

DESPERATE JOURNEYS

Refugees and migrants entering and crossing Europe via the Mediterranean and Western Balkans routes



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SUMMARY

The number of refugees and migrants arriving by sea to Europe decreased significantly in 2016 from 2015 with a further decrease since March mostly due to fewer people using the Eastern Mediterranean route. Most refugees and migrants entered the European Union (EU) through three primary routes: the Central Mediterranean route from North Africa to Italy, the Eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey to Greece, Bulgaria, and Cyprus, and the Western Mediterranean route from North Africa to Spain. The movement along these three routes, as well as onward movement through the Balkans and onwards from Italy are the focus of this short report analyzing trends in 2016. Despite border restrictions imposed at several points along key routes, thousands entered and moved through Europe each month with many likely to be in need of international protection.¹

Following the EU-Turkey Statement of 18 March and the closure of the so-called Western Balkans route, the Central Mediterranean again became the primary entry point to Europe with most departing from Libya but smaller numbers also arriving in Italy from Egypt and Turkey. However, arrival trends in Italy show that the primary nationalities of those who had crossed to Greece in 2015 had not switched in significant numbers to the Central Mediterranean route in 2016. Among those arriving in Italy, 23% came from the ten countries currently producing the most refugees globally but arrivals from other countries also included refugees, victims of trafficking, and unaccompanied and separated children (UASC). Meanwhile in Greece, 87% of arrivals came from the ten countries currently producing the most refugees globally. In the latter part of the year, an increased number of people reached Europe through Spain, with rising numbers crossing the sea from Morocco and Algeria, along with further entries by Syri-

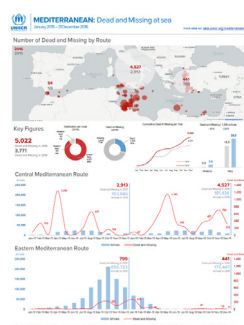
ans and others to the enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta. However the numbers are much lower than those in the Central Mediterranean and the total number of arrivals in Spain in 2016 still dropped slightly from those of 2015 due to fewer land arrivals. 2016 has now become the deadliest year on record with 5,096 deaths at sea recorded.

After arriving in Europe, many refugees and migrants moved onwards across different countries within and outside the EU, on many occasions using smugglers. However, larger numbers of people arriving in Italy stayed in Italy, due primarily to restrictions imposed by neighbouring states at the northern borders, with over 176,000 people in reception centres across the country as of the end of the year.

It is of great concern that cases of abuse and violence by smugglers and other criminal networks continued to take place throughout the region. Furthermore, reports of incidents of violence and push-backs by state authorities² at several borders continued despite the prohibition on collective expulsions under European and international law and the potential for direct or indirect *refoulement*.

Despite many refugees already in Europe being legally entitled to family reunification, in practice there are many obstacles that delay or prevent refugees with immediate family members outside Europe or even sometimes elsewhere in Europe from being able to reunify.³ As a result of this and limited other legal pathways available for people seeking international protection to enter Europe, many saw no alternative to undertaking dangerous journeys.

Read more:



¹ In many locations, refugees and migrants entering Europe or transiting through countries cross borders irregularly so the data provided in this document is based on official sources but the actual numbers using a particular route may be slightly higher.

² <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/7/5788c85a4/unhcr-concerned-hungary-pushing-asylum-seekers-serbia.html>; <http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2016/1/56aa19556/unhcr-alarmed-plight-refugees-migrants-bulgaria-borders.html>; <http://www.acnur.es/noticias/noticias-de-espana/2617-acnur-recuerda-que-la-convenccion-de-ginebra-no-limita-el-derecho-de-asilo-segun-el-modo-de-entrada>; <http://www.unhcr-centraleurope.org/en/news/2016/unhcr-alarmed-at-refugee-death-on-hungary-serbia-border.html>

³ <http://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2016/8/57aca60a4/right-reunion-eludes-refugee-families-europe.html>

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE

In contrast to 2015, the numbers of those entering the European Union via Turkey in 2016 were far smaller with 173,450 refugees and migrants entering Greece by sea and a further 3,282 by land. In Bulgaria, 18,884 refugees and migrants were apprehended by authorities over the course of the year – a significant decrease from apprehensions in 2015 with almost half caught in the interior of the country in 2016.

After March, the numbers crossing the sea to Greece from Turkey dropped drastically with arrivals in October 2016 almost 99% lower than in October 2015 when 211,663 crossed the Aegean – an average of 6,828 per day. In 2016, arrivals on the Greek islands dropped from an average of 2,175 per day in January to 96 per day in October and 54 per day in December. While women and children comprised 60% of arrivals in the first three months of 2016, following the EU-Turkey Statement, women and children made up only 46% of arrivals in the remaining nine months of the year with the numbers of children falling from 38% between January and March to just 27% for the rest of the year. As the conflict in Syria continued to displace civilians, Syrians were still the largest group entering Greece each month aside from December along with smaller numbers of Afghans, Iraqis and Pakistanis and the majority of those using the Eastern Mediterranean route are likely to be in need of international protection.

