Sea Arrivals Overview

Europe Region | August 2025

Lampedusa, Italy – Four-year-old Tala from Guinea arrives at the port in Lampedusa with her mother Fatuba after being disembarked at sea. Many people arriving to Europe by sea are fleeing war and persecution, or are survivors of torture, violence or abuse experienced in their country of origin or along the route. © UNHCR / Alessandro Penso

Sea crossings towards Europe remain complex and dynamic, with ongoing high arrivals of asylum-seekers, refugees as well as migrants along the primary Mediterranean and North-West African maritime routes. In 2024, at least **187,337 total sea arrivals** were recorded by sea, while the number of people **reported dead or missing** unfortunately remained high.[1] As of end-June 2025, a total of 66,155 sea arrivals were recorded since the beginning of the year.[2] Addressing the complex challenges and risks associated with mixed movements across primary maritime routes requires robust and consistent collaboration among states.

Central to UNHCR's approach is working with national authorities and relevant stakeholders to identify alternatives to dangerous journeys and encourage sustainable responses to ensure those arriving by sea are properly identified, provided with assistance, protection and information, referrals to the appropriate channels as well as to solutions to help them rebuild their lives according to their profiles, legal status and needs. Key principles of inclusion and non-discrimination underpin efforts to safeguard access to territory, aligning with international and regional human rights and refugee standards. Recent trends and dynamics of sea arrivals in 2024 highlight **the need for responsibility-sharing and robust mechanisms** to safeguard access to territory, ensure protection, while delivering better outcomes for those on the move, affected communities and states alike.

People undertaking dangerous sea journeys face considerable risks including pushbacks[3] and dangerous deterrence practices, exploitation by human smugglers and traffickers, and shipwrecks that frequently result in loss of life, injuries or individuals missing at sea. These dangerous practices by authorities, which have been observed during border control operations in certain maritime regions, have also resulted in the tragic loss of life and missing people at sea. **Such incidents not only highlight the precarious situation of those forced to flee, but also underline gaps in effective search-and-rescue mechanisms**, which require urgent action and coordination to mitigate, prevent and respond to these challenges. UNHCR's mandate to protect refugees and stateless people is critically linked to protection at sea when people who are or may be in need of international protection are involved.

Sea journeys also pose complex challenges for receiving and transit states, which must balance humanitarian and human rights obligations with border and national security prerogatives. To support States in fulfilling their international and regional legal obligations, **UNHCR engages in advocacy, capacity-building and monitoring efforts to help ensure that responses remain protection-centred**. These efforts aim to uphold access to asylum for those in need of international protection and prevent refoulement in line with international and European human rights law and universally accepted principles and standards.

1. UNHCR has limited access at sea, therefore data on those feared dead or missing is also limited and based on secondary sources. For further information, please see UNHCR's Europe Sea Arrivals Operational Data Portal.
2. This figure is based on preliminary data and is subject to future adjustment.
3. These include various measures taken by States which result in people being summarily forced back to the country from where they attempted to cross or have crossed an international border without access to international protection or asylum procedures, or denied of any individual assessment on their protection needs, which may lead to a violation of the principle of non-refoulement.

