UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

# Refugees and Migrants Along the Central Mediterranean Route to Europe

## ROUTE-BASED APPROACH

**January-March 2025**

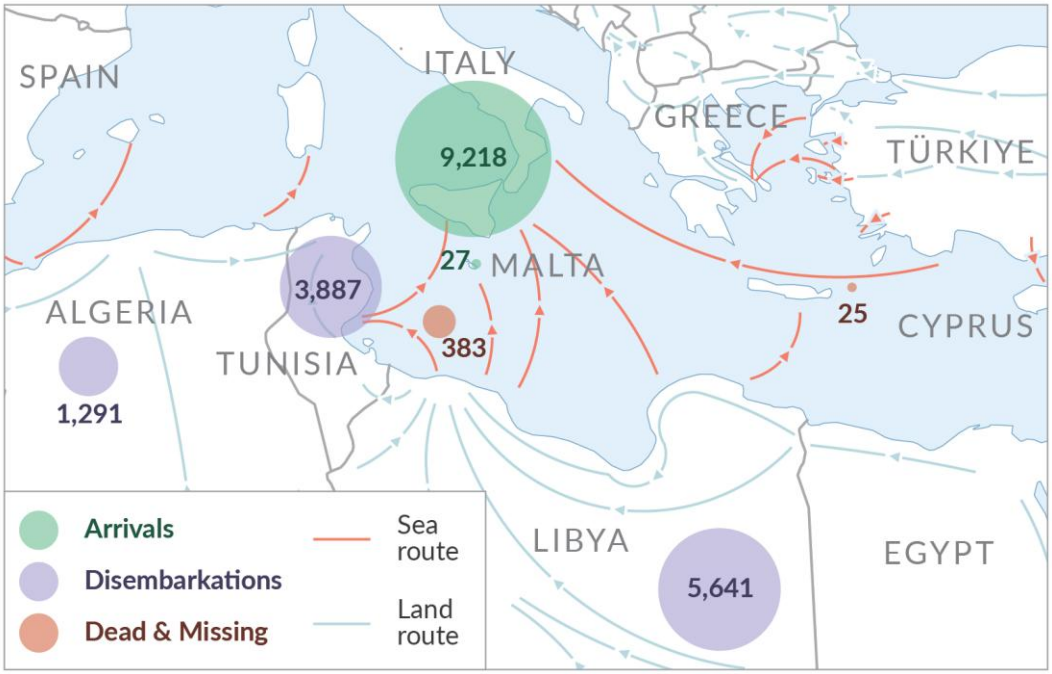
# Movements towards the Central Mediterranean

The Central Mediterranean Route is one of the main mixed movement corridors linking parts of the Sahel and West Africa, East and Horn of Africa, the Middle East and South Asia to Europe. It encompasses overland and airborne journeys toward North Africa (primarily Libya, Tunisia, and to some extent Algeria), where refugees and migrants attempt to cross the Central Mediterranean Sea to Italy or Malta. Although some of the persons crossing the Mediterranean are searching for a better life and economic opportunities, many are seeking safety from conflict, violence, or persecution. The most common countries of origin for people moving along the Central Mediterranean Route include those affected by protected of conflict and displacement, widespread human rights abuses, and some of the largest refugee and internal displacement crises driven by conflict and violence in the East and Horn of Africa. Along this route, individuals face serious protection risks, including violence, exploitation, trafficking, expulsion, and arbitrary detention on land, as well as life-threatening conditions at sea. Despite these dangers, intensified enforcement measures by coastal States and an increasingly volatile protection environment, the Central Mediterranean corridor remains one of the most active and perilous land and maritime routes towards Europe.

This short report provides an overview of key developments in the first three months of 2025 related to mixed movements along the Central Mediterranean Route including UNHCR's response and the implementation of the Route-Based Approach, together with authorities and partners.

Between January and March 2025, UNHCR recorded some 19,150 attempted sea departures, primarily from North Africa, along with one boat that reached Italy from Türkiye.[1] This represents a 38 per cent decrease compared to the same period in 2024. Attempted departures from Libya accounted for roughly 79 per cent of the flow (≈ 16,450 people), followed by Tunisia with 20 per cent (≈ 4,200), and fewer than 1 per cent from Algeria (≈ 165) and Türkiye (≈ 130). Some 44% (≈ 9,200) of those departing from Libya and Tunisia, succeeded in reaching Europe, almost all arriving in Italy, with smaller numbers reaching Malta. Departures from eastern Libya to Crete, Greece, through the Eastern Mediterranean Sea were also observed. Meanwhile, some 9,500 persons were intercepted or rescued and disembarked in North Africa (some 58 per cent in Libya; 42 per cent in Tunisia). At least 383 women, men, and children were reported dead or missing during the first quarter of the year, underscoring the continuing dangers of this route.