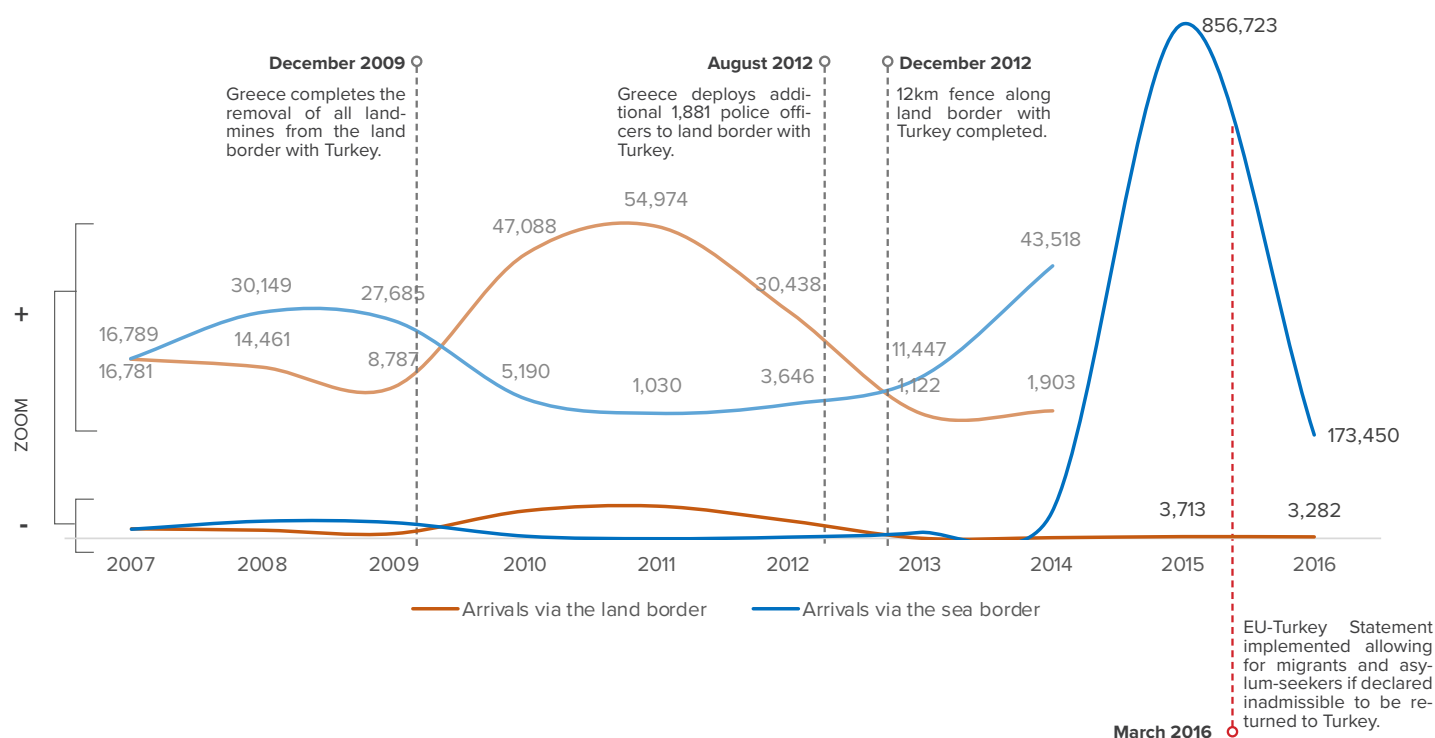
In the latter part of the year, refugees and migrants increasingly diversified their routes out of Turkey with greater numbers attempting to cross the Turkey-Greece land border and 349 arrivals to Cyprus

reported between August and December. Several boats from Turkey continued to land each month in Italy as some refugees and migrants sought to avoid returns under the EU-Turkey Statement as well as the arduous Western Balkans crossing. Such arrivals increased 26% from 2,471 in 2015 to 3,114 by the end of 2016.

Despite the short distance between Turkey and some Greek islands, people continued to drown in the Aegean Sea, including young children, as many of them attempted to seek international protection in the EU. At least 27 people are thought to have drowned in a single incident as a boat with Syrian and Pakistani nationals on board capsized en route from Bodrum in Turkey to Kos on 29 September. By the end of the year, 441 people had drowned along the Eastern Mediterranean route in 2016 compared to 799 in 2015. Although a reduction in absolute terms, the proportion of those refugees and migrants that died while attempting to cross the Aegean increased substantially from one in 1,072 in 2015 to one in 393 in 2016, although most deaths occurred between January and March when larger numbers attempted the crossing despite the winter weather. At the land borders, the bodies of two unknown refugee or migrant men were found at the Greece-Turkey border in October and November while in late December, the body of a 23-year-old Pakistani national was found in Turkey near the Bulgarian border.

In the latter part of 2016, UNHCR received several reports of people being irregularly returned to Turkey from neighbouring states. In October, UNHCR

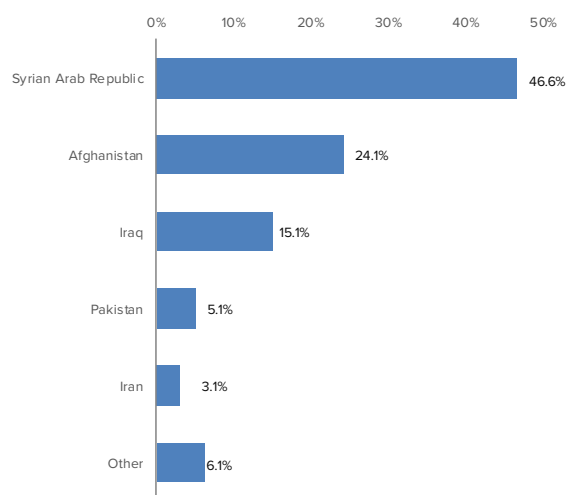
ARRIVALS IN GREECE FROM TURKEY VIA LAND AND SEA BORDERS - 2007 TO 2016



LAND AND SEA ARRIVALS IN GREECE AND BULGARIA JAN TO DEC 2016



*Number of persons apprehended for irregular entry at or close to all Bulgarian borders (primarily crossing from Turkey). In total, 18,844 undocumented persons were apprehended in 2016, including those apprehended elsewhere in the country or trying to exit the country irregularly. Sources: UNHCR and Ministry of Interior, Bulgaria https://www.mvr.bg/NR/rdonlyres/022CB329-08B3-42C4-AEDD-64D6C47D48CC/0/Mesechna_spravka_dekemvri_2016.pdf



