

A Moving Target

The Evolution of Human Smuggling

By Matt Herbert

MPI
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Executive Summary

Irregular migration has been at the heart of political debate for the past decade. This movement has been fueled by conflict, state instability and persecution, economic disparities, and climate change. Yet the increase in irregular movements has also been facilitated by another force: the development of a robust and resilient transnational smuggling industry, which has become extremely effective at recruiting clients and moving them to their destinations, including increasingly far-flung locations. As this industry has grown in efficiency, innovation, and reach, states have struggled to adapt and develop effective responses.

In part, this is due to the changing nature of the global smuggling industry. As the profit margins for smuggling have skyrocketed over the last decade, human smuggling networks have become more professionalized. Networks may now use specialized cells or subcontractors to perform specific functions, such as managing logistics and sourcing transportation, interfacing with clients, and managing financial transactions. Networks are also increasingly transnational, with cells across multiple locations that in some cases enable them to offer package services that can move clients across large distances.

At the same time, a more diverse set of actors have become part of the smuggling industry. Hybrid smuggling, which combines licit and illicit travel, often involves legal businesses such as charter airlines and travel agents along with more illicit smuggling operations. Criminal groups have also become more involved, creating greater overlap between human smuggling and other illegal activities, such as drug trafficking. Criminality has, in turn, prompted a rise in corruption and greater involvement of state agents in smuggling, ranging from border guards who accept bribes to high-level political leaders who provide protection.

Technology has boosted the reach and effectiveness of smuggling services. Social and new media have expanded smugglers' ability to advertise their services and recruit clients, reducing information barriers that previously hindered access to those services and limited mobility. Encrypted messaging apps, GPS, and map services allow smugglers to direct the movement of people and provide guidance from afar, reducing their exposure and risk of detection by law enforcement. Cryptocurrencies have made it easier to transfer payments, and smugglers increasingly use artificial intelligence, including translation tools, to facilitate outreach and communication with clients.

Although changes in the smuggling industry have contributed to its growth, ineffective or outdated responses by state actors share the blame.

Although changes in the smuggling industry have contributed to its growth, ineffective or outdated responses by state actors share the blame. A focus on hardening borders has raised risks and made unaided movement more difficult, enabling smugglers to charge more for their services and creating financial incentives for a wider array of criminal actors to become involved in smuggling operations. Policy responses have focused largely on unilateral actions against migrants themselves—restricting access to asylum on arrival, removing benefits, or using detention to deter irregular journeys. However, such measures have

done little to dismantle the smuggling networks that play a separate but important role in driving demand through advertising and effectively delivering on the promise of evading border security measures.

Where counter-smuggling measures have been deployed, they have often focused on low-level operators such as transporters, boat pilots, or recruiters—some of whom are migrants themselves. But arresting these operators does little to disrupt broader network operations. Larger cooperative arrangements with transit countries also frequently fall short because they either fail to account for the politics of transit countries (where residents may oppose greater enforcement) or do not recognize the resilience and adaptability of smuggling networks, which can adjust to enforcement by finding new routes and partners.

In the face of an evolving smuggling market, states need to become more adaptable themselves. The following four strategies could help them adapt to the new smuggling ecosystem:

- **Improve identification and targeting of critical actors.** Policymakers and law enforcement in destination and transit states should adapt their analytical methods to better reflect the diversity of actors engaged in modern smuggling. Current analysis often takes a criminal-network-based approach that focuses only on smugglers themselves and leaves out other important actors such as subcontracted criminal groups, the private sector, and corrupt state agents. By contrast, an ecosystem-based approach would widen the lens to include important ancillary actors such as armed groups, critical facilitators, or agents used to conduct financial payments. Such an approach can identify actors whose disruption or prosecution could have a greater impact on smuggling operations.
- **Develop or acquire novel tools that can disrupt key nodes in a smuggling ecosystem.** Traditionally, anti-smuggling approaches have heavily focused on strengthening border security or arresting and prosecuting smugglers. However, the professionalization and diversification of smuggling ecosystems have meant that states now have a wider range of targets—and therefore more tools to address them. Formal banking systems, informal value transfer systems (such as hawalas), and cryptocurrencies are increasingly central for smuggling payments, making targeted financial sanctions a potent but underused tool. Targeted visa bans can restrict the ability of key actors to move across borders to carry out their functions, a capability they need as smuggling becomes more globalized. Importantly, these are also measures that states can carry out unilaterally, making them valuable tools in a world where interstate cooperation is fraying.
- **Include nonstate and private-sector actors in counter-smuggling plans, though with caution.** Many states along key smuggling routes are experiencing fragility and political upheaval, making it difficult for destination states to engage them as partners. Law enforcement and policymakers in destination states may be tempted, out of necessity, to partner with nonstate armed groups as part of counter-smuggling efforts, though doing so requires proactively addressing the risks associated with these groups' often poor adherence to human rights and growing power vis-à-vis recognized governments. The rise of hybrid smuggling has also made partnerships with the private sector, including airlines, increasingly critical.
- **Build ecosystems of cooperation that extend beyond one or two transit countries.** Destination states should build their own geographically diverse ecosystems of partners to match the nimbleness

of smugglers. Rather than relying on one or two core transit states as partners, destination states should account for the adaptability of smuggling networks by engaging more countries across a wider geographic area, including origin, transit, and destination countries. Detailed operational plans should underpin such partnerships and provide enough specificity to guide ongoing technical-level cooperation.

Smuggling ecosystems have stayed a step ahead of government responses, but as policymakers look for novel ways to tackle irregular migration, updating their policies to reflect new models of smuggling is an opportunity for real impact. With new technologies, better analytics, and more diverse operational partnerships, governments have options to better tackle smuggling and, in doing so, to achieve migration management goals.

1 Introduction

Irregular migration stands out as one of the most politically pressing and divisive issues in 2026. Concerns about irregular migrant arrivals dominate political and public discourse in a growing number of countries. Although such concerns are most visible in highly developed states that are often destinations for irregular migrants, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, migration has also complicated politics in transit and origin countries. In recent years, migration drove protests in Tunisia, became a key element of opposition strategy in Turkey's parliamentary elections, and prompted legislative changes in Mexico.[1]

BOX 1
What Is Human Smuggling?

In this study, human smuggling is defined as a service arrangement in which migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers contract for assistance with illegally entering or transiting through a state where they are not a national, permanent resident, or otherwise have authorization to be present. This term is also used to denote contracted movement within states where conflict or stability concerns impede normally free movement. The definition largely draws on the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air as well as the EU Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation's compilation of legal definitions on such smuggling.

Sources: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime," November 15, 2000; European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust), *Legal Definition of Migrant Smuggling and/or Facilitation of Irregular Migration: An Overview of EU Legislation* (The Hague: Eurojust, 2024).

Policymakers have generally responded to irregular migration in two ways: targeting migrants, including efforts to deter movement, impede mobility by hardening borders, or accelerate removals, and targeting human smugglers through measures such as prosecutions and financial or visa sanctions. Efforts targeting human smugglers reflect a largely accurate view that smugglers play an increasingly important role in facilitating irregular migration in an era of hardened borders. While not all irregular migrants use human smugglers to arrive at their destinations, many contract with them at some point in their journeys.

1 Sam Metz, "Tunisians Stage Anti-Migrant Protest as the Number of Stranded in Transit to Europe Grows," Associated Press, May 18, 2024; Elmas Topcu, "Turkey Elections: Refugees Are a Top Political Issue," Deutsche Welle, April 20, 2023; Mary Beth Sheridan, "Mexico Moves to Ban Noem Ads on Illegal Migration," *The Washington Post*, April 24, 2025.

Smuggling networks have expanded and professionalized in recent years and many now use advanced methods to move migrants across the globe.

However, human smuggling is dynamic. Smuggling networks have expanded and professionalized in recent years and many now use advanced methods to move migrants across the globe, including commercial and charter airlines, social media, and encrypted communications apps. Global conflict and economic, political, and environmental instability have heightened demand for smugglers, while decreased state capacity has created operational space for them in many places. As a result, human smuggling hotspots are multiplying and becoming more difficult to predict, which affects how states respond. Although destination and transit states have expanded their unilateral efforts to manage migration, they have been outpaced by the ever-evolving human smuggling ecosystem.

These challenges underscore the need for new approaches and tailored tools to understand and address human smuggling. To this end, this report analyzes current trends and dynamics in human smuggling and assesses state efforts to combat it. It begins by providing a high-level snapshot of migration and smuggling globally, then details five cross-cutting issues that affect how human smuggling is conducted and examines the challenges destination and transit states face in responding unilaterally to smuggling. The report concludes with a set of opportunities to improve government responses through strategy development and partnerships.

2 The State of Play for Human Smuggling

Looking at numbers alone, one might be tempted to declare that the past year and a half have brought newfound success to counter-smuggling operations. In 2025 and the first half of 2026, migrant arrivals to key destination countries in North America and Europe slowed sharply,[2] but these figures tell only part of the story. Declines in migrant arrivals do not mean that human smuggling ecosystems—the combination of networks, facilitators, and corrupt state actors critical to smuggling activities—have declined. These ecosystems are highly resilient: They can endure downturns in demand for irregular migration and then increase their activities when demand rises. In eastern Libya, for example, traffic surged along routes from the city of Tobruk toward Crete that had been effectively dormant since before the country's 2011 revolution, becoming a critical pathway between 2025 and 2026.[3] Air travel is also playing a growing role along migration corridors between Europe and Africa and in the Western Hemisphere.

2 Irregular entries into the European Union dropped by 26 percent in 2025, a decline that continued into 2026. Frontex, "Frontex: Irregular Border Crossings Down 26% in 2025, Europe Must Stay Prepared" (news release, January 15, 2026); Frontex, "Frontex: Irregular Border Crossings into the EU Down 40% in the First Four Months of 2026" (news release, May 15, 2026). Border apprehensions in the United States also fell sharply: 2025 levels were 79 percent lower than in 2024, and lower levels continued into mid-2026. See U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community: 2026* (Washington, DC: ODNI, 2026); U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), "Nationwide Encounters," accessed May 17, 2026.

3 Associated Press, "Greek Island Sees Surge in Migrant Boat Arrivals Despite Harsher Detention Policy," Associated Press, August 18, 2025; Sarantis Michalopoulos and Sofia Mandilara, "Greece Faces Migrant Surge as Libya, Turkey Intensify Mediterranean Energy Ties," Euractiv, July 2, 2025; Fatjona Mejdini and Matt Herbert, "A Smuggling Route Reawakens: Movement Surges between Eastern Libya and Crete," Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), May 14, 2026.

Smuggling ecosystems evolve rapidly and vary by context. Yet across regions, even in those seeing declines in irregular migration, smugglers have continued to adapt and operate.

- **The Americas.** Irregular crossings at the U.S. southern border fell from around 61,000 in January 2025 to slightly less than 8,000 in July 2025, driven by changing U.S. policies and heightened border security.[4] Although crossings have rebounded modestly, to around 13,000 Border Patrol encounters in April 2026, this still represents a steep change from extraordinarily high arrival levels in 2023 and 2024, when between 100,000 to 200,000 encounters per month was the norm.[5] These declines have been mirrored in Central American states, suggesting northbound human smuggling has been sharply curtailed,[6] even as southbound smuggling, trafficking, and associated predation have increased.[7] However, there is little sign that human smuggling systems in the area have been substantially targeted via law enforcement action. Rather, they have adapted, such as by facilitating the southbound movement of migrants heading back from the U.S.-Mexico border toward South America. This durability heightens the potential for a "snap-back" scenario in which northbound smuggling could revive quickly if either enforcement dynamics at the U.S.-Mexico border shift or migrant demand for smuggling services rises. Notably, hybrid smuggling, which combines legal transport (i.e., commercial flights) with unauthorized movement (i.e., overland or maritime smuggling), continues through Canada to the United States, mainly involving high-paying South Asian migrants. Despite growing Canadian and U.S. law enforcement action on the joint border, smuggling routes remain operational and could expand.[8]

- **Europe.** There has been a broad, multi-year decline in irregular migrant arrivals to Europe. Most routes had substantially fewer arrivals in 2025 than in 2024, including declines of 63 percent in the Canary Islands, 37 percent at Europe's eastern borders, and 27 percent in the eastern Mediterranean.[9] However, as in the Americas, declining arrival numbers are not necessarily indicative of a decline in smuggling networks or capacity. Rather, smugglers have increasingly adapted to heightened enforcement, shifting movement onto less-used routes or using new techniques to subvert borders. Irregular migration along the western Mediterranean route to Spain, for example, grew by 14 percent between 2024 and 2025, with a further rise in 2026. In Libya, smuggling has shifted east, with departures now mainly headed to Greece, rather than Italy.[10] In the Baltics, smuggling networks have shifted from Belorussia's border with Poland to those with Latvia and Lithuania, using complex tunnels to move people into the European Union.[11]

4 ODNI, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community: 2026*; CBP, "Southwest Land Border Encounters (By Component)," accessed May 17, 2026.
5 CBP, "Southwest Land Border Encounters (By Component)," accessed October 27, 2026.
6 In Panama, for example, government data indicate that the number of irregular migrants moving north through the Darién Gap had declined from 2,229 in January 2025 to just 7 in July 2025, then rebounded modestly in late 2025 and the first three months of 2026. However, monthly levels remained in the low double digits. See Migración Panamá, Cuadro No. 001 "Tránsito Irregular De Extranjeros Por La Frontera Con Colombia Por Región Según Orden De Importancia: Año 2025," accessed May 17, 2026); Migración Panamá, "Tránsito Irregular De Extranjeros Por La Frontera Con Colombia Por Región Según Orden De Importancia: Año 2026," accessed May 17, 2026.
7 Harriet Barber, "Turned Away at U.S. Border, Venezuelans Languish in Panamanian 'Purgatory'," *The Guardian*, September 4, 2025.
8 Wyatt Gilliland, Masih Khalatbari, Robert Cribb, and Brian Fitzpatrick, "Inside the Human Smuggling Racket along U.S.-Canadian Border," Investigative Post, September 17, 2025.
9 Frontex, "Frontex: Irregular Border Crossings Down 26% in 2025."
10 Frontex, "Frontex: Irregular Border Crossings into the EU Down 40%."
11 Adam Goldman and Michael Schwirtz, "A Front Line at the Border: How Russia Uses Migrants as Weapons Against Europe," *The New York Times*, October 2, 2026.