[1] *All arrivals to Italy and Malta are reported under the Central Mediterranean Route. During the first three months of 2025, some 130 persons were reported to have arrived to Italy from Türkiye.*



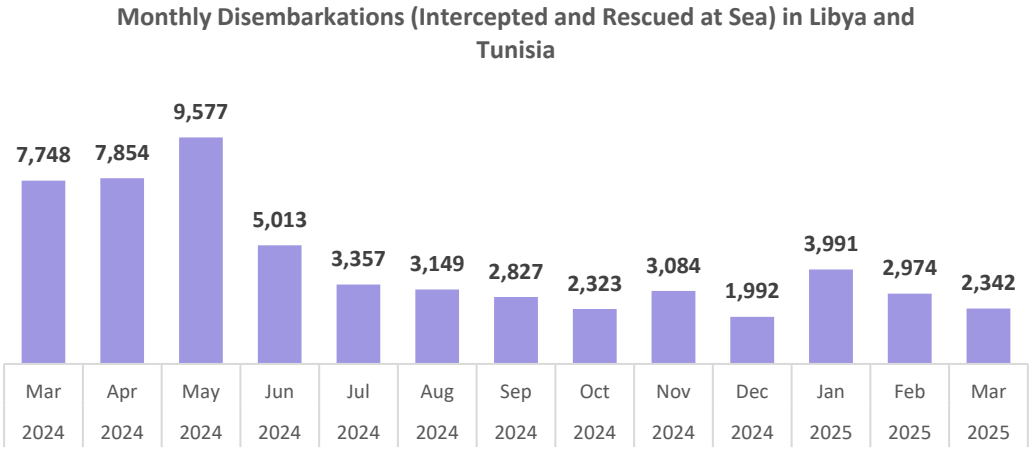

*Map of maritime movement and land movement analysis: Data sources: UNHCR, UNCS, public sources.*

## How have movements along this route evolved in the first quarter of 2025?

The first quarter of 2025 marks the consolidation of the downward trend in maritime movements observed since mid-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. Although crackdown efforts by Eastern Libyan authorities in 2023 led to a significant slowdown in departures from eastern Libya to Italy, departures movements toward Greece increased substantially in 2024 and continued into 2025. Meanwhile, movements from eastern Libya towards Italy restarted in early 2025. While these measures may have reduced the frequency of large-scale tragedies at sea, they have not addressed the underlying drivers of these movements, nor have they provided sustainable protection solutions along the land segments of the route. Italy remains the primary destination for those who succeed in crossing, and the Central Mediterranean continues to record the highest loss of life of any mixed movement route toward Europe.

Comparing Q1 2025 with Q1 2024 highlights several notable shifts: the total number of attempted sea departures fell by approximately 38 per cent (from 30,680 to 19,150); disembarkations in North Africa were halved (decreasing by 49 per cent , decreasing from 18,620 to 9,530); and successful sea arrivals to Europe declined by 20 per cent (11,490 to 9,240). Most notably, the number of reported deaths and missing at sea dropped by 34 per cent (from 581 to 383), largely as a result of the lower number of departures. While this

contraction in movements reflects more stringent control measures, the continued attempts by thousands to undertake the journey — and the persistent loss of life at sea — underscore the urgent need for enhanced search-and-rescue capacity and coordination, protection-sensitive border management, and the expansion of safe and regular pathways.

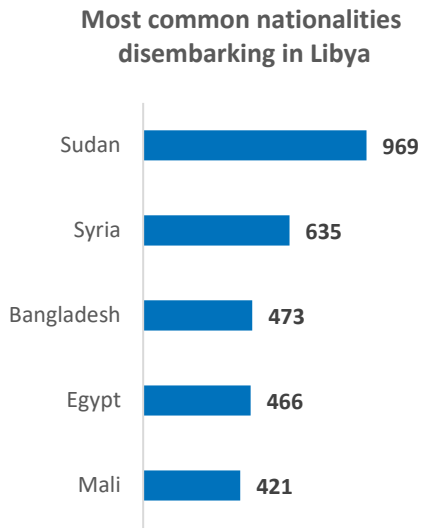



During the first quarter of 2025, movements towards Europe via the Central Mediterranean became increasingly concentrated in Libya, while departures from Tunisia contracted sharply. Departures from Libya reached approximately 14,450, a 24 per cent increase compared to Q1 2024, driven by continued instability and shrinking livelihood opportunities, particularly in Tripoli and Benghazi. Some two-thirds of those departing from Libya successfully reached European shores, while over 5,640 people (32 per cent) were intercepted or rescued and disembarked back in Libya, marking a 37 per cent increase from the previous year.

By contrast, departures from Tunisia dropped significantly to some 3,890 (a 73 per cent decrease compared to the same period in 2024), largely due to heightened policing around Sfax and a decline in smugglers' launch capacity. The success rate for those departing Tunisia remains very low, with some 80 per cent of persons departing from Tunisia ultimately disembarking back in Tunisia during Q1, indicating that the route has become increasingly difficult to navigate.

On the northern side of the corridor, Italy continues to receive the overwhelming majority of arrivals. In the first quarter of 2025, some 9,220 people arrived, 19 per cent below the 2024 figure. The composition of these arrivals has undergone significant shifts: some 92 per cent embarked from Libya and just five per cent from Tunisia, compared to 66 per cent and 34 per cent respectively in the previous year. Malta registered only 27 arrivals, a 60 per cent decrease compared to the same quarter in 2024. Overall, these patterns underscore a consolidation of the Central Mediterranean route around the Libya-to-Italy

channel, while departures from Tunisia to Italy and arrivals to Malta continue to decline under intensified enforcement measures.