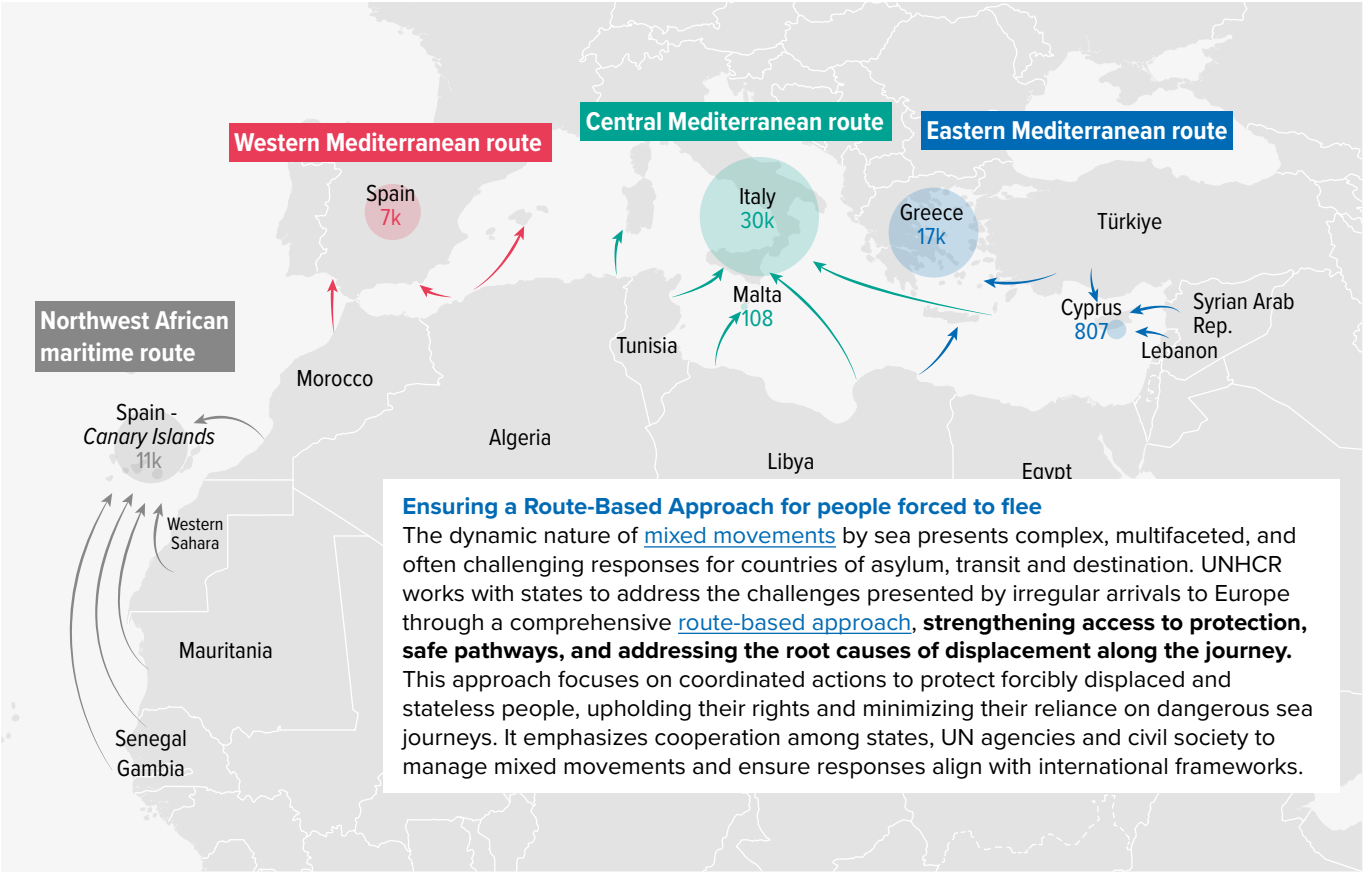
What are the primary sea routes towards Europe?

The three Mediterranean routes and the northwest African Maritime route (see Figure 1) remain the primary pathways for irregular sea arrivals amongst refugees and migrants to Europe. Each route is shaped by unique dynamics including patterns of departure, transit and arrival, necessitating context-specific interventions to support those along the routes, as well as destination countries. The primary countries of departure in North Africa include Libya and Tunisia; the primary countries of arrival—**Italy, Greece** and **Spain**—continue to be the main points for disembarkation and initial reception, requiring coordinated responses to ensure that access to protection is provided to those in need while international and regional legal obligations are upheld. **Cyprus** and **Malta** also continue to observe arrivals by sea.

In 2024, the northwest African maritime route towards Spain's Canary Islands saw a 16 per cent increase in arrivals from the year prior—with over 46,800 recorded arrivals—overtaking the Mediterranean as the primary maritime route used by refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants to reach Spain. This increase is driven by multiple factors including war, persecution and different forms of violence affecting women and children, as well as economic factors, poverty, and natural disasters in countries of origin and transit of refugees. UNHCR also observed a significant rise in international protection needs among sea arrivals in the Canary Islands, notably among women and unaccompanied children.[4]

Sea arrivals also continue along the eastern Mediterranean route from Türkiye and the Middle East towards Europe, including Cyprus and Greece. For detailed 2024 arrival figures, see Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: SEA ARRIVALS TO EUROPE IN 2024 (INDIVIDUALS)



The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

4. Departures originated primarily from Mauritania, Morocco, and Senegal. While Malian nationals represented the majority, other nationalities were also present, notably individuals from Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. Smaller numbers originated from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. Notably, despite their limited numbers, the presence of Sudanese arrivals was also seen.

What is the profile of people arriving to Europe by sea?