- **Africa.** Sharp crackdowns in Mauritania, Senegal, Tunisia, and Libya have reduced irregular migration to Italy and Spain's Canary Islands, though levels remain above historic norms.[12] Smugglers are adapting by launching vessels from The Gambia toward the Canary Islands, or shifting to routes from eastern Libya that had previously been rarely used. The composition of irregular migrants has also changed: Arrivals from the Horn of Africa to Europe in 2025 more than doubled those in preceding years, with a particularly sharp increase in Somali arrivals.[13] Conflicts in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Sudan are driving demand for smuggling and irregular movement and redirecting smuggling routes in the Sahel away from insurgent violence. For example, about 14,000 Sudanese arrived in Europe in 2025, up from fewer than 4,100 in 2024.[14]
- **Asia.** Intercontinental hybrid smuggling remains common among South, Central, and East Asians. Routes include those through Libya (mainly involving Bangladeshis and Pakistanis) and through Canada and into the United States, which is more popular among Indian nationals.[15] Conflicts are also altering movement patterns. Maritime smuggling of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar (also known as Burma) spiked in 2024 and remained elevated in 2025 and 2026,[16] but departures from postconflict Syria to Europe decreased from about 46,000 in 2024 to 6,000 in 2025.[17] Human trafficking linked to scam centers in Southeast Asia continues to grow,[18] targeting people from within and outside the region, including East and North African nationals of countries with limited diplomatic presence in the region.[19]

3 Key Trends in the Global Smuggling Business

Networks and ecosystems constantly adapt to shifting demand from migrants and refugees, changes in state enforcement, and the evolution of criminal actors. These changes are often specific to individual ecosystems. The shift toward returnee smuggling in Central America, for example, is unique to the region, with little indication that smugglers elsewhere have sought to adopt it. However, some changes are more widespread, influencing the operations and dynamics of smuggling ecosystems globally.

12 GI-TOC, *Tunisia: Crackdowns Disrupt Smuggling and Fuel New Abuses* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2025); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Italy Weekly Snapshot (01 Sep.–07 Sep. 2025)" (fact sheet, September 8, 2025); Flore Berger, Lucia Bird Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo, and Mouhamadou Kane, "Why the Deadliest Migration Route in the World Is Becoming More Popular," GI-TOC, July 23, 2025.
13 Frontex, "Detections of Illegal Border-Crossings," accessed June 8, 2026.
14 Frontex, "Detections of Illegal Border-Crossings."
15 Wyatt Gilliland, Masih Khalatbari, Robert Cribb, and Brian Fitzpatrick, "Inside the Sprawling Online Industry Selling Fake Canadian Visas and Human Smuggling Services," *National Post,* September 11, 2025.
16 Alfiyya Haq and Mitra Suryono, "More Refugees Risk Dangerous Sea Journeys from Myanmar as Crisis Worsens," UNHCR, February 6, 2025; UNHCR, "Myanmar Situation," accessed June 7, 2026.
17 Frontex, "Detections of Illegal Border-Crossings."
18 GI-TOC, *Compound Crime: Cyber Scam Operations in Southeast Asia* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2025); Rebecca Ratcliffe, "Revealed: The Huge Growth of Myanmar Scam Centres That May Hold 100,000 Trafficked People," *The Guardian*, September 8, 2025.
19 Mixed Migration Center (MMC), *Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Eastern and Southern Africa, Egypt and Yemen—Quarter 2, 2025* (N.p.: MMC, 2025); Amine Belghazi, "Du Myanmar au Maroc: Enquête sur une Arnaque qui Gangrène les Réseaux Sociaux," TelQuel, May 7, 2025; Jason G. Tower, "Scam Empire Strikes Back: Crackdowns on Myanmar's Scam Industry Have Had Little Material Impact," GI-TOC, August 27, 2025.

This section details several key cross-cutting dynamics that have emerged recently: the professionalization of human smuggling networks, their expanded use of social media, the rise of intercontinental hybrid smuggling, the impact of rising conflict, and the emergence of atypical hotspots.

A. Human Smuggling Networks Become More Complex and Professionalized

Human smuggling has become increasingly professionalized, and networks often consist of multiple components that perform discrete, specialized functions, which makes dismantling them more difficult. In 2025, for example, authorities in Spain uncovered a network that facilitated movement between Algeria, Morocco, and Spain. Multiple cells within the network handled specific functions such as logistics (sourcing boats, fuel, and other supplies from private-sector partners), operations (such as vessel navigation), and management of other network functions.[20] Small-scale smugglers remain common in many areas and provide discrete services for limited compensation, such as smuggling migrants across the Niger River at the Benin-Niger border or over the Ethiopia-Sudan land border. However, human smuggling globally is becoming more advanced and professionalized. Characteristics of this professionalization include:

- **Full-service packages.** Under older pay-as-you-go smuggling models, migrants paid different smugglers at each stage of their journey. However, full-service smuggling packages have become more common as routes and networks have become more geographically diverse.[21] Under these models, migrants contract with a single network for multiple components of a journey, and the network handles the logistics of coordinating with smugglers and bribing state agents across the entire route. Full-service packages tend to command a premium. For example, smuggling migrants from India to the United States can cost between U.S. $45,000 and $100,000.[22] Even shorter routes, such as Syria to Europe or Morocco to Spain, can cost up to U.S. $23,490 (20,000 euros).[23] The growing prominence of full-service packages has also led to an explosion in direct advertising by smuggling networks targeting prospective migrants on social media in origin states (see Section 3.B.).
- **Growing involvement of organized criminal groups.** The rising profitability of human smuggling has drawn a wider range of criminal actors (notably drug trafficking organizations) into the trade or in extracting value from it.[24] This involvement is especially acute at key choke points, such as the Darién Gap in Central America, the Alboran Sea in the Mediterranean, and the U.S.-Mexico border region,

20 European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol), "Spain Dismantles Criminal Network Smuggling Migrants from Algeria to the EU" (news release, August 27, 2025).
21 GI-TOC, *Small Boats, Big Business: The Industrialization of Cross-Channel Migrant Smuggling* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2024).
22 Yogita Limaye, "Migrant Deported in Chains: 'No-One Will Go to U.S. Illegally Now'," BBC, March 8, 2025; Suhasini Raj, "India, a Big Source of Illegal Migration, Hopes to Navigate the Trump Storm," *The New York Times*, January 26, 2025; Soutik Biswas, "Why Indians Are Risking It All to Chase the American Dream," BBC, November 24, 2024.
23 Europol, "Seven Arrests in Hit against Egyptian Criminal Network Smuggling Irregular Migrants across the Mediterranean" (press release, April 9, 2025); Europol, "19 Arrests for Smuggling Migrants within the EU" (news release, August 13, 2023); Europol, "8 Arrests for Migrant Smuggling and Drug Trafficking across the Mediterranean" (news release, June 19, 2025).
24 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Links Between Smuggling of Migrants and Other Forms of Organized Crime along the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes* (Vienna: UNODC, 2024).

where drug trafficking groups have well-established control.[25] These organized crime groups come from both origin and transit states, such as Albania, Iraq, and Italy, and include more opportunistic criminals from states with lower levels of migrant departures, such as Armenia and Georgia.[26] Human smugglers are also expanding their involvement in other forms of criminality. Smugglers in France and southern Libya, for example, are known to invest their earnings in drug trafficking ventures.[27]

- **Full-route presence.** The rise in package services and greater involvement of highly organized criminal actors have expanded the geographic presence of smuggling groups, with representatives or coordinators operating throughout a given route. These coordinators subcontract local actors for the physical movement of migrants. In the Western Balkans, for example, larger transnational networks have increasingly replaced small local groups and use local logistical coordinators in the Balkans and Western European states such as France and Germany.[28] Similarly, networks smuggling Bangladeshi migrants to Europe often have representatives or subcontractors at each stage of the journey: in Dhaka to arrange travel to Libya, in eastern Libya to facilitate movement through Benina International Airport in Benghazi, in departure zones in western Libya to connect migrants with coastal smugglers, and in Europe to support arrivals.

- **The rise of subcontracting.** Smuggling networks now commonly work with specialist actors and subcontract a range of criminal and lawful services (see Section 3.C.). Recent cases in Europe, for example, have involved different subcontractors that transport migrants, produce and ship counterfeit documents, and operate entire parallel banking networks to transfer and launder funds for human smugglers and other criminal actors.[29] On the route from Turkey to Italy, smuggling networks have turned to Central Asian nationals to pilot boats, while in Tunisia, criminal actors specializing in boat construction have become central to the human smuggling system, manufacturing vessels in a range of hidden locations.[30]

- **The growing interconnection of legal businesses**. Legal business actors are increasingly connected to the most profitable forms of human smuggling, assisting with both movement and the integration of migrants into destination countries. Actively complicit businesses may include labor and travel agencies, charter aircraft companies (see Section 3.C.), yacht and truck owners, and companies that provide fraudulent job contracts to irregular migrants.[31] Such actors, both witting and unwitting, are central to supplying trucks used for overland smuggling, the vessels and engines required for maritime

25 ODNI, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community: 2025* (Washington, DC: ODNI, 2025); Andrés Cajiao, Paula Tobo, and Mariana Botero Restrepo, *On the Border: The Gulf Clan, Irregular Migration, and Organized Crime in Darién* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2022); Frontex, *Annual Risk Analysis 2025/2026* (Warsaw: Frontex, 2025).

26 Alexander Kupatadze, *Den of Thieves: Mapping Organized Crime in the South Caucasus* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2025).

27 GI-TOC, *Small Boats, Big Business*.

28 GI-TOC, "The Internationalization of Migrant Smuggling through the Balkans" (Risk Bulletin #21, May 2025); Europol, "4 Arrests for Smuggling over 600 Migrants across the Western Balkans" (news release, September 19, 2025); Europol, "Migrant-Smuggling Driver Cell Intercepted in France" (news release, April 10, 2025).

29 Europol, "4 Arrests for Smuggling"; Europol, "17 Providers of Criminal Banking Services Arrested" (news release, May 14, 2025); Europol, "Eight Arrested in Takedown of Fake Document Distribution Hub Disguised as Greek Travel Agency" (news release, July 28, 2025).

30 Lorenzo Tondo, "People Smugglers Recruiting Skippers from Central Asia on Turkey to Italy Route," *The Guardian*, January 29, 2024; GI-TOC, *Tunisia: Crackdowns Disrupt Smuggling.*

31 Europol, "Eight Arrested in Takedown"; Europol, "8 Arrested in a Hit against Criminal Network Smuggling Cuban Nationals into Spain" (news release, May 27, 2026); UK National Crime Agency, "Jail for People Smugglers Who Ran 'VIP Ferry Service' for Migrants," updated March 12, 2026.

passage, and components of the financial infrastructure that enable migrant payments and laundering of proceeds.[32]

- **A greater role for migrants in smuggling ecosystems.** Migrant involvement in smuggling ecosystems has grown noticeably in some areas. In Tunisia, for example, migrants have become more critical to boat-building networks. On the English Channel route, migrants recruit others to fill smugglers' boats and assist with launches in exchange for free passage or, increasingly, cash payments.[33] Similar systems involving migrants in recruitment or navigation roles are also becoming more common on Europe's southern periphery, including in Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia. Growing numbers of Sudanese refugees have been arrested in Greece on human smuggling charges after piloting vessels from Libya in exchange for free or reduced-price transit.[34] These roles are highly visible and therefore carry a heightened risk of arrest and prosecution. Migrants performing discrete smuggling tasks is not new, but their involvement appears to have become more systematized as state enforcement efforts have increased.

- **Increased involvement of state agents.** Corruption has always had a critical though infrequently discussed role in human smuggling. Smugglers commonly bribe low-level security actors to help them evade patrols, continue their journeys, or ignore incomplete or falsified documentation.[35] Such bribery has made some routes, including those in the Darién region between Colombia and Panama, predictable and operationally efficient for smugglers, and it becomes even more important in areas with tighter security, such as the U.S.-Mexico border. One U.S. Customs and Border Protection officer who was indicted in 2025 for facilitating human smuggling allegedly received U.S. $4,000 per migrant allowed through the border.[36] However, reports increasingly indicate that corrupt high-level security commanders and political leaders provide protection to smugglers. Numerous reports link high-ranking law enforcement officers, government officials, and politicians to the protection or facilitation of the scam industry in Southeast Asia and its associated human trafficking.[37] In eastern and southern Libya, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces allegedly maintain a highly structured system of unofficial "taxation" of human smugglers as part of the group's broader profiteering from illicit markets.[38] Such high-level corruption is especially concerning because it can allow wrongdoing to go unpunished and erode state capacity, making already fragile states even weaker.

