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Post pandemic migration flows

Measuring undocumented migration

Mixed migration by land and by sea to Europe: recovery after a transient pandemic impact

Note by [International Organization for Migration (IOM)] *

Abstract

The paper aims at discussing the most up-to-date evidence on post-pandemic migration flows in the specific context of the mixed migration by land and by sea towards Europe. In doing so, it tackles the topics of the emerging trends after the outbreak and evolution of COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and mid-2022 and that of irregular migration flows along the three main Mediterranean and the Western African Atlantic routes to Europe.

The paper uses IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) data from national authorities and media coverage to present major trends in arrivals to Spain, Italy, Malta, Greece, Cyprus, and Bulgaria, returns to North African countries and Türkiye, and deaths reported on the same routes since 2016. It considers available data for the pre-pandemic years, for 2020 as the year of the pandemic outbreak when most travel and mobility restrictions were imposed globally and arrivals to Europe slowed down, and the 2021-2022 years when most restrictions were lifted, the socio-economic

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impacts of the pandemic started to unfold more clearly, and registered arrivals returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Being descriptive in nature, this paper acknowledges the multiple limitations deriving from different definitions, degree of availability and overall quality (accuracy, granularity, reliability, comparability, coherence) of data from national authorities complemented by information from IOM's and other international organizations' presence in the field and from the media. Moreover, it recognizes that COVID-19 mobility restrictions as such may have played a direct role particularly in the first half of 2020 on departures and arrivals by all means, including irregular ones by land and by sea. Yet, as these represent a specific, small slice of all international migration flows to Europe at any given point in time, mixed-migration flows by land and by sea to Europe resumed and increased in 2021 and 2022 so far, as they are determined by a complex mix of demographic, socio-economic, security/safety, environmental factors interplaying at origin, transit and destination.

I. Introduction

1. Human mobility across the Mediterranean basin, in all directions, is not a new phenomenon and has occurred for thousand years. Yet, mixed migration flows towards Europe have increasingly gained political and mediatic attention over the last decade, with maritime and land movements becoming more visible in parallel with important political and economic developments in several countries of the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa. At the same time, they also pose a series of technical issues in terms of data availability, accuracy and comparability over time and space.
2. The paper aims at discussing the most up-to-date evidence on post-pandemic migration flows in the specific context of the mixed migration by land and by sea towards Europe as compiled by IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix through a set of sources and across several countries.
3. While the mobility restrictions imposed globally since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 have impacted the possibility of individuals to move from and to different locations, countries and continents by all means, the analysis of available existing data on the specific movements by sea and by land that occurred before and after 2020 from North Africa, Asia and the Middle East towards Europe helps putting the possible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic into a wider temporal context.
4. After the peak in 2015 and 2016, migrant and refugee arrivals by land and by sea to Europe started to decline in 2017 and continued a downward trend in 2018 and 2019. According to the available data, the second quarter of 2020 registered a record low of arrivals to Europe. At the same time, the estimated number of dead and missing migrants of 2020 was not lower than that of the previous year. In a shifting course, in 2021 arrivals returns and deaths reached levels higher than in 2018, and the increasing trend continued in 2022 so far.
5. The analysis tries to three main questions:
 - i. What are the main yearly and quarterly trends of mixed migration to Europe since 2016?
 - ii. Do trends in arrivals to Europe and returns to departure coasts coincide?

- iii. What are the most recent observed trends, as new political, social and economic developments unfold in main traditional countries of origin and transit in 2021 and 2022?
6. Routes that migrants and refugees take to reach Europe are influenced by a wide range of different factors, including adjustment to conditions and possibilities in transit countries, as well as policy changes and route closures in countries of transit or of intended destination. This article does not try to identify causal relationships or single factors influencing migrants' intentions and actual movements, but rather to provide a descriptive overview of mobility trends across the main Mediterranean and Western African Atlantic routes to Europe in the period under analysis.
7. The paper is structured as follows: The next section presents the main definitions adopted to identify the data to be considered for the analysis – in terms of data type, geographical scope and time coverage. Then, the paper describes the available data for the entire region and by routes. It concludes with most recent available info and challenges to continuously compile comparable and meaningful data across a wide range of countries.