People arriving in Europe by sea as part of mixed movements represent diverse profiles and protection needs. These include refugees and asylum-seekers fleeing conflict, persecution, and human rights violations, as well as migrants seeking better opportunities through work, education, family reunification, or relief from extreme hardship. Drivers of irregular and unsafe sea journeys include natural disasters, food insecurity, poverty, gender and social inequalities and a lack of access to safe environments and economic opportunities. The situation is further exacerbated by the absence of sufficient and accessible safe and regular pathways for refugees and migrants, leading many to choose irregular pathways to find safety and solutions.

Women and children account for a substantial proportion of those arriving to Europe by sea, representing 11 and 23 per cent respectively, while men comprise the remainder. The top nationalities of those arriving varies by country of arrival, with Syrians, Malians, and Afghans recorded as the top three nationalities across all primary sea routes towards Europe. **Many with extreme vulnerabilities continue to be observed among arrivals**, including older people, those with disabilities, and unaccompanied children. Spain's Canary Islands observed a considerable increase in the number of unaccompanied children arriving since the third quarter of 2023, which make up approximately 7 per cent of total arrivals; as of early-2025, child protection authorities there reported the presence of 5,500 unaccompanied children across around 80 centres.

Increased arrivals of **unaccompanied children** particularly via sea routes puts the reception capacity of the receiving states under significant strain, with systems often struggling to accommodate and deliver appropriate care arrangements for the rising number of children. A recent trend in arrivals of unaccompanied children from Egypt has been observed, which in Greece leads to overcrowding in safe areas on the islands and is coupled by a deterioration of the living conditions in these safe areas. In many cases this leads to subsequent delays in registration, appointment of guardians or implementation of the best interests or care arrangements. In the Canaries, a sharp increase in the arrival of unaccompanied children led to the saturation of the child protection system and the creation of emergency centres, which do not always meet minimum standards of reception conditions. The lack of resources and overcrowding of child protection centres continues to negatively impact the identification of children with protection and other specific needs, thereby limiting an effective response to adequately meet their needs.

UNHCR teams on the ground actively monitor the situation of unaccompanied children arriving by sea, conducting assessments and interviews to understand their international protection needs. In Spain, UNHCR released a report on interviews with foreign unaccompanied children in the Canary Islands. The publication includes specific recommendations related to best interest determination, identification and referrals of children in need of international protection, communication and psychosocial support, among others.

In some countries of arrival, authorities regularly conduct age assessment to determine access to services and appropriate care arrangements for children. However, procedures and standards for these procedures can vary. This raises concerns regarding the consistent application of the principle of the best interest of the child, a core principle that should underpin all decisions affecting children. In some contexts, age assessments are used primarily as a migration management tool, rather than as part of a child-centred case management process. UNHCR notes that this may compromise the presumption of minority principle. Where possible, **UNHCR assists Governments in managing data on unaccompanied children in need of international protection** and establishing effective child protection case management systems, guided by the best interests of the child principle and meeting their protection and care needs, while undertaking advocacy to highlight protection risks faced by unaccompanied children arriving along these dangerous routes.

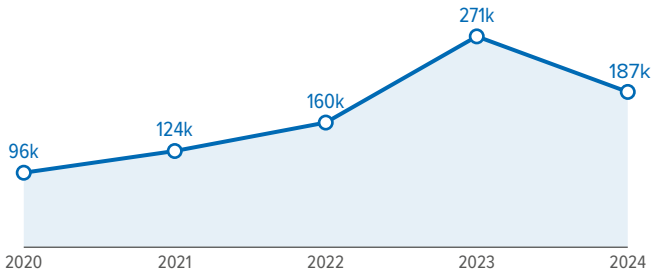
Lesvos, Greece – After fleeing the conflict in Sudan, refugees Amna and Emmanuel found safety in Lesvos. Emmanuel sees the island as a symbol of his new beginning, while Amna dreams of a future with a family and her own business. Despite hardships, they persevered and recently secured jobs at the same company. Now, they look forward to rebuilding their lives with hope and with dignity. ©UNHCR/ Angelina Tsoukala

How have sea movements to Europe evolved over time?

The overall number of people arriving to Europe by sea remains significant and broadly consistent with arrival trends from 2020 to 2024, with a peak observed in 2023 (see Figure 2). In addition to varying levels of overall irregular arrivals since—which range from 373,652 in 2016, to just under 200,000 in 2024—the routes taken by refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants to reach Europe are also fluctuating. **Movement patterns have increasingly shifted from the Mediterranean routes to the northwest African maritime route along the Atlantic Ocean**, where a high number of sea arrivals continue to be observed to Spain's Canary Islands; since August 2023, the Canaries have consistently received a growing number of sea arrivals, surpassing the Western Mediterranean as the primary sea route for refugees and migrants to reach Spain.

