



Terörizm ve Radikalleşme ile Mücadele Araştırma Merkezi



MIGRANT SMUGGLING AND TERRORISM CONNECTION ON MIGRATION ROUTES

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INTRODUCTION

The connection between migrant smuggling and terrorism is becoming an increasingly prominent issue in global security. There are many aspects that could require cooperation between terrorist organizations and migrant smugglers. The income generated from migrant smuggling can be used to finance the activities of terrorist groups. Many irregular migrants, including women, men, and children, can be targeted by terrorist groups as potential new recruits.

International smuggling networks may allow terrorists to cross borders more easily or enable their militants to move with irregular migrants to other countries. Some terrorist groups specifically target vulnerable groups such as women and children among irregular migrants, threatening them with crimes such as sexual exploitation or forced labor. This situation poses a serious threat to both the safety of irregular migrants and national security.

Research conducted by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) through its Migrant Smuggling Observatory confirms that many criminal groups involved in smuggling migrants by sea and land have become increasingly sophisticated. Cases of abduction, robbery, detention, and other serious human rights violations, as well as exploitation, have been documented.

New migration routes are being added to both primary and secondary migration routes and the problem is growing for countries. Especially Europe has been facing its largest refugee crisis since World War II, and this situation has created significant impacts at economic, social, and political levels. Factors such as conflict, instability, discrimination, climate change, war, and unemployment have driven millions of people to seek a safe place, leading them to head toward Europe. Those who cannot reach European countries through legal means resort to illegal methods. The perception of European countries as a more stable region economically, politically, socially, and environmentally; the dissemination of misinformation by human smugglers; and false promises encouraging irregular migrants to undertake dangerous journeys are the main factors fueling irregular migration. According to the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol), more than 90% of irregular migrants reaching Europe undertake part or their entire journey through human smugglers. Two-thirds of these migrants fail to meet the criteria for international protection and are deported. Mediterranean migration routes often require assistance from migrant smugglers, and are exposed to the risk of unsafe and dangerous travel conditions, as well as various crimes and forms of violence committed by armed groups. The study titled *Links Between Smuggling of Migrants and Other Forms of Organized Crime Along the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes* (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023) examined the links between migrant smuggling and other forms of organized crime along the Central and Western Mediterranean routes. The study presents evidence of the connections between terrorism, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking. In this context, terrorist networks have become intertwined with actors engaged in migrant smuggling and human trafficking. For example, in northern Mali, armed groups are known to be part of the migrant smuggling industry, not only providing protection to migrants but also demanding passage rights from migrant smuggling convoys. Therefore, the relationship between migrant smuggling networks and armed groups takes the form of cooperation and protection, rather than direct involvement in facilitating irregular migration.

Migrant Smuggling

Human smugglers endanger people's lives by giving them false hopes. Irregular migrants – particularly vulnerable groups such as women, children, and unaccompanied minors – are subjected to violence, extortion, exploitation, rape, abuse, theft, kidnapping, and even murder. Migrant smuggling is a key activity for criminal networks sustained by ongoing demand.

Smuggling networks have the ability to quickly adapt their illegal services to measures taken by law enforcement.

Migrant smuggling activities operate differently depending on geographic locations and the context in which they occur. Along migration routes, they offer various services such as different modes of transportation, safe houses, and forged travel documents. For air travel, document forgery for identity cards and visas plays a key role, while for land travel, methods such as hiding in vehicles or crossing borders on foot are used.

The profiles, organization, and activities of smugglers and smuggling networks, as well as the level of illegal services they provide, vary significantly depending on the socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts of the countries involved. Migrant smuggling, as an illegal economic activity, supports a broader range of operations in origin, transit, and destination countries. These operations include shop owners selling life jackets or travel supplies, car rental services, ship and hotel owners at certain transport hubs, and money transfer shops. Smuggling networks often rely on connections with local communities where their services are recommended to other potential migrants and where payments are facilitated.



On the other hand, the use of social media (WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram) in migrant smuggling has exponentially increased in recent years. Human smugglers typically use social media to advertise their smuggling services, provide information about migration routes, offer informative materials guiding irregular migrants, communicate with migrants, address migrants' safety concerns, share happy migration stories, and facilitate communication among smugglers.

