UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Refugees and Migrants Along the Central Mediterranean Route to Europe

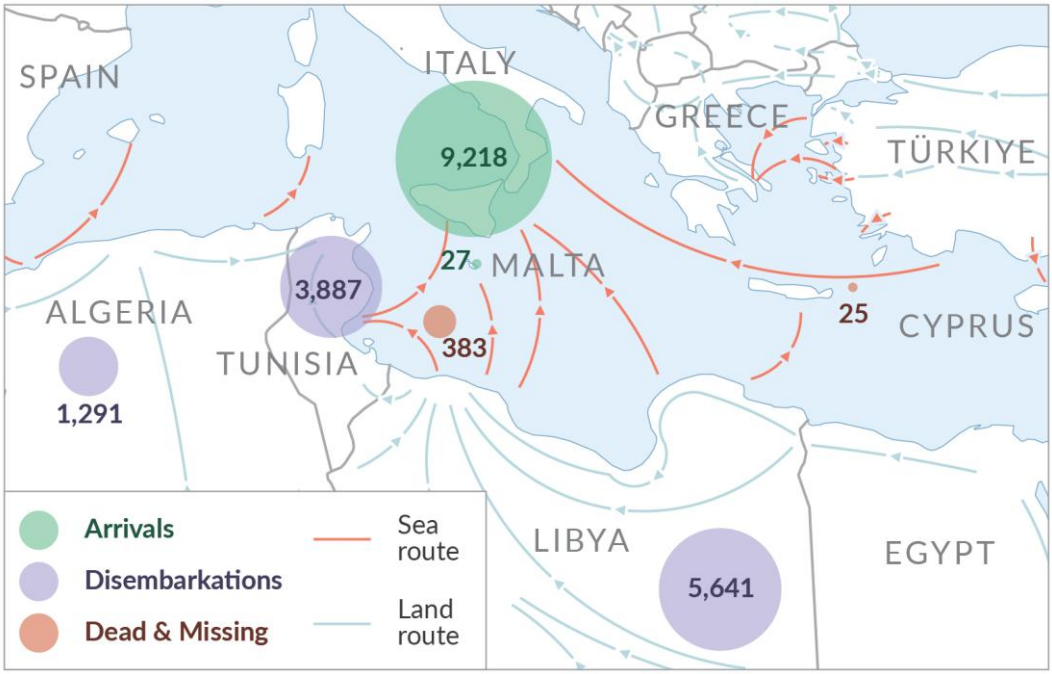
ROUTE-BASED APPROACH

(Snapshot Version)

January-March 2025

Movements towards the Central Mediterranean

The Central Mediterranean Route is one of the one of the main mixed movement corridors linking the Sahel, West Africa, East and Horn of Africa, the Middle East and South Asia to Europe. Journeys often pass through Libya, Tunisia, and to some extent Algeria and Türkiye, before attempting sea crossings to Italy or Malta. While some travel in search of better economic opportunities, many are fleeing war, violence, or persecution. Journeys involve severe protection risks, including violence, exploitation, trafficking, and life-threatening conditions at sea. Between January and March 2025, about 19,150 attempted to cross the sea primarily from North Africa along with one boat that reached Italy from Türkiye. Nearly half reached Europe, mostly Italy, while around 9,500 were intercepted or rescued and disembarked in Libya and Tunisia. At least 383 people were reported dead or missing.

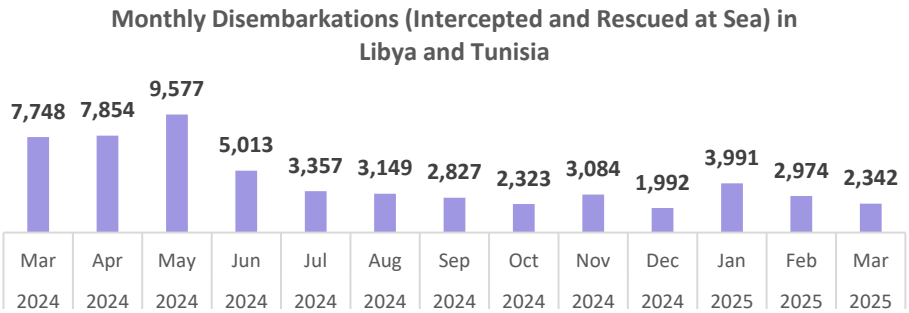


Map of maritime movement and land movement analysis: Data sources: UNHCR, UNCS, public sources.

