

Who Profits from the Deadly Illegal Migrant Trafficking Trade Across the Mediterranean?



Captain and first mate of capsized illegal migrant vessel
Mohammed Ali Malek, left, and Mahmud Bikhith

Source: Alessandra Tarantino/AP

Yesterday, we [drew attention](#) to the massive surge in the deadly illegal migrant trade across the Mediterranean that figured in an emergency meeting of EU Foreign ministers in Luxembourg. The loss of over 1,000 in two separate trafficking ship disasters last week spurred on deliberations requested by Italian President Renzi and Maltese PM Muscat. Today charges were brought in Italian courts against the 27 year old Tunisian captain and 25 year old Syrian mate of the 66 foot fishing boat that capsized off Libya with a loss of upwards of 900 crammed into the flimsy vessel. *NBC news* reported:

The Tunisian captain of the boat – 27-year-old Mohammed Ali Malek – [was arrested along](#) with a Syrian crew member, 25-year-old Mahmud Bikhith.

Sicilian prosecutors said Tuesday that Malek has been charged with culpable shipwreck, manslaughter and aiding and abetting illegal immigration. Bikhith has been charged with aiding and abetting illegal immigration, the statement from Catania's prosecutors said.



The question is who benefits from this deadly smuggling business?

The answer is the jihadists in Libya who have profited from the turmoil in the region. A *Wall Street Journal* [report](#) revealed how profitable the business of trafficking illegal migrants is worth taking the risks involved as deadly as the results have been to their customers seeking refuge in the EU,. The bottom line of the *WSJ* report: "Brazen, multi-million-dollar people-smuggling enterprise run by Libyan militias and tribesmen proves hard to combat."

The *WSJ* wrote:

Various armed groups in Libya are aggressively advertising their services to would-be migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and Syrians fleeing conflict in their country, presenting the collapse of order in Libya as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to secure safe passage to Europe, says Arezo Malakooti, the director of migration research for Paris-based Altai Consulting, a consultancy that works with the International Organization for Migration and other migration-related groups.

"The profits from human trafficking have consolidated a new balance of power in the Sahel and Libya," says Tuesday Reitano, head of the Geneva-based Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

How a Saharan tribe profits:

The Saharan Tebu tribe, for instance, is now making "a killing," according to Ms. Reitano, who estimates the tribe pockets some \$60,000 a week by charging West African migrants for a seat on four-wheel-drive cars that take them to Agadez, a major city in Niger. From there, they ferry the migrants to the central Libyan city of Sabha and then proceed to northern Libya ahead of their sea journey to Italy and Malta.

The profits are such that tribes normally at war cooperate at times in getting migrants from one place to the next.

[...]

Mustapha Orghan, an activist who has worked with aid groups to track smuggler operations said:

Tebu and Tuaregs used to smuggle goods. The new alternative is human trafficking...and now both Tuaregs and Tebu are trying to get their share of the cake."

Mr. Orghan said Ghat, a southern Libyan town near the Algerian border where he lives, is the first entry point from Algeria for Africans. There, he said, "African migrants get sold from one smuggler to another."

He said the trafficking business has become increasingly lucrative since chaos in Libya sharply reduced traditional sources of income in the region: heavily subsidized oil, food and other goods from Algeria.

"Farming" migrants to make profits:

In Sabha, African men typically spend months working as laborers, and women as housemaids, to earn the roughly \$1,000 to pay for the crossing from Libya's northern coast. If there is no demand for their services in Sabha, smugglers farm them out to cities further north and west for approximately 700 Libyan dinar, or about \$500.

Discrimination among "customers" leads to deadly trips:

Ismail, an African migrant who declined to give his full name and nationality, tried to cross three times in recent weeks but was thwarted by overcrowding and breakdowns of the cheap plastic boat of the sort usually provided for Africans. Syrians, who can often pay more and aren't discriminated against by the overwhelmingly Arab smugglers, typically make the crossing in sturdier wooden

boats.

The EU according Frontex agency has arrested 10,000 involved in the illegal migrant trade, mainly truck drivers and many migrants involved in navigating the flimsy crafts. Italian authorities have arrested `1,000 smugglers since 2014. However of these, less than 100 have been convicted. They simply lack the resources in contending with the mushrooming human trafficking business as Libya devolves into a failed state.

[Watch](#) this WSJ video dramatizing the journey of an Eritrean illegal migrant across Africa to Libya and his perilous transit via smugglers to his ultimate destination in the Italian island of Lampedusa:

Yesterday's EU foreign ministers meeting in Luxembourg may have surfaced calls for safe and secure channels to reduce the deadly toll of illegal migrants, but going after the lucrative smuggling trafficking business at its source means contending with warring militias and the criminal activities of tribal groups in Libya. Note this ironic comment from the UN Human Rights Commission head:

“Europe is turning its back on some of the most vulnerable migrants in the world, and risk turning the Mediterranean into a vast cemetery,” said U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein Monday. “Migrant smugglers are the symptom, not the cause of this wretched situation.”

Jihad conflicts in the Middle East and Africa are driving hundreds of thousands annually in desperation to pay top dollar for a deadly ride on those rickety boats whose owners cop big time profits. Nature abhors a vacuum when chaos

creates rich opportunities to rake in enormous wealth from trafficking illegal migrants. As we saw yesterday, the successful smugglers even alert EU officials that they are bringing another shipload of hapless migrants to fatten their margins from this deadly trade. How the EU and the Union for the Mediterranean deal with problem of illegal mass immigration will surely be daunting costing billions of Euros. In the meantime, Italian and other EU coast guards continue to provide a picket line of vessels daily monitoring these dangerous trips in flimsy craft across the Mediterranean from the failed state of Libya. Stay tuned for developments.