II. Definitions and Methodology

8. This paper is based on data on arrivals, interceptions and disappearances of migrants and refugees collated and consolidated by IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) Europe team from national authorities, IOM field presence and media coverage in main disembarkation and arrivals countries along the Mediterranean and Western African Atlantic routes to Europe.
9. These data do not represent all different mixed migration flows to the European Union from neighbouring regions and countries, as are limited to specific modes of travel to cross international borders and have a specific geographical and time focus.

A. Definition of migrants

10. According to IOM Glossary of Migration (2019), "migrant" is an "umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students." Given the purpose of IOM's work of monitoring the mixed migration flows to Europe, this paper takes into consideration international migrants, crossing international boarder for whichever reason, and hence includes refugees and asylum seekers.

B. Type of data series

11. This paper discusses trends of migrant flows (IOM 2019), considering in particular three series of data.

1. Arrivals.

12. This is the number of persons detected by national authorities, while entering the country irregularly either at the green border or at an official border point. In the case of arrivals by sea, these can be the result of rescue operations by maritime authorities, merchant vessels and humanitarian organizations, the detection and escorting of boats to port by authorities in their patrolling operations, the autonomous landing of boats on shores with the detection and registration of persons at land. Both in the case of sea and land arrivals, only actual detections/registrations can be included. Official data provided by national authorities vary in terms of disaggregation and timeliness, and are then complemented and corroborated by the presence of IOM staff in the field in some meaningful locations, and by information shared by national and local media, to enrich the figures available with further disaggregation by date, gender, age and nationalities of the persons involved, location and country of departure, location and country of arrival. A meaningful comparability over time of arrival data is possible insofar national authorities maintain a comparable approach in registrations of irregular entries at their sea and land borders.
13. IOM's DTM system distinguishes arrivals into two main categories. First arrivals are arrivals by land and by sea to countries at the southern and south-eastern borders of the EU – Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain. DTM tracks these data systematically since 2015 and has reconstructed older time series for Greece, Italy and Spain.¹ Transits in the Western Balkan (WB) region – through Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Kosovo² - are also tracked by DTM since 2015. DTM assumes that most of the individuals travelling along the WB region are already included in the arrivals' figures for either Greece, Bulgaria or Cyprus.³ As the same person may cross multiple land borders of EU and non-EU countries while moving along the region and there is no way to avoid double counting, these transits not included in the total figures for arrivals to Europe.⁴

2. Returns

14. This is the number of persons intercepted or rescued and returned to the country they have departed from by national authorities, merchant vessels and others. No official data is provided consistently over time by national authorities of main countries of boats' departures. IOM collates information on returns of migrants to Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Türkiye⁵ since 2016, from some national authorities, its field presence and media and

¹ For more information, please see: <https://migration.iom.int/europe>

² References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

³ This is an approximation. There are accounts of migrants arriving regularly, by flights or other means, to some countries of the WB region and then moving irregularly towards central Europe.

⁴ This is also mentioned by Frontex for what concerns its release of "illegal border-crossings statistics": <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>

⁵ It is often not possible to distinguish between interceptions and rescues operations. A rescue at sea is defined as "an operation to retrieve person in distress, provide for their initial medical or other needs, and deliver them to a place of safety" (IOM 2019). An interception is "any measure applied by a State, either at its land or sea borders, or on the high seas, territorial waters or borders of another State, to: (i) prevent embarkation of persons on an international journey; (ii) prevent further onward international travel by

humanitarian coverage. No data is available of operations conducted by the Moroccan authorities.

3. Dead and missing

15. This is the estimated number of migrants and refugees losing their lives during their migration journeys. All existing counts of migrant fatalities have gaps, as most of them happen in the context of irregular migration, in areas that are physically remote or outside well monitored routes. The remains of deceased migrants are often not found, and deaths and disappearances may not be reported to the authorities in a timely manner, if at all. On maritime routes, the likelihood of “invisible shipwrecks” where there is evidence of departure but no sign of rescue or arrivals, is even higher. Few official sources collect in a centralized and structured way data on the number of persons died during irregular movements in their territory, and make them public (Robins 2019). Since 2014, IOM’s Missing Migrants Project (MMP) records incidents in which migrants, including refugees and asylum-seekers, have died at state borders or in the process of migrating to an international destination.⁶