COUNTRY OF ORIGIN OF PRIMARY GROUPS ARRIVING BY SEA IN GREECE - 2016

expressed its concern after 10 Syrians who had arrived in a group of 91 on the Greek island of Milos were subsequently returned to Turkey despite reportedly having expressed their intention to seek asylum in Greece.⁴ At the land borders, UNHCR continued to receive testimonies of refugees and migrants who had crossed the Evros River from Turkey being pushed back by Greek authorities without any form of individualized screening or the opportunity to seek asylum, and outside of established legal frameworks. Such practices have also been extensively documented in the past by UNHCR and others.⁵ Likewise, at the border between Turkey and Bulgaria, UNHCR continued to receive accounts of refugees and migrants being pushed back from inside Bulgarian territory to Turkey by Bulgarian authorities, also involving the use of violence. Such measures do not conform with EU Member States' obligations to provide access to asylum procedures for those requesting international protection and conduct protection screening prior to returning persons to neighbouring states. UNHCR has expressed concerns in the past about such measures⁶ including requesting investigations into two incidents in which deaths occurred.⁷ Additionally, Bulgaria continued the construction of a fence along its border with Turkey, a measure that may also impede access to international protection for those seeking asylum.⁸

Onward movement from Greece and Bulgaria

By the end of 2016, relocations to other EU Member States from Greece under the EU's Emergency Relocation Mechanism remained low with only 7,275 asylum-seekers (11%) of the September 2017 target of 66,400 asylum-seekers relocated from Greece after 16 months of the programme. Despite the efforts of Greek authorities, UNHCR, NGOs, volunteer groups and other actors to improve conditions at accommodation sites across Greece, refugees and migrants continued to move on from Greece each week, including to reunite with family members already in the EU as well as due to lengthy delays in the asylum process, substandard reception conditions especially in the winter weather, and limited integration prospects.



NUMBERS OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS ON THE GREEK MAINLAND



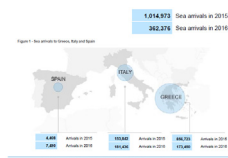
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REFUGEES & MIGRANTS SEA ARRIVALS IN EUROPE

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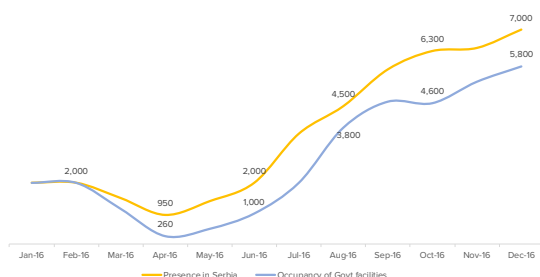
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- <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2016/10/5809e78d4/unhcr-concern-return-10-syrian-asylum-seekers-greece.html>
- <http://www.refworld.org/docid/54cb3af34.html>
- <http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2016/1/56aa19556/unhcr-alarmed-plight-refugees-migrants-bulgaria-borders.html>; <http://www.unhcr.org/53198b489.pdf>
- <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2015/3/551abb606/unhcr-concerned-border-practices-deaths-iraqiis-bulgaria-turkey-border.html>; <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/afghan-refugee-shot-dead-enter-bulgaria-151016072352779.html>
- <http://www.refworld.org/docid/52c598354.html>

two 'transit zones' where up to 100 people per week were admitted to seek asylum (a decrease since early November prior to which up to 210 people per week were admitted) and some reported waiting for up to six and half months to gain entry. Between 05 July and 31 December, Hungarian police reported preventing the irregular entry of 10,496 refugees and migrants (an average of 58 per day) and apprehending and returning 8,507 refugees and migrants found within 8 km of the border (an average of 47 per day).

As a result, the number of refugees and migrants in Serbia increased from approximately 2,000 in June to 7,000 by the end of the year.



Following the Hungarian restrictions, Serbia too increased controls at its borders with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria from 22 July and reported preventing the irregular entry of 17,000 refugees and migrants between then and the end of the year.⁹ New restrictions imposed by Hungary also resulted in those already in Serbia seeking alternative ways out of the country and increased irregular entries were recorded in Romania from Serbia from August onwards with a high of 121 ir-

⁹ <http://rs.n1info.com/a218255/Vesti/Vesti/Za-dve-nedelje-uhapseno-25-krijumcara-migranata.html>

