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In terms of the overall migration volume, the Central Mediterranean route is currently the most active Mediterranean migration route to the EU and, in terms of irregular arrivals recorded this year, only second to the Western Balkan route. Comprising the arrivals to Italy and Malta, this route has served as one of the key corridors for mixed migration flows since the 2015 migration crisis. Despite a temporary dip in migration flows, the evolution of migration dynamics has led to increasing growth of migratory pressure along this route since 2020.

The situation on the Central Mediterranean route is of major concern not only because the migration flows exert immense pressure on capacities of both Italy and Malta and subsequently affect the secondary movements across the EU. The Central Mediterranean route is also characteristic for its dangerousness, with majority of deaths and disappearances in the Mediterranean occurring along this route.

For these reasons, and with the aim of paying due attention to all migration routes to the EU, the Presidency would like to dedicate a debate to the Central Mediterranean route in the framework of EMWP.

### *Overall developments on the route*

A major shift in the developments on the Central Mediterranean route occurred in 2014. As a result of ongoing tensions caused by the Arab Spring, as well as the instability in the Sahel region and the Horn of Africa, an almost fourfold increase in arrivals was registered on the route, with the overall number of illegal border crossings spiking to more than 170 000. 2016 saw the highest number of arrivals ever recorded on this route, with 181 459 detected migrants.

The figures gradually dropped until 2019, when less than 15 thousand arrivals were recorded, the lowest yearly number of irregular migrants since before the outbreak of the Arab Spring (although the significant drop of arrivals to the Italian coast stood in stark contrast to the increase of arrivals in Malta).

Despite the fact that 2020 saw the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and consequent introduction of travel and movements restrictions, the number of migrants arriving through the Central Mediterranean route more than doubled in that year, reaching more than 36 000 arrivals. This also made the Central Mediterranean route the most used route to the EU.

This trend continued also in 2021, further supported by the gradual relaxation of travel restrictions as well as arising socio-economic hardships in the wake of the general economic slowdown caused by the pandemic. The number of arrivals almost doubled again in 2021 to 62 315 arrivals. As a result, the Central Mediterranean route accounted for almost one quarter of all reported illegal border-crossings at EU's external borders last year.

This year's data clearly indicate that the trend is set to continue, as the arrivals recorded so far already exceeded the overall figures from last year. As of 16 October 2022, 76 104 arrivals were recorded (75 783 in Italy and 321 in Malta), an increase of 51% compared to the same period in 2021. This accounts for almost 60% of all the arrivals across the main Mediterranean routes.

Besides the shifts in the overall volume of migration flows, their composition has been also changing since the outbreak of the migration crisis. During the peak years 2014 – 2016, nationals of West African and Horn of Africa countries (primarily Eritreans, Nigerians and Somalis) were among the most represented nationalities, along with Syrians who predominated at the outbreak of the migrations crisis in 2014 (before shifting to the Eastern Mediterranean Route).

In 2017, nationals of North African countries – primarily Tunisians – started to predominate on the route, also as a result of the establishment of sea routes from the Tunisian coast. Together with these nationalities, nationals of Middle East and Asian countries (Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Iraqis), who had traditionally used the Eastern Mediterranean Route, became more frequent on the Central Mediterranean Route. This has been most prominent in the case of Bangladeshi nationals, who have remained among the top nationalities detected on this route in the past years.

Since 2021, another new development has been apparent, as nationals of Egypt have started to prevail among the top nationalities on this route. Egypt has become one of the two main countries of origin this year so far, together with Tunisia.

### *Situation in the neighbourhood*

Similarly to other migration routes, the dynamics in the Central Mediterranean region is shaped by the developments in different origin and transit countries. This includes the accessibility and feasibility of the individual parts of the routes, the operations of smuggling networks along them as well as EU's efforts to address the migration flows. The Presidency would like to focus on the role of countries in the direct neighbourhood, particularly Libya, as the primary transit country and point of departure for those attempting to reach the EU's Central Mediterranean coast, and Tunisia and Egypt as countries of origin whose nationals currently make up a large proportion of arrivals on the route.

## Libya<sup>1</sup>

Since the 2011 civil war, the socio-political situation in Libya has been marked by protracted insecurity and instability, which continues to heavily shape migration policies and trends in the country. Over the years, cooperation with Libya has been fraught by the lack of an effective migration governance and refugees protection system in line with international standards, as well as by the criminalization of irregular migration in the existing national legal framework. The governance structure remains unclear and fragmented, with overlapping mandates of various government entities, as well as the emergence of non-state actors. This has had direct impact on the country's capacities to manage migration, as well as on the conditions of the migrants present in the country's territory, especially in terms of safeguarding their fundamental rights, improving access to basic services and protecting them from all forms of exploitation, abuse and violence, as too often demonstrated by ill-treatment of those held in detention centres. In this context, according to IOM and as of October 2022, more than 3,000 migrants are held in official detention centres across Libya.

Libya shares more than 4 300 km of land borders with six countries, with a large majority of migrants (3 out of 4) in Libya originating from Niger, Egypt, Sudan and Chad in particular. Libya has traditionally been the country of destination for many labour migrants, hence many arrive to the country through legal channels. The latest round of IOM's tracking programme identified a total of 664 440 migrants of 41 nationalities in Libya. The findings confirm the increasing number of migrants currently staying in Libya, in line with the trend started at the beginning of 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> The action plan for cooperation with Libya was developed under the Slovenian Presidency. The last oral update on its implementation was presented during the French Presidency at EMWP in May 2022.

