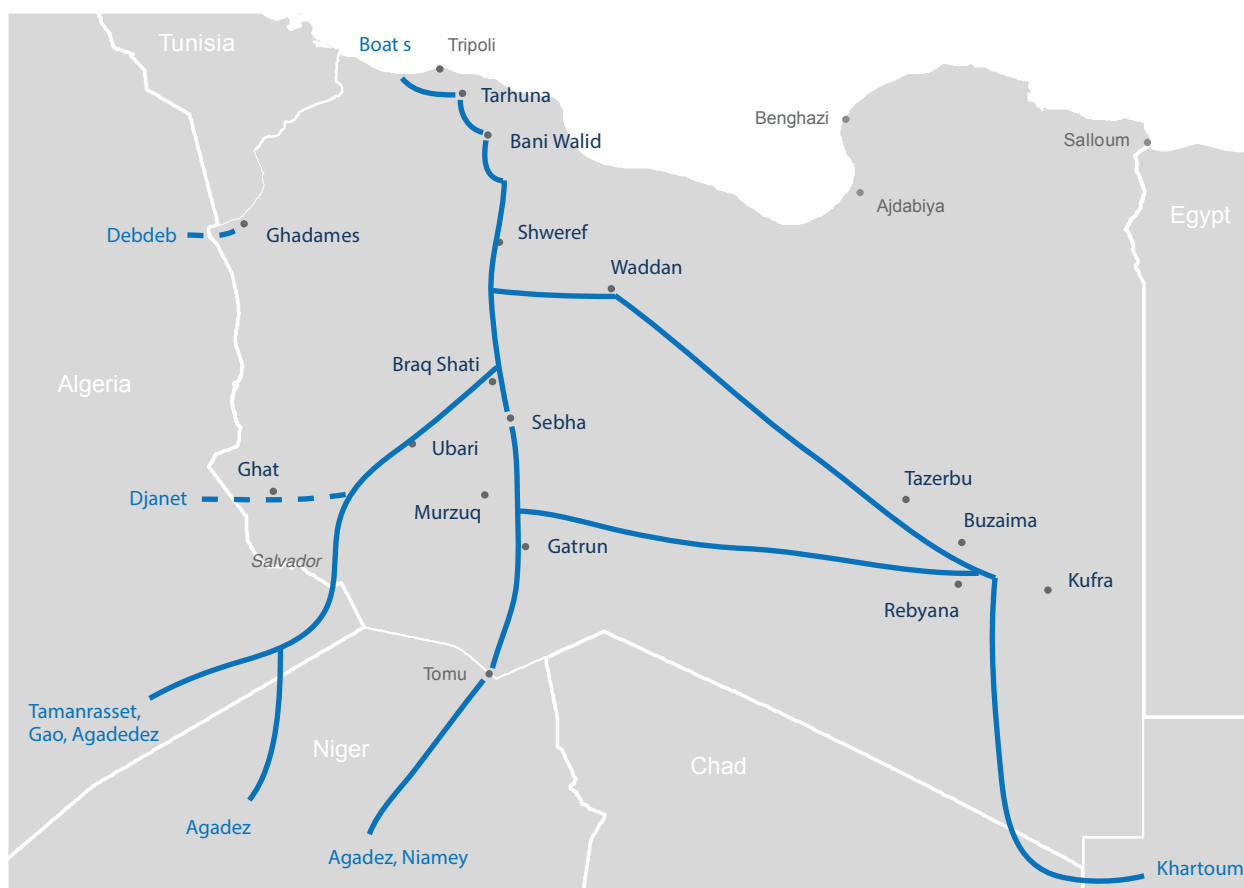
There are a wide array of routes, price scales and quality options for refugees and migrants in Libya. However, two principal types of journey are evident:

- “Organised” journeys are akin to a complete travel package deal from country of origin to country of destination.
  - The whole journey is taken care of by a transnational, structured smuggling network. Those smuggled are provided with basic accommodation and food, and do not deal directly with intermediaries.
  - Costs for this type of journey are particularly high (often around USD 5,000 from the country of origin to the Libyan coast). Refugees and migrants pay for the whole trip at once, in some cases through international wire transfers from relatives or community members in Europe or America.
  - This type of journey is mostly undertaken from East Africa.
  - People on an organised journey usually transit through Libya as quickly as possible on their way to Europe and seldom stop in Libyan cities. The trip from their countries of origin to the coast usually does not take longer than two to three weeks.
- “Step-by-step” journeys are fragmented into several legs, and are organised by refugees and migrants themselves.
  - Different smugglers are used for each leg of the journey. Refugees and migrants pay the smuggler in charge of each leg separately in cash before departure. Food and accommodation are often not included.
  - Those travelling stop between each leg of the journey to work or receive money from relatives to fund the next leg.
  - The overall journey from country of origin to the Libyan coast takes much longer than the “organised” version, often several months.
  - This type of journey is mostly undertaken by West and Central Africans.
  - Smugglers might know each other and redirect their clients to the next person they need to carry on with their journey. However, they are not part of structured and hierarchal smuggling networks.
  - Step-by-step journeys are generally significantly cheaper than organised journeys, yet prices vary widely.
- Most refugees and migrants interviewed in Libya said they learned about the route and its risks from friends, acquaintances or members of their community. Levels of information vary according to the country of origin, but overall, a significant number of respondents knew little about details such as how long it the sea journey to Europe would take or how much it would cost.

## Routes within Libya

- The main entry points into Libya have not changed in recent years. Refugees and migrants from East Africa usually cross the Sudanese border south-east of Kufra, while refugees and migrants from West and Central Africa mostly arrive from Niger to the south of Sebha. Other entry points include Ras Jedir at the Tunisian border, Ghat or Ghadames at the Algerian border, and Salloum at the Egyptian border.
- The routes within Libya have evolved since 2013, however, with the northeast of the country now largely avoided because of recurrent fighting. At the time of research, people rarely passed through or stopped in Benghazi or Ajdabiya and those going from East Africa to the Libyan coast travelled through the Kufra area to Bani Walid directly, or to Sebha.
- Those transiting now stop less than they used to. They are also less inclined to stay for long periods of time in the south of Libya, due in part to the many conflicts that the region has known in the past few years.
- Tripoli remains the main city people stop in to seek work and ways to reach Europe. However, Bani Walid is emerging as a new stop-off point en route to the coast. In the South, Sebha is the preferred hub, while transit through Kufra city has decreased.
- The main departure points by sea across the Mediterranean are Sabratha, Surman, Garabuli, Zawiya and to a lesser extent Tajoura and Gargaresh – all located on the north-western coast.

### Overview of the main migration routes through Libya





## MIXED MIGRATION IN THE SOUTH

### Refugee and Migrant Communities

- Refugees and migrants usually only stay a few days to a maximum of two months in the South before heading for northern Libya.
- Respondents in the southern cities of Sebha, Kufra, Ghatrun, Murzuq, Ubari and Ghat reported staying in shared accommodation in specific neighbourhoods, depending on the tribal background of the smugglers used.
- Relatively few refugees and asylum seekers reside in the South.<sup>5</sup> Most refugees and asylum seekers settled in Libya (as opposed to transiting through it) are Palestinians, Syrians and Iraqis who arrived many years or decades ago. They are employed and well-integrated, and usually live in northern urban centres.
- People on organised journeys transiting through the South stay for very short period of times in smuggler-controlled locations often on the outskirts of cities, and are particularly vulnerable. They are barely visible and difficult to reach.

### Vulnerabilities

- People travelling along the western or eastern routes to and through Libya face harsh environmental conditions, a lack of rule of law and prevalence of criminal networks, unsafe means of transportation (pick-up trucks and rubber boats for instance), and minimal or no access to food, water and medical support.
- Along the route, they often fall victims to extortion and ill-treatment including being insulted, beaten, robbed, or detained until they paid more money. Some end up being subject to trafficking, forced labour, sexual violence and exploitation.
- In Libya, respondents cited additional issues – many of which attributable to the current instability – such as: insecurity and armed violence, racism and discrimination against people of sub-Saharan origin, lack of livelihood, accommodation, healthcare and education opportunities, as well as the degradation of the economic situation.
- Vulnerabilities vary depending on country of origin.
  - In the South, Sudanese, Nigeriens and Chadians are reportedly mostly settled, integrated and therefore less vulnerable. Syrians, Palestinians and Iraqis in the North are in a comparable situation: they are usually well settled but they do face specific difficulties such as administrative obstacles when renewing official documents.
  - Eritreans, Somalis and Ethiopians are usually only in transit through the South, in most cases using “organised journeys” offered by transnational and structured smuggling networks. They are vulnerable because they are under the constant control of smugglers during their stay in Libya and it is difficult for them to reach support organisations. They are thought to be at particular risk of trafficking, as trafficking networks that operate in North Africa tend to offer the kind of full package journeys they purchase.

