



HGRA

EnHancing manaGement and studies
on migRation issues in LibyA

Understanding Smuggling Routes at the Tunisian- Libyan Border



Co-funded by
the European Union

ABOUT HGRA

About the project

Migration is an international phenomenon affecting several sectors of both the destination and the country of origin. EU is the most targeted destination for migrants and there are three main routes bringing refugees and migrants to it: 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 via Libya is the most active one and accounts for the largest number of people crossing by sea to Europe. In addition, Libya is both a transit and destination country.

The HGRA project is dedicated to enhancing the role of Libyan universities in addressing migration challenges comprehensively. Central to this mission is the empowerment of universities to build capabilities and prepare proficient cadres equipped to tackle migration issues effectively. Through tailored curricula, specialized training programs, and interdisciplinary initiatives, universities play a fundamental role in nurturing professionals with the expertise to navigate migration governance, policy formulation, and societal integration.

Moreover, universities serve as vital hubs for driving scientific research that directly informs evidence-based policymaking and strategic interventions in migration management. By fostering a culture of inquiry and innovation, universities contribute invaluable insights into migration dynamics, socio-economic impacts, and best practices in migration governance. This research not only enriches our understanding of migration phenomena but also equips policymakers with the knowledge needed to devise holistic and sustainable solutions to migration challenges.

In essence, the HGRA project recognizes universities as linchpins for fostering capacity building and scientific research that address migration issues comprehensively, ultimately contributing to the creation of more inclusive and resilient societies.

Document Information

Project Title

HGRA – Enhancing management and studies on migration issues in Libya

Project n.

101083015 — HGRA

Responsible Author(s)

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Understanding Smuggling Routes at the Tunisian-Libyan Border

The overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 and the prolonged political and security crisis that followed in Libya created a power vacuum and weakened state institutions.¹ This environment enabled the swift expansion of human smuggling networks, which began operating more openly and extensively across the country. These networks capitalized on the lack of effective governance and law enforcement [to facilitate the illegal movement of migrants seeking to reach Europe by sea](#). Libya's strategic location on the southern Mediterranean coast made it a central transit point for migrants, especially from sub-Saharan Africa, the Horn of Africa, and parts of the Middle East.

For generations, individuals involved in trade and transport—many of whom come from tribal or pastoral communities—have played a key role in enabling the movement of people across the Maghreb region, the Sahara Desert, and even farther afield. These traditional networks of mobility, which once supported commerce, seasonal migration, and nomadic lifestyles, have also laid the groundwork for contemporary migration routes, some of which are now exploited for irregular or clandestine travel.²

Migration facilitators were often everyday individuals residing in border zones, transit regions, or migrant-populated areas in coastal towns and cities. These individuals offered transportation or smuggling services as a means of earning a livelihood or reducing the financial burden of their own migration efforts. They included both Libyan citizens and people from other nationalities. Typically, these facilitators operated independently and did not explicitly associate themselves with armed groups or militias.

¹ Adler-Nissen, R., & Pouliot, V. (2014). Power in Practice: Negotiating the International Intervention in Libya. *European Journal of International Relations*, 20(4), 889-911.

² Bredeloup, S. and O. Pliez. (2011). The Libyan Migration Corridor, EU-US Immigration Systems, 2011/03, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, San Domenico di Fiesole (FI): European University Institute.

Thus, the scenario that emerges is complex and critical with several actors involved in smuggling operations in Libya. Recently, a specific kind of migrants smuggling appeared on the border between Libya and Tunisia. In fact, according to the FTDES, [since 2023 Tunisia intercepted more than 100,000 people fleeing the country, of whom more than 80% were from Sub-Saharan Africa](#). A significant part of these 80,000 people has been expelled from Tunisia to Algeria and Libya.³ I will now briefly analyse the practices of smuggling of migrants from Tunisia to Libya.

The process of collective expulsion in Tunisia typically begins with the arrest of individuals or groups by the Garde Nationale. In practice, these are less formal arrests and more akin to forced apprehensions, designed to consolidate migrants in a single location before transporting them to border areas. These operations function outside any legal framework—no official documentation or individual case assessments are conducted, meaning the unique situations of those detained are entirely disregarded. In this setting, [the conditions of women and children](#) a particularly worrying and there are many testimonies of the severe conditions faced by them during this collective expulsions.

These apprehensions occur in a wide variety of settings: at sea during attempted departures, in workplaces, outside banks and money transfer outlets, in public spaces, within private homes, inside prisons, and especially during operations to dismantle makeshift migrant camps in the northern outskirts of Sfax. Despite their scale and frequency, these actions lack transparency and legal safeguards, raising significant concerns about arbitrary detention and violations of migrants' rights.⁴

Because groups of prisoners often include individuals from diverse backgrounds, information about the exchanges between Tunisian sellers and Libyan buyers sometimes becomes known, particularly through translations of their conversations. Reportedly, the going rate for each person sold ranges from 40 to 300 Tunisian dinars—roughly 12 to 90 euros per individual. [These prices are not fixed](#); they depend on several factors, including the potential ransom value the person might yield, the number of people in the group, and the group's overall demographic makeup.⁵

Prisoners are typically moved under the cover of night, and during transit through residential or populated areas, they are instructed to keep their heads down. This practice is intended to conceal the operation from public view and prevent identification or public scrutiny. Prisoners often realize they are being taken toward the Libyan border by noticing road signs during the journey. The primary route used for these expulsions is the A1 highway, a major artery that links [Sfax to Ben Guerdane and on to Ras Ajdir, near the Libyan border](#). However, there are also lesser-known routes mentioned in some testimonies. One alternate path branches off from the A1 at Medenine, following P19 and then C112, passing through the Dehiba/Wazzin border area. Another route reportedly leads from P19 to C211, ultimately reaching Borj el-Khadra, a remote and strategic point where the borders of Tunisia, Libya, and Algeria converge.

³ Researchers X. (2025). *State Trafficking. Expulsion and Sale of Migrants from Tunisia to Libya*. Available: <https://statetrafficking.net/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Groups of detainees are often handed over in return for [various forms of payment, including money, hashish, and fuel, or a combination of these](#). On the Tunisian side, uniformed officials are regularly observed participating in or overseeing these exchanges. On the Libyan side, the profiles of those receiving the prisoners differ. Some groups are described as being composed entirely of uniformed agents driving official vehicles, while others include a mix of uniformed and plainclothes armed individuals. In some instances, non-uniformed militia members are the ones taking custody, indicating a complex network of both state and non-state actors involved in these transactions.

The widespread abuse of the human rights of migrants and refugees in Libya is well-documented and has been extensively reported by leading [international organizations and human rights bodies](#). The initial destination for many trafficked migrants in Libya is reportedly Al Assah prison, a facility under the control of the Libyan Border Guard and the Department for Combating Irregular Migration (DCIM), which operates within the Ministry of the Interior in Tripoli.⁶ This prison has already been highlighted in the June 2024 [report by the UN Human Rights Council](#) as a major site of serious human rights abuses, marking it as one of the central locations linked to the mistreatment of migrants.

The increasing reliance on criminal networks as instruments of migration control in Libya underscores the profound complexities inherent in contemporary global migration governance. This phenomenon necessitates a critical reassessment of existing migration management frameworks and a rigorous examination of their legal and ethical underpinnings. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics is imperative not only for policymakers but also for scholars, practitioners, and all stakeholders committed to safeguarding the rights, security, and dignity of individuals in migration contexts.

⁶ Researchers X. (2025). *State Trafficking. Expulsion and Sale of Migrants from Tunisia to Libya*. Available: <https://statetrafficking.net/>



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