What has not varied are the dangers present along these sea routes, with a higher degree of dead and missing reported in recent years. Verifying the exact number of deaths is challenging, but recent estimates on fatalities highlight the urgent need for enhanced monitoring, preventive measures, and effective and coordinated search-and-rescue operations in line with the Search and Rescue (SAR) Convention[5] and other international law standards. Despite this, certain governments are adopting increasingly narrow interpretations of distress for boats carrying refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants within their search-and-rescue region, possibly limiting life-saving support. UNHCR continues to monitor such incidents and engage with States, civil society, including SAR NGOs, while alerting relevant authorities and providing assistance to survivors upon arrival in Europe, including through presence at disembarkation points where feasible.

FIGURE 2: SEA ARRIVALS (INDIVIDUALS)



Source: Europe Sea Arrivals - Operational Data Portal (UNHCR)

What are the safety risks for those undertaking dangerous sea journeys?

Near El Hierro, Canary Islands – A Spanish SAR Agency rescues a wooden boat which departed from Mauritania. ©Spanish SAR Agency/Salvamento Maritimo

Forcibly displaced people are already in particularly vulnerable situations due to the circumstances of their displacement and the traumas they face prior to embarking on irregular journeys. For many, boarding unseaworthy vessels seems like the only option to escape conflict or persecution, given a lack of safer alternatives. **These perilous journeys carry significant risks, including injury or death at sea, as well as reckless endangerment of life, exploitation and violence at the hands of smugglers and traffickers**. They also pose complex challenges for States and search-and-rescue actors, including private shipping.

Overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels operated by smugglers frequently result in high rates of fatalities due to shipwrecks and other preventable causes of death along the routes. Limited access to basic services such as clean water, food and medical care exacerbates these challenges, particularly for women, children, and individuals with specific needs, including older people and those with disabilities. Survivors of sea journeys often recount incidents of violence, abuse, and exploitation at the hands of human smugglers and traffickers. **The practices of summary forced returns and violent pushbacks further heighten protection risks for people forced to flee**. In addition to risks faced during dangerous journeys, conditions of rescue and interception also pose concern for refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants. Interception measures employed by some maritime authorities to curb irregular sea movements have increasingly involved the use of excessive force, including hazardous manoeuvres and aggressive boarding tactics. These practices not only endanger lives but may also lead to arbitrary detention at sea, should individuals be held for extended periods at sea without access to adequate protection or legal safeguards and prevented from disembarking in a timely and humane manner.

5. International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, 1979, 1405 U.N.T.S. 97

What are Governments doing to assist people arriving to Europe by sea, and how is UNHCR supporting?

States are responsible for the identification, registration, and reception of people arriving by sea, ensuring that those seeking international protection can have access to asylum procedures, as well as for referral to specialized services based on individual needs, including for survivors and victims of violence or trauma. **UNHCR underscores the need for newly arriving individuals to have access to first-line reception facilities for registration immediately upon disembarkation, as well as necessary medical care**; however, reception facilities in countries of arrival regularly operate beyond capacity, straining states' abilities to provide sufficient shelter and essential services. As such, vulnerable groups including unaccompanied children face heightened risk of neglect or exploitation in overcrowded environments. In the absence of official reception facilities at disembarkation points, prompt transfer to appropriate sites must be ensured through effective coordination among all relevant authorities. Despite ongoing efforts to provide emergency assistance, medical support and psychosocial counselling, the scale of humanitarian needs remains immense, reinforcing the urgency of sustained international cooperation and support.

Those undertaking dangerous sea journeys often face limited access to services upon arrival, while destination countries experience persistent challenges in ensuring safe disembarkation and managing reception capacities. Through its Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) approach, in many contexts UNHCR's interventions focus on providing protection support and identifying the most vulnerable among those arriving through needs assessments, as well as referral to specialized services. UNHCR regularly engages in advocacy and capacity-building to help states in strengthening their asylum capacities, including providing legal expertise and recommendations through monitoring mechanisms.[6] UNHCR also promotes a **route-based approach,** collaborating with governments in ensuring international protection and solutions for people forced to flee, whilst providing assistance to displaced individuals in transit countries, addressing the full spectrum of protection needs and identifying opportunities for migrants along key routes.

UNHCR consistently advocates with states to safeguard the rights of those seeking international protection and prevent instances of refoulement in line with international law, while working with national authorities to promote efficient, human-rights compliant, and protection-sensitive border management. **Further efforts are needed to address the root causes that lead people to undertake dangerous sea journeys, while ensuring access to territory, asylum and the swift identification of those with vulnerabilities for referral to appropriate services**. In parallel, UNHCR works to promote safe and legal pathways to reduce reliance on dangerous sea crossings and mitigate associated risks.