Mixed movements by land remain difficult to quantify given the irregular nature journeys to North Africa, which often involve remote routes through the desert. While refugees and asylum-seekers who approached national authorities or UNHCR may be registered, many others remain unrecorded. IOM flow monitoring captures data from only some countries along the routes, and data gaps persist in remote areas and critical key border crossings due to limited access or the absence of outreach partners. In the first quarter of 2025, efforts continued to deepen understanding of onward movement dynamics from East, West, and Central Africa, including the drivers, directions, and the needs and intentions of those on the move. Analysis conducted by the Regional Bureau for the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes (EHAGL) in 2024 indicates that a small number of refugees and asylum-seekers moved onward beyond the region. Most of these movements occurred within the West and Central Africa (WCA) sub-region, followed by onward movements toward North Africa.[2] In North Africa, registration data also points to some pendular[3] onward movements of refugees and asylum-seekers between countries, including movements linked to attempts to move onwards to Europe.

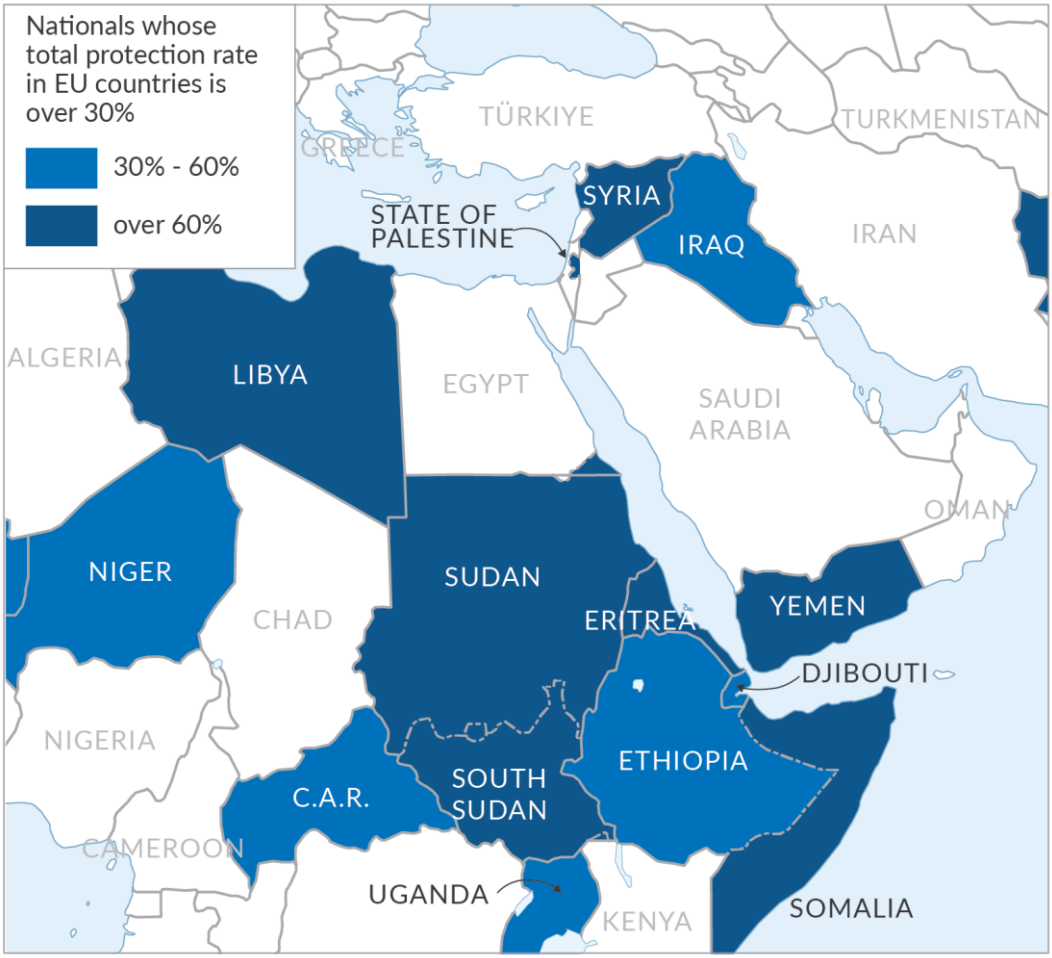
[2] *The actual number of onward movements is believed to be much higher, considering that a number of asylum-seekers and refugees do not register with the authorities, including due to a lack of awareness on the concept of asylum in a region where a freedom of movement is enforced.*

[3] *Refers to movements between countries in the Maghreb region.*

## Who is in need of international protection?

The profiles of individuals transiting the Central Mediterranean in early 2025 points to a mixed caseload, with many having pronounced international protection needs. Alongside sizeable groups of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis, who usually arrive in Libya by air, nearly half of those departing from the North African coast each month originate from countries affected by active conflict or systematic human-rights violations, including Sudan, Syria, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Mali.