Central Mediterranean Route – Q1 2025 Overview

In the first quarter of 2025, maritime movements along the Central Mediterranean Route continued the downward trend observed since mid-2024, with total departures falling by 38% compared to Q1 2024. A combination of reinforced law enforcement measures to curb irregular movement in Tunisia, expanded land and sea interdiction capacity in Libya, and increased operational cooperation with European partners has curtailed the scale of departures and shifted smuggling dynamics along the Central Mediterranean Route.

Italy remained the main destination, receiving 9,220 arrivals (–19%), with 92% departing from Libya. Departures from Tunisia and arrivals to Malta declined markedly, consolidating the corridor around the Libya–Italy route. Despite a notable 34% reduction in reported deaths and missing persons at sea compared to the same quarter last year, movements persist, underlining the continued need for enhanced search-and-rescue coordination, protection-sensitive border management, and expanded safe pathways. Land movements remain harder to quantify due to data gaps but generally involve forced displacement and mixed and onward movements in West and Central Africa as well as East and Horn of Africa, onward journeys towards North Africa, and movements between countries in North Africa.

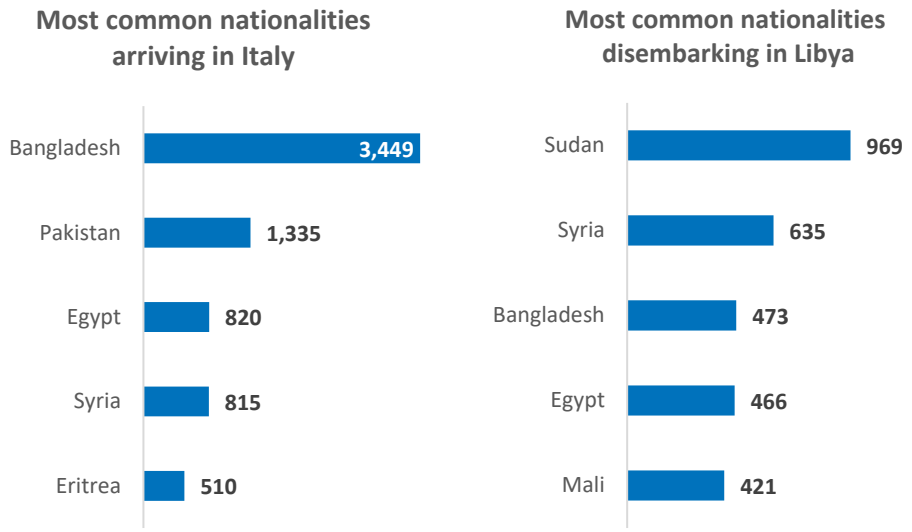


Profiles of Persons on the Move

In early 2025, movements along the Central Mediterranean reflected a mixed caseload combining refugees and migrants with varied drivers. Nearly half originated from countries affected by conflict and violence, political instability, or serious human rights concerns, like Sudan, Syria, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Mali, confirming the route's role as a vital channel for those in need of international protection rather than solely irregular migration. Based on EU asylum data for relevant nationalities, UNHCR estimates that some 36% of those who arrived in Europe via the Central Mediterranean Sea in 2024 may have been in need of international protection. At the same time, significant numbers from Bangladesh and Pakistan highlight economic and social migration drivers.

Between January and March 2025, 9,220 people arrived in Italy via this route, mainly from Bangladesh (3,449) and Pakistan (1,335) framing the largest groups, followed by Egyptians, Syrians, Eritreans, Sudanese, and Ethiopians. Many cited conflict, insecurity and violence and human rights abuses; others were driven by economic hardship, family reasons, or lack of services. Compared to early 2024, arrivals show a sharper dominance of South Asian nationals, fewer Tunisians and Guineans, and a continued decline in the share of women. Around 80% were men, 16% were children, particularly among Egyptians and Eritreans, underscoring the child protection needs.