Despite a critical decrease in funding, UNHCR is present at key points of arrival in Europe, supporting the work of authorities, NGOs and other actors, and providing information on asylum and other rights to new arrivals, as well as individual counselling to ensure they are aware of available support mechanisms. However, when circumstances do not allow for access to disembarkation points, UNHCR works to maintain a presence at reception centres where those arriving irregularly are registered, monitoring their situation to ensure compliance with international standards, and intervening where necessary to address any protection gaps – including in instances where people face arrest or detention.

Critically, the current funding landscape is limiting UNHCR's ability to maintain consistent field presence at disembarkation sites and reception facilities. The scaling down of personnel and resources at arrival points—particularly on frontline islands—will negatively impact timely identification of vulnerable individuals including unaccompanied children, survivors of trafficking and those with specific needs. The funding crisis will also limit the provision of accurate, life-saving information on international protection, legal pathways and available services. Unless critical funding is secured, gaps in referral mechanisms and access to protection will impact the most vulnerable, thereby increasing the risk of rights violations and hinder early engagement necessary for ensuring effective asylum procedures. **Sustained, predictable funding remains crucial for UNHCR to fulfil its protection mandate and support national systems in responding effectively and humanely to those arriving by sea.**

Las Palmas, Canary Islands – UNHCR staff provide information about asylum to individuals recently arriving in the Canary Islands at a center for women and children in Las Palmas.

© UNHCR/Lurdes Calvo

6. This includes but is not limited to restrictive border practices and bi-lateral transfer agreements.

UNHCR's Recommendations

In the line with the route-based approach, **UNHCR underlines the need to strengthen access to protection and safe pathways along the migratory routes**, while addressing the root causes of displacement.

Risks during irregular sea crossings by refugees and migrants continue to be immense. **UNHCR holds that it is essential to adopt a humanitarian and precautionary approach when identifying and responding to situations of distress at sea.** States and relevant actors should ensure that their actions translate into good-faith implementation of the obligations set out under international law, particularly those relating to search and rescue. The focus must remain on safeguarding human life and dignity at every stage of the response.

To that end, **current capacity for search and rescue operations along the Mediterranean and Northwest African maritime routes must be strengthened.** This includes reinforcing partnerships not only among states but also with civil society organizations and the commercial shipping industry, whose contributions are often vital to life-saving efforts at sea. UNHCR values **the critical role of NGOs engaging in search and rescue activities** and calls for a strengthened and better coordinated state-led systems for search and rescue.

Rescue and interception operations should be guided by operational protocols that are fully rights-compliant. These procedures must ensure that individuals are not exposed to further harm during or after the rescue process, and that their protection needs are appropriately assessed and addressed.

Strengthening international cooperation remains a cornerstone of an effective and humane approach. In a spirit of responsibility-sharing and solidarity, and in line with international law, **it is imperative that all individuals rescued at sea are provided access to a place of safety, ensuring that disembarkation takes place in a safe and orderly manner**.

Finally, **there is a pressing need to expand regular and safe pathways for refugees and migrants across the Mediterranean**. This includes scaling up access to resettlement, family reunification, education, labour mobility and other legal avenues. Offering such alternatives is key to reducing reliance on dangerous and irregular journeys and to upholding the rights and dignity of people forced to flee.

Lampedusa, Italy – The southern island of Lampedusa remains one of the primary disembarkation points along the central Mediterranean route. UNHCR together with partners are actively engaging with local and national institutions to support the creation and implementation of efficient identification and referral mechanisms for people recently arriving by sea. © UNHCR/Michele Cirillo

Further information:

- UNHCR-IOM Joint statement: Distress at sea: a call for a humanitarian and precautionary approach
- Press Release: 10 years since the largest loss of life in the Mediterranean, UNHCR urges decisive action to save lives
- Press Release : States urged to do more to protect refugee and migrant lives at sea
- Press Release: UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM united in memory of the victims of the Cutro shipwreck
- UNHCR- IOM Joint statement: One year on from the tragic shipwreck off Pylos, Greece
- Press Release: UNHCR calls on parliamentarians to show solidarity and share responsibility to strengthen the protection of unaccompanied migrant and refugee children arriving in the Canary Islands.
- Statement: UNHCR: urgent concerted and coordinated efforts are needed to put an end to the continuing incidents in the Mediterranean