**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.**




*Map 2: Nationals whose total protection rate [4] in EU countries is over 30%*

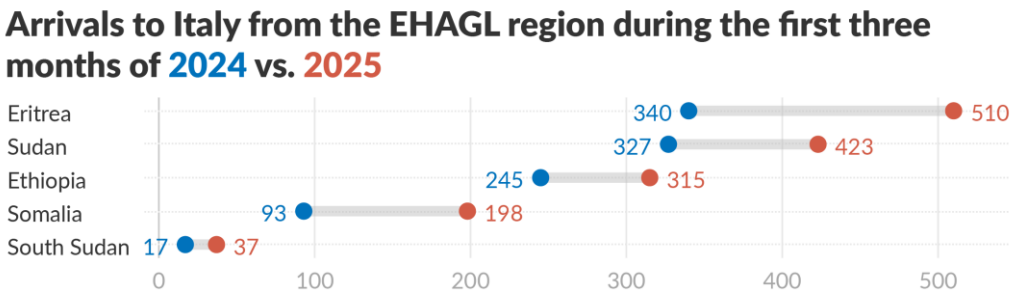
Sudanese refugees primarily cite conflict-related violence, including ethnic targeting and forced conscription, as key drivers of displacement. Eritrean refugees report fleeing prolonged forced conscription and arbitrary detention. Syrians continue to flee due to

[4] *https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/insights/explainers/forcibly-displaced-faq.html#RSD2*

widespread insecurity, fear of individual persecution, and the collapse of basic services – although the number of Syrians crossing the sea reduced by 61% during the reporting period. Ethiopians and Malians cite intensified insecurity in their regions of origin. The continued presence of Egyptian nationals, many of whom are unaccompanied boys, underscores serious child-protection concerns along this route. Taken together, these nationality trends confirm that the Central Mediterranean route is not solely an avenue for irregular movement but remains a critical channel for individuals and families with a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm. It also includes others with specific needs, such as unaccompanied and separated children, underlining the urgent need for protection-sensitive border management and access to asylum procedures on both shores of the Mediterranean.

## Where are people coming from and going to?

Between January and March 2025, a total of 9,220 people reached Italian shores via the Central Mediterranean[5]. Three out of every ten arrivals were Bangladeshi nationals (3,449), confirming Bangladesh as the single-largest country of origin so far this year. Pakistanis ranked second (1,335), followed by sizeable groups of Egyptians (820) and Syrians (815). Eritreans (510), Sudanese (423), and Ethiopians (315) also featured prominently, each representing populations with well-documented international protection needs linked to armed conflict, forced recruitment and conscription, or grave human rights violations. While the flow remains overwhelmingly male (≈ 80 per cent), children accounted for a significant 16 per cent of all sea arrivals, most notably among Egyptians (242 children) and Eritreans (185). These figures highlight the urgent need for child-sensitive reception arrangements upon arrival in Italy.




*Note: Values shown are the total new arrivals during January, February and March.*

Source: Government, UNHCR, partners

The majority of persons who are intercepted or rescued at sea and returned to Libya reflect the overall departure profiles from North Africa, but their situations require an even sharper protection focus: Sudanese, Eritrean, and Syrian nationals, many of whom are fleeing armed conflict, forced recruitment and conscription, and systematic human-rights

[5] *The number of Sudanese feeling the conflict and reaching Europe in the first three months of 2025: Cyprus 90, Greece 484, Italy 423, Malta 1, and Spain 144 persons.*

violations, make up a significant portion of the 5,640 persons disembarked in Q1 2025. Libya's official and unofficial detention infrastructure remains characterized by inhumane conditions, limited oversight, extortion, forced labour and widespread torture and other forms of ill treatment.[6] As a result, those detained following disembarkation or rescue at sea are at heightened risk of trafficking, exploitation and other grave human rights violations. These conditions underscore the imperative for sustained advocacy on alternatives to detention and the establishment of predictable, protection-centered disembarkation arrangements.

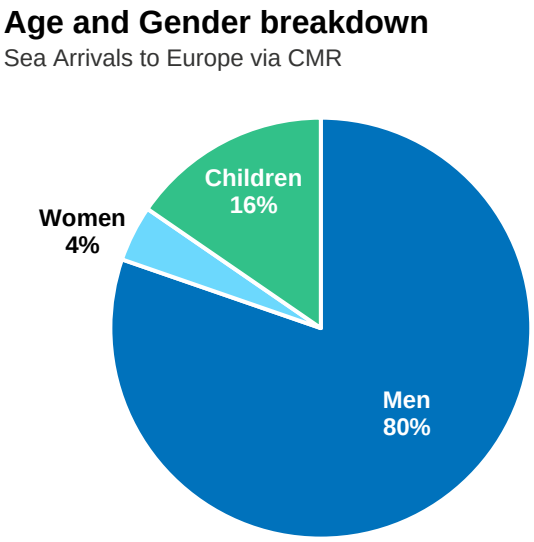
# Population Profiles

## Who are the people moving along this route?

The population flow on the move is overwhelmingly of male, with adult men accounting for 80 per cent (7,360) of all sea arrivals. However, children represent a significant 16 per cent (1,430), with unaccompanied and separated boys particularly visible among Egyptians (242 children) and Eritreans (185 children). By contrast, the presence of women remains limited, with some 410 individuals, or four per cent of all arrivals. though Syrian women (150) and Eritrean women (21) represent the highest absolute numbers. Gender and age profiles vary significantly across nationalities. For example, while no Pakistani women were reported among arrivals in Q1 2025, nearly one-third of Somali arrivals were women or girls, many of whom may be traveling without family support. These differences underscore the need for protection responses tailored to specific demographic and vulnerability profiles.