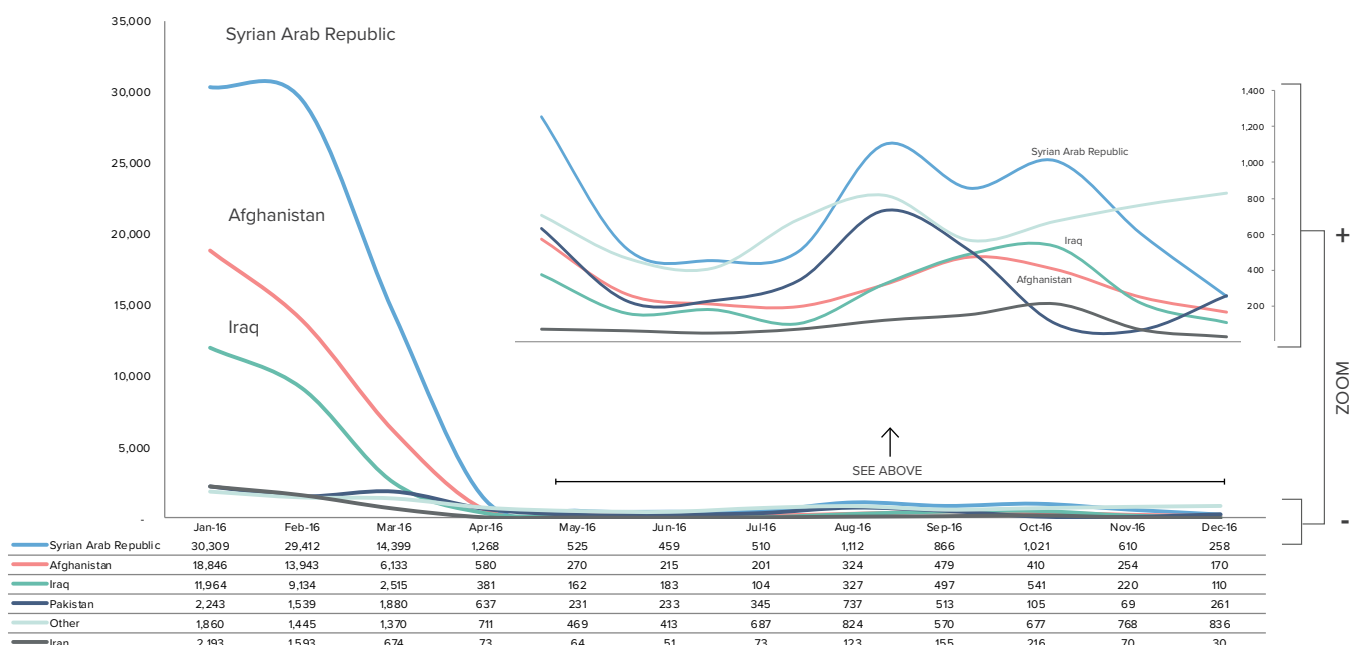
regular entries from Serbia in October. This prompted stricter controls by Romania along its southwest border resulting in just eight people crossing the border irregularly in November before numbers rose again to 112 in December. Increased irregular entries to Croatia and Slovenia and even attempts to move onwards via Montenegro from Serbia were also observed.

Refugees and migrants moving on from Bulgaria mostly crossed to Serbia with Bulgarian authorities reporting having made 13,776 interceptions at the Serbian border up to 29 December in 2016.

From September onwards, following the increased restrictions at the Bulgaria-Serbia border, more people crossed from Bulgaria to Romania, including at least two groups that managed to cross the Danube River by boat, with numbers reaching a high of 111 in December. The use of alternative routes to crossing from Greece to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia increased in the second half of the year, however in lower numbers, with some refugees and migrants attempting to cross via Albania and then Kosovo or Montenegro to Serbia or else via Bulgaria from Greece to Serbia.

As States in the region increased border restrictions, refugees and migrants undertook more risky ways to try to cross borders, including along established routes, resulting in several deaths. At the Bulgaria-Romania border, during an attempt to cross the Danube River on 09 September, a boat overturned causing two Iraqi nationals, one a six-year-old boy, to drown and four others (three of whom were children) to go missing. In August, an Afghan national was shot dead allegedly accidentally by a hunter after irregularly crossing to Serbia from Bulgaria. As winter set in, the body of an 18-year-old Afghan man was found in November in a pump house where he had sought shelter near Bulgaria's border with Serbia. In early December, a group arriving in

MONTHLY SEA ARRIVALS IN GREECE BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN - 2016



Arrival figures for Greece are provided by the Hellenic Coast Guard and Police. All figures are provisional and subject to change.

the south of Serbia told authorities that smugglers had forced them to abandon a young Iraqi woman in the mountains as they crossed from Bulgaria as she could no longer walk.

UNHCR remains concerned by consistent reports of push-backs, including the frequent use of violence by state authorities of different countries, which appear to contravene the prohibition on collective expulsions and due process standards. In July, UNHCR voiced concerns about push-backs and the use of violence by Hungarian state authorities,¹⁰ but these continued to be reported. Likewise, push-backs were regularly reported from the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, where the majority of those apprehended in the country are summarily returned to Greece, along with push-backs from Serbia to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria¹¹, and as push-backs from Croatia to Serbia.¹² In multiple cases in the region, UNHCR

received accounts of persons who had requested international protection but were denied access to asylum procedures and still pushed back. These included families and persons with specific needs including unaccompanied children. In some cases, in the middle of winter, border authorities allegedly forced refugees and migrants to remove all their warm clothing then sent them back across the border despite the freezing weather.

At the same time, many refugees and migrants reported abuses by smugglers who routinely detained and extorted some in sites in the north of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, as well as at times in Belgrade, Pristina, and Sofia. Others not using smugglers' services reported being kidnapped by the same smuggler groups. As part of extortion attempts, some smugglers allegedly frequently used physical and sexual violence and torture as well as detained people against their will for several days to obtain additional fees above those previously agreed upon.