C. Geographical and time coverage

16. With regards to the geographical scope, this paper focuses on the three Mediterranean migration routes and the Western African Atlantic route to Europe.
17. The Central Mediterranean route (CMR) is made of sea crossings from North African countries and the Middle East to Italy and, to a lesser degree, to Malta. Libya has consistently represented the main departure country for arrivals to Italy and Malta since 2015, being a main destination for migrants in itself and the transit for many African and Asian migrants intending to reach Europe. At the same time, attempted crossings and actual arrivals to Italy from the coasts of Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Türkiye, Lebanon, Greece have also been reported in non-negligible numbers and have shown swinging trends in parallel with several socio-economic and policy developments at origin, transit and destination, including the decreased maritime patrol areas of Italian authorities, the shift of EU operations’ mandate and capacity from maritime vessels to drones and the increased patrolling activities by national authorities of North African. Arrivals by sea through the CMR and migrants intercepted by authorities of Libya, Tunisia and Algeria are quite scattered among several nationalities from North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, the Horn of Africa and West and Central Africa.
18. The Western Mediterranean route (WMR) is made of several sub-routes that connect Morocco and Algeria to Spain by sea with crossings across the Strait of Gibraltar and the Alborán Sea to the peninsular coasts of Spain and the Balearic Islands, and by land with crossings into the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla, located in North Africa.

persons who have commenced their journey; or (iii) assert control of vessels where there are reasonable grounds to believe the vessel is transporting persons contrary to international or national maritime law. In relation to the above, the person or persons do not have the required documentation or valid permission to enter” (IOM 2019). Data on returns in this article include reported interceptions and also some rescue operations conducted by Algerian, Tunisian and Turkish authorities.

⁶ For a deeper discussion on the adopted methodology, please see: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/methodology>

Moroccans and Algerians are the two main nationalities registered by Spanish authorities along this route, followed by many other Western and Central African nationalities.

19. The Western African Atlantic route (WAAR) is the overseas route from Western African coastal countries and Morocco to the Canary Islands in Spain. The route is extremely dangerous due to the length of the journey, with migrants remaining at sea for days to weeks in unequipped boats, and the lack of dedicated rescue operations in that part of the Atlantic Ocean. Western and Central African nationalities are those reported more frequently at arrival by Spanish authorities, together with Moroccans.
20. The Eastern Mediterranean route (EMR) involves migration flows from Türkiye and to a lesser extent from Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic towards Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria by land and by sea. Being the main mixed migration route in the region in 2015-2016, arrivals to Greece either by sea or by land dropped sharply since the implementation of the EU-Türkiye statement in March 2016, while more diversified trends have been observed in arrivals to Bulgaria by land and to Cyprus by sea and through the green line with the northern part of the island. Main regions of origin of migrants detected at arrivals and intercepted by the Turkish Coast Guard are the Middle East, South Asia, and the Horn of Africa, notably Syrians, Afghans, Pakistanis, Iraqis, Bangladeshi, Somalians.
21. In terms of period of coverage, the following sections use any available evidence for arrivals returns and deaths along the four above-mentioned routes from January 2016 to August 2022. Quarterly data over these almost 7 years-time-period are presented to discuss the changing trends in 2020 in parallel with the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, and how transient the impact of the mobility restrictions has been among the many factors at play in determining mixed migration flows to Europe.
22. All figures used should be understood as minimum estimates and subject to continuous consolidation and adjustments as new, more verified information is available to IOM. Given the descriptive nature of analysis, based on a specific period of time and geographical scope, as well as limited available data, observations and conclusions should be considered indicative rather than conclusive, and should not be understood as predictive of future trends. Not only the analysis does not cover years prior to 2016, but also does not provide evidence of causal effects nor of shifts happened in a longer time perspective.

III. Mixed migration routes to Europe

23. Between January and December 2020, slightly less than 100 thousand migrants and refugees were reported to have arrived in Europe by land and by sea via the Mediterranean and Western African Atlantic routes. This is 22 per cent less than the number of arrivals recorded in 2019, and the lowest level recorded over the last decade.⁷ Reported returns to North African countries and Türkiye also slowed down by 30 per cent in 2020 compared to 2019, while the number of dead and missing increased by 10 per cent yearly.
24. Arrivals by land and by sea to Europe decreased considerably everywhere especially between March and May 2020, where lockdowns and mobility restrictions were imposed in various ways globally (Benton et al 2021). This was likely a direct effect of greater controls at entry and exit borders, and of forced immobility in departure and transit countries.