**Overall, while the number of sea arrivals to Europe decreased in Q1 of 2025 compared to the same period in the previous year, the composition of arrivals changed more significantly, with more persons from refugee-producing countries arriving to in Italy.** For example, the number of Sudanese nationals increased by 29 per cent compared to Q1 2024. The arrival of Tunisian nationals, who ranked third last year, decreased by 77 per cent (from 1,371 to 238 persons), reflecting the sharp decline in departures from Tunisia. Syrian arrivals also decreased by 61 per cent, and Guinean families, previously a significant component, dropped significantly. Conversely, the number of Pakistani nationals more than doubled, up by 114 per cent, and Bangladeshi arrivals rose by 29 per cent,. The proportion of children among arrivals declined slightly, from 18 per cent to 15 per cent, while the share of women fell from 5 per cent to 4 per cent, signaling an even stronger tilt toward single -adult male movements. These shifts suggest that enhanced interdiction efforts off the Tunisian coast and changing movement dynamics in Libya are reshaping both the scale and demographic make-up of those arriving in Italy.

[6] *See, for example https://docs.un.org/en/S/2024/642*




## Why are people moving along this route?

Based on EU asylum data for key nationalities, UNHCR estimates that approximately **36 per cent** of people who arrived in Europe via the Central Mediterranean Route in 2024 may be in need of international protection. This indicates that over one in three individuals using this route were likely fleeing conflict, persecution, or other serious human rights violations, rather than moving primarily for economic or other reasons. The figure highlights the mixed nature of movements along this route, where people with international protection needs travel alongside those moving for other purposes.[7]

This picture is further corroborated by survey data from the Mixed Migration Center (MMC). **A substantial proportion (around 45%) of those interviewed by the Mixed Migration Centre in Libya, Tunisia, and Sudan reported fleeing violence, insecurity, and conflict, highlighting significant safety concerns.** Issues related to rights and freedoms were important for approximately 30%, while personal or family reasons motivated around 25%. Corruption and limited access to essential services also drove decisions on movement for roughly 20% of individuals. The tradition of migration influenced about 15%, indicating established movement networks or community patterns. Environmental stressors were less frequently cited. Economic factors were cited as a reason for the movement by nearly 70% of respondents. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of mixed movement,

[7] *Data avalable here: https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download?url=IAr67y*

driven by a complex interplay of economic, security, social, and governance-related factors[8].

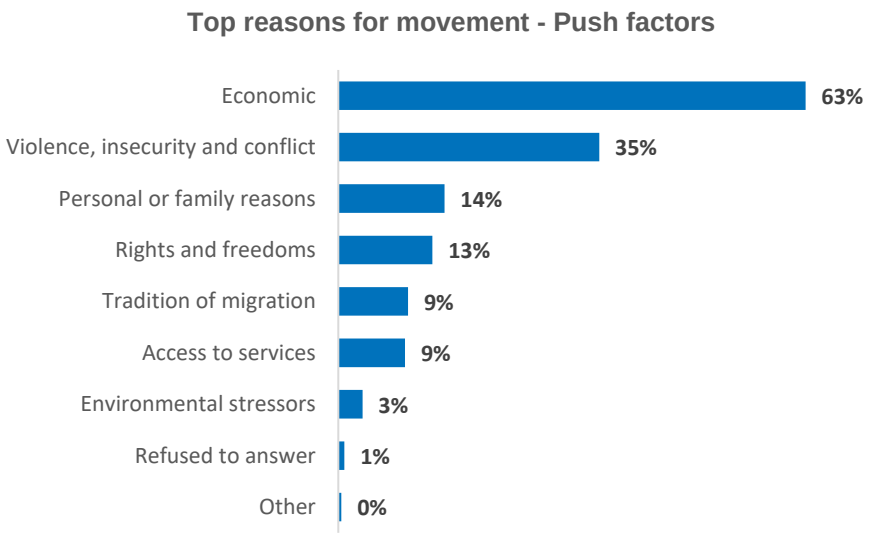



*Figure 1: Respondents who have started the movement since 1 January 2024 and have not completed their journey. Interviews were held during Q1 of 2025 in Libya, Tunisia, and Sudan. A multiple-choice question.*