According to the findings of a study titled “The Impact of Social Media on Migrant Smuggling,” supported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, it has been observed that messaging—such as smugglers communicating with their networks via platforms like WhatsApp, Viber, Messenger, and Telegram—is highly prevalent. In addition to messaging, applications for sharing GPS data, making calls, and conducting video chats play a significant role in the smuggling process.

A report published in 2022 by Europol's European Migrant Smuggling Center highlights how migrant smugglers and human traffickers use social media. The report mentions that free and popular digital platforms like social media and mobile applications are frequently used for various purposes, including advertising, recruitment, communication, coordination, guidance, money transfer, or monitoring law enforcement activities.

In summary, migrant smugglers use a variety of payment systems, ranging from online methods to underground banking systems. These systems allow funds to be deposited and collected upon service delivery. Digital smuggling poses a new challenge for law enforcement and judicial authorities, as smugglers increasingly rely on social media and mobile applications for communication, money transfers, recruiting irregular migrants, providing route guidance, sharing photos and videos of documents and tickets, and even monitoring law enforcement activities.

Organized crime structures capable of conducting sophisticated operations encompassing all aspects of migrant smuggling services, particularly individuals at the upper levels of these criminal organizations, pose a significant risk to Europe's security. Approximately 50% of the networks involved in migrant smuggling are poly-criminal organizations also engaged in other criminal activities, such as human trafficking, drug trafficking, tax fraud, arms smuggling, and money laundering.

It is estimated that smuggling networks earn between €4.7 and €6 billion annually worldwide from their criminal activities. While the prices of smuggling services vary depending on the routes used and the facilitation services provided, investigations into smuggling cases have revealed that the cost of smuggling services can reach up to €20,000 per person.

Irregular Migration Routes to Europe

Migration routes can change rapidly in response to increased border measures and controls, law enforcement activities, or security risks. However, smuggling hubs where the supply and demand for smuggling services converge remain relatively stable.

The three Mediterranean sea routes (Western, Central, and Eastern) and the West African route (often referred to as the Atlantic route) continue to be the primary paths used by smuggling networks to bring irregular migrants to Europe. It is estimated that 85% to 90% of irregular migration to Europe is carried out via sea routes. Irregular migrants attempting to reach Europe increasingly embark on life-threatening journeys accompanied by smugglers who employ more dangerous tactics. Smugglers are using increasingly unseaworthy and/or overcrowded boats, as well as high-capacity vessels, which pose inherent challenges to search and rescue operations.

West African Route

The West African route connects West Africa (and its northern regions) to Spain's Canary Islands. In 2023, instability in West Africa led to a tripling of arrivals detected from this region. Smugglers have started using larger cayucos (a type of fishing boat typical of West Africa) to transport more irregular migrants. Most arrivals originate from Senegal, followed

by Morocco and Mali. Due to increasing instability in some countries in this region, such as military coups or socioeconomic insecurity, a further rise in migration through this route seems likely. North Africa, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East serve as major hubs for the trafficking of human victims subjected to sexual and labor exploitation.

Central Mediterranean Route

Stretching between North Africa and the European sides of Italy and Malta, this section of the Mediterranean remains one of the main migration routes to Europe. Northward movements also intersect with migration flows from the Eastern Mediterranean region. In 2023, there was a significant increase in arrivals via the Central Mediterranean route, with over 158,000 irregular border crossings recorded (an increase of more than 50,000 compared to 2022). Tunisians, Guineans, and Ivorians were the top three most frequently reported nationalities in 2023. Tunisia ranked first among departure countries, followed by Libya. Smugglers often used makeshift metal boats to cross the Mediterranean; however, an increase in more seaworthy vessels (such as fishing boats) has been observed, suggesting that sea routes may become less dependent on seasonality than in the past.



Eastern Mediterranean Route

This migration route covers movements toward Cyprus, Greece's sea borders, and the land borders of Turkey with Greece and Bulgaria. Syrians, Afghans, and Palestinians are the most frequently reported irregular migrants. There has also been an increase in the number of boats arriving from Lebanon, Libya, and Syria. Due to conflicts and instability in the region, the Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes are likely to witness even more migration activity.

Eastern Borders Route

This migration route spans the 6,000-kilometer-long land borders between Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, the Russian Federation, and European Union member states such as

Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, and Romania. A 195% increase was recorded in arrivals at the Eastern Land Borders this year, with 15,234 people reported.

