

Special Dossier

Researching human smuggling in the Mediterranean

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The Arab Spring, its aftermath, and the Syrian conflict have significantly contributed to the sharp increase of migration to Europe. In 2014, most of the migrants and refugees who traveled on smugglers' boats departing from Libya, Tunisia, or Egypt sought to reach Italy. This extremely dangerous Central Mediterranean Route dominated flows during 2014 and was the location of large-scale tragedies in October 2013 and April 2015, which prompted calls for a response on the part of the European Union (EU). One year later, the track shifted from the Mediterranean crossing toward the east, from Turkey to Greece. In 2015, migration and refugee movements as well as smuggling services in the Mediterranean region gained unprecedented momentum, and the shift from the long and extremely perilous Central Mediterranean Route to the shorter and relatively safer crossing from Turkey to Greece (known as the Eastern Mediterranean Route) has allowed a much larger number of migrants and refugees to reach Europe's external borders via the services of smugglers.

Because of the unprecedented volumes of new arrivals, even the "best prepared" European countries have reached a breaking point in terms of their ability to meet EU standards for receiving and processing applicants. Furthermore, the enormous interest in and concern for human smuggling in governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental organizations, not to mention in the media and popular opinion, is running well ahead of our theoretical understanding of and factual evidence on the subject. This has implications for policy measures designed to "combat" human smuggling, which may not work and may have unintended side effects. Indeed, despite the fact that human smuggling has attracted great media and political attention over the last two decades, there remains a good deal of imprecision about just what human smuggling *is* within the global context of irregular migration. As a result, an exploration of the less debated dimensions of this phenomenon—such as the

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diversity that exists within the smuggling industry, the social context in which smuggling occurs, or the criminalization of human smuggling and its unintended consequences—would undoubtedly initiate new scientific and political debates.

It was against the backdrop of these debates that I organized a workshop entitled “Researching Human Smuggling: A Critical Appraisal of Shifting Routes and Methods” as part of the 13th International Migration, Social Cohesion and Integration (IMISCOE) Annual Conference on Migration and Development, which was held in Prague between June 30 and July 2, 2016. The goal of the workshop was to create a forum where scholars and experts could exchange their knowledge and scientific findings in order to bring conceptual clarity to the existing discourse of human smuggling. The idea for this special dossier of *New Perspectives on Turkey* grew out of that workshop. The dossier has two aims: firstly, to enhance our concrete understanding of the phenomenon of human smuggling through a discussion of the main conceptual and definitional issues confronting researchers as well as politicians; and secondly, to review the empirical studies on the Eastern Mediterranean Route in order to present findings on the dynamics of smuggling operations, shifting routes, and changing methods.

Despite great practical difficulties and obstacles, the empirical research in this area has developed significantly over the past few years, and much insight has been gained into the process of migrant smuggling as well as into the actors involved. The articles in this dossier contribute to our understanding of human smuggling through comparative, structural, and actor-focused perspectives.

Ayşen Üstübcü and Ahmet İçduygu’s article examines the recent history of border closures by analyzing their impact on human mobility at two ends of the Mediterranean; namely, Turkey and Morocco. The authors investigate controls over mobility in the Mediterranean after the 1990s and discuss their implications in the light of these two comparable cases by showing that border closures are neither linear nor irreversible. Even though there have been some relative and short-term successes in terms of closures and externalization policies on the Morocco-Spain and Turkey-Greece borders, the study highlights how, in the last several decades, unauthorized crossings through these borders have in fact never ended. In this sense, the article once again shows that costly and restrictive arrangements constitute unresolved issues of governance within and between states, while at the same time they continue to violate the fundamentals of individuals’ rights to mobility as well as the premises of international protection regimes.

In her contribution to this special dossier, Veronika Bilger reviews six complementary descriptive types of migrant smuggling as they were originally defined in the early 2000s. Her examination of these different types against

more recent empirical material demonstrates that changing geopolitical dynamics have led to the expansion and opening of new smuggling markets: the “self-organization” of irregular migration processes, where migrants have themselves begun to organize certain parts of the journey. Bilger’s study thus belies the popular argument, especially prominent in the media, that human smuggling is organized by mafiaesque criminal groups.

In their article, Ela Gökalp Aras and Zeynep Şahin Mencütek focus on the case of Turkey in particular, examining the extent to which Turkey’s regime of irregular migration governance has evolved since the 1990s. This they do via analysis of Turkey’s responses to European externalization policies, as well as its national security concerns, which grew in number and became more acute with the Syrian refugee influx that began in 2011.

Özge Biner’s study adds another important dimension to the issue of border closures and irregular crossings by elaborating upon migrants’ agency through an analysis of the multilayered relations that are set up between smugglers and undocumented people. Exploring different phases of the human smuggling process in the province of Van on the Turkish-Iranian border, Biner examines how the physical and sociopolitical conditions of border crossing affect people’s way of thinking, behavior, and engagement with different structures of power. In this way, the article stipulates how smuggled migrants mobilize their agency in order to manipulate and challenge the system, and also how this process transforms their capacity to simultaneously recognize and unsettle state bordering practices.

All together, these papers add significantly to our knowledge of human smuggling across the Mediterranean by going well beyond the stereotypes constantly produced and reproduced in the media. The portrayal of migrants and refugees as tragic victims clearly ignores migrants’ own agency, while political narratives proclaiming a “crisis” of migration to Europe prompt states to justify exceptional migration control measures extending even beyond their own borders. The articles in this special dossier emphasize the importance of analyzing processes and actors that operate through borders, international arrangements, and state structures. It is hoped that such evidence-based and comparative studies might have an impact on policymaking as well.