

## Migrants and the 'business' of the boat journey from Libya to Europe

*By the time migrants and refugees successfully make it through the Sahara desert to Libya, Europe is only a boat ride away. Marthe Achtnich explores the challenges facing migrants at this juncture.*

**This post is part of our series [African Perspectives on Migration](#) looking at the theme of irregular migration.**

The brightly-coloured shoes on the floor in front of me were brand new. They looked somewhat out of place in this old derelict house on the outskirts of Tripoli in Libya where I was sitting with a group of people from Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia. In a way, they represented hope, the hope for a different future across the sea. The owner of the shoes told me that they were for his 'new life' in Europe, for his 'freedom', for when he can be a 'normal person'. He would take them on the boat, he told me, and wear them to take his first steps on European soil. Another guy showed me the warm jacket he had bought for the boat journey. He had heard that it is cold on the sea, so he wanted to be prepared, he said. A woman sitting on the floor recalled how she had tried to take a boat five times already, but was arrested and detained each time, losing a lot of money to smugglers and to get out of detention in Libya. 'No lucky me', she exclaimed with a smile, but 'next time' she would be 'sixth time lucky'. A few weeks later, one of the men called me from Italy. 'I made it, I made it', he shouted down the phone.



Photo Credit: UNHCR.org

In migrants' daily life in Libya, they were often exposed to various forms of violence by different actors – militias, security forces, criminal gangs – and to arbitrary arrest and detention, often in deplorable conditions. Despite knowing the risks of the boat journey to Europe, many people felt they had no other option, also linking the boat journey to the idea of 'chance' and a risky 'game', as one migrant in Malta recalled: 'I got the chance, I tried, and thank God I won'. Others were not willing to take the risk and decided to stay in Libya. They were simply too scared, they told me, in particular after having experienced the dangerous journey through the Sahara desert. Still others changed their mind once they realised how bad the situation in Libya was, and only then decided to take a boat. 'We need only Europe', one person exclaimed, 'just to leave Libya only, and go anywhere, Lampedusa, Malta, Sicily, anywhere we are lucky [...] if we die in the sea it's better than to go back to Libya.' Some referred to God: 'It is in God's hands', they explained, 'God will guide us' and knows 'when it's time to die'.

After the decision to leave, 'getting ready' and 'waiting' became the next steps in this risky 'business'. This meant trying to raise enough money to pay the smuggler (around US\$ 300-2,000, depending on the smuggler, the type of the boat, or the season) and waiting hidden away from Libyan authorities until the weather conditions became stable enough or until the boats were ready. Often, people described this decision as entering into an 'agreement' or 'contract' with the smuggler, a distant person who was never seen, but only liaised with through a broker. 'Contractor' and 'subcontractor' were terms I often heard to describe these relationships. Further referring to the idea of a 'business', the smugglers 'arrange' them in houses and on boats, migrants told me, referring to these houses as 'storage facilities'. 'Libya is only business', was a common sentiment. The business is lucrative and competition is high because people often prefer to use smugglers who were recommended to them by friends who safely made it to Europe. The full reality of the 'agreement' was often only revealed at the beach. Many migrants had imagined the boats to be much bigger and hesitated when they saw their actual size. Returning from the beach, however, was not an option, in particular as most of the smugglers were heavily armed, and also because the money would be lost.

This confusion often continued on the boats, where migrants were among themselves, without any other actor. One of them usually got the journey for free, as the 'pilot' or 'captain'. This person, however, was quite often immediately exposed as 'a liar' many people told me, describing how nobody knew how to drive the boat or to handle technical equipment. This, in combination with malfunctioning engines and severe overcrowding often led to the very real dangers of sinking and disorientation. Additional problems such as dehydration, lack of food, heatstroke, or fighting erupting on overcrowded vessels among exhausted people, often led to further difficulties increasing the uncertainty of the boat journey.

In peoples' own view, being 'lucky' played a role when being rescued either by passing boats or European rescue teams. Proximity to the Libyan shoreline, however, put the boats at risk of detection, arrest and detention by the Libyan authorities. For the migrants this meant losing their money and often having to find even more to pay their way out of detention, thus reinforcing their sense of being 'commodities' in a 'business'. While some were too shaken to leave again after such a failed attempt, others kept trying repeatedly.

Here, I have focused on one snapshot of migrants' perceptions on the boat journey; it is not my intention to convey the idea that this captures the whole situation in this controversial context. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind the various actors influencing this 'business' of the border and the role and collaboration of EU migration control efforts in shaping it.

**Marthe Achtnich** is a DPhil (PhD) Candidate in Anthropology at University of Oxford.

*For my doctoral research in anthropology, I have conducted several months of ethnographic fieldwork with sub-Saharan migrants in Libya in 2014 and in Malta in 2013. People come from various countries—Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Cameroon—and mostly entered Libya through the Sahara desert with the help of smugglers, after which they either stayed in Libya or took a boat to Europe. As I am focusing on their perspectives, here I have used the term 'migrant' for all of them. While they have left their countries of origin for different reasons, many have similar experiences in Libya.*

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