- **Higher prices.** As smuggling becomes more sophisticated, migrants face higher prices because harsher enforcement requires more complex and costly smuggling techniques. Enforcement has made

32 See, for example, UNODC, *Study on Illicit Financial Flows Associated with Smuggling of Migrants and Trafficking in Persons from Glo.Act Partner Countries to Europe* (New York: United Nations, 2023).
33 GI-TOC, "The Small-Boat Casino: How to Make and Lose a Fortune Smuggling Migrants on the French Coast," updated January 23, 2025.
34 Mejdini and Herbert, "A Smuggling Route Reawakens."
35 Ruggero Scaturro, *Catch Me If You Can: Illicit Flows through Balkan Airports* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2023); Alice Fereday, *Niger: Regional Migration and Gold Mining Consolidate as Smuggling to Libya Stagnates* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2023); GI-TOC, *Compound Crime*.
36 U.S. Attorney's Office, Western District of Texas, "Former CBP Officer Sentenced to Federal Prison and Community Service for Bribery and Role in Alien Smuggling" (news release, March 31, 2025).
37 GI-TOC, *Compound Crime.*
38 Matt Herbert, Rupert Horsely, and Emadeddin Badi, *Illicit Economies and Peace and Security in Libya* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2023); United Nations Security Council, "Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011) Concerning Libya" (UN document S/2023/673, September 15, 2023); United Nations Security Council, "Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011) Concerning Libya" (UN document S/2024/914, December 13, 2024).

smuggling highly profitable for several reasons: More limits on migrants' autonomous movement through walls, surveillance, and patrols, combined with insufficient alternative options, force them to rely on smugglers; greater operational risks for smugglers include tighter restrictions on their access to cars, boats, fuel, and other resources; and the market dominance of professionalized groups able to navigate these risks creates barriers to entry for new smuggling groups that might be willing to operate for less profit.[39] Even smaller networks are highly profitable because of the large numbers of migrants they move. One Syrian network in Europe, for example, charged relatively low prices of 4,500 to 12,000 euros (U.S. $5,230 to $14,000) for smuggling, transportation, and accommodations along routes through the Balkans and Eastern Europe but allegedly made about 3.4 million euros (U.S. $4 million) in profits between 2021 and 2024.[40]

B. Social Media and New Technology Change Smuggling Tactics

The greater availability of information and interconnection, largely because of social media, is another trend affecting human smuggling. Historically, human smugglers functioned within small, often highly localized information silos. Migrants seeking smuggler services obtained information and contact details from friends or family members who had migrated, found smugglers on their own by traveling to known smuggling hotspots such as Tijuana in Mexico or Agadez in Niger, or relied on professional organizers whose businesses were based on knowledge of and connections to smugglers.[41] In practice, this limited information environment likely constrained movement because prospective irregular migrants often lacked information on how to move irregularly. The system also placed considerable power in the hands of organizers, whose central role as connectors has weakened for several reasons.

Widespread smartphone and internet availability has transformed how prospective migrants learn about smugglers.[42] Successful and prospective migrants can easily connect in public and private groups on social media platforms such as Facebook and TikTok and via encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram and WhatsApp. They share information about the journey and prices, recommend smugglers, and warn about problematic smugglers.[43] They also make videos about their smuggling journeys and post them to platforms such as TikTok[44] as a form of influencer entertainment[45] that gives prospective migrants a view of the journey in a visceral way that was not previously possible.

39 GI-TOC, "The Small-Boat Casino."

40 Europol, "25 Arrests in EU-Wide Operation against Syrian Migrant Smuggling Network" (news release, November 21, 2024).

41 MMC, "Contact between Smugglers and Refugees and Migrants in West and North Africa" (MMC West Africa and North Africa 4Mi Snapshot, MMC, Geneva, August 2022).

42 Eurojust, *Eurojust Meeting on Migrant Smuggling: Outcome Report* (The Hague: Eurojust, 2023); Daniel Adamson and Mamdouh Akbiek, "The Facebook Smugglers Selling the Dream of Europe," BBC, May 13, 2015.

43 Özlem Özdemir, Bülent Baykal, and Elif Başak Sarıoğlu, "The Use of Social Media in Irregular Migration and Migrant Smuggling: A Qualitative Study in Türkiye," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 40, no. 6 (2025): 1497–1519; Matt Herbert and Emadeddin Badi, *Sudan: Conflict Drives Mass Refugee Movement and Fuels Human Smuggling* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2024); International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Information and Communication Technologies and Migrant Smuggling in Central America, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic* (San José, Costa Rica: IOM, 2023); Miriam Jordan, "African Migration to the U.S. Soars as Europe Cracks Down," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2024; Amine Ghoulidi and Matt Herbert, "Social Media Bridges North Africa's Divides to Facilitate Migration," Institute for Security Studies, March 25, 2019.

44 Munir Ahmed and Renata Brito, "From Pakistan to Spain via the Canaries, Smugglers Are Using Longer, More Dangerous Migration Routes," Associated Press, June 6, 2025.

45 Julie Turkewitz, "Live from the Jungle: Migrants Become Influencers on Social Media," *The New York Times*, December 20, 2023; Francesca Ebel, "Tunisian Women's Posts Glamorize Risky Migrant Crossings," Associated Press, February 14, 2022; *The Economist*, "Vloggers Show How to Migrate Illegally on a Jet Ski," *The Economist*, July 23, 2020.

Smugglers increasingly advertise their services online, including in private groups and the comments sections of videos, offering false documentation and alleged testimonials from satisfied clients. Once a migrant responds to a public or semiprivate solicitation, smugglers move the conversation to secure messaging.[46] For example, migrants arriving at the English Channel can readily find smugglers on Telegram,[47] while social media advertising was critical to smugglers helping South Asian migrants travel from Canada to the Unted States and contributed to a sharp increase in use of the route between 2022 and 2024.[48]

New technologies have also changed how smuggling takes place. Smugglers use encrypted communication apps and location-sharing tools such as Google Maps to direct migrants' journeys remotely, track their progress, and arrange pickups, including on Europe's Eastern Border route, along the U.S.-Canada border, and in Latin America.[49] Such remote operations reduce the risk of physical capture and will likely become more common. Smugglers also use these apps to communicate within their networks. Leadership figures, for example, can operate away from areas where migrant smuggling occurs and thus limit their risk of capture. Network leaders increasingly operate from destination countries, such as France, Italy, and the United Kingdom or from non-European states such as Iraq or Turkey by using encrypted communications to direct cash handling and network operatives.[50]

Smugglers use encrypted communication apps and location-sharing tools such as Google Maps to direct migrants' journeys remotely, track their progress, and arrange pickups.

Prospective migrants and smugglers are reportedly increasing their use of cryptocurrencies, mirroring the growing global adoption of these financial instruments for legal purposes.[51] Although cryptocurrencies remain less common across most human smuggling routes than cash payments or transfers through banks, money service businesses, and informal value transfer systems such as hawalas, they will likely become more prominent for payment between migrants and smugglers and within smuggling networks.

46 Reha Kansara, Samrah Fatima, and Jasmin Dyer, "Going Undercover to Reveal People Smugglers' Sales Tactics," BBC, October 27, 2023; Shabaka, *Briefing Report: Online and Offline Human Exploitation in Sudan* (Brighton, UK: Shabaka, 2024); Bernd Debusmann Jr., "TikTok and Title 42 Rumours Fuel Human Smuggling at the U.S. Border," BBC, July 8, 2023.

47 Akhtar Makoii, "How Migrants Are Smuggled from the Afghan Desert to Britain—and Crossing the Channel Is the Easiest Part," *The Telegraph*, January 3, 2025.

48 Romain Schué, "Smugglers Are Advertising Illegal Canada-U.S. Border Crossings on TikTok," CBC News, September 19, 2024; Marie Woolf, "As Border Anxiety Mounts, Ads for Smugglers in Canada Helping Migrants Illegally Cross into U.S. Flourish on Social Media," *The Globe and Mail*, January 18, 2025; Gilliland, Khalatbari, Cribb, and Fitzpatrick, "Inside the Sprawling Online Industry Selling Fake Canadian Visas."

49 Aleksandra Krzysztoszek, "Human Smuggling Like Pizza Delivery: Telegram—A Haven for Dealers and Terrorists?" PulseZ, April 30, 2025; Gabriel Bejan et al., "Telegram, Crypto, and Corruption: The Ukrainian Men Fleeing the Military Call-Up," Balkan Insight, December 18, 2024; Jorge Barrera, "Human Smuggling Persists along Canada-U.S. Border, Despite Crackdown," CBC News, January 30, 2025.

50 Andrew Harding, "Violent Channel Smuggling Gang's French and UK Network Exposed by Undercover BBC Investigation," BBC, August 5, 2025; Adina Campbell and Dominic Casciani, "Man Who Helped Smuggle More than 3,000 People into Europe Jailed," BBC, May 20, 2025; Matt Taylor, "Arrests over Small Boat 'People Smuggling Ring'," BBC, February 13, 2025.

51 Europol, *The Changing DNA of Serious and Organised Crime: European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment* (Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union, 2025); U.S. Government Accountability Office, "As Virtual Currency Use in Human and Drug Trafficking Increases, So Do the Challenges for Federal Law Enforcement," updated February 24, 2022; TRM Labs, "Blockchain Intelligence and Border Security," updated February 18, 2025.

The rapid development and widespread adoption of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools are also affecting human smuggling, a trend that will likely accelerate soon, although its impacts remain uncertain. AI could help states improve border security and investigations, but it could also help smugglers recruit clients and subvert state enforcement.[52] Improved translation tools, for example, will enable smugglers to reach prospective migrants who do not share a common language.[53] Smugglers could also use AI to advertise at scale, scan large volumes of social media comments, and directly contact individuals seeking smuggling services.[54] More dangerously, inexpensive AI-generated videos and deepfakes could misrepresent smugglers' services, capabilities, and safety.

There is a scenario where generative AI may increase migrants' ability to plan and make journeys autonomously by, for example, identifying safe routes and travel options. Migrants are already using AI this way to a limited degree: In one 2025 case, a group of Palestinians reportedly relied on ChatGPT to determine how much fuel they needed to travel from Libya to Italy.[55] Greater autonomy could weaken smugglers' influence and potentially allow migrants to travel safely without the expense and harm associated with smugglers, but it could also create new risks for states in managing this mobility.

Expanded access to information has broadened smugglers' markets and reduced their risks. Contacting prospective migrants in person is particularly risky for smugglers because it can expose them to law enforcement surveillance or arrest. Using social networks and encrypted chats for recruitment and operations reduces the likelihood that security forces will identify smugglers in many contexts and in some cases can place smugglers entirely beyond a force's jurisdictional reach.

Social media companies generally prohibit such activity and frequently take down posts or close accounts. However, this has had limited systemic impact to date, with smugglers frequently creating new accounts or moving platforms—a dynamic generative AI is likely to further fuel.

C. Airborne Hybrid Smuggling Spikes

A third cross-cutting trend is the rise of hybrid smuggling, which uses both legal and illegal modes of travel and has become common along many migration routes.[56] Migrants in West Africa or Latin America, for example, use commercial buses for parts of their journeys before turning to smugglers to cross key borders. However, over the last decade, *intercontinental* hybrid smuggling using commercial or charter aircraft has grown.[57] This approach appears to have accelerated rapidly after the COVID-19 pandemic and is now a key smuggling tactic on several migration routes, including through Libya into Europe. Bangladeshis, Pakistanis,

52 Europol, *The Changing DNA of Serious and Organised Crime*; Europol, "Network Smuggling Migrants through Belarus Busted in Poland" (news release, October 24, 2024).
53 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process (RSO), *New Frontiers: The Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence to Facilitate Trafficking in Persons* (Vienna and Bangkok: OSCE and RSO, 2024).
54 U.S. Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, "The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Trafficking in Persons" (brief, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC, 2026).
55 Tony Colapinto and Alvise Armellini, "From Gaza to Europe, via Jet Ski: Muhammad Abu Dakha's Daring Escape Story," Reuters, September 15, 2025.
56 Rupert Horsely, *Libya: Sophisticated Smugglers Thrive as Libyan Governance Stagnates* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2023).
57 UNODC, "Migrant Smuggling by Air" (issue paper, UNODC, Vienna, 2010); Marfa Public Radio, "With More Nationalities Seen in Border Apprehensions, a Changing Face of Migration," Marfa Public Radio, October 6, 2016; UNODC, *Multicountry Study on the Smuggling of Migrants and Trafficking In Persons from Nepal* (Vienna: UNODC, 2019).

and Syrians—the three nationalities most likely to use hybrid travel—accounted for 56 percent of all arrivals from Libya to Italy between January 2022 and March 2026 (slightly fewer than 119,000 people).[58]

Intercontinental hybrid smuggling toward the United States is also common along southern routes through Latin America and the Caribbean and northern routes through Canada.[59] Hybrid movement across both borders spiked substantially in the early 2020s. In 2023, for example, authorities at the U.S. southwestern border intercepted around 188,000 migrants from outside of the Western Hemisphere, who most likely traveled to the hemisphere by air.[60] Migrants—especially Chinese citizens—are known to fly to the Bahamas or other Caribbean states before boarding smuggler boats bound for the United States.[61] Most journeys appear to be package trips: Chinese groups organize the journey and subcontract transportation services to local Caribbean smugglers.[62] Although movement from Canada into the United States involves lower absolute numbers, hybrid migration has increased substantially over the past five years, particularly among South Asians. Most arrive in Canada on commercial flights with valid visas before engaging smugglers to cross into the United States.[63] Even though the volume of hybrid smuggling toward the United States fell dramatically in 2025, many of the networks involved remain operational, increasing the likelihood that the volume will rebound.