Western Mediterranean Route

This route extends from Northwest Africa to southern Spain. Moroccans and Algerians constitute by far the largest migrant groups. The use of powerful speedboats by smugglers has been a common practice. Migrants frequently report that smugglers on the Western Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes are often armed. These two routes also have the highest reported incidents of violence among irregular migrants.

Western Balkan Route

The Western Balkan route includes the countries in the Western Balkan region and the land borders with Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Croatia. Irregular migrants along this route primarily include Syrians, Turks, and Afghans.

English Channel Route

In the English Channel, more than 62,000 irregular border crossings, including attempts and successful crossings, have been recorded. The most frequently reported migrants are Afghans, Iraqis, and Syrians. Migrants crossing the English Channel are transported in unseaworthy vessels or hidden in concealed compartments of vehicles along the Balkan land routes.

Table: 1 Number of recorded deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea from 2014 to 2024

Year	Deaths
2014	3,286
2015	4,055
2016	5,136
2017	3,139
2018	2,337
2019	1,885
2020	1,449
2021	2,048
2022	2,411
2023	3,105
2024	1,620

Source: Statista. (2024). Number of recorded deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea from 2014 to 2024, Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1082077/deaths-of-migrants-in-the-mediterranean-sea/>



Table 2. Irregular Border Crossing At The External Borders Of The European Union

ROUTE	OCTOBER 2024	JAN-OCT 2024	JAN-OCT 2023/JAN-OCT 2024	TOP NATIONALITIES (JAN-OCT 2024)
Eastern Mediterranean	7303	54989	+14%	Syria, Afghanistan, Egypt
Central Mediterranean	5433	55227	-62%	Bangladesh, Syria, Tunisia
Western African	3288	34091	+14%	Mali, Senegal, Morocco
Western Balkan	1766	18955	-80%	Syria, Türkiye, Afghanistan
Western Mediterranean	1418	12696	-5%	Algeria, Morocco, Mali
Eastern Land Border	1611	15237	+195%	Ukraine, Somalia, Eritrea
Exist towards the UK	9648	57162	-4%	Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq

Source: Frontex. (2024). EU external borders: irregular border crossings drop 43% in first 10 months of 2024, Available at: <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/eu-external-borders-irregular-border-crossings-drop-43-in-first-10-months-of-2024-PnbwBc>

Key Highlights from the First 10 Months of 2024:

A 62% annual decrease was recorded in irregular border crossings in the Central Mediterranean.

The Western Balkans region saw a significant drop of 80%.

The Eastern Land Border experienced the highest increase at 195%.

The most frequently reported nationalities of irregular migrants this year so far are Syrians, Malians, and Ukrainians.

Europe's Fight Against Migrant Smuggling: The European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) and European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC)

EMPACT

One of the most urgent crime threats faced by the European Union is migrant smuggling. European countries have taken strict measures in response to the issue of uncontrolled migration. The European Union is calling for strong action to combat migrant smuggling. Effective efforts against organized crime are possible not only through police forces but also through cooperation among the judiciary, customs, border security, and the private sector.

Increased border controls to prevent irregular migration and ensure security have sparked debates in Europe regarding the rights of irregular migrants. In particular, migration policies have caused political polarization in European countries and paved the way for the rise of populist parties.



The cross-border activities of criminal organizations have highlighted the importance of international cooperation. Two significant initiatives related to Europe's fight against migrant smuggling are EMPACT and EMSC. Both initiatives complement each other as part of Europe's security infrastructure. EMPACT was launched within the framework of the European Union's security strategy to identify crime threats in advance and develop proactive solutions to address them.

This platform enables a more effective and coordinated approach to combating organized and serious crime threats within the European Union. While migrant smuggling is considered a priority crime area, it is only one of its overall objectives. It provides an effective cooperation platform among police, customs, judiciary, and other institutions across Europe. It aims to enhance the ability to combat crime by promoting information sharing among member states.

Recognized as one of the cornerstones of the European Union's security policies, the platform offers an integrated approach to internal security. This approach includes measures such as external border controls, police, customs and judicial cooperation, information management, innovation, education, prevention, the external dimension of internal security, and, where appropriate, public-private partnerships. It seeks to strengthen and improve cooperation between member states, EU institutions, and EU agencies, as well as with third-party countries and organizations, including the private sector where relevant. In this way, it aims to address the most significant threats to the European Union in a consistent and methodological manner.