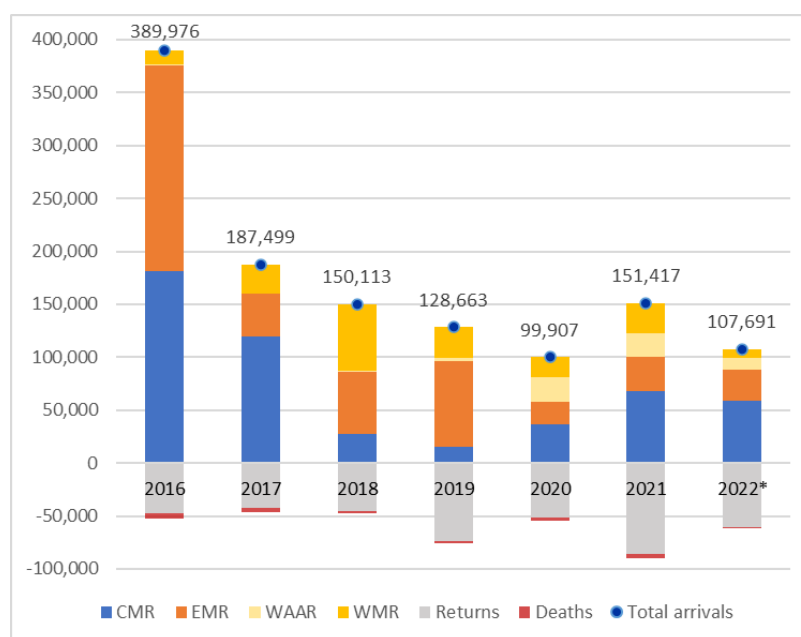
⁷ To download the yearly data for longer time series, please refer to the Datasets section of the DTM Europe portal <https://migration.iom.int/europe/arrivals>

Arrivals from Türkiye to Greece practically fell to zero for several weeks around April, and those from North Africa to Spain more than halved between February and March 2020. Also due to difficult winter weather conditions, arrivals by sea along the CMR decreased by almost 80 percent between February and March 2020. Although with slightly different timing, the initial, short-term impact of mobility restrictions imposed to contrast the pandemic were similar across all routes.

25. However, subsequent developments from mid-2020 onwards were more diversified and the resulting overall downward trend of 2020 is not homogenous across all routes, with a changing composition of arrivals by route both in relative and absolute terms. As shown in Graph 1 and 2, the 2020 decrease was particularly evident on the EMR that passed to represent from 63 to 22 per cent of all Europe arrivals, with a less 73 per cent compared to 2019, and on the WMR (-37% between 2019 and 2020). On the contrary, 2020 represented a shift from the downward trend of previous years for the CMR, which returned to be the most used route in 2020 (36% of the total compared to 12 of all arrivals in 2019), and for the WAAR to the Canary Islands which increased by 8 times between 2019 and 2020.