¹⁰ <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/7/5788c85a4/unhcr-concerned-hungary-pushing-asylum-seekers-serbia.html>

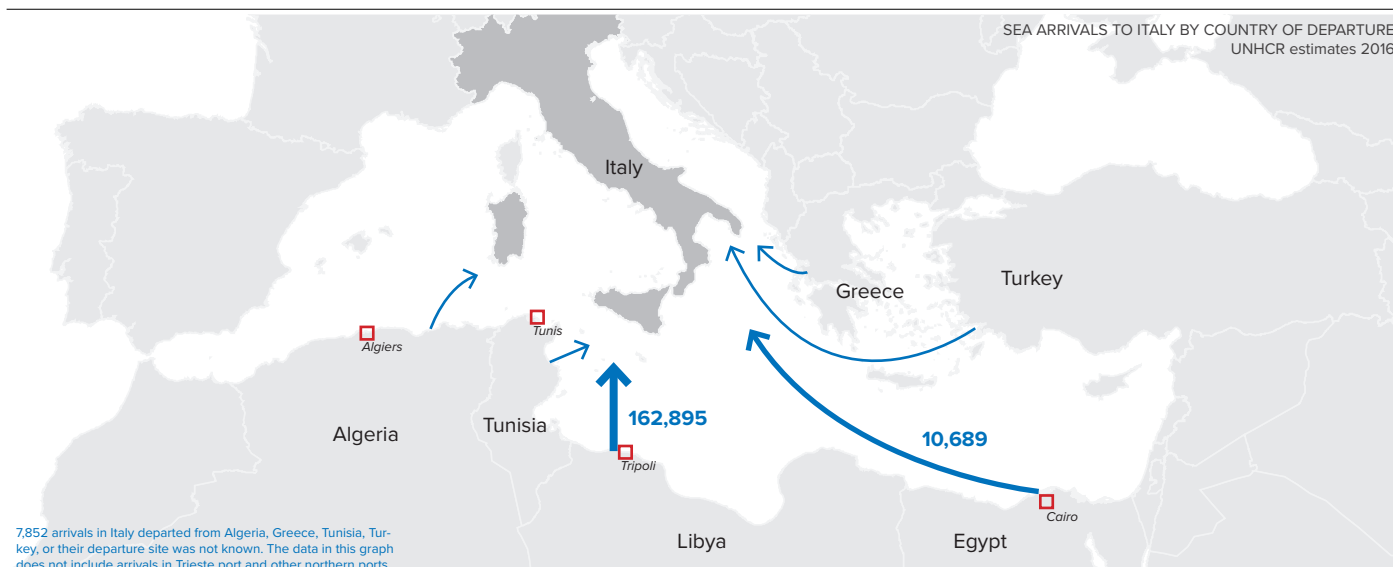
¹¹ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/53795>

¹² <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2017/1/58789f624/refugees-migrants-face-high-risks-winter-weather-europe.html>

MOVEMENT OUT OF TURKEY AND ONWARD MOVEMENT FROM GREECE AND BULGARIA



CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE



From April onwards, the Central Mediterranean became the primary entry point to Europe for refugees and migrants. While the number of arrivals each month was generally consistent with those of 2015 up to September, record numbers of arrivals in October helped push 2016 arrivals beyond the 153,000 who arrived in 2015 and the 2014 level when 170,000 reached Italy. Those arriving by this route were mostly from Sub-Saharan Africa, including many with international protection needs and UASC. While 71% of arrivals in Italy were men, 14% of all arrivals (25,846 children) were UASC, mostly from Eritrea, Gambia, and Nigeria, more than double the 12,360 UASC who arrived in 2015.¹³ While women comprised only 13% of arrivals, they accounted for 29% of Nigerian arrivals and over 20% of arrivals from Somalia, Cameroon, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. IOM has raised concerns that around 80% of Nigerian women who arrived by sea to Italy in 2016 may be victims of trafficking.¹⁴

Of the 181,436 refugees and migrants who reached Italy in 2016, 90% departed from Libya with most boats departing from the west of the country, especially Sabratha. Many travelled in inflatable boats

with between 120 and 140 persons on board while others travelled on wooden boats ranging in size and with between 20 and 700 persons on board. The Libyan Coast Guard reported intercepting or rescuing 14,332 people at sea in 2016. A joint report by the UN Support Mission in Libya and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that after interception by armed men believed to be from the Libyan Coast Guard, refugees and migrants “are often beaten, robbed and taken to detention centres or private houses and farms, where they are subjected to forced labour, rape, and other sexual violence.”¹⁵

Around 6% of those who arrived in Italy departed from Egypt. While over 4,000 Syrians crossed the sea from North Africa in the first half of 2015, in 2016 the number of Syrians on this route was far lower with only 1,200 crossing the sea from North Africa to Italy.

The number of deaths of refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean as they attempted to reach Europe in 2016 is the highest on record¹⁶, primarily

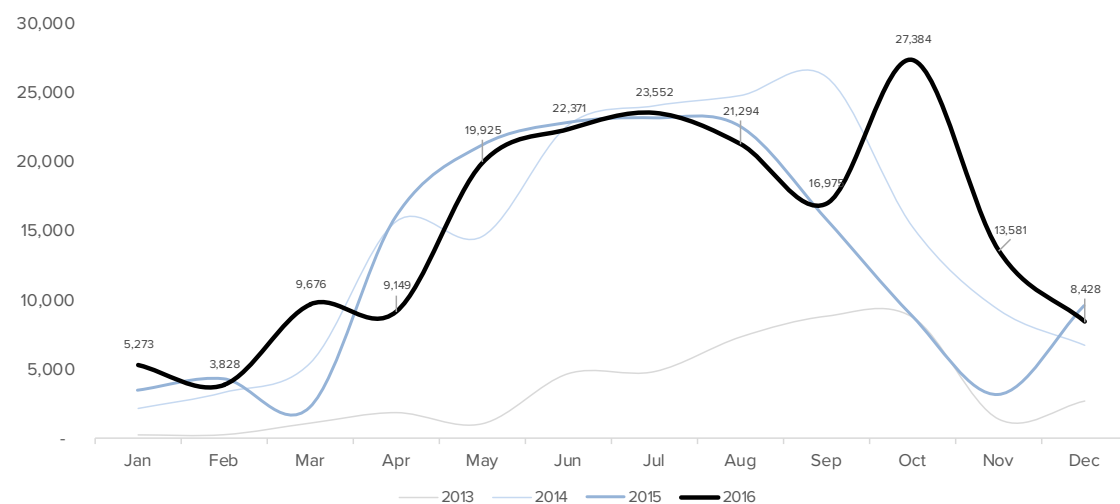
¹³ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/53357>