Most hybrid smuggling involving air travel uses commercial carriers. Some routes are direct and pass through large airports, but others involve remote airports and airlines with limited technological capacities or that cross many countries, which complicates enforcement. For example, routes to Mauritania, from which migrants depart for the Canary Islands, regularly involve flights through Dubai, United Arab Emirates; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; and Dakar, Senegal, followed by overland travel to departure zones in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou in Mauritania.[64] Airlines and airports have tried to crack down on suspicious travel,[65] but their efforts depend heavily on states' political will and airline personnel's capacity to detect suspicious cases.[66]

58 UNHCR, "Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard: December 2022" (fact sheet, January 2023); UNHCR, "Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard: December 2023" (fact sheet, March 2024); UNHCR, "Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard: December 2024" (fact sheet, April 2025); UNHCR, "Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard: December 2025" (fact sheet, March 2026); UNHCR, "Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard: March 2026" (fact sheet, March 2026).

59 Miriam Jordan, "Leader of Smuggling Ring Gets 10 Years after Indian Family Froze to Death," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2025; David Goodhue, "Feds Stop Another Boat Smuggling Chinese Migrants from the Bahamas to South Florida," *Miami Herald*, February 13, 2025; Masahiro Okoshi, "Chinese Migrants Flock to U.S.-Mexico Border on Economic Pressures," Nikkei Asia, February 13, 2024; Cate Cadell, Nick Miroff, and Li Qiang, "Walking the Line: Chinese Migration Surge Tests President Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping," *The Washington Post*, July 29, 2024; Farangis Najibullah, "Central Asians Find New Routes on American Journey as Turkey Blocks Them," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 20, 2024.

60 Mica Rosenberg et al., "New $72,000 Migrant Smuggling Routes to the United States Start with Charter Flights," Reuters, June 21, 2024.

61 David Goodhue, "Agents Stop Boats from Bahamas Loaded with Cocaine and Migrants, Court Docs Say," *Miami Herald*, September 5, 2025; Milena Malaver, "Migrants' Arrival in the Florida Keys Leads to Human Smuggling Arrests," *Miami Herald*, September 6, 2025; U.S. Department of Justice, "Florida Men Plead Guilty to Alien Smuggling Conspiracy Involving 69 Aliens" (news release, August 8, 2025); Aarne Heikkila, "Ocean Patrols and Narcotics Playbooks: How a Florida City Is Tackling Human Smuggling," NBC News, May 17, 2025.

62 Aarne Heikkila and Kimmy Yam, "Chinese Migrant Smuggled to Florida Shares Why She Was Desperate to Flee to the U.S.," NBC News, February 5, 2025.

63 Gilliland, Khalatbari, Cribb, and Fitzpatrick, "Inside the Sprawling Online Industry Selling Fake Canadian Visas."

64 Abid Hussain, "As Pakistanis Die in Fresh Mediterranean Tragedy, a Question Lingers: Why?" Al Jazeera, January 29, 2025; Ahmed and Brito, "From Pakistan to Spain via the Canaries."

65 Najibullah, "Central Asians Find New Routes"; Daniel Thorpe, "What's Behind the Rise in Turkish Citizens Seeking Asylum in Europe and North America?" The New Humanitarian, June 11, 2024.

66 Lindsey Kennedy and Nathan Paul Southern, "Flying Under the Radar: How Airports and Airlines Could Be Vital Partners in Combating the Cyber Scam Industry," GI-TOC, June 12, 2025.

Smugglers have also experimented with charter aircraft during the past three years, possibly because of greater restrictions on commercial travel. Most of the activity has been on routes from Africa and Asia to the Western Hemisphere. For example, between February and June 2024, Libyan airline Ghadames Air operated five charter flights between Libya and Nicaragua, each allegedly carrying about 300 migrants.[67] Managua, Nicaragua emerged as a major destination for charter flights suspected of carrying migrants.[68] Other Central American and Caribbean states, such as El Salvador and Jamaica, also recorded an uptick in migrant-linked charter flights.[69] The use of charter flights in the Western Hemisphere declined in 2025, partly because U.S. authorities took action against a Romanian charter company and partly because of the broader decline in migrant movement to the United States.[70]

In some cases, commercial and charter airlines are unaware of their role in smuggling because passengers at that stage of the journey can be traveling legally, such as on a valid visa, before being smuggled onward once on the ground. In other cases, however, legal businesses have reportedly known about smuggling attempts or even participated in them. For example, visa facilitation and travel agencies in South Asia and the Middle East arrange human smuggling as an additional service for customers,[71] likely because this form of smuggling is so profitable. The highest recorded fees for smuggling, such as U.S. $96,000–$100,000 for itineraries from South Asia to the United States, involve hybrid intercontinental smuggling and can attract potential smugglers and other criminal actors.[72] The profit margins also pay for bribes to higher-level officials, such as those responsible for overall airport security where charter flights land in Libya.

New routes can emerge quickly and from farther away.

Intercontinental hybrid smuggling makes it difficult for law enforcement agencies to understand smuggling routes, migrant nationalities, and the scale of smuggling activities—let alone combat them. Hybrid air routes greatly complicate decisions about which transit states should be prioritized as partners for cooperation and information sharing. New routes can emerge quickly and from farther away. For example, Somali migrants have flown from Ethiopia to Benin and then continued to Algeria and Spain. The route reportedly expanded in the spring and summer of 2025, contributing to Somalis becoming the third most encountered nationality on the western Mediterranean route that year.[73] Spain has long engaged with neighboring transit states such as Algeria, Mauritania, and Morocco on migration, but the rapid rise in Somali movement increased the salience of information sharing and law enforcement partnerships with other states such as Benin, Ethiopia, and Somalia.

67 Rupert Horsely, *Libya: Hybrid Migration Systems Underpin Resilience of Human Smuggling in 2024* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2025); Nissim Gasteli, "Benghazi, Libya's New Hub for Illegal Immigration to the U.S.," *Le Monde*, June 3, 2024; *La Prensa*, "Aterriza en Managua un Nuevo Vuelo Charter Procedente de Libia en Medio de Amenazas de EE. UU.," *La Prensa*, May 18, 2024.

68 Wilfredo Miranda Aburto, "Ortega Regime Turns Nicaragua into Gateway for Irregular Migration to the United States," *El País*, June 23, 2024; Mediapart, "Plane Held in France Points to Nicaragua Role in U.S. Migrant Crisis," Mediapart, January 1, 2024.

69 Rosenberg et al., "New $72,000 Migrant Smuggling Routes."

70 U.S. Department of State, "Alert: Disrupting Irregular Migration," updated May 15, 2024; Susan Heavey, "U.S. Bans European Charter Flight Officials over Migrant Trips," Reuters, September 11, 2024.

71 Horsely, *Libya: Sophisticated Smugglers Thrive.*

72 Milena Malaver, David Goodhue, and Jacqueline Charles, "How Coral Gables Became a Key End Point for Smuggled Chinese Migrants," *Miami Herald,* February 18, 2025; Rosenberg et al., "New $72,000 Migrant Smuggling Routes"; María Martín, "Madrid, the New Launchpad for Migration from Africa to the United States," *El País*, February 6, 2024.

73 María Martín, "From Somalia to Spain's Balearic Islands: A Journey along One of the Most Dangerous Migration Routes in the World," *El País,* August 17, 2025.

D. Rising Conflict and Fragility Fuel and Reshape Smuggling

The global rise in conflict has increased displacement and demand for human smuggling services, reshaped smuggling routes, and restricted states' abilities to combat smuggling in conflict-affected areas. The year 2025 set a record for the highest number of state-involved conflicts since the end of World War II,[74] while internal wars between states and nonstate groups remain pervasive[75] and increasingly extend across borders, particularly in the Sahel.

Conflict as a Driver of Smuggling

Rising conflict has contributed to record forced displacement and greater demand for smuggling. Not all displaced persons turn to smugglers, but many rely on them to cross conflict-affected areas, enter neighboring states more safely, or make longer journeys toward destination zones.[76] For example, Sudan's civil war has forced millions of refugees into neighboring countries, and many have turned to smugglers to cross frontlines or circumvent closed borders. More Sudanese are also traveling to Europe: Arrivals more than tripled in 2025, and indications point to continued heavy movement in 2026.[77] Similarly, internal conflict in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger continues to contribute to irregular arrivals in Europe.[78] In Myanmar, worsening conflict and humanitarian conditions in western Rakhine state prompted a sharp rise in the number of Rohingya using smugglers to leave the country. Those departing from Myanmar accounted for 91 percent of detected seaborn Rohingya in 2024.[79] The number of Rohingya traveling with maritime smugglers from refugee camps and directly from Myanmar remains elevated. During the first five months of 2026, the number was about twice the level recorded during the same period in 2025 and four times the 2024 level.[80]

Young men seeking to avoid military conscription in states at war are also turning to smugglers to escape. In western Ukraine, for example, a large and highly lucrative smuggling system has emerged to move potential conscripts into neighboring states, with young men or their families paying up to U.S. $20,000 per journey.[81] In 2024, Myanmar implemented the 2010 People's Military Service Law, leading large numbers of young men to seek ways to leave the country, including through the maritime routes from Rakhine state.

74 World Bank and United Nations, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018); Siri Aas Rustad, "Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2024" (PRIO paper 2025, Peace Research Institute Oslo, Oslo, 2025).
75 Siri Aas Rustad, "Conflict Trends"; Romain Le Cour Grandmaison, "A Strategic Tool in Criminal Hands," GI-TOC, July 16, 2025.
76 Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), *Refugees and Migration Movements in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: POMEPS, 2017); Herbert and Badi, *Sudan: Conflict Drives Mass Refugee Movement*; Bülent Baykal and Özlem Özdemir, "Turkey Aims to Halt Irregular Migration and Migrant Smuggling in the Eastern Mediterranean," *Migration Information Source*, August 27, 2024.
77 Frontex, "Detections of Illegal Border-Crossings."
78 Arrivals of these nationalities, particularly Malians, to Europe have increased sharply from 988 in 2020 to 20,757 in 2023. Arrivals fell modestly in 2024 to 19,923, before falling sharply in 2025 and the first half of 2026. Declining arrivals are likely linked to heightened enforcement on the Atlantic Route. Frontex, "Detections of Illegal Border-Crossings."
79 Haq and Suryono, "More Refugees Risk Dangerous Sea Journeys."
80 Haq and Suryono, "More Refugees Risk Dangerous Sea Journeys"; UNHCR, "Myanmar Situation."
81 GI-TOC, *Smuggling, Inc.: Illicit Trade between Ukraine's Transcarpathia and the EU* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2025).

Conflict Reshaping Smuggling Routes

Rising insecurity and indiscriminate violence have caused smuggling networks to shift some routes rapidly. In the Sahel, for example, the expanding territorial control of Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, an Al-Qaeda-linked violent extremist organization, and Islamic State-Sahel has led to more attacks on commercial buses.[82] In Burkina Faso, the attacks became so severe in 2024 that most bus routes through the eastern part of the country to Niger shut down, and companies rerouted buses south into Togo and Benin, entering Niger at the Malanville-Gaya crossing.[83] Because most migrant journeys use commercial buses from West African states to Niger and onward to Europe, rerouting the bus lines has altered migrant itineraries and hotspots.[84] The Malanville-Gaya crossing, for example, has become a critical migration hotspot even though the Benin-Niger border is officially closed. A large smuggling system has developed to shuttle migrants across the Niger River by boat.[85]

Because most migrant journeys use commercial buses from West African states to Niger and onward to Europe, rerouting the bus lines has altered migrant itineraries and hotspots.

Farther west in Mali, heightened conflict in the north has sharply limited the feasibility of migrant travel through the area and on to the Mediterranean during the past two years, leading to a substantial rise in departures from Mauritania and Senegal to the Canary Islands in 2024.[86] The effect of Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin's increasing control in southwestern Mali on the migration route is unknown, but it will likely push the route and related departure sites farther south, potentially to Guinea or Guinea-Bissau. Such a shift would lengthen an already long and dangerous maritime route north to Europe.[87]

Fragility and Conflict Constrain Policy Responses and Enforcement

The rise in conflict has expanded the number of areas that are either outside state control or under the control of weak states focused on conflict management rather than anti-smuggling measures, creating more opportunities for smuggling and trafficking. Myanmar's scam centers are a high-profile example, and many operate in areas held by armed groups such as the United Wa State Army and Karen Border Guard Force (also known as the Karen National Army). Despite greater international attention to this form of criminality, the scam center industry has continued to grow rapidly because many centers operate outside state control.[88] Similar conditions exist in Haiti and Ukraine and in fragile postconflict settings such as Libya.[89] The Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), a major nonstate armed group, and the Government of National Stability, which is not recognized internationally, control several key areas linked to human smuggling into Libya,

82 Alice Fereday, *Niger: Coup Reverses 2015 Human Smuggling Ban amid Major Political and Security Upheaval* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2024).
83 Alice Fereday, *Niger: Decriminalization Reshapes Human Smuggling but Sahel Upheaval and Border Closures Prevent Return to Pre-2015 Levels* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2025).
84 Fereday, *Niger: Decriminalization Reshapes Human Smuggling*.
85 GI-TOC, "Benin-Niger Border Closure Drives Surge in Migrant Smuggling Profits" (Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa Risk Bulletin issue 11, GI-TOC, Geneva, October 11, 2024).
86 Berger, Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo, and Kane, "Why the Deadliest Migration Route in the World Is Becoming More Popular."
87 Collins Nabiswa, Abdou Aziz Diédhiou, Natasha Booty, and Chris Ewokor, "Trucks Set Ablaze as Militants Block Key Senegal–Mali Trade Route," BBC, September 17, 2025.
88 GI-TOC, *Compound Crime*; Ratcliffe, "Revealed: The Huge Growth of Myanmar Scam Centres."
89 GI-TOC, *Odesa: An Oasis for Organized Crime* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2025); Herbert, Horsely, and Badi, *Illicit Economies*.

including the Benghazi airport, the coastal areas around Tobruk, and the southwestern borderlands near Qatrun. Their control limits the ability of the internationally recognized Government of National Unity to coordinate forces across the country to counter human smuggling. Effective coordination has become more critical because the center of human smuggling in Libya has shifted toward areas under LAAF control.