Graph 1

First arrivals to Europe by route and total, returns and deaths, 2016-2022*

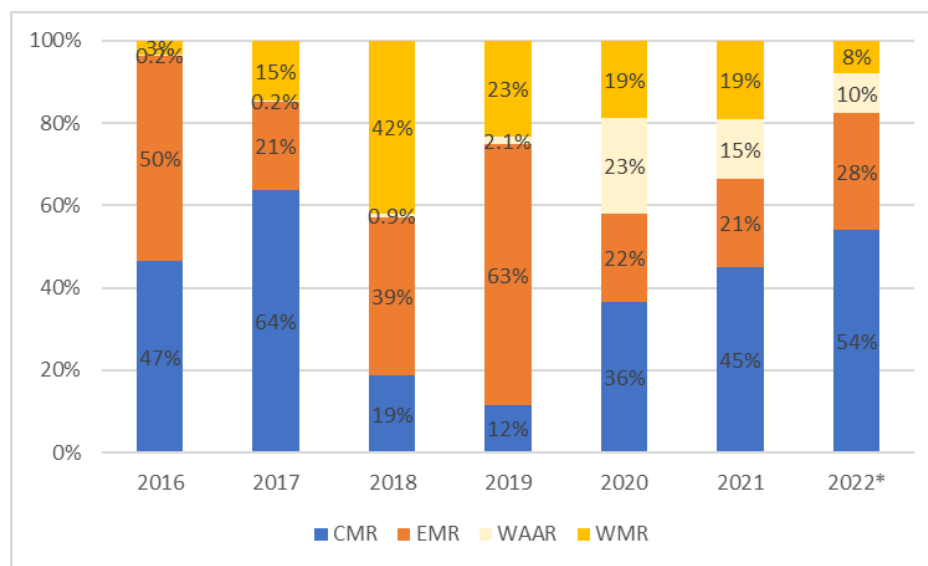


Source: IOM's DTM compilation of data on arrivals (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain) and returns (Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Türkiye) from national authorities, IOM staff in the field, media and NGOs: <https://migration.iom.int/europe> Data on deaths and missing are based on records collected by IOM's MMP www.missingmigrants.iom.int

*Data for Jan-Aug 2022 is not final and subject to consolidation.

Graph 2

First arrivals to Europe, share (%) by route, 2016-2022*



Source: IOM's DTM compilation of data from national authorities of Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain, IOM staff in the field, media and NGOs: <https://migration.iom.int/europe>.

*Data for Jan-Aug 2022 is not final and subject to consolidation.

D. Unpacking trends by route

26. So, while a decrease of flows was observed in the first part of 2020 across all monitored routes, if this arrived after a pre-COVID-19 period of low or high flows and if it lasted throughout that year or not, varies by route.
27. Along the CMR, the number of landings by sea to Italy and Malta began to decrease significantly since the summer of 2017. The “lockdown effect”, if any, has kept the arrivals in the first half of 2020 at comparable levels of 2018 and 2019, but not lower. On the one hand, migrants and refugees departing from Libyan coasts probably experienced more diverse and external pressures that factored their decision to leave, due to the more dynamic and changing context in which they find themselves, such as security threats and instability in many parts of the country and operations of smuggling networks. On the other hand, it is reasonable to assume that people departing from Tunisia could have postponed the journey to overcome the months of greater restrictions on domestic and international mobility. Once these were lifted, departures with small boats from Tunisian coasts resumed in line with the usual summer peak and perhaps increasing in response to the reported deterioration in economic conditions in the country.⁸ Departures from Tunisia represented 43 per cent of arrivals to Italy in 2020, while in any other year before and after they have been less than one third of the total. In 2021 and 2022, Libya has returned to represent the main departure country (47% and 55% of all arrivals, respectively) and the average total arrivals per quarter was about 18 thousand persons. Moreover, from 2018 onwards the trend of reported returns