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jan/12/nigerian-women-trafficked-to-italy-for-sex-doubled-2016>

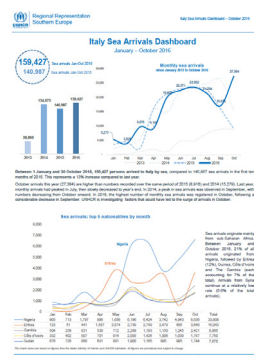
¹⁵ <http://unsmil.unmissions.org/Portals/unsmil/Documents/Migrants%20report-EN.pdf>

¹⁶ <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2016/10/580f1d044/mediterranean-death-toll-soars-all-time-high.html>

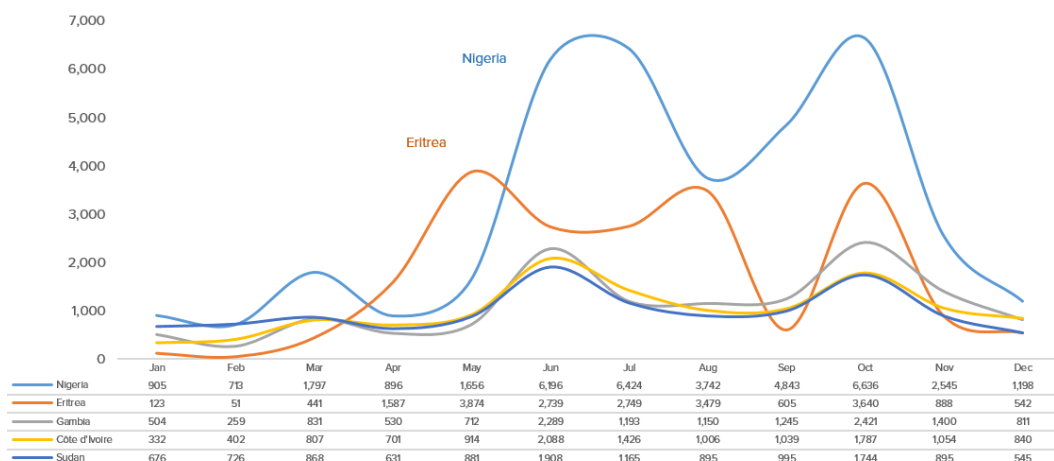
MONTHLY SEA ARRIVALS IN ITALY 2013 - 2016



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SEA ARRIVALS IN ITALY: TOP 5 COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN - 2016



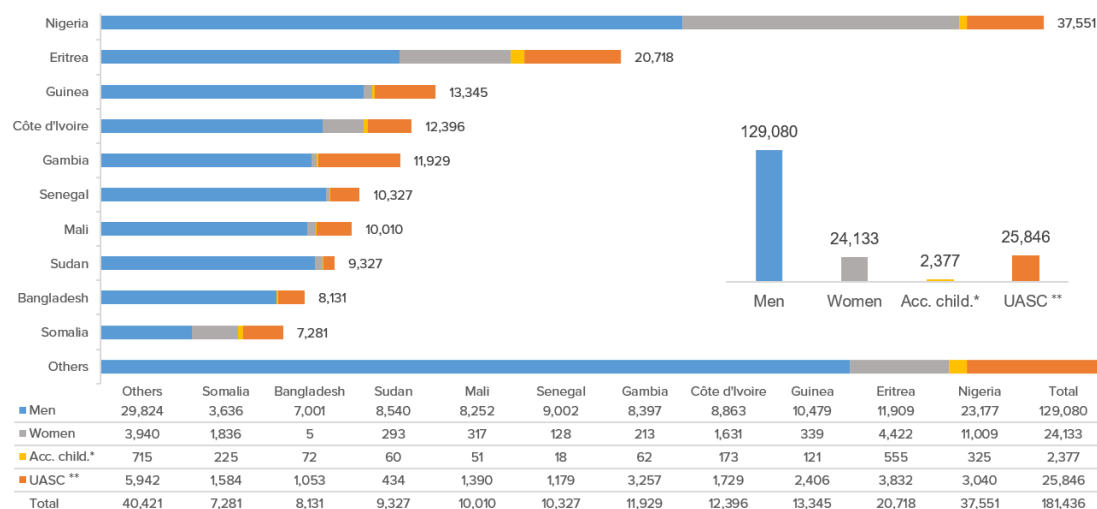
due to 4,578 deaths in the central Mediterranean, compared to 2,913 in the whole of 2015.¹⁷ The proportion of those refugees and migrants that died while attempting to cross the central Mediterranean in 2016 is one death for every 40 persons crossing, which is higher than the one in 53 recorded in 2015. Despite the presence of multiple governmental and NGO search and rescue vessels, people continue to drown as boats capsize, including during rescue attempts, with some trapped or locked below deck. Others asphyxiate, including after breathing engine fumes for hours in an enclosed space, or are even crushed to death in the panic to be rescued. Additional factors contributing to the increase in the number of deaths include the use of lower quality vessels by smugglers especially inflatable boats, travel in bad weather, overloading of boats, and sometimes mass embarkations of thousands at a time. Survivors reaching Italy often have horrific injuries, including burns from fuel mixing with sea water in the boat, or else accrued during their journeys across the Sahara or in Libya, often at the hands of smugglers. Other particularly vulnerable persons rescued include victims of torture, many survivors of sexual violence, women in advanced stages of pregnancy, and unaccompanied children.