.....

**5.** Note that this key finding is specific to refugees and asylum seekers, as opposed to migrants.

The high cost of the “organised journey” packages also means that large debts may be built up, increasing the risk of exploitation and coercion for debt repayment.

- West and Central Africans seem to be the main victims of abuse and ill-treatment by smugglers and the local population. They are usually younger than other refugees and migrants, less educated, less skilled and possess fewer resources.

## Supporting Refugees and Migrants in the South

- Support to refugees and migrants is very limited in the South. Local civil society organisations (CSOs) struggle to operate and only a few provide services to refugees and migrants. Due to the multiple conflicts, most non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations (IOs) have left the region. Support by the Libyan authorities and public agencies is also scarce.
- While some refugee and migrant communities have unofficial representatives, there were only three official diplomatic missions open in the South at the time of the research.<sup>6</sup> Some respondents indicated being reluctant to interact with these for a variety of reasons, including conditions in their country of origin, irregular entry or presence in Libya or reports that some official representatives might collaborate with smugglers. Of note here is that refugees would not normally seek consular protection and assistance from the authorities of their country of origin. Depending on the root causes and specific circumstances of flight, contacting diplomatic or consular authorities might put refugees at risk.
- Approximately half of respondents in Libya declared having been directly supported by other refugees and migrants in the country.
- A large majority of refugees and migrants interviewed in Libya had access to a functioning phone at all times, regardless of their country of origin, and communicated regularly with their relatives. Internet access, on the other hand, was far less widespread and more irregular.
- Numerous gaps were identified in service delivery and assistance, including direct humanitarian and medical assistance and protection against trafficking and other human rights violations. The availability of information on the rights of refugees and migrants was also severely lacking as was legal and other support with administrative processes, such as obtaining/renewing official documents.

## CONCLUSIONS

Mixed migratory movements to Libya and from Libya to Europe appear to have significantly increased in 2016. While it is difficult to predict the evolution of migration flows, considerations that factor into the decision of refugees and migrants to make their way to Libya irregularly and stay in the country or leave for Europe can be categorized. Looking at these indicators, it seems likely that Libya will remain the main transit hub for refugees and migrants to reach Europe from Africa in the coming years.

.....

<sup>6</sup>. The only consulates functioning in the South at the time of research were those of Chad, Nigeria and Mali, all located in Sebha.

## Main Changes in Recent Years

With the deepening of the political and security crisis in Libya since 2013, migration dynamics in the country have known significant evolutions:

- Routes and transit hubs within Libya have changed. People no longer travel through the northeast of the country and Bani Walid has emerged as a new hub.
- Countries of origin and profiles of refugees and migrants have evolved. In particular, flows from West Africa have increased, involving individuals usually travelling “step-by-step”.
- Refugees and migrants are less likely to seek to settle in Libya or stop in Libyan cities for more than a few weeks (in particular in the South).
- The smuggling industry has grown increasingly professional and transnational smuggling organizations further developed.
- Armed groups play an increasingly dominant role in the smuggling industry.
- Smuggling prices have generally risen.
- Refugees and migrants making the journey to and within Libya are more vulnerable, while support services have decreased and the security situation has deteriorated. In particular, fewer CSOs, NGOs and IOs are able to continue actively supporting refugees and migrants on the ground, especially in the South.

Some aspects have remained unchanged however, including the routes people take to reach Libya, entry points into the country and the fact that all flows are mixed, involving individuals from very different backgrounds and with different motivations travelling alongside each other in search of safety, protection or livelihood opportunities.

## Implications of Lack of Service Provision and Protection of Refugees and Migrants

The recent evolutions identified above have implications for protection and service provision from the international community, such as the following.

