



Migrant deaths: explaining variations over time and across smuggling routes

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Large amounts of economic, political and communication resources are being invested (how effectively is another matter) in trying to deal with the refugee crisis. The same can hardly be said about intellectual resources, if one judges from the analytical poverty of our understanding of some key dynamics at play. In particular, although migrant deaths at sea represent a crucial dimension of the



crisis, we understand still too little about what drives mortality rates up and down, however essential such kind of information would be in order to save more lives.

Media (and therefore political) attention towards migrant (I use this as a generic term, even if many or even most of these ‘migrants’ should be more accurately defined as ‘refugees’) deaths does not seem to be driven primarily by the *quantity* but rather by the *quality* of such deaths: the powerful image of a single drowned baby can do more in terms of awareness raising and mobilising power than thousands of anonymous and unseen corpses.

Right or wrong, this is a deeply human reaction and there is no reason to be surprised or scandalised.

Nevertheless, a more systematic attention towards numbers, even in such a highly emotional field, would be beneficial, particularly because death patterns are far from linear, predictable or easily explained.

This stands out if we juxtapose recent trends in migrant arrivals and migrant deaths along the two main smuggling routes across the Mediterranean to the European Union: the so-called ‘Eastern route’ from Turkey to Greece; and the ‘Central Mediterranean route’ originating in Libya (in much smaller proportions in Egypt and Tunisia), and heading across the Sicily Channel with the explicit goal of being rescued by the Italian and European (Frontex’s Triton mission) search and rescue (SaR) apparatus.

No national or European agency takes official responsibility for counting migrant deaths. In part this is because it is technically a very complex task, with deadly events taking place in a huge maritime area composed mainly of international waters where no state or organisation has sovereign rights. But it is also because officially counting deaths could, in some way, imply an acknowledgement or, in the eyes of the public at least, an indirect assumption of responsibility that nobody really wants.



Clear trends from unclear data

Therefore, the existing data are very partial and/or of limited reliability. They are based on media reports of uneven accuracy, or on unofficial national sources covering only recovered bodies, or on survivors' accounts that are very hard to double-check. Thus, on the one hand existing figures certainly miss a great number of undetected shipwrecks with no witnesses and no survivors. On the other, estimates are probably affected by a certain amount of double-counting. However, looking at the table below, which is based on the (not always perfectly consistent) data provided by UNHCR, Frontex and [IOM's Missing Migrants Project](#), a number of interesting considerations can be made.

Route	1 Jan. - 21 Mar. 2016		1 Jan. – 31 Mar. 2015		1 Jan. – 31 Dec. 2015		1 Jan. – 31 Dec. 2014	
	Arrivals (A)	Deaths (E)	Arrivals (B)	Deaths (E)	Arrivals (C)	Deaths (E)	Arrivals (D)	Deaths (E)
East Med.	148,317	347	12,392	16	873,179	806	44,057	34
Central Med.	13,825	97	10,165	457	153,946	2,892	170,664	3,186
Total	162,142	444	22,557	473	1,027,125	3,698	214,721	3,220

Sources:

(A): [UNHCR](#)

(B): [UNHCR](#)

(C): Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly*, Q4 October – December 2015.

(D): Frontex *FRAN 2015* (E): OIM, [Missing Migrants Project](#)

It is common knowledge that the geography of cross-Mediterranean mixed flows has undergone radical changes in the last couple of years. While in 2014 the Central Mediterranean route was largely predominant in terms of both arrivals and victims, the situation was spectacularly reversed in 2015 and a similar trend is in part confirmed for 2016 (although with a new increase of arrivals in Italy).



While the macro-causes of this shift are largely undisputed (opening of the much less dangerous Aegean route accompanied by the introduction of visa obligations for Syrians by some transit states including Algeria), its impact on migrants' death toll has not been sufficiently researched.

Given the huge gap in the number of arrivals along the two routes, in order to grasp the implications of this change correctly it is necessary to look at relative numbers.

This can be done in a simple way by separately calculating the arrivals/deaths ratio for the two routes. In 2015, this ratio – that could also be framed as *survival rate* – was 53.2 in the central Mediterranean (almost unchanged from 53.6 in 2014), and 1,083.3 in the Aegean (down from 1,295.8 in 2014). One person died for every fifty-three who made it in the first case; one for every one thousand and eighty-three in the second.

This striking gap was reduced in the early months of 2016 (until 21 March, when the last data were made available): the survival rate almost tripled to 142.5 along the Central Mediterranean route, while it plummeted to less than half (427.4) for the crossings from the Turkish coast to the Greek islands. In other words, the death risk was cut to one third in the first case; it more than doubled in the second.

What saves lives on the high seas?

How can such a dramatic (albeit almost unobserved and totally un-researched) shift be explained? A solid and reliable answer would require in-depth analysis and sophisticated treatment of micro-data concerning the details of each deadly event. Although such data is largely unavailable and in any case hard to obtain, targeted research efforts in this direction are certainly possible and urgently needed. But already at this stage, some preliminary hypotheses are worth formulating.



A determinant of the mortality trends in the Central Mediterranean, which is consistently pointed out by practitioners in the field, has to do with the effectiveness of search and rescue activities.

To wit, the interruption of the Mare Nostrum operation and its replacement with the much smaller Frontex-led Triton operation at the end of 2014 brought about an abrupt increase in fatalities in the first part of 2015. Only a substantial (although implemented without much publicity) [upgrade of the Triton operation](#) in spring 2015 allowed for a partial return to the previous levels of SaR effectiveness. But mortality statistics were nevertheless marked negatively for 2015 as a whole.

Two other factors can explain the observed variations. One regards changes in smugglers' modus operandi. The ever more frequent use of low-quality, inflatable rubber dinghies instead of more costly and harder to get wooden fishing vessels certainly plays a role in the increasing frequency of fatal events in the Aegean. As suggested by the first results of a multinational research project coordinated by [Coventry University](#), a similar effect can be associated with the spreading habit of transporting migrants at night as a countermeasure against enhanced patrolling efforts in the eastern Mediterranean.

Finally, the characteristics of the smuggled migrants themselves may play a role. The growing share of families with children among Syrian refugees is increasing their average vulnerability to extreme weather conditions, deprivation, and smugglers' abuses during the crossing, and might thus be another factor boosting the mortality rate along the Eastern route.

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