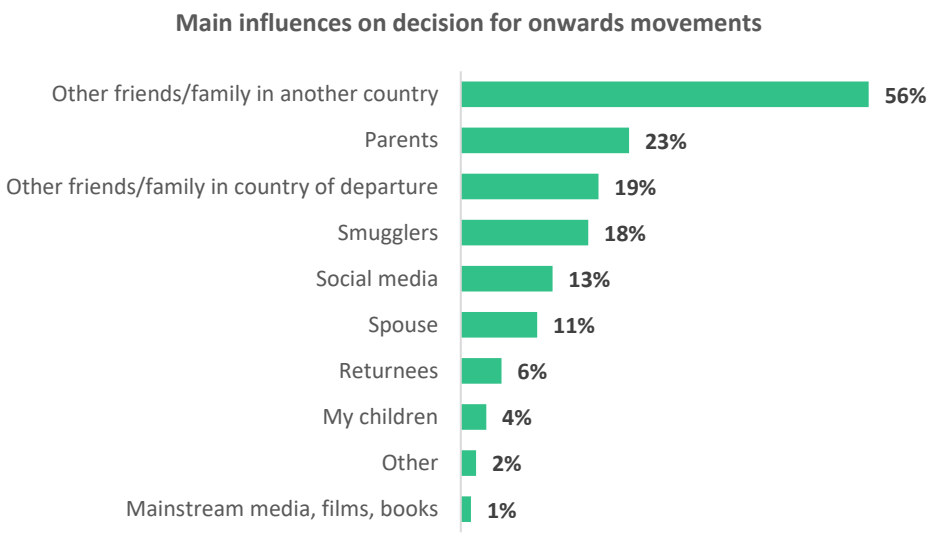



*Figure 2: Respondents who have started the movement since 1 Jan 2024, and have not completed their journey. Interviewed during Q1 of 2025 in Libya, Tunisia, and Sudan. A multiple-choice question.*

[8] *4Mi data from the interactive dashboard (Respondents who have started the movement since 1 Jan 2024, and have not completed their journey. Interviewed during Q1 of 2025 in Libya, Tunisia, and Sudan. A multiple-choice question) - https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/4mi-interactive/*

# Protection Risks

## What are the conditions along the journey?

Much attention is focused on the dangers of crossing the Mediterranean Sea, 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.[9]

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. Ongoing conflict in Sudan continues to drive the world's largest internal displacement crisis (with 12.7 million people displaced internally and externally). On average, 363 individuals crossed daily across the Maiwut and Hamdayet crossings into Ethiopia, while a further 49,000 moved toward Chad since January 2025. Once in eastern Chad, the majority, primarily women and children, encamp in border areas already overwhelmed by earlier inflows. Onward movement through the desert is both costly and dangerous. In Libya, smugglers' fees from the "Triangle Area" to Al Kufra rose by 13 per cent in March following intensified patrols by the Department for Combating Illegal Migration. Despite these risks, daily arrivals of 300 to 500 Sudanese continued, facing threats despite the risk of interception or expulsion.

Economic hardship, limited access to essential services, prolonged wait times to regularize one's stay, and heightened risks of arrest, detention and deportation, result in returns under adverse circumstances to Sudan. According to the IOM DTM Sudan Monitoring Report from March 2025[10], cross-border movements from Egypt to Sudan have increased significantly in early 2025. Between 1 January and 31 March 2025, an estimated 72,040 individuals crossed from Egypt into Sudan, **nearly double the total number of movements recorded throughout all of 2024 (42,420).**

Since January 2024, an estimated total of 114,460 individuals reportedly crossed back to Sudan from Egypt. Movements were concentrated at Ashkeet (87%) and Argeen (13%) border crossing points, with the majority of those crossing being Sudanese nationals originally displaced from Khartoum (71%) and Aj Jazirah (22%), where the impact of more than two years of conflict is immense.[11]

[9] *https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/PUB2023-093-EL-On-this-journey-vol-2%2003-July-24%20WEB.pdf*

[10] *DTM Sudan Mobility Update (16) : https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1461/files/reports/DTM%20Sudan%20Mobility%20Update%20%2816%29_0.pdf?iframe=true*

[11] *https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/urgent-support-needed-over-1-3-million-war-displaced-sudanese-begin-return-home*

Protection-monitoring networks across the route document a consistent pattern of grave human rights abuses. In Chad, 84 per cent of newly arrived households reported experiencing at least one violation en route, most commonly physical assault (48 per cent), extortion of property (27 per cent), and illegal "taxes" levied by armed actors (9 per cent).

Arbitrary arrest and prolonged detention remain widespread: 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. Risks of trafficking, gender-based violence, and forced recruitment, including of children, are recurrent along desert routes and at border crossing points.

Protection risks associated with pushbacks, expulsions and returns under adverse conditions continue to rise along the routes. In Libya, individuals have been expelled to Egypt and Sudan, while in Tunisia, expulsions to Libya and Algeria took place following disembarkation or land interceptions. Algeria also continues to expel individuals to Niger and Mali, often to remote desert areas with minimal access to assistance. Across these locations, expulsions are frequently carried out without due process, individualized assessments, or access to protection mechanisms, significantly heightening exposure to human rights violations, violence and extortion.

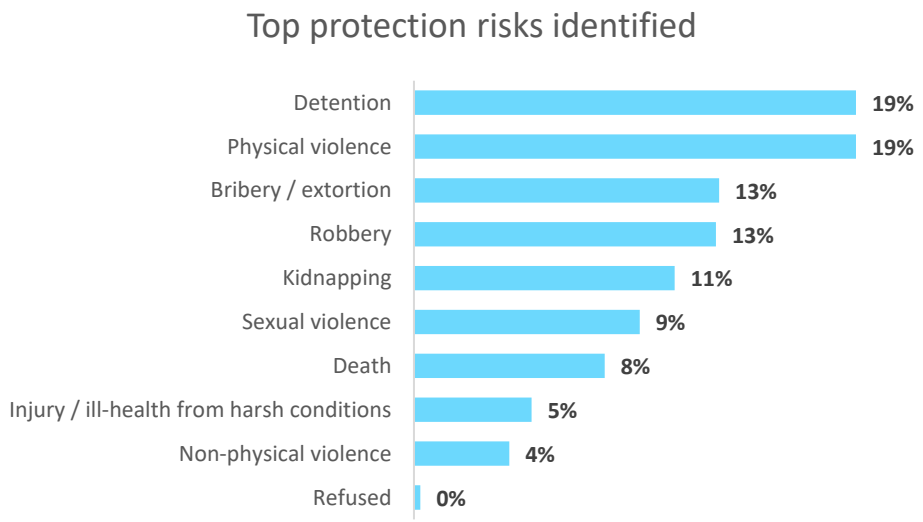



*Figure 3: Respondents who have started the movement since 1 Jan 2024, and have not completed their journey. Interviewed during Q1 of 2025 in Libya, Tunisia, and Sudan. A multiple-choice question*