- Since those travelling through Libya are highly mobile, they would be best reached through mobile teams. In the South in particular, vulnerable individuals tend to be difficult to reach and to stay in the region for short periods of time only, thus a permanent centre would not be, in its own, sufficient to answer their needs.
- Smugglers of different backgrounds use different roads, tracks, transit cities and neighbourhoods within Libya, so protection interventions must cover large geographical areas, rather than just targeting specific cities.
- As routes and transit hubs within Libya may evolve quickly given the extreme volatility of the political and security context, operational locations need to be regularly re-assessed.
- Refugees and migrants have become less visible, in particular those traveling on “organised journeys”, who remain under the control of smugglers throughout their stay in Libya and are usually held in private locations on the outskirts of cities. This means cooperation with local civil society is essential to access vulnerable individuals and provide them with support – especially given that the international community is often forced to operate remotely due to the current instability in Libya.
- Refugees and migrants are often unable to reach out for support themselves, because they do not have freedom

of movement, they experience a language barrier, they lack reliable information on support available, or they are concerned about the intentions of those providing support. It is therefore necessary to proactively reach out to them and supplement information centres with methods of dissemination that work with current dynamics.

- Since migration flows are mixed and specific circumstances in Libya make it difficult to distinguish refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, comprehensive response and referral mechanisms are paramount.
- Humanitarian interventions need to be coordinated across borders routes from countries of origin to destination since the risks and vulnerabilities of migrants are not particular to the countries they find themselves in.
- Given the current political context in Libya, refugees and migrants who came regularly to Libya or whose situation was regularized in the past need support renewing official documentation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNHCR AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS SUPPORTING REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN LIBYA

### Direct Humanitarian Assistance for Refugees and Migrants in Libya

- Provide direct relief in the form of mobile joint interventions in key hubs in the South (Sebha, Ubari, Gatrún, Murzuq, Bani Walid, Rebyana, Tazerbu, and Kufra for instance), where assistance could be delivered weekly or bi-weekly.
- In addition to health care, food and non-food items (e.g. hygiene kits), direct assistance should include psychosocial support, counselling services and temporary shelter.
- Accompany border monitoring and rescue operations (after conducting due diligence checks) to provide support to refugees and migrants stranded in the desert, while raising awareness of patrols of the human rights, needs and vulnerabilities of refugees and migrants.
- Provide support to local communities/stakeholders on the management of human remains in accordance with international standards.
- Support the renewal of documentation and other administrative processes, in particular for established non-national communities in Libya and those who wish to remain in the country.

### Information Sharing and Referrals for Refugees and Migrants in Libya

- Inform refugees and migrants about support provided by the different organisations active on the issue, their rights, as well as available legal pathways to protection or migration.
- Establish referral mechanisms to CSOs, INGOs, IOs and authorities and maintain an updated roster of those actively providing support.
- Support the establishment of self-help support mechanisms and trustworthy community networks, committees and organisations of refugees and migrants in Libya.

- Provide information on the risks of irregular migration by sea or land as well as policy changes in transit countries and in Europe to allow refugees and migrants to make informed decisions.
- Engage with diaspora communities in destination countries to encourage them to communicate on available legal pathways and protection services, the risks of irregular movements and living conditions in Europe in order to manage expectations.<sup>7</sup>

## Advocacy and Awareness Raising for Libyan Authorities and Citizens

- Promote the development of a migration management framework that is sensitive to the protection needs of refugees and other vulnerable populations; advocate for the decriminalisation of irregular migration.
- Advocate for the development of a functioning asylum system in the country, including early identification of persons in need of international protection, adequate reception facilities, durable solutions, and clear allocation of roles and responsibilities of the different institutions in charge of migration and asylum.
- Advocate on the necessity to prosecute smugglers and enforce laws against trafficking.
- Continue efforts with authorities to ensure that the certificates<sup>8</sup> given by UNHCR are respected and provide the protection that they should.
- Raise the awareness of authorities in direct contact with mixed migration flows about the legal differences between refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, and imperative of respect of the human rights of all.
- Advocate for decent conditions in detention facilities as well as for alternatives to detention, with an immediate priority being the release of those most vulnerable.
- Conduct awareness-raising media campaigns targeting the general public in Libya with information about refugees and migrants and their rights, to reduce racism, discrimination, exploitative practices and misconceptions.
- Encourage civil society to engage more with refugees and migrants, in particular in the case of CSOs already active with internally displaced persons (IDPs).

.....

<sup>7</sup>. Note that these recommendations can only be truly efficient if they go hand in hand with the development of legal alternatives to irregular migration and enhanced access to international protection when necessary. <sup>8</sup>. In Libya, UNHCR provides basic documentation following registration in the form of Attestation Certificates mentioning that the bearer is a person of concern to UNHCR. In 2016, a total of 1,850 individuals were registered and therefore provided with Attestation Certificates.