While previously most of those arriving in Italy were moving onwards to other European destinations, including as victims of trafficking,¹⁸ increased restrictions at Italy's land borders contributed to larger numbers remaining in Italy and seeking asylum there. 123,482 people applied for asylum as of the end of the year and over 176,000 accommodated around Italy in reception centres. Relocations from Italy under the EU's Relocation Mechanism of asylum-seekers were slow with just 2,654 (7%) of the 39,600 original target by September 2017 relocated after 16 months of the programme, likely contributing to onward movement. As refugees and migrants tried to move onwards and cross into France or Switzerland, increased numbers accumulated in the towns of Ventimiglia and Como requiring the establishment of temporary accommodation facilities. In August, a group of 48 Sudanese nationals who may have been in need of international protection but had not applied for asylum in Italy were deported to Sudan under a bilateral agreement, prompting concerns about whether the agreement includes adequate safeguards against *refoulement*.

¹⁷ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/53632>

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/aug/08/trafficking-of-nigerian-women-into-prostitution-in-europe-at-crisis-level>

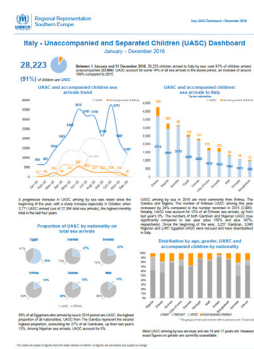
PRIMARY COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN OF SEA ARRIVALS TO ITALY BY GENDER AND AGE - 2016



* Accompanied children ** Unaccompanied and Separated Children

Arrival figures for Italy are provided by the Italian Ministry of Interior. Figures are subject to future adjustment and should not be considered final.

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WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE

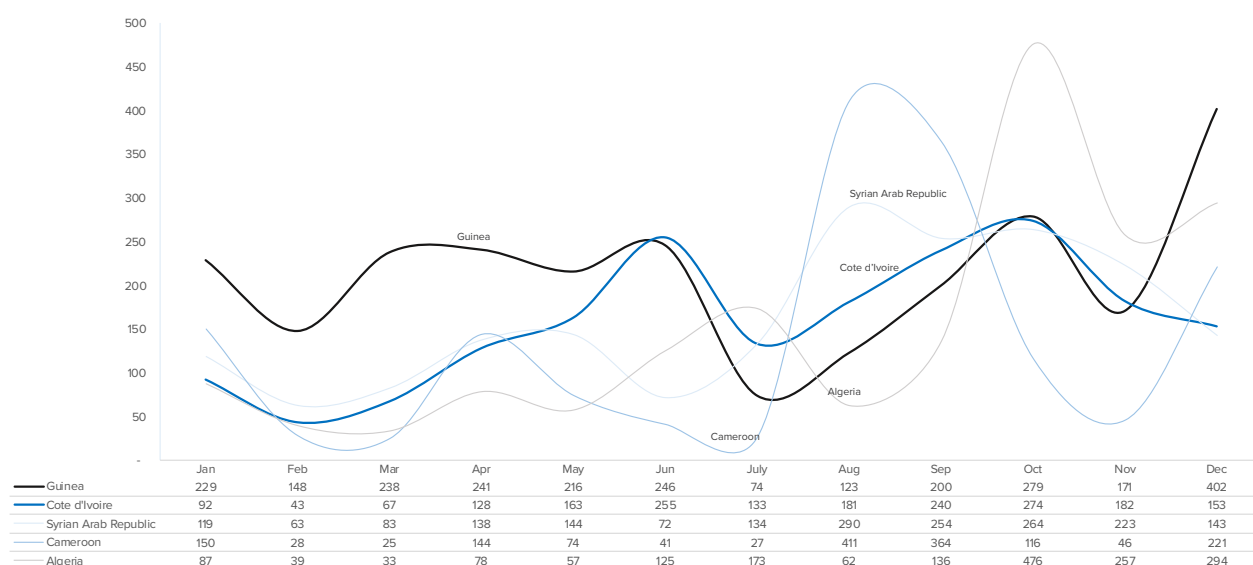


A third route commonly used by refugees and migrants in 2016 was from North Africa to Spain, known as the Western Mediterranean route. Some crossed the Straits of Gibraltar or the Alboran Sea in inflatable boats while others crossed into the two enclaves in North Africa, Melilla and Ceuta, either by climbing the high surrounding fences or passing undetected through border crossing points. The number of refugees and migrants entering Europe via Spain dropped 13% from 16,263 in 2015 to 14,094 in 2016. One primary reason for the decrease was that fewer Syrians entered Melilla in 2016 with just 1,927 reaching the enclave in 2016 compared to 7,164 in 2015 when those in North Africa sought a safer alternative to the sea crossing to Italy from Libya. As a result, entries to Melilla dropped from 9,169 in 2015 to 3,901 in 2016. However, there was

an 85% increase in numbers of people crossing to the Spanish mainland by sea from North Africa with 6,979 people crossing this way in 2016. Numbers crossing the sea generally increased throughout the year and peaked in September with 1,132 refugees and migrants reaching the mainland before numbers dropped in line with regional sea crossing trends as the winter weather set in.