Fragile and conflict-affected states pose challenges to global anti-smuggling efforts because weak or nonexistent state control often makes enforcement impossible. In some cases, states tacitly allow certain forms of smuggling to retain support from the public, key elites, or criminal groups. Some destination states have quietly established anti-smuggling partnerships with nonstate actors in such countries, notably ethnic armed groups in northern Mali, Libyan groups such as the LAAF, and smaller militias in western Libya. The partnerships provide financial benefits and greater status to nonstate armed groups. Libyan groups, for example, use them to strengthen their local legitimacy and international recognition at the expense of the internationally recognized government in Tripoli. Such approaches are rare, however, partly because of the practical and political challenges they pose. Worsening fragility and conflict could lead more states to pursue such partnerships, requiring them to weigh the political, legal, and operational risks of working with such nonstate armed groups.

Conversely, postconflict countries or areas that are becoming more stable offer some hope for disrupting smuggling systems. The overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 marked one key change. Authorities intercepted about 6,000 Syrian nationals trying to reach Europe through irregular means in 2025, down from 46,000 in 2024.[90] Smuggling of Syrian and Lebanese nationals from Lebanon to Cyprus, which had been growing in 2023–24, fell substantially in 2025 and 2026.[91] Although the situation in Sudan is more complex, the government's recapture of Khartoum led a growing number of refugees to return from neighboring states, notably Egypt. However, bureaucratic requirements have blocked some returns, including those of refugees in Libya seeking to transit through Egypt. The restrictions reportedly led some Sudanese to hire smugglers to arrange their return, prompting the smugglers to adapt their services to the new demand.[92]

E. Smuggling Hotspots Become More Diffuse and Unpredictable

Smuggling hotspots are becoming more diverse, linked to an increase in hybrid smuggling, and often shifting rapidly or moving into conflict zones or fragile states. Historically, hotspots have been relatively identifiable, often located at key choke points on known routes, such as the Darién Gap on the Colombia-Panama border and the city of Agadez in Niger, or in countries adjacent to major destination countries, such as Mexico, Morocco, and Turkey. Although many of these known hotspots remain important, new areas of concern have emerged, such as Benin, Nicaragua, and Thailand, because of greater access to air travel and the rapid spread of information through social media. In other cases, such as Myanmar and Sudan, conflict has weakened state capacity or diverted security forces, creating operational space for smugglers.

90 Frontex, "Detections of Illegal Border-Crossings."
91 Omar Sanadiki and Kareem Chehayeb, "First Group of Syrian Refugees Returns Home from Lebanon under New UN Plan," Associated Press, July 29, 2025; Julia Litzkow, "Cyprus' Migration Dilemma: Hardline Measures, Regional Conflict and Rising Pressures," MMC, October 2024; UNHCR, "Cyprus," accessed June 9, 2026.
92 Author interview with Sudanese researcher, October 2025.

The professionalization of human smuggling networks has enabled them to respond rapidly and fluidly to evolving opportunities, thus creating new migration hotspots.

These new hotspots can emerge rapidly as smugglers identify and advertise a route and direct migrants to it, and they can disappear just as quickly when operating costs and interception risks increase to unacceptable levels.

Notably, these new hotspots can emerge rapidly as smugglers identify and advertise a route and direct migrants to it, and they can disappear just as quickly when operating costs and interception risks increase to unacceptable levels. In West Africa, for example, the Mauritanian government's dual crackdown on maritime smuggling and the Senegalese government's greater enforcement at the international airport in Dakar in early 2025 effectively halted a Pakistan-Mauritania-Spain smuggling system that had emerged suddenly in the previous year.[93] This example shows that hotspots can develop far from destination countries, with smugglers choosing locations because of airport links or weak state capacity that allows migrants to be staged there.

The diffusion of hotspots and rapid shifts in smuggling activity between them have complicated states' efforts to address smuggling. Diplomatic and law enforcement cooperation on human smuggling is necessarily slow because states must negotiate mutual legal assistance treaties, bridge differences in legal regimes, and build trust between law enforcement bodies. When hotspots are predictable and stable, destination and transit states have time to develop this trust and cooperation. However, when hotspots are diffuse and shift quickly, the time required to build cooperation between destination states and newly important transit areas can hinder international coordination efforts.

A less visible but critical consequence of more diffuse hotspots involves data collection and sharing. Particularly when hotspots shift into highly fragile or conflict-affected states, state actors can lack the capacity to collect information on human smuggling trends in their jurisdictions and share it with other international stakeholders. Limited information can complicate efforts to understand and track evolving human smuggling routes, design responses, and build cases against key smuggling actors. As the number of fragile and conflict-affected states grows, obtaining this information could become substantially more difficult in the coming years, with potentially significant impacts.

4 Why Smuggling Is a Wicked Problem for States

Irregular migration has become a central political issue for both destination and transit states. Populist actors and political parties in government and in opposition have drawn support by pressing for harsh crackdowns on migrants and the smugglers who facilitate their arrival. In response to these pressures, destination and transit states have increasingly used unilateral measures to counter smuggling, including stronger border security, prosecutions, sanctions, and expulsions.

93 Ahmed and Brito, "From Pakistan to Spain via the Canaries."

These efforts have had mixed results. Although migrant flows have halted or declined in some contexts and authorities have arrested some smugglers, they have rarely disrupted the higher-level infrastructure of smuggling networks. States face substantial operational and in some cases political challenges in addressing smuggling. These challenges are becoming more acute as smugglers professionalize, routes shift, and conflict weakens government capacity along key migration routes.

This section examines why smuggling is such a difficult problem for states to address, focusing on the political and operational challenges in destination and transit states and the impediments to effective cooperation between them.

A. Destination-Country Strategies Reduce Arrivals but Have Limited Impact on Smugglers

High-income destination states have taken strong measures to deter and prevent arrivals in response to public backlash against irregular migration, with uneven success. Governments across North America and Europe and in Australia and South Africa have sought to deter would-be migrants by strengthening border security, changing asylum application procedures, and returning irregular migrants. In several contexts, these policies have led to allegations of unsafe or problematic conduct by border security officials. For example, Greek and Polish officers have repeatedly faced allegations of violence and pushbacks targeting migrants. French authorities have allegedly engaged in aggressive and unsafe maneuvers against smuggler vessels off the coast of the Department of Mayotte in the Indian Ocean, reportedly resulting in shipwrecks.[94]

In the United States, the administration of President Donald Trump has taken drastic measures to deter arrivals and has had success in reducing border crossings, continuing a downward trend that began in 2024 before he re-took office,[95] and a similar decline in northbound irregular migration was recorded in Central America (see Section 2). However, these trends do not indicate significant or permanent dismantling of the human smuggling ecosystem linked to the U.S.-Mexico border. A dense web of human smuggling networks remains operational throughout the region. In some cases, these networks have adapted to changing circumstances, including by catering to southbound returnees traveling through Mexico and Central America and farther south.[96] Venezuelans in particular have reportedly relied on human smugglers to help them travel south across borders and through checkpoints. Other parts of the ecosystem have also adapted. Corrupt state agents in several Central American states, for example, have allegedly extracted bribes to allow migrants to travel south.[97] Reports also indicate that changes in U.S. border security have stranded refugees and migrants at various points in Latin America, and they lacked sufficient funds to get home.[98]

94 Raphaëlle Aubert et al., "French Border Police Accused of Causing Shipwrecks and Deaths of Migrants from Comoros," *Le Monde*, September 16, 2025.

95 Colleen Putzel-Kavanaugh, "Can Near-Historic Low Migrant Encounter Levels at the U.S.-Mexico Border Be Sustained?" (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, June 2025).

96 Ximena Canal Laiton, Carmen Elena Pérez Muñoz, and Pablo José Pérez Herrera, *Migration Dynamics and Protection Risks in North-South Return Movements in the Americas: Impacts of Changes in U.S. Migration Policy* (Geneva and Santiago, Chile: MMC and ProLAC, 2025).

97 Author interview with Central American organized crime researcher, May 2025.

98 Daniela Díaz, "Stranded: The Trump-Induced Migration Crisis in Mexico," The New Humanitarian, March 26, 2025; Barber, "Turned Away at U.S. Border"; Daniela Mohor and Eric Reidy, "What Happened to the 300,000 Asylum Seekers Stranded in Mexico by Trump?" The New Humanitarian, April 23, 2026.

Such instances have heightened returnees' vulnerability to trafficking and could signal an expansion of that criminal market in some areas.

Governments have turned to prosecuting smugglers because deterring arrivals alone is insufficient. However, convictions of network leaders and key organizers are few, and convictions of other actors in human smuggling ecosystems, such as business actors and corrupt state agents, are even rarer. In the United States, sentencing data show that 4,345 people were convicted of human smuggling offenses in 2024, when authorities recorded slightly more than 1 million encounters with migrants crossing just the U.S. southern border irregularly.[99] Spain and Italy, both at the European terminus of key smuggling routes, recorded only 187 and 106 convictions for smuggling the same year, respectively.[100] Arrests typically target low-level actors such as transporters and vessel captains. In Greece, Italy, and Spain, a substantial number of convictions involve migrants who pilot smuggling vessels—usually for a reduced fare—rather than the organizers.[101] Data for the United States, for example, show that only about 2.9 percent of cases involve the smuggling of more than 100 migrants.[102] Destination countries face growing challenges in successfully prosecuting smugglers as networks adopt new technologies and use subcontractors to reduce their risk.

Convictions of network leaders and key organizers are few, and convictions of other actors in human smuggling ecosystems, such as business actors and corrupt state agents, are even rarer.

Newer, more sophisticated policy tools could help disrupt smuggling ecosystems. In July 2025, the United Kingdom unveiled the world's first sanctions regime targeting human smugglers and their enablers.[103] The regime allows sanctions against criminal actors, business facilitators, and complicit state agents, reflecting the growing importance of a range of new actors in human smuggling. The United States has also expanded its use of financial sanctions under its Transnational Organized Crime regime and has used Department of State authority to impose visa bans on actors linked to smuggling, including the head of a charter airline.[104] However, the United States uses these measures far less extensively against human smugglers than it does against drug traffickers and major criminal organizations.[105]

99 U.S. Sentencing Commission, "Quick Facts: Alien Smuggling Offenses" (fact sheet, 2025).
100 Porco Rosso, *La criminalizzazione dei cosiddetti scafisti nel 2024, Progetto "Dal mare al carcere," Report annuale 2024* (Palermo: Porco Rosso, 2025); Captain Support, "The Criminalisation of Boat Drivers in Spain and Canary Islands," updated April 11, 2025.
101 Rosso, *La criminalizzazione dei cosiddetti scafisti nel 2024*; Captain Support, "The Criminalisation of Boat Drivers."
102 U.S. Sentencing Commission, "Quick Facts: Alien Smuggling Offenses."
103 Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, "UK Brings Forward World's First Sanctions Regime to Smash the Gangs Responsible for Irregular Migration" (news release, July 22, 2025).
104 U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Transnational Criminal Organization Smuggling Migrants into the United States" (news release, July 18, 2024); U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Guatemalan Human Smuggling Organization for Illegal Transport of Migrants to the United States" (news release, July 15, 2025); U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Mexico-Based Leader of Transnational Criminal Organization Responsible for Smuggling Thousands of Migrants across the U.S. Southern Border" (news release, March 18, 2025); U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Southeast Asian Networks Targeting Americans with Cyber Scams" (news release, September 8, 2025); U.S. Department of State, "Visa Restrictions on Executive of a Charter Flight Company Facilitating Irregular Migration to the U.S." (news release, June 13, 2024).
105 Matt Herbert and Lucia Bird Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo, *Convergence Zone: The Evolution of Targeted Sanctions Usage against Organized Crime* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2023).

Greater use of targeted sanctions to counter human smuggling could benefit destination countries by providing a unilateral tool that can directly affect smugglers' finances and mobility. Evidence on their effectiveness is limited, but research on UN sanctions on human smugglers in Libya found that they affected the smuggling ecosystem there, though mainly by deterring specific practices such as human rights abuses instead of curtailing smuggling altogether.[106] Limited follow-up to the sanctions in Libya also meant that their impact was temporary and dissipated gradually.[107]

Rapid advances in AI also offer significant opportunities for destination countries, particularly by enabling more robust tactical use of large data sets and technical surveillance systems.[108] The most visible uses of AI involve border security or internal enforcement, but law enforcement bodies and financial intelligence units are also using the technology more often in their operations. This trend will likely lead to greater use of AI to investigate networks and map illicit financial flows linked to human smuggling.[109] Although these technologies are promising, they cannot address the challenges of human smuggling on their own.

Heightened efforts to counter smugglers are difficult but critical. Without such action, declines in migrant arrivals are likely temporary and could reverse when conditions change. In the Western Hemisphere, for example, the decline in U.S. arrivals should be viewed as a pause and realignment because human smuggling networks remain operational despite reduced activity, and most of the major drivers of migration in South America over the past five years remain, including economic precarity in Venezuela and rising criminal violence in Ecuador.[110] Moreover, dynamics in other states are worsening, particularly Cuba, where an economic and governance crisis is fueling mass migration.[111] Northbound movement and migrant arrivals could therefore shift rapidly if these drivers intensify or U.S. enforcement efforts weaken.

