



Expert Comment

The Libyan coastline is the departure point for many migrants heading to Europe. Credit: lachris77/Bigstockphoto.com

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The links between illegal migration and organised crime

Abdelhafid Dib

Illegal migrants are often blamed for increasing crime rates in host countries. Blame is frequently assigned without evidence and without any efforts to understand migrants' plight. Why do people decide to emigrate? Do they have a desire to do so? Or are they reluctant to leave their native countries and families for distant and illusive dreams of success?

With the aspirations of many immigrants firmly focused on Europe as their final destination and on hopes of settling permanently, the topic of migration has become a major challenge for political leaders and an obstacle to the implementation of political agendas. Illegal immigration is a phenomenon that politicians from different countries are being forced to face together and one that necessitates defining a common strategy.

Illegal immigrants are victims of corruption, coercion, and bad governance

The fertile ground for criminal activities connected to illegal migration, such as people smuggling and trafficking, is created by factors such as bad governance, coercion, and corruption. These conditions threaten peace, stability, and good governance, cause human suffering, and lead to massive illegal migration, especially towards Europe.

While corruption is a universal phenomenon, it is particularly endemic in developing countries, where it is a barrier to economic development, an obstacle to good governance, and prevents restricts the rule of law. Corruption also enables criminality and terrorist

activities. According to the World Bank brief, 'Combating Corruption' (2017), the total of bribes paid each year is \$1.5 trillion, which equates to 9% of global trade.¹

Corruption and money laundering threaten the economic and political stability of concerned countries, as well as international security. Organised crime emerges and flourishes in these conditions to become a permanent threat to all citizens, as well as to state institutions and to economic and social stability more broadly.

Migrants are naturally *victims* of conflicts, famine, and coercion, and at the same time, can easily be exploited and used by criminals. Worse, migrants may be forced to join organised criminal gangs and networks. Such networks are well organised and usually keep close contact with operatives in foreign countries. These groups exercise a powerful influence on the movement of illegal migrants.

Organised criminal networks have become well-armed, well-trained, and equipped with advanced technology like digital phones. Some groups also possess sophisticated light weaponry. When recruited into such organisations, illegal migrants can end up contributing to the formation of militias. The collapse of the state in Libya is a case in point.

Furthermore, organised crime usually takes advantage of the hopelessness of disenchanting youth. The opportunity is there to create a lucrative human market and the high-risk nature of illegal gains drives the financial rewards higher.

Illegal immigrants risk their lives to reach Europe

North Africa, a source of many Europe-bound migrants, is both a transit point and a destination for illegal African immigrants. The desire to migrate to Europe remains high, especially among young people aged 22 to 35.

¹ The brief includes further details on how corruption reduces efficiency and increases inequality. Estimates show that the cost of corruption equals more than 5 percent of global GDP (\$2.6 trillion, World Economic Forum) with over \$1 trillion paid in bribes each year (World Bank).

There are signs that this migratory pressure was renewed in 2017, as Europe's border agency Frontex told *The Washington Post* reporter Sudarsan Raghavan on 6 June 2018. Increasing numbers of Algerians, Moroccans, and Tunisians were believed to be among irregular arrivals in Italy and Spain. The number of Tunisians arriving in Italy in the first nine months of 2017, for instance, was more than double those recorded for the entirety of 2016, according to Frontex reporting (2017a).

The Maghreb countries remain a transit point for Sub-Saharan and West African migrants fleeing conflicts. This situation has dramatically intensified since the breakdown of Libya's central government in 2011. In the following five years, the majority of immigrants crossing illegally into Europe came from North Africa. In 2016, 89% of the estimated 182,000 illegal migrants recorded along the Central Mediterranean route departed from Libya, according to risk analysis by Frontex in February the following year (2017b).

Migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa in general and West Africa especially have shown great determination in making the crossing to Europe. Upon arrival at coastal departure points, they are at the mercy of gangs, militias, and smugglers. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported in April 2018 that more than 8,000 people died in 2016 and 2017 while attempting to cross the Mediterranean (UNHCR, 2018).

From 2011 to 2017, more than 800,000 people crossed the Mediterranean from Africa to reach Europe illegally. Two-thirds came from Sub-Saharan Africa, according to Frontex. Most of these illegal migrants passed through Libya where militias rule the country and where the distance to European shores is as short as 180 miles. The cost of passage from Libya is only \$420, compared to Tunisia and Morocco, where Frontex reports it is \$3,500 and \$3,700 respectively.²

² Frontex reported 821,355 detected crossings along the Central Mediterranean, Western Mediterranean, and Western Africa routes from 2011-17, 531,553 of which were reported as undertaken by Sub-Saharan African nationals. See Frontex, 'Detections of Illegal Border-Crossings' Statistics (2018).

In coming next decades, Africa will witness remarkable demographic growth and its expanding population is expected to double to more than 2.5 billion people by 2050 (Parry and Bazinet, 2014).³ Africa's population is young, with almost 60% of the population aged under 25. Tough economic and social conditions will continue to drive many to migrate in search of a better life.

Conclusion

Dealing with mass illegal migration from Africa is a task that must be addressed collectively by all concerned states. Illegal migration applies significant pressure on political leaders in African, European, and Maghreb countries.

Maintaining border security and other prevention measures requires significant funding. For this reason, all concerned states must share the burden in order to minimise both costs and risk and in order to curb the large number of illegal migrants causing social and economic problems and instability in host countries.

Historically, North African countries have served as a gateway for the vast majority of illegal African migrants seeking to reach Europe. The increase in illegal migration has been dramatically influenced by the total collapse of Gaddafi's regime in Libya in 2011. This resulted in incredible chaos and led 800,000 migrants residing in Libya to flee to escape from the brutal civil war.

The resulting political vacuum created an opportunity for smuggling and trafficking networks to turn Libya into a regional hub for illegal migration. Illegal migrants transiting through Libya face widespread violence and severe abuse, according to reports by the International Organization for Migration in 2016.

³ According to media reports, migrants with money can hire a boat for \$1,500 from Morocco and sail across the Strait of Gibraltar. For \$3,700, migrants can be smuggled in the bodywork of cars or boats and pass from Morocco through to the Spanish North African enclaves of Melilla or Ceuta. See Parry and Bazinet (2014).

In my view, European states urgently need to create an international fund by providing 1% of their gross domestic product for the economic development of the poorest destination countries and for the promotion of democratic legitimacy in African countries. Fighting corruption, bad governance, and refraining from supporting authoritarian regimes should be the main focus of European states wanting to curb illegal migration.

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