EMSC

The European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC) was established by Europol in early 2016, following a highly dynamic period of irregular migration during which large groups of vulnerable migrants traveled, largely unrestricted, by sea and land toward their desired destinations in Europe.

EMSC focuses specifically on combating migrant smuggling, playing an active role in the operational and tactical dimensions of this field. It is designed to combat crimes linked to migrant smuggling and human trafficking.

Operating within Europol, the EMSC provides operational support to identify, track, and dismantle criminal networks. It conducts real-time information sharing and intelligence analysis and plays a direct role in planning and executing specific operations. The center supports investigations conducted by member states, including financial investigations, and enhances cooperation and coordination among law enforcement agencies.



Europol's Internet Referral Unit also contributes to the fight against migrant smuggling by supporting digital investigations. It monitors online content and directs platforms to remove pages associated with smuggling networks, helping to prevent the facilitation of migrant smuggling through the internet.

Conclusion

Europe's migration issue remains a complex and multifaceted challenge. It requires the development of sustainable policies to address humanitarian crises while adopting balanced approaches that protect Europe's security, economy, and social cohesion.

Migrant smuggling is a lucrative business for criminal networks, with an estimated annual global turnover of billions of euros. Smugglers use land, sea, and air routes to facilitate irregular migration both into and within the EU. Migrant smuggling, especially via sea routes,

is increasingly linked to severe human rights violations and deaths. The loss of migrant lives in the Mediterranean at the hands of smugglers underscores the urgent need to combat migrant smuggling using all available legal, operational, and administrative tools.

The close ties between smuggling networks and other forms of serious and organized crime, such as terrorism, human trafficking, and money laundering, further amplify this urgency. Cooperation with partner countries is crucial to preventing migrant smuggling and addressing it on an international scale. Strengthening legal frameworks and reinforcing operational and strategic structures in member states is therefore essential

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EĞİTİM:

Prof.Dr. Özlem Özdemir, İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi'nde öğretim üyesi olarak görev yapmaktadır. Özdemir, ortaokul eğitimini Tehran Intermediate International School'da, lise eğitimini Pakistan School/College'de tamamlamıştır. Lisans eğitimini Ankara Üniversitesi, İletişim Fakültesi, Halkla İlişkiler ve Tanıtım Bölümünde 2002 yılında, yüksek lisans eğitimini Ankara Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Halkla İlişkiler ve Tanıtım Anabilim Dalında 2006 yılında, doktora eğitimini Akdeniz Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü İletişim Çalışmaları Anabilim Dalında 2014 yılında tamamlamıştır. 2013-2014 tarihleri arasında Swansea University/İngiltere, Political and Cultural Studies, College of Arts and Humanities'de araştırma görevlisi olarak çalışan Özdemir, 2014-2016 tarihleri arasında Türkiye Bilimsel ve Teknolojik Araştırma Kurumu (TUBİTAK) bursu ile Swansea University/İngiltere, College of Science, Department of Geography'de mülteciler ve uluslararası göç alanlarında post doktora çalışmasını yürütmüştür.

MESLEKİ BİLGİLER:

Çalışma alanlarını; stratejik iletişim, düzensiz göç, göçmen kaçakçılığı, insan ticareti, uluslararası göç, toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı şiddet konuları oluşturmaktadır. İçişleri Bakanlığı'na bu konularda projeler yapmaktadır. Milli Savunma Üniversitesi Stratejik Anabilim Dalında ders vermektedir. El-Şebab üzerine Somali'de inceleme ve araştırmalarda bulunmuştur. "Sosyal Medyada Adalet Arayışı", "Mülteciler ve Dijital Göç", "Göçmen Kaçakçılığı'nın Saha Araştırması ve Dijital Boyutu" adlı kitapları bulunmaktadır. Konu ile ilgili İçişleri Bakanlığı'na projeler yapmıştır. Birleşmiş Milletler'de danışman olarak görev yapmaktadır. Birleşmiş Milletler ve Avrupa Birliği projelerinde eğitici olarak görevlendirilmiştir. Jandarma Genel Komutanlığı ve İl Jandarma Komutanlıklarında subay olarak görev yapan Özdemir, Plan Subayı, Kısım Amiri ve Şube Müdürü kadrolarında bulunmuştur.



TELİF HAKKI

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