Of those entering Spain, people in need of protection included those fleeing conflicts in Syria, the Central African Republic, and Yemen; women fleeing sexual and gender-based violence, persons fleeing persecution due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, and unaccompanied children. In 2016, the primary nationalities arriving in Spain were Guineans (19%), Algerians (17%), Syrians (14%), and

TOP FIVE COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN OF ARRIVALS TO SPAIN - 2016



Ivoirians (14%). While Syrians continued to cross undetected via the border crossing point into Melilla and Algerians primarily entered Spain by sea, Guineans were the largest group to enter the enclaves (aside from the Syrians) with most crossing via the fence and smaller numbers of Guineans crossing the sea to the Spanish mainland. Ivoirians were the largest group to cross the sea to the Spanish mainland. Notably, between August and November, over 200 Syrians a month entered Spain in search of international protection, making the Western Mediterranean the second most frequently used entry point to Europe for Syrians after the Eastern Mediterranean.

As more people crossed the sea to the Spanish mainland, more people lost their lives at sea with 77 persons reported dead or missing in 2016 compared to 59 in 2015. UNHCR also remains concerned by consistent allegations of automatic returns at the Spain-Morocco border. On 10 September, news media footage¹⁹ showed forced returns to Morocco,

including the use of violence, of persons attempting to enter Ceuta via the fences without any form of apparent protection screening, prompting statements from UNHCR²⁰, the Defensor del Pueblo²¹ as well as a reaction from the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights.²² A similar incident took place on 01 January 2017 when over 800 persons attempted to cross the fence to Ceuta. Of the 106 persons that reached Spanish territory that day by climbing the fence only two who required hospitalization were allowed to stay and the others were returned to Morocco without any form of protection screening. Further allegations of similar returns were also made in recent months including of those on Spanish territory attempting to cross the fence to Melilla as well as those entering Ceuta and Melilla by sea.

¹⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exAlcGigs_U

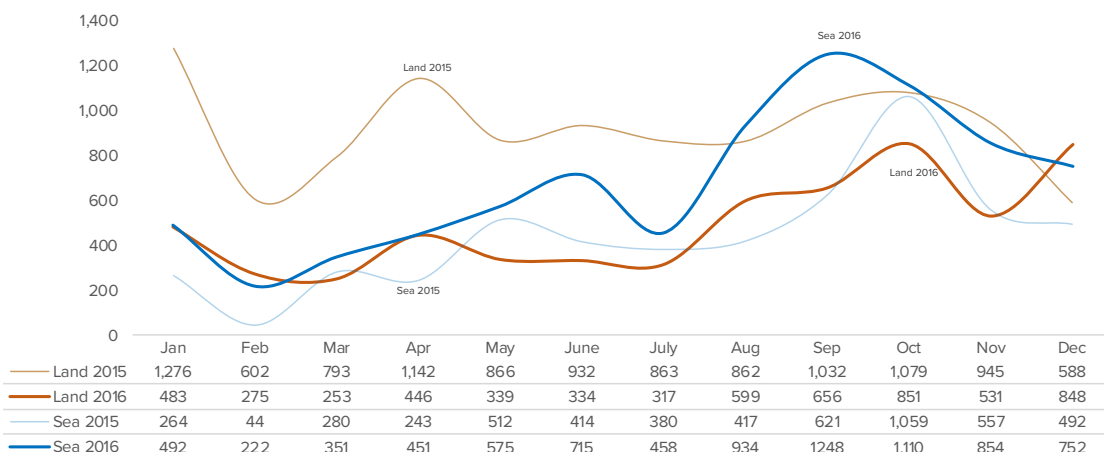
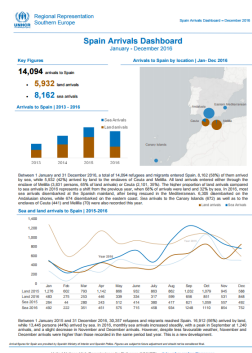
²⁰ <http://www.acnur.es/noticias/noticias-de-espana/2617-acnur-recuerda-que-la-convencion-de-ginebra-no-limita-el-derecho-de-asilo-segun-el-modo-de-entrada>

²¹ <https://www.defensordelpueblo.es/noticias/inmigrantes-en-la-valla-de-ceuta/>

²² <https://twitter.com/CommissionerHR/status/775620525402062848>

SEA AND LAND ARRIVALS TO SPAIN 2015 - 2016

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Arrival figures for Spain are provided by Spanish Ministry of Interior and Spanish Police. Figures are subject to future adjustment and should not be considered final.

CONCLUSION

People in need of international protection will continue to need to seek safety in Europe in 2017 and beyond, regardless of the restrictions, including push-backs and other abuses at borders, imposed to reduce their numbers. In order to prevent further loss of life and reduce the risks to those who are seeking safety in Europe, some of whom have spouses or other family members already in Europe, European States need to expand opportunities for safe pathways. These include the use of resettlement, effective family reunification arrangements, private sponsorship, work and study visas and other complementary pathways to access protection.²³ In addition, it is important to strengthen the use of re-

location for those who have arrived in Greece and Italy. For those who have arrived in an EU Member State, UNHCR calls for prioritization of family reunification for those with family members elsewhere in the EU, accelerated and simplified asylum determination procedures, a common approach to UASC, and increased integration support to reduce the incentive for irregular onward movement. Finally, UNHCR calls for EU Member States and other European States along primary transit routes to halt border practices that are not in accordance with international and European law, including push-backs, denial of access to asylum procedures, and use of violence by authorities, and ensure instead that those in need of protection are identified and assisted by border authorities.

²³ <http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2016/12/58453b614/unhcr-calls-stronger-eu-action-refugees.html>