B. Politics and Capacity in Transit States Affect Enforcement Effectiveness

Transit states, and origin states to a lesser extent, have taken more proactive roles in countering irregular migration and human smuggling over the past five years. The shift stems partly from incentives and pressure from destination states but also reflects domestic politics and public and government priorities in transit states.[112] In many cases, public opposition to migration has centered on concerns about the

106 Matt Herbert, "Countering Libya's Illicit Economies through Targeted Sanctions," ENACT, July 14, 2023.
107 Matt Herbert and Lucia Bird Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo, *Hard Targets: Identifying a Framework of Objectives for Targeted Sanctions on Illicit Economies* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2023).
108 European Commission, Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs, "EU-Backed Projects Contribute to Countering Migrant Smuggling with AI," updated December 18, 2024; Christina Khoury and Maegan Hendow, "Advances in Border Management: Digitalisation Trends and Emerging Technologies" (working paper, International Center for Migration Policy Development, Vienna, January 2025).
109 CBP, "Big Bend Sector Expands High-Tech Border Security with New Autonomous Surveillance Towers" (news release, November 7, 2024); Josie Stewart, Michelle Du, and Nicol Turner Lee, "How Tech Powers Immigration Enforcement," Brookings Institution, October 6, 2025.
110 Regina Garcia Cano, "For Many Families, Every Meal Is a Struggle in Venezuela's Economic Crisis," Associated Press, August 27, 2025; Renato Rivera Rhon, "Ecuador's Criminal Crisis," GI-TOC, September 22, 2025; Inés Fernández, "Violence Transforms Ecuador's Migration Landscape," InSight Crime, January 21, 2025.
111 Will Freeman, "Inside Cuba's Mass Exodus: How Losing a Quarter of the Population Has Changed the Island," Council on Foreign Relations, September 21, 2026.
112 Omar N. Cham and Ilke Adam, "The Politicization and Framing of Migration in West Africa: Transition to Democracy as a Game Changer?" *Territory, Politics, Governance* 11, no. 4 (2021): 638–57; Jeremy Lebow, Jonathan Moreno-Medina, Horacio Coral, and Salma Mousa, "Do Local Experiences or National Narratives Drive Anti-Migrant Sentiment?," VoxDev, April 12, 2024.

settlement of migrants or refugees, economic competition, or frustration that migrants and refugees receive forms of direct support from the international community that citizens do not.[113] Government leaders and opposition politicians in several countries have used these concerns to gain popularity, including Tunisia's Kais Saied,[114] India's Narendra Modi,[115] and Peru's Dina Boluarte,[116] along with opposition leaders in countries such as Turkey[117] and Libya.[118]

In response to these political pressures, transit countries have adopted a range of measures to combat migrant arrivals and smuggling, with mixed effectiveness and reports of abuses. One approach has been to strengthen border security and internal enforcement targeting migrants, similar to measures used in high-income destination countries. However, migrants and independent observers often allege more severe and systematic use of force and human rights violations by transit-country security officers.[119] In the Levant, Iranian and Turkish forces have both been accused of violence, including shootings and physical assault.[120] Irregular migrants traveling between the two countries, generally to reach Europe, have reported injuries and deaths resulting from such enforcement.[121] In Thailand, state security agents targeting irregular migrants from Myanmar have allegedly engaged in physical violence and extortion.[122]

Another approach focuses on expulsions, both to remove migrants (often without an adjudication process) and to deter migration. Countries across the Americas, Africa, and Asia have used this approach.[123] Between

113 However, an important nuance in politics has emerged when transit countries are simultaneously origin countries. For these states, migration of their nationals becomes mainly a political problem when dangerous smuggling attempts lead to the deaths of those nationals, which often drives pressure and protests from victims' families. For example, in Tunisia, political pressure to counter migration focuses overwhelmingly on non-Tunisians. For Tunisian migrants seeking to reach Europe, political discourse is either muted or sympathetic, and the government faces domestic pressures not to crack down heavily on such migrants. See Matt Herbert, *Losing Hope: Why Tunisians are Leading the Surge in Irregular Migration to Europe* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2022); GI-TOC, *Tunisia: Increased Fragility Fuels Migration Surge* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2023).

114 GI-TOC, *Tunisia: Irregular Migration Reaches Unprecedented Levels* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2024); Magdi Abdelhadi, "Kais Saied: Why Tunisia's President Picked on Sub-Saharan African Migrants," BBC, March 13, 2023.

115 Bharti Jain, "Illegal Immigration Orchestrated Move to Change Demography, Says PM, Announces Countermove," *The Times of India*, August 16, 2025.

116 Paula Dupraz-Dobias, "Latin America Makes It Harder for Venezuelan Refugees as Xenophobia Mounts," The New Humanitarian, April 17, 2024; Associated Press, "Presidenta peruana advierte que vigilará remesas y exigirá contratos laborales a venezolanos," Associated Press, October 23, 2024.

117 Ruth Michaelson and Deniz Barış Narlı, "Turkish Opposition Stirs Up Anti-Immigrant Feeling in Attempt to Win Presidency," *The Guardian,* May 28, 2023.

118 Wolfram Lacher, "The Political Fallout of European Migration Policy in Libya" (comment 2025/C 41, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin, September 2025); Matt Herbert, *Deporting to Danger: How Potential U.S. Migrant Expulsions to Libya Could Feed into the Country's Criminal Economy and Instability* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2025).

119 Charlotte Greener and Dominika Ożyńska, *Brutal Barriers: Pushbacks, Violence, and the Violation of Human Rights on the Poland-Belarus Border* (Nairobi: Oxfam, 2025); Helen Smith, "Strasbourg Court Finds Greece Guilty of 'Systematic' Pushback of Asylum Seekers," *The Guardian,* January 7, 2025.

120 Yogita Limaye, "'We Are Dying Every Moment': The Afghans Risking Their Lives to Reach UK," BBC, November 16, 2024; Amnesty International, *"They Don't Treat Us Like Humans": Unlawful Returns of Afghans from Turkey and Iran* (London: Amnesty International, 2022); Carlotta Gall, "Afghan Refugees Find a Harsh and Unfriendly Border in Turkey," *The New York Times*, August 23, 2021.

121 MMC, "Lives on the Borderline: Between Peril and Pushbacks on Routes through Iran, Türkiye, and Greece" (MMC 4Mi Snapshot, MMC, Geneva, June 2025).

122 Human Rights Watch, "Thailand: Authorities Abuse, Exploit Myanmar Nationals" (news release, July 14, 2025).

123 Human Rights Watch, "Mexico: Mass Expulsion of Asylum Seekers to Guatemala" (news release, September 8, 2021); Human Rights Watch, *India: Hundreds of Muslims Unlawfully Expelled to Bangladesh* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2025); Human Rights Watch, "India: Scores of Rohingya Refugees Expelled" (news release, August 28, 2025); Amnesty International, *"Handcuffed Like Dangerous Criminals": Arbitrary Detention and Forced Returns of Sudanese Refugees in Egypt* (New York: Amnesty International, 2024); International Crisis Group, "Pakistan-Afghanistan: Tempering the Deportation Drive" (commentary, May 22, 2025); *The Times of Central Asia*, "Tajikistan Confirms Deportation of Afghan Refugees," *The Times of Central Asia*, July 23, 2025.

June and August 2025, Iran expelled about 700,000 Afghan refugees.[124] The Dominican Republic expelled almost 542,000 migrants, mainly Haitians, between January 2025 and May 2026.[125] Libya, which created a national deportation program in late 2025, has expelled thousands more by land or air.[126] As with border security operations, expulsions have prompted recurrent allegations of violence and human rights abuses.

As with border security operations, expulsions have prompted recurrent allegations of violence and human rights abuses.

Algeria and Tunisia have been accused of using violence against expelled migrants, sending them into unsafe conditions, or abandoning them in remote border areas.[127] In India, border security officials have allegedly used violence to round up individuals in various parts of the country and force them across the border with Bangladesh.[128]

Transit and origin countries have also restricted legal travel in an effort to limit hybrid smuggling. On July 14, 2023, a migrant vessel that had departed Libya sank off the Greek coast, killing an estimated 650 migrants, about half of whom were Pakistani.[129] The Pakistani government, in response to significant anger and unrest associated with the incident, reportedly sought to curb migration by preventing about 70,000 of its citizens from leaving the country. The government instituted policies such as greater scrutiny of documents, alleged "shadow bans" on specific demographic groups traveling to certain countries, and the arrest or blacklisting of security officers believed to have been corrupted by smugglers.[130]

Transit countries have also imposed more visa requirements on migrants moving through their airports toward migration hotspots. Ecuador, Egypt, and Turkey, for example, have implemented targeted transit visa requirements designed to deter hybrid smuggling through their territories.[131]

These efforts have reduced arrivals in both transit and destination countries. In Tunisia, a 2024–26 campaign largely succeeded in sharply reducing movement into the country and departures for Italy, though movement of foreign migrants through Tunisia remains higher than historical norms.[132] A similar decline has

124 Frontex, "Detections of Illegal Border-Crossings"; International Crisis Group, "Pakistan-Afghanistan: Tempering the Deportation Drive"; BBC, "Iran Drives out 1.5 Million Afghans, with Some Branded Spies for Israel," BBC, July 31, 2025.

125 Dominican Republic, General Directorate of Migration, "In May, the DGM Deported 35,305 Undocumented Foreigners" (news release, June 1, 2026); Dominican Republic, General Directorate of Migration, "Immigration Deports 27,540 Undocumented Immigrants in April, Total Reaches 126,790 in 2026" (news release, May 1, 2026); Dominican Republic, General Directorate of Migration, "DGM Deported 379,553 Irregular Foreigners in 2025 and Processed 20.4 Million Traveler Documents" (news release, January 14, 2026).

126 Sami Zaptia, "Libya's National Programme for the Deportation of Illegal Immigrants: Thousands Repatriated with Aim to Repatriate 60,000 Per Month," *Libya Herald*, December 3, 2025.

127 Elian Peltier, "'Living Through Hell': How North Africa Keeps Migrants from Europe," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2025; Researchers X, *State Trafficking: Expulsion and Sale of Migrants from Tunisia to Libya* (Turin: Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration, 2024); United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, *Unsafe and Undignified: The Forced Expulsion of Migrants from Libya* (New York: United Nations, May 2021); Raouf Farrah, *Migration and Human Smuggling in Southern Algeria* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2020).

128 Human Rights Watch, *India: Hundreds of Muslims Unlawfully Expelled*.

129 Matina Stevis-Gridneff and Karam Shoumali, "Everyone Knew the Migrant Ship Was Doomed. No One Helped," *The New York Times*, July 1, 2023; Nick Beake and Kostas Kallergis, "Greek Coastguards Charged over 2023 Migrant Shipwreck," BBC, May 26, 2025.

130 Abid Hussain, "Pakistan Sacks, Blacklists Dozens of Officials after Mediterranean Deaths," Al Jazeera, January 31, 2025.

131 MercoPress, "Ecuador Announces New Transit Visa Requirements," MercoPress, September 1, 2025; *Hurriyet Daily News*, "New Transit Visa Requirement for South America Travelers," *Hurriyet Daily News*, April 9, 2024; *Dhaka Tribune*, "Egypt Makes Transit Visa Mandatory for Bangladeshis," *Dhaka Tribune*, May 26, 2026.

132 GI-TOC, *Tunisia: Crackdowns Disrupt Smuggling*; UNHCR, "Italy Weekly Snapshot."

occurred off West Africa, where a sharp crackdown by Mauritania along its coast has been largely credited with limiting movement to the Canary Islands.[133] At the same time, enforcement at the international airport in Dakar has reportedly halted an emerging Pakistan-Mauritania-Spain hybrid smuggling system.[134] In Iran and Turkey, state action has largely limited the movement of Afghan migrants. Despite worsening economic conditions in Afghanistan, compounded by expulsions from Iran and Pakistan, the number of arrivals in Europe has not changed appreciably.[135]

However, as in destination states, transit states' actions have tended to focus on migrants, while measures against smugglers have often been limited in scope and impact. Several factors contribute to this challenge: the growing professionalization of smuggling networks, the use of new technologies and more subcontractors (such as migrants in Tunisia),[136] the rise in airborne hybrid smuggling, and the accompanying growth in the number and diversity of hotspots.

Political economy and operational reality are particularly important in many politically fragile transit countries or those facing internal security challenges. In those countries, efforts to ensure state stability can take precedence over or even conflict with anti-smuggling efforts. Cracking down on citizens involved in smuggling can cause discontent. In countries that are both transit and origin states, such as Morocco and Tunisia, the migration of their nationals abroad—legally or irregularly—acts as a safety valve by giving potentially resistant youth an opportunity to leave and thus limiting tensions.[137] Curtailing smuggling restricts this option. As a result, even when transit states target smuggling, enforcement can be selective: Officials may readily target foreign smugglers transporting foreigners but subject citizens to less scrutiny, especially those transporting the country's own nationals.