The data collected includes information on who refugees and migrants perceive as the likely perpetrators of human rights violations and abuses. The groups identified as likely perpetrators are outlined below

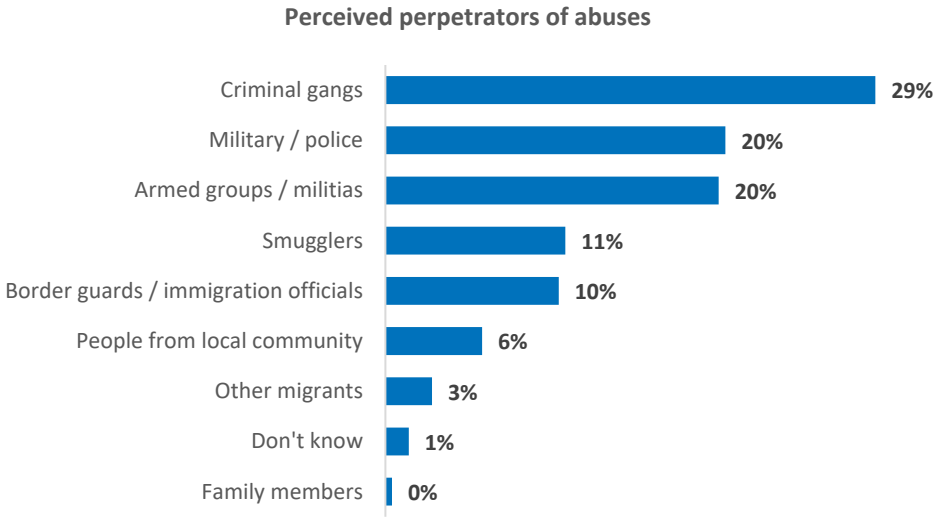



*Figure 4: Respondents who have started the movement since 1 January 2024, and have not completed their journey. Interviewed during Q1 of 2025 in Libya, Tunisia, and Sudan. A multiple-choice question.*

## What are the protection gaps along the route?

The absence of protection and assistance services for refugees along key routes undermines the purpose and objective of effective asylum and migration management by States. For national border and asylum systems to be protection-sensitive, they must, at a minimum, provide adequate infrastructure and deliver meaningful, accessible protection and assistance responses.

**Sudan**: Ongoing indiscriminate airstrikes, targeted killings, and widespread sexual violence are not only forcing people to flee their homes but also severely hindering humanitarian access to affected areas. In the absence of safe and legal pathways, restrictive entry requirements are forcing many to take perilous journeys in the hands of smugglers.

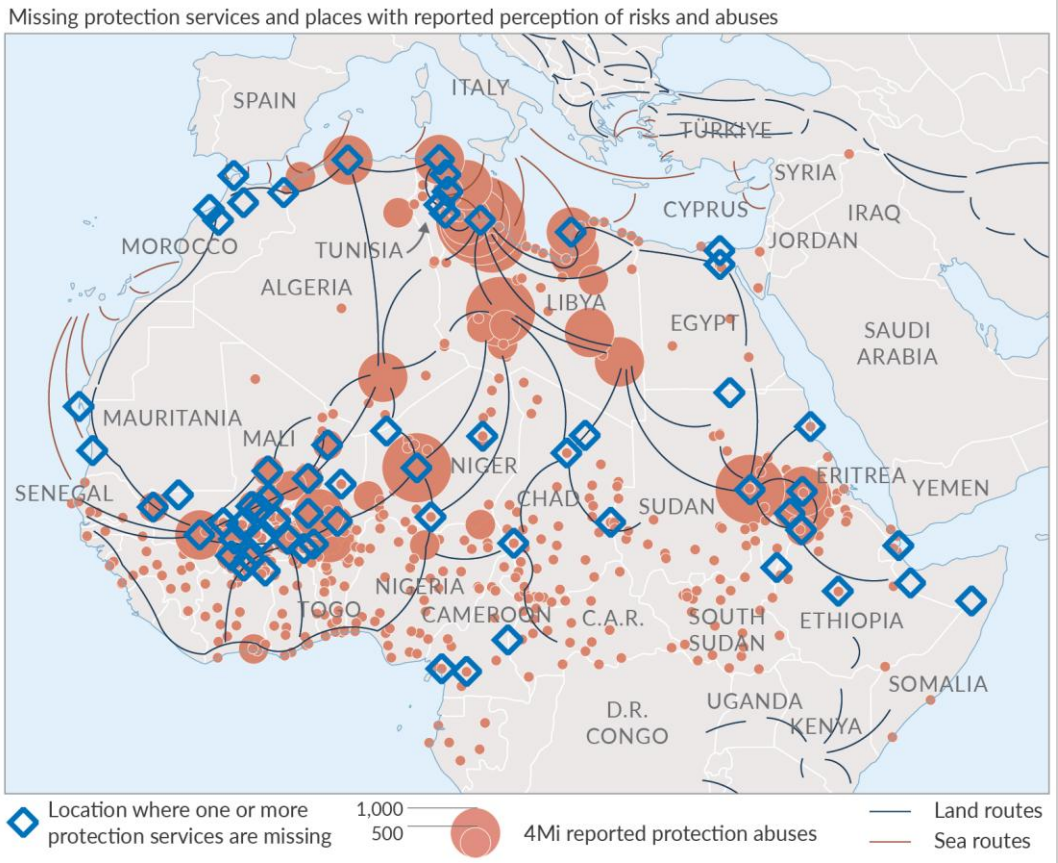
**Egypt–Libya border**: According to information gathered by UNHCR through continuous focus group discussions and dialogues with communities, onward movement continues to be driven by barriers to accessing rights and basic services, and challenges to regularize one's stay in Egypt. Furthermore, findings from the continuous communication with the communities revealed that some are choosing to cross back to Sudan to further proceed to Libya, avoiding using the Egypt-Libya border, perceived to be more dangerous and with a higher risk of arrests.