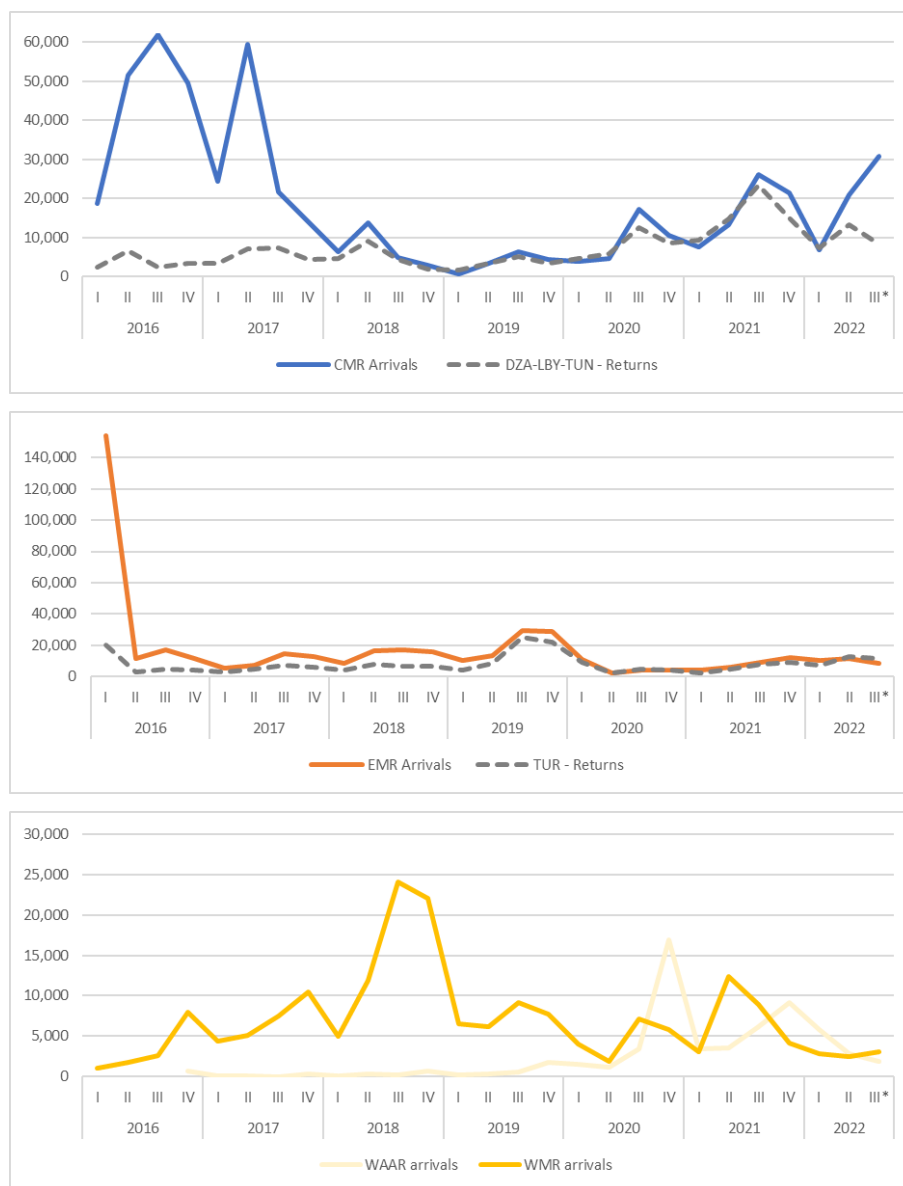
⁸ See for example: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tunisia/overview>

to Libya, Tunisia and Algeria follows almost perfectly that of arrivals. According to registrations by Italian and Maltese authorities, the CMR is used by a wide range of different nationalities with an increasing presence of North Africans (Tunisia, Egypt), Middle Eastern (Syrians, Iraqis) and Asians (Afghans, Bangladeshis) and a decrease in the proportion of sub-Saharan Africans (Ivorians, Guineans, Nigerians, Somalians).

28. Similarly to CMR, also trends along the EMR show quite strong correspondence in the number of arrivals reported by Bulgaria, Greece and Cyprus and the number of interceptions and returns reported by the Turkish authorities. But unlike CMR, the record low number of arrivals in 2020 arrived after the peak reached in 2019, a year when arrivals grew at levels similar to 2016. After 2020, total arrivals along this route started to increase again, but have remained at an average of less than 9 thousand per quarter. Main nationalities from 2016 onwards have consistently been Syrian Arab Republic, Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia, followed by others from North Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Yet, while the EMR was prevalently made by sea arrivals to Greece until 2020, an increasing diversification within the route is observed in 2021 and 2022 with more arrivals being reported to Cyprus (38% of all arrivals over the last 2 years).
29. Finally, arrivals to Spain along the two main Atlantic and Mediterranean routes have shown contradicting trends. Arrivals to the Canary Islands, being very low before the pandemic, reached a peak in the last quarter of 2020 (almost 17 thousand arrivals) to then go down to about 5 thousand arrivals per quarter in 2021 and 2022 so far. Arrivals by land and by sea on the WMR instead reached a bottom low in the second quarter of 2020 when mobility restrictions in both Morocco and Spain were at the strictest level, and then resumed to levels comparable to the pre-pandemic year. Unfortunately, no comparable data over time for returns operations by Morocco and other Western African countries are available. The relative importance of arrivals to Spain either via the WMR or WAAR on arrivals to Europe has decreased from being 42 per cent of the total in 2020, to 34 per cent in 2021 and 18 per cent in 2022 so far. Also, main nationalities at arrivals are always Moroccans and Algerians, followed by many sub-Saharan Africans from countries mainly on the West and Central part of the continent.