More than half of migrants identified by IOM come from Sub-Saharan countries, mainly Niger (over 160 000 Nigerien migrants, i.e. 24% share of the overall migrant population) and Chad (over 88 000 migrants, i.e. 13% share). Migrants from North African countries and Sudan make up over a third of the migrant population, with nationals of Egypt (more than 136 thousand migrants, i.e. 20% share) and Sudan (more than 119 000 migrants, i.e. 18% share) representing the bulk of migrants from this region.

To address the number of persons embarking from the Libyan coast, the EU and its Member States have stepped the outreach support to the Libyan authorities. In particular, provision of training, equipment and support to the Libyan coast guard initiated in 2016 (primarily through Operation Sophia) contributed to improving the security situation along the Libyan coast, while saving lives at sea.

Nevertheless, the number of departures has been increasing again – in 2021, Libya overtook Tunisia as the main country of departure towards Italy (46% of the total) and remained the only country of departure towards Malta. This year, departures from Libya have accounted for more than a half of all the departures towards Italy (39 087 departures as of 16 October).

The continuing political stalemate in Libya, aggravated by the repeated postponement of the long-awaited elections, also limits the ability of the EU and other international partners to provide effective and human rights-based migration management support to the Libyan authorities. This further undermines Libya's capacities as a host country and its role in providing protection and preventing irregular (and life threatening) sea journey into the EU.

## Egypt<sup>2</sup>

Egypt is a major migrant and refugee-hosting country, with IOM estimating the current number of international migrants residing in Egypt to have reached a total of 9 million. The biggest groups staying in Egypt are Sudanese (4 million), Syrians (1.5 million), Yemenis (1 million) and Libyans (1 million). However, in addition to being an important destination and crossing point, from the EU's perspective, Egypt also plays an important role as a source country of migration.

Egyptian nationals currently make up a significant share of the migrant population in Libya (although Libyan authorities are known to return irregular migrants back to Egypt) and the number of Egyptian nationals on the Central Mediterranean route has been soaring. While Egyptians represented only about 4% of all the arrivals at the Central Mediterranean route in 2020, they became the second most represented nationality in 2021 (8 352 migrants, i.e. 12% of all the arrivals). This year's data indicates that Egyptians might overtake Tunisians as the main nationality on the route (16 604 disembarked migrants, i.e. 21% of all the arrivals). The majority of Egyptians arrive from Libya, with a small portion departing from Turkey (Egyptian nationals constituted 3% of those intercepted by the Turkish Coast Guard in the period from 1 March to 14 June this year). Journeys directly from the Egyptian coasts are now rare, due to the measures undertaken by the Egyptian authorities since 2016.

The trend of increasing arrivals is also reflected in the number of submitted asylum applications. In March 2022, the number of Egyptian nationals applying for asylum reached its highest levels since at least 2014. As of 23 October, 11 267 applications have been submitted by Egyptians, with 67% of them in Italy. In comparison, 2 915 applications were submitted in 2020 and 6 005 were submitted last year. It is to be noted that, along with the general increase of asylum applications, the share of positive first instance decisions has also been growing (24% in the first quarter of 2022, in comparison to 13% last year).

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<sup>2</sup> The action plan on Egypt was developed during the French and Czech Presidencies, to be followed by the MOCADÉM action fiche, which will be submitted to COREPER on 9 November.

The higher number of positive decisions can also be seen as an indicator of the worsening domestic situation. However, economic concerns and search for employment are the primary push factors for most Egyptian migrants. Despite governmental interventions to control the inflation and the costs of basic food items such as bread, Egyptians are acutely feeling the impacts of economic slowdown resulting from the interplay of Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine (to the extent that the Egyptian Prime Minister described the situation as the "worst crisis in a century"). The unsatisfactory human rights situation in the country is also a factor influencing the migratory flow, according to the EUAA report, and has been highlighted by different international organizations

As the EUAA report on Egypt predicts, this situation is unlikely to change in the short term, as economic and human rights factors are likely to continue incentivizing movements of Egyptian nationals. The trend of significant arrivals primarily in Italy can thus be expected to continue.

### Tunisia<sup>3</sup>

While Libya serves primarily as a transit country, the situation in Tunisia presents a different challenge for the EU, as most of the irregular migrants embarking from Tunisia are its nationals. Tunisian nationals accounted for roughly two thirds of migrants intercepted by the Tunisian authorities last year. Nonetheless, the level of non-Tunisian migrants transiting through the country grew substantially in comparison to 2020. Sub-Saharan Africans residing in Tunisia are deciding in larger numbers to make a move towards the EU, given the deteriorating conditions in the country<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The action plan for Tunisia was developed during the Slovenian Presidency. The last oral update on the evolution was presented during the Czech Presidency at EMWP in July. The MOCADDEM action fiche was developed during the French Presidency. The progress of the actions implementation was assessed during the Czech Presidency and will be presented to COREPER on 9 November.

<sup>4</sup> 'Losing Hope: Why Tunisians are leading the surge in irregular migration to Europe', *Global Initiative against organised crime*. January 2022. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/GI-TOC-Losing-Hope-Tunisia-Report-2021.pdf>

This year so far, 20 218 migrants have departed from Tunisia towards Italy and, similarly to Egyptians, Tunisian nationals have made up around 20% of the total of arrivals (15 656) in Italy. These figures already more or less correspond to the total number of departures and arriving Tunisian nationals recorded throughout the whole of last year.

In 2021 the number of asylum applications submitted by Tunisian nationals peaked at 9 085 (almost a quadrupling of the 2020 figures), with 70% of the applications having been submitted in Italy. The dramatic growth has continued this year, as Tunisians have submitted 17 501 applications as of 23 October. However, Austria replaced Italy as the top receiving country (74%), which points out to the