**Libya**: The discovery of mass graves in the east illustrates the lethal consequences of human trafficking. Despite well-known protection needs of Sudanese nationals, systematic detentions and deportations (2,046 Sudanese in Q1) persist.[12]

**Eastern Chad**: Crowded entry points such as Birak and Tiné expose women and girls to heightened risk of GBV. Additionally. two-thirds of new arrivals lack civil documentation, heightening the risk of statelessness and family separation.

**Mali - Algeria corridor**: Monitoring recorded some 3,900 persons on the move, nearly half of whom reported experiencing abuses in Timbuktu and Gao. 41 unaccompanied children were identified in Algeria in Q1 alone, all of whom face heightened risks of exploitation.

These location-specific risks demand sustained advocacy for safe pathways, alternatives to detention, and coordinated, protection-sensitive border management along the entire route.




*Mapping of Missing Protection Services and Reported Protection Abuses along the land routes. As of 15 Dec 2024*
*Data: MMC, UNHCR, UNCS*

[12] *See: Two mass graves of migrants uncovered in Libya | UN News (https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/02/1159951)*

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

Governments, UNHCR and other UN agencies, humanitarian actors, and donors are increasingly engaging in efforts to expand the protection and solutions space along mixed movement routes. UNHCR, together with IOM, national authorities, and other stakeholders, is operationalizing a route-based approach aimed at ensuring earlier access to protection, assistance, and information for people on the move. This approach focuses on delivering context-specific support at strategic points along displacement routes, not only at destinations, and is grounded in close cooperation with States.

UNHCR's work on implementing the route-based approach along the Central Mediterranean route, carried out together with authorities and partners, includes efforts to strengthen the identification and referral of people with international protection needs, better address the specific vulnerabilities of children on the move, increase access to documentation for refugees and asylum-seekers, support the development of national asylum systems, enhance access to essential services where people are, and increase access to safe and legal pathways as alternatives to dangerous journeys. Linked to this are also efforts to increase communication with people on the move to advise of the protection options available where they are, warn of the risks along the route, and see how protection and assistance needs can best be addressed.

In Chad, this cooperation led to the opening of a Multi-Purpose Hub in Tine in April 2025, near a key border crossing with Sudan. The hub provides protection services, legal and basic assistance, and referrals for relevant services, and is implemented jointly with national authorities. The Chadian Government also identified five additional locations for future hubs, reflecting a strong commitment to scale up structured, route-based responses.

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, which focused on operationalizing the route-based approach across the five countries. These efforts aim to create a harmonized protection framework along key corridors.

In Egypt, UNHCR and IOM are jointly working to establish a Communications Hub which would serve as both a physical and an online information centre, providing refugees and asylum seekers with the needed support and related information.

Together, these efforts reflect growing momentum toward more coordinated, protection-centered responses along mixed movement routes.

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

Access to rights and services in host communities remains highly uneven across key countries along mixed movement routes, with significant protection gaps and limited solutions space contributing to onward movement.

In Chad, over 600,000 Sudanese refugees have arrived since the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, placing extreme pressure on already overstretched services in eastern regions. While the government has showed strong willingness to respond and work with UN agencies and other stakeholders, access to basic services remains limited, particularly in border areas. The overstretched response and lack of sustainable opportunities are key drivers of onward movement, including toward Libya. The government has called for increased international assistance to meet growing needs.

In Egypt, GoE Immigration's centralised procedures and delays in obtaining asylum-based residence permits hinder effective access to rights and State services, prompting some individuals to move onwards, often transiting via Libya.

In Tunisia, the suspension of access to the asylum since mid-2024 has left newly arrived individuals unable to seek international protection. Without access to asylum procedures or regular status, newly-arrived refugees and asylum-seekers face significant barriers to essential services and remain at risk of abuse, exploitation and expulsion, contributing to secondary movements.

# REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS ALONG THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE TO EUROPE

## ROUTE BASED APPROACH

**January - March2025**

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