Graph 3

First arrivals to Europe and reported returns, by route and by quarter, 2016-2022*



Source: IOM’s DTM compilation of data on arrivals (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain) and returns (Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Türkiye) from national authorities, IOM staff in the field, media and NGOs: <https://migration.iom.int/europe> *Data for Jan-Aug 2022 is not final and subject to consolidation.

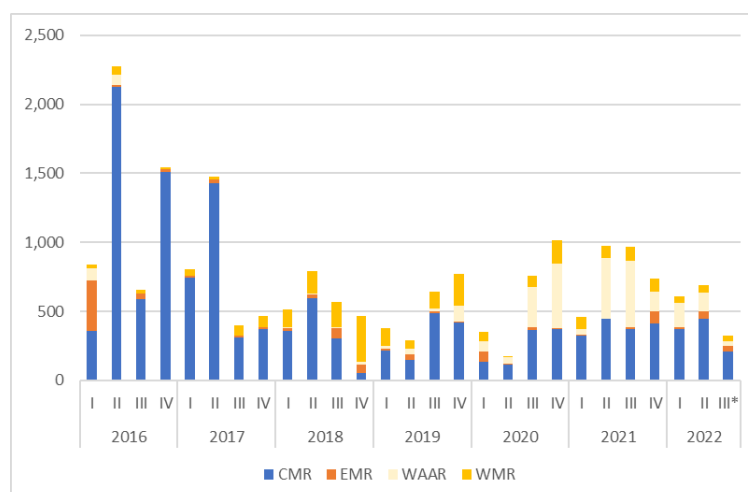
E. Dead and missing migrants

30. To have a more complete picture of trends in mixed migration flows in the Mediterranean and Western African Atlantic, data on the estimated number of persons who have lost their life at sea should also be considered. According to IOM’s MMP data, while the second

quarter of 2020 signed a record low in parallel with arrivals and returns, the entire 2020 surpassed 2019 as per total estimated deaths (2,300, +10% than the 2,087 of 2019) and the increasing trend continued in 2021 (+36% compared to 2020). The CMR remains the deadliest route among those monitored globally, representing about two thirds of all reported deaths in the Mediterranean and Western African Atlantic routes over the entire period. As much as 20 thousand persons have died along these routes from 2016 until 2022 so far, these numbers do not include all those who go missing at sea without notice, those who die or disappear before crossing the sea or after they are returned to their departure shores.

Graph 4

Dead and missing migrants at sea, by route and by quarter, 2016-2022*



Source: Data on deaths and missing are based on records collected by IOM's MMP www.missingmigrants.iom.int

IV. Conclusions

31. This article tackled the topic of irregular migration flows along the three main Mediterranean and the Western African Atlantic routes, with an analysis of available data on arrivals, returns and dead and missing to understand pre- and post-pandemic trends and most recent developments in 2022 so far.
32. After acknowledging that 2020, and especially the second quarter, has registered a record low in the number of arrivals to Europe and of returns to the departure coasts of North Africa and the Middle East, the article shows how looking at the years prior, during and after the outbreak of the pandemic and unpacking trends by routes helps grasping a better insight in human mobility flows to the region. Being clear in the limitations that available data imply in terms of completeness, disaggregation and comparability over time, it can be claimed that the impact of COVID-19 restrictions to the ability to move within countries and across borders by all means that was observed almost globally until mid-2020 had a direct but transient impact on the number arrivals, returns and deaths registered along the Mediterranean and Western African Atlantic routes to Europe. After mid-2020, movements have resumed and arrivals returned to pre-pandemic levels if not higher.
33. Yet, as these represent a specific, small slice of all international migration to Europe at any given point in time, mixed-migration flows by land and by sea to Europe are determined by

a complex mix of demographic, socio-economic, political, security and environmental factors at origin, transit and destination. Important developments such as the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021, the war in Ukraine since February 2022, protracted instability, displacement and recent cholera outbreak in the Syrian Arab Republic, some major political changes and the economic and food crisis registered in many countries of North Africa and the Middle East, are among the factors at play in determining the increasing numbers of persons attempting to reach Europe by irregular means by land and by sea over the last two years.

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