Officials may also target smugglers who have the least power, lack connections to corrupt state agents who could protect them, lack social or tribal constituencies that could prevent action against them, or are perceived as linked to antigovernment groups or actors. In Libya, authorities have arrested or forced out high-profile smugglers in only a few cases, usually after the smugglers lost local security protection. In June 2025, for example, a dispute between UN-sanctioned Libyan smuggler Ahmed al-Dabbashi and a local security official led to actions to force al-Dabbashi out. The security official then installed a new leader of al-Dabbashi's network, leaving its smuggling operations unaffected.[138] In Southeast Asia, police have ignored powerful scam center traffickers and have in some cases actively pressured trafficking victims to recant their claims of harm.[139]

These stability dynamics also help explain why some transit states are reluctant to target broader smuggling networks, especially corrupt state actors who are critical to a government or ruling power. In Libya, for example, the airport in Benghazi is a main arrival point for hybrid smuggling and is controlled by the LAAF through the Tariq Bin Ziyad Brigade, one of its powerful units that is controlled informally by the

133 Berger, Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo, and Kane, "Why the Deadliest Migration Route in the World Is Becoming More Popular."
134 Ahmed and Brito, "From Pakistan to Spain via the Canaries."
135 Frontex, "Detections of Illegal Border-Crossings"; International Crisis Group, "Pakistan-Afghanistan: Tempering the Deportation Drive"; *The Times of Central Asia*, "Tajikistan Confirms Deportation"; BBC, "Iran Drives out 1.5 Million Afghans."
136 GI-TOC, *Tunisia: Crackdowns Disrupt Smuggling*.
137 Matt Herbert, "'La Mal Vie': The Routes, Drivers, and Politics of North African Irregular Migration," Institute for Security Studies, May 31, 2019.
138 Mohamed Ahmed, "Human Smuggler Ammo Is on the Run," *The Libya Observer,* June 14, 2025.
139 GI-TOC, *Compound Crime*.

second most powerful officer in eastern Libya.[140] Despite the unit's extensive involvement in facilitating migrant entry and human smuggling through the airport, its political importance has effectively prevented crackdowns on the unit and airport smuggling operations, even when the LAAF has targeted migrant smuggling by land and sea in areas under its control.[141]

Domestic political factors that influence decisions about targeting smugglers can be extremely difficult for external actors such as destination-country policymakers to understand. Better assessment and understanding of these dynamics will become more important as migration gains political importance in transit states and as broader stability and conflict challenges in these countries become more acute. Destination countries seeking greater cooperation with transit countries to confront smuggling and trafficking networks need to understand what actions are possible and which could pose political risks—an important though often overlooked consideration.

C. *Effective International Cooperation Is Critical to Counter Smuggling but Difficult to Achieve in Practice*

The transnational nature of smuggling has increasingly caused destination countries to pursue bilateral or multilateral approaches to anti-smuggling enforcement.

Some initiatives coordinated among law enforcement entities in high-income destination countries have had success. In Europe, for example, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) has taken an increasingly important role in coordinating multinational investigations among Member States, leading to the arrest of significant components of various smuggling networks. Several recent Europol operations have gone beyond low-level actors to target senior members of smuggling networks and other actors involved in smuggling ecosystems, such as transportation groups and financial specialists.[142] The International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) has also used this approach and has coordinated joint actions against human smuggling networks, including several involving both destination and transit countries.

Cooperation between destination and transit states has generally had mixed results and often varied over time. In some cases, cooperation has clearly had an impact on human smuggling. For example, the U.S. Joint Task Force Alpha, a Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security partnership established in 2021 to combat human smuggling, has conducted several joint investigations of human smuggling networks in Latin America that resulted in successful prosecutions in the United States or partner states.[143]

140 Rupert Horsley, *Libya: Hybrid Human Smuggling Systems Prove Resilient* (Geneva: GI-TOC, 2024).
141 Horsley, *Libya: Hybrid Migration Systems*.
142 Europol, "4 Arrests for Smuggling"; Europol, "17 Providers of Criminal Banking Services Arrested"; Europol, "Spain Dismantles Criminal Network."
143 U.S. Department of Justice, "Justice Department Expands Efforts to Dismantle Human Smuggling Operations and Support Immigration Prosecutions" (press release, May 31, 2024); U.S. Department of Justice, "The Department of Justice Announces Significant Enforcement and Expansion Efforts to Dismantle Transnational Human Smuggling and Trafficking Networks" (press release, September 4, 2025); U.S. Department of State, "Targeting Human Smuggling and Trafficking in the Northern Triangle and Mexico" (foreign press center briefing by Ian Hanna and James Hepburn, June 5, 2024); U.S. Embassy Guatemala, "Major Enforcement Operation in Guatemala: Arrest of Human Smuggler for Links to Mass Casualty Event in Texas" (news release, August 22, 2024).

Between Europe and North Africa, several multicountry investigations have targeted smugglers in countries such as Libya, Sudan, and Ethiopia, resulting in arrests and prosecutions.[144]

However, several factors impede cooperation between destination and transit countries. One is the differing political goals and interests of transit states, especially when social cohesion and stability are involved. Although Italy considers its stronger efforts to suppress irregular migration between Tunisia and Italy an unambiguous success, those efforts keep migrants in Tunisia longer and risk heightening domestic political tensions. Resource constraints amid competing security priorities also pose challenges.[145] Transit countries such as Libya, Mexico, and Pakistan face internal unrest, terrorism, and violent criminal organization activity—security concerns that those countries have prioritized over human smuggling. Although most countries are willing to devote some resources to countering human smuggling, especially when faced with pressure from destination states and their own citizens, they could reallocate those resources if threats in other security areas worsen. In Tunisia, for example, the current focus on countering migration and smuggling has been possible because social unrest and terrorist activity are at their lowest levels in a decade.[146] If either increases, security forces will likely shift their focus away from counter-smuggling.

Transit countries such as Libya, Mexico, and Pakistan face internal unrest, terrorism, and violent criminal organization activity—security concerns that those countries have prioritized over human smuggling.

Shifting geopolitics also influence how destination and transit states address smuggling. Belarus and Russia, for example, have weaponized migration for geopolitical gain by allowing smuggling through their territories to Europe, effectively becoming hotspots by choice.[147] However, geopolitical issues affect a wider range of transit countries and their willingness or ability to cooperate on anti-smuggling efforts. In Niger in 2023, the military junta repealed the country's 2015 anti-smuggling law after relations with France and the United States broke down and ties with Russia strengthened, but geopolitical realignment was not the main reason Niger relaxed efforts to counter human smuggling. The junta's effort to gain public support was arguably a more critical driver, especially in northern Niger, where human smuggling remains an important livelihood.[148] However, the geopolitical realignment allowed Niger to relax enforcement without concern about repercussions. Geopolitics have also influenced smuggling in the Western Hemisphere. Nicaragua's emergence as a human smuggling hotspot is likely tied to its estrangement from the United States, and worsening geopolitical relations in destination states could contribute to similar shifts.

Effective cooperation also requires coordination among transit countries at different points along a migration route. Political goodwill and trust between neighboring states are critical to such cooperation. Although some neighboring states cooperate routinely, historic antagonisms or emerging tensions can

144 See, for example, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, "Dutch Court Hands 20-Year Sentence to Eritrean Human Trafficker" (news brief, January 28, 2026); Dutch Prosecution service, "UAE Extradites Suspected Eritrean Migrant Smuggler to the Netherlands" (news release, December 24, 2025).
145 Eurojust, *Eurojust Meeting on Migrant Smuggling*.
146 GI-TOC, *Tunisia: Irregular Migration Reaches Unprecedented Levels*.
147 Maria Khoruk, "Crossing the Line: Will Lithuania's ICJ Case against Belarus Set a Precedent for State Accountability in Human Smuggling?" GI-TOC, June 18, 2025; Europol, *The Changing DNA of Serious and Organised Crime*.
148 Fereday, *Niger: Coup Reverses 2015 Human Smuggling Ban*.

impede joint efforts.[149] For example, political tensions between Benin and Niger over Niger's 2023 coup have largely halted state-to-state cooperation, sharply limiting efforts to counter smuggling activities.[150]

BOX 2
Foreign Aid Cuts Risk Worsening Fragility and Heightening Demand and Opportunity for Smugglers

Debate over the impact of substantial U.S. foreign aid cuts and cuts by other major donors began in 2024 and intensified in 2025. However, mounting evidence shows that the cuts may be contributing to irregular migration, human smuggling, and trafficking. People relying partly or primarily on aid may turn to migration and smugglers in search of other opportunities when that aid is cut. Sharp reductions in assistance for refugee camps in Asia and Africa have created significant gaps in food assistance, medical care, and education. Even though new political spending priorities focused on countering migration could buffer their impact, the scale of foreign aid cuts will likely shape human smuggling, trafficking, and irregular migration trends in several ways in the coming years.

Refugees in several contexts increasingly appear to be seeking out smugglers, and smugglers are also recruiting refugees in their operations. Along the Kenya-Somalia border, for example, highly organized criminal networks have targeted more refugees living in the Dadaab camp complex, promising them transportation to Europe without up-front fees. Hundreds of young men and women have reportedly left the camp during the past year, only to have criminal networks in Libya and Sudan imprison and extort them.

In eastern Chad, Sudanese refugees living in camps increasingly seek out smugglers to transport them to Saharan gold fields, where many hope to earn money for onward movement to Europe. In Bangladesh, aid cuts have reportedly affected food security and contributed to more maritime smuggling.

International aid cuts are also likely to worsen the fragility of already weak states and raise the risk of internal instability and conflict, potentially driving demand for human smuggling. Greater fragility could create favorable operating conditions for criminal groups and lead to the emergence of new human smuggling hotspots. Aid cuts also risk weakening law enforcement capacity, including in key transit countries, through direct cuts to police assistance programs or recipient states deciding to shift resources from law enforcement to fill assistance gaps in other areas. Cuts to security assistance have occurred before: Between 2019 and 2021, the United States cut foreign assistance for rule-of-law programs in countries such as El Salvador and Guatemala, affecting efforts to counter corruption linked to organized crime. Reduced resources could also weaken efforts to encourage local action against human smuggling and broader initiatives to support multinational cooperation to address smuggling.

Finally, recipient nations may view aid cuts as politically biased, and the resulting frustration could strain relations between donor destination states and transit states that have received aid. Deteriorating bilateral relations could then reduce transit states' interest in cooperating on migration and human smuggling controls or their willingness to do so.

Sources: Valtino Omolo and Willis Okumu, "Young Somali Refugees Targeted by Libyan-Based Traffickers," Institute for Security Studies, September 3, 2025; Alice Fereday, *Chad: Movement of Sudanese Refugees Drives High Demand for Human Smuggling* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2025).

149 Eurojust, *Eurojust Meeting on Migrant Smuggling*.
150 Fereday, *Niger: Coup Reverses 2015 Human Smuggling Ban*.

5 Opportunities to Address Human Smuggling

Policymakers should recognize that professionalization of smuggling, broader smuggling ecosystems, hybrid migration, and greater use of technology are not passing phenomena but rather likely to continue and deepen in the coming years. Geopolitical instability, political challenges in transit states, and constraints on state capacity are also likely to persist for the foreseeable future. This underscores the need for new approaches to assessing and acting against smuggling groups. The dynamics examined in this report point to several areas that warrant greater policy focus to better counter human smuggling—not just migration—in destination and transit countries.

A. Use Ecosystem Analysis to Better Target Critical Actors

First and foremost, states could benefit substantially from shifting from the network- and actor-based analyses they typically use to ecosystem-based assessments when identifying targets for prosecution or other actions. A network-based approach can overlook actors that are growing in importance, including subcontracted criminal groups, private-sector actors, and corrupt state agents. Those actors have become the norm rather than the exception in smuggling ecosystems, and an ecosystem approach would give them greater visibility. This broader view is critical because some parts of the ecosystem, such as legal businesses that collude with smugglers, could be easier to target, while focusing on others, such as financial intermediaries, could have effects across the entire ecosystem. An ecosystem analysis allows policymakers to consider a broader range of targets beyond those traditionally prosecuted.

Another advantage is the flexibility to define the scope of an ecosystem. Analysts can focus the model on relevant actors along a particular border or within a country, or they can map the ecosystem across an entire migration route. An ecosystem approach can also trace financial payments and the actors involved, including legal businesses and financial hubs. In many cases, financial flows linked to smuggling do not track with the physical movement of migrants (as in the case of Somali migrants, discussed in Box 3) and involve discrete, often more legally exposed, ecosystem actors.

For policymakers, the value of an ecosystem-based model lies in its ability to identify atypical but critical actors whose disruption or prosecution could have substantial effects. When designing multicountry strategies, ecosystem mapping can help determine which tools, wielded by which states, are best positioned to systemically disrupt human smuggling activity.

At the implementation level, ecosystem analysis requires substantial intragovernmental cooperation and information sharing. In addition to personnel nominally tasked with countering human smuggling—mainly from interior and justice ministries—an ecosystem approach benefits from the inclusion of actors who are less frequently involved, including those from a government's foreign affairs, finance, and commerce ministries. Sharing and integrating information across this broad group and using it to develop whole-of-government strategies are inherently complex tasks, but such an approach is critical, given the growing complexity of contemporary human smuggling ecosystems.

B. Develop Detailed, Comprehensive Anti-Smuggling Strategies to Guide International Cooperation

Efforts to counter human smuggling should be grounded in detailed international strategies. Although new coalitions have emerged, such as the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling and similar Group of Seven initiatives, more detailed operational strategies need to flow down from these global initiatives. Existing coalitions could also be expanded or new ones created to include other key countries. Strategies should establish specific goals, define metrics for success, and identify tools that different states will use, such as prosecution, sanctions, capacity building for local law enforcement, and development aid for communities at risk of criminal infiltration.

These strategies should bring together as many relevant states in a routes-based approach as possible, including fragile states and those struggling to counter organized crime within their territory. Cooperation should include technical collaboration among security, diplomatic, and prosecutorial agencies in participating states. And while these strategies may need to target specific migration routes to maintain political attention and secure sufficient resources for operational cooperation, they should remain flexible enough to adapt quickly as new hotspots emerge. Such flexibility requires specific processes for incorporating new countries, continuous coordination and knowledge exchange with other routes-based strategic coalitions, and connections to broader regional or global cooperation platforms.