The majority of persons who are intercepted or rescued at sea and returned to Libya share the same nationalities as overall departures, but face heightened protection risks upon return, including exposure to abuse, exploitation, and arbitrary detention.



Protection Risks

What are the conditions along the journey?

Much attention is focused on the dangers of crossing the Mediterranean Sea, however, the journey to North Africa and Türkiye is often marked by extreme and repeated forms of violence and abuse, including rape, torture, human trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, arbitrary detention and forced expulsions. Refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants moving North during the first quarter of 2025 traversed an increasingly insecure corridor stretching from conflict-affected Sudan through Chad, Egypt, and the Sahara into Libya, Mali, and Algeria.

In early 2025, refugees fleeing Sudan, now the world's largest internal displacement crisis, travelled through dangerous routes via Chad, Egypt, and the Sahara to Libya, Mali, and Algeria. Many, especially women and children, get stranded in overcrowded remote border areas like eastern Chad. Others face high smuggler fees, widespread violence, arbitrary detention, trafficking, expulsions, and other grave abuses at the hands of criminal gangs, armed groups, smugglers, and state authorities. In Chad, for example, 84% of newly arrived families reported at least one violation, such as physical assault or extortion. At the same time, more than 114,000 people reportedly returned from Egypt to Sudan since January 2024, in adverse circumstances.

Serious human rights violations are also widespread along the route:

- In **Libya**, more than 5,900 refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants are held in official detention centers, with an estimated 8,000 more in unofficial sites, typically in dire and inhumane conditions.

- **Expulsions from Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria** frequently carried out without due process, individualized assessments, or access to protection mechanisms, leaving people stranded in remote desert areas without assistance.

What are the protection gaps along the route ?

The absence of adequate protection and assistance services along the Central Mediterranean Route undermines effective asylum and migration management. National border management and asylum systems that are protection sensitive require, as a minimum, to have adequate infrastructure and meaningful, helpful protection and assistance responses in place.

In Sudan, ongoing conflict and violence not only force displacement but also restrict humanitarian access, pushing people into the hands of smugglers. Along the Egypt–Libya border, barriers to accessing rights and basic services, and challenges to regularize one's stay in Egypt, with some choosing alternative, riskier routes to avoid arrest. Eastern Chad's overcrowded entry points expose women and girls to GBV, while the lack of civil documentation for most arrivals increases risks of statelessness and family separation. Further west, the Mali–Algeria corridor sees frequent reports of abuse and exploitation, particularly affecting unaccompanied children. Together, these risks underscore the need for safe pathways, alternatives to detention, and coordinated, protection-sensitive border management, and strengthened access to protection, assistance and solution along the route.

How are governments and other actors responding to mixed movements with protection and solutions space?

Governments, UNHCR and other stakeholders are increasingly adopting a coordinated, route-based approach to mixed and onward movements, aiming to provide earlier access to protection, assistance, solutions along key mixed and onward movement corridors. This includes initiatives like the Multi-Purpose Hub established in Tine, Chad, in April 2025, with plans for expansion. In parallel, UNHCR continues to work with authorities in Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Niger, and Chad to build on the outcomes of the 2024 regional workshop in Dakar to create a harmonized protection framework along key corridors. Additionally, in Egypt, a joint UNHCR-IOM Communications Hub is being established to offer information and support both physically and online. These efforts highlight a growing commitment to protection-centered responses throughout the mixed and onward movement journey.

What do we know about access to rights and services in host communities?

Access to rights and services in host communities along mixed movement routes remains uneven, with significant protection gaps contributing to mixed and onward movement. In Chad, the arrival of over 600,000 Sudanese refugees since 2023 overwhelmed services, especially in

border areas, despite government cooperation, leading many to continue toward Libya. In Egypt, bureaucratic delays in issuing asylum-based residence permits limit access to rights and services, prompting onward movements, often transiting via Libya. In Tunisia, the suspension of asylum access since mid-2024 left new arrivals without legal status or essential services, increasing their vulnerability and contributing to onward movements.

REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS ALONG THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE TO EUROPE

ROUTE BASED APPROACH

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