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A key added value of such strategies is the opportunity to plan how to target actors beyond those who are easy to prosecute and are often disposable. Such strategies also allow policymakers and law enforcement officials to identify less conventional tools, such as financial sanctions or visa bans, that are likely to have the greatest impact on actors whose expertise and activities are essential to the smuggling enterprise, including those involved in finance or high-level logistics. Some countries on a route may have more ability to leverage sanctions, while others may be better placed to conduct investigations, and others could address the diplomatic and security challenges of operating in fragile contexts.

Such an approach can help to build support in fragile transit states struggling to counter worsening human smuggling, rather than leaving them feeling singled out for what is, in reality, often a transnational problem. These strategies could also prepare for situations in which state presence is weak or nonexistent, especially in conflict-affected or postconflict settings, and identify opportunities to disrupt smuggling remotely. Limited state presence makes tools such as targeted sanctions, strategic communications campaigns, and extraterritorial investigations and prosecutions especially important because they can be used against smugglers operating in a country regardless of its governance capacity or level of territorial control.

To develop such a strategy, one or more states or multilateral bodies such as the African Union, European Union, or United Nations would convene key states affected by a particular smuggling ecosystem to build

support for a shared strategic approach and identify operational tools to disrupt or shape different parts of the ecosystem. The tools selected would depend on each state's capacity and the broader strategic aims, but they would be coordinated and used together to achieve a specific effect.

C. Deploy Financial Sanctions and Visa Bans against Specialist Targets

Targeted sanctions and visa bans are particularly well suited to addressing organized crime because they target the financial structures that support smuggling ecosystems and the ability of key personnel to travel. These tools take advantage of smuggling ecosystems' growing reliance on financial systems. Although cash payments remain common, the most complex and effective global smuggling networks—especially those charging a premium—now receive most payments through banks, hawalas and other value-based transfer systems, and cryptocurrencies. Targeting these systems or the specialists who operate them could disrupt smuggling operations substantially. Research suggests that visa bans and other mobility restrictions, though often viewed as less important, can also impose surprisingly high social and operational costs on organized crime actors.[151] Financial sanctions and visa bans are likely to be most effective when directed at specialists in smuggling networks, criminal facilitators, and legal businesspeople. Those actors tend to be more vulnerable to sanctions than network leaders, but their expertise and activities are often critical to organizational success.

The United Kingdom has increasingly led efforts in this area, issuing 55 separate designations against individuals, groups, and businesses involved in human smuggling in less than a year. These designations account for about 45 percent of all sanctions related to human smuggling issued by any country or the United Nations.[152] Other sanction regimes targeting human smuggling also appear to be under development. The European Union is reportedly negotiating the scope of a regime that will cover smuggling and trafficking.

Due to the multicountry and often transcontinental reach of contemporary smuggling, along with the importance many states place on countering it, there may also be an opportunity to develop a UN sanctions regime targeting the phenomena. While uncommon, the United Nations has imposed thematic sanctions in the past, notably to address international terrorism. A sanctions regime targeting smuggling and trafficking could help build momentum for action and deter the multinational, professionalized networks that have become increasingly common.

151 Herbert and Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo, *Hard Targets*.

152 Author calculations based on a review of UK, U.S., UN, and EU sanctions imposed on human smugglers. See Council of the European Union and the European Council, "Sanctions against Human Rights Violations," accessed November 5, 2026; U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, "OFAC Sanctions List Service – Specially Designated Nationals List," accessed November 5, 2026; UN Security Council, "Narrative Summaries of Reasons for Listing," accessed November 5, 2026; UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, "The UK Sanctions List," accessed November 5, 2026.

D. Leverage AI and Regular Foresight to Speed Analysis of Law Enforcement Data and Identify Emergent Challenges

Smugglers are likely to adopt AI and new technologies much faster than governments, given both the bureaucracy of government and the profit-seeking incentives and networked nature of "private-sector" smugglers. But governments have key advantages, including access to much larger data sources. Rapid advances in AI could help governments address a key challenge created by the widespread use of surveillance systems: how to sort and analyze large amounts of data and use the results to guide law enforcement responses to emerging issues in real time. Combining AI with data-driven analysis could become increasingly important for monitoring border and coastal areas for human smuggling activity.[153] And combining data with surveillance and analysis across an entire route could map out patterns and trends that can help fine-tune international strategies. This approach could be especially useful if governments find ways to share tools and analysis across countries with different data sets and new ways to help reliable Global South partners to do the same.

Rapid advances in AI could help governments address a key challenge created by the widespread use of surveillance systems: how to sort and analyze large amounts of data and use the results to guide law enforcement responses to emerging issues in real time.

However, data-driven analysis and AI are only as good as the information available to them. Even as surveillance makes such data more available in some regions, rising conflict and declining state capacity in others will likely reduce the information available from large parts of the world. National security concerns or longstanding security force cultures that favor keeping information within individual organizations could also make states reluctant to share information. Addressing these concerns as part of broader strategy development or negotiations over partnership agreements will be critical.

Finally, even as governments invest in new AI technologies, they should anticipate how human smuggling ecosystems will adapt to shifting demand, government policies, and socioeconomic and geopolitical conditions. Governments should periodically assess how smuggling ecosystems are changing along various routes and refine the tools used to address those changes, particularly in multinational strategies. Law enforcement practitioners and policymakers should also consider using foresight exercises and initiatives to game out how human smuggling ecosystems will likely respond to planned strategies and tools. They can use the results to monitor the effectiveness of a strategy, for example, whether smugglers respond as anticipated, and prepare specific actions or interventions for anticipated scenarios.

153 For more on the data-driven analysis and AI approach, see Shawn Benson, "Deciphering Ubiquitous Technical Surveillance (UTS) with Data-Driven Analytics and Artificial Intelligence (D2A2)" (Intelligence After Next series no. 23, paper no. 24-1387, MITRE Corporation, McLean, VA, 2024).

E. Develop Cooperative Relationships with Key Private-Sector Actors

Governments have not fully recognized how much human smuggling activities rely on the ordinary private sector. Although some private-sector actors knowingly participate in smuggling, many others such as social media companies and commercial airlines become involved unintentionally through their legal commercial activities. Governments therefore need to find better ways to engage with these unwitting private-sector "partners" of smugglers to mitigate the harms caused by smuggling.

Outreach and information sharing could help address this challenge. For many private-sector companies, human smuggling issues are likely not a major concern. The aviation industry especially has focused mainly on countering trafficking rather than addressing far-less-visible smuggling activity. Governments can alert companies to an emerging challenge by sharing information and help them identify patterns of activity to monitor. For example, the U.S. Department of State, Department of Homeland Security, and Department of the Treasury have issued an effective alert on smugglers' use of commercial aviation to transport migrants to Latin America.[154] The alert described the problem, outlined specific steps that commercial airlines could take to address human smuggling, and provided information about resources available from the U.S. government.

In other cases, private-sector actors know that smugglers use their businesses but face difficult decisions or constraints in responding. To address this, governments should clarify expectations and rules regarding known problem areas, such as social media. Social media companies are broadly aware that human smuggling advertisements appear on their platforms. However, many are cautious about removing such content because doing so could impede refugees' efforts to find information on how to escape from active conflict zones. Migrants and smugglers also use dialects, mixed-language posts, and specific slang that can make content difficult for private-sector actors to understand and remove automatically. Governments will ultimately need to decide whether and how strictly to regulate and monitor private companies and how to design regulations that enable private companies to address smuggling-related activities.

Open and ongoing dialog between governments and private-sector actors could help resolve these complex issues.

Governments also need to establish clear thresholds for determining when information should be removed from public view, removed but retained for law enforcement or intelligence analysis, or remain publicly available. When information is removed from public view but retained, governments must ensure that legal frameworks are up to date on data storage and preservation requirements and that social media companies can comply with those rules.[155] Open and ongoing dialog between governments and private-sector actors could help resolve these complex issues by allowing both to address their respective aims and limitations in responding to human smuggling and the harms it causes.

154 U.S. Department of State, "Alert: Disrupting Irregular Migration."
155 Eurojust, *Eurojust Meeting on Migrant Smuggling*.

BOX 3
Applying the Strategies to Migration from Somalia

A look at a specific migration route—in this case, the route between Somalia and Libya—can illustrate how the tools and approaches outlined in this section could be applied. The first step is an ecosystem analysis that maps the locations and roles of key organizers based in Somalia, Libya, and Europe. The analysis would then cover the groups involved in clandestine overland transportation of Somali migrants, traffickers who extort migrants, and maritime smugglers. The focus should extend beyond smuggling leaders to mid-level Somali recruiters, facilitators, and organizers who work with the smugglers. Ecosystem mapping would also identify and assess less conventional actors who facilitate smuggling. These include formal security actors, such as in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and South Sudan, as well as nonstate actors, such as Sudan's Rapid Support Forces and various Libyan armed groups that accept bribes to allow movement along the route and those involved in transferring payments, including legal businesses and financial hubs in the Middle East.

Policymakers and law enforcement officials in relevant states would use the mapping results to develop a strategy for action, starting with an assessment of states and entities affected by rising smuggling. These include origin states (Kenya and Somalia), transit states (Ethiopia, Libya, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda), destination states (such as Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom), and actors involved in financial flows (such as Turkey or the United Arab Emirates). One or more entities, such as the African Union, would convene these states to build support for a shared strategic approach and identify operational tools to disrupt or shape different parts of the ecosystem.

The tools selected would depend on each state's capacity and broader strategic aims, but they would be coordinated and used together to achieve a specific effect. Financial sanctions, for example, could target actors involved in smuggling payments, including legal businesses and financial hubs in the Middle East, where a separate group of businesses facilitates the transfer of funds into Libya for distribution to various smugglers. Other tools could include AI-enabled monitoring to flag potentially suspicious transaction patterns.

A strategy would also need to extend beyond states to relevant private-sector entities. Information sharing and training, for example, could focus on commercial airlines, which a growing number of Somalis have used to reach Egypt, Libya, and coastal West Africa. Governments could also engage social media companies to help monitor smugglers who use their platforms to offer services to migrants and flag relevant operational information for law enforcement bodies.

Foresight initiatives could help assess how smugglers might respond to the strategy. For example, stronger prosecution efforts against smugglers in Libya could shift smuggling to routes through Algeria and West Africa. If an assessment identifies a high risk of such a shift, regional states could prepare for greater movement through diplomatic engagement, trust-building and information exchange among law enforcement, and training and equipment.

6 Conclusion

The challenges of addressing human smuggling are arguably growing more acute. Human smuggling systems continue to professionalize and operate within complex, blended ecosystems that include specialized criminal networks, private-sector actors, and complicit state agents. Smugglers have also adapted their operations to take advantage of technological advances, advertising on TikTok, organizing

operations on Telegram, and using Google Maps to remotely guide migrants along routes. Hybrid migration involving legal (often air) transport has upended traditional assumptions about migration routes, allowing new smuggling and migration hotspots to emerge quickly, including in states with limited operational experience confronting professionalized human smuggling. These developments have broadly helped shield smugglers from state investigations and disruption and enabled them to circumvent state efforts to strengthen borders and restrict movement along migration corridors. The trends also risk reducing the effectiveness of commonly used counter-smuggling policy tools and analytic models.

These changes present additional challenges for policymakers and law enforcement in destination and transit states, who are already struggling to effectively counter smugglers. When authorities arrest smugglers, they often target low-level, disposable actors—including migrants hired by smugglers for exposed roles—with little broader impact on smuggling ecosystems. Operational barriers to investigations generally account for this limited effect, though some transit states facing stability and security challenges have selectively targeted high-level smugglers because of concerns that arrests could undermine stability. Authorities are even less likely to investigate or arrest complicit state agents. Although migration creates acute political challenges for both destination and transit states, their goals and interests do not necessarily align. Divergent domestic political interests, security priorities, and geopolitical considerations can impede efforts to build and sustain bilateral and multinational cooperation to combat an increasingly transnational phenomenon.

Policymakers and law enforcement bodies in destination countries should adopt a strategic approach to countering smuggling that considers the entire smuggling ecosystem and develops targeted tools to disrupt the key nodes and most influential actors. Such an approach would engage both higher-income destination countries and states and actors along smuggling routes, while identifying tools that can realistically be applied where state capacity is weak. It would also use less conventional tools, such as financial sanctions and visa bans, to exert pressure on key actors and engage relevant private-sector actors, such as airlines, as partners. The approach should account for the likelihood that smuggling networks will continue to evolve and adapt in response to state pressure. Regular reviews of key assumptions and strategies, combined with foresight exercises, could help anticipate how criminal activity will evolve. Building such a comprehensive approach could prove difficult amid declining support for multilateralism, but it is crucial if destination states hope to control the growing smuggling market and mitigate its harms.

Policymakers and law enforcement bodies in destination countries should adopt a strategic approach to countering smuggling that considers the entire smuggling ecosystem and develops targeted tools to disrupt the key nodes and most influential actors.

About the Author



MATT HERBERT

Matt Herbert is the Global Thematic Lead for Human Smuggling and Head of Research: North Africa and Sahel at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. He specializes in transnational organized crime, human smuggling, border management, and use of targeted sanctions to counter organized crime.

Dr. Herbert previously consulted throughout North Africa and the Sahel on organized crime, human smuggling, and border security issues, and in East Africa on a variety of political economy issues. He has also worked on transborder threats at the U.S.-Mexico border and served as a policy aide to New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson. He holds a PhD in international relations from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

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1275 K St NW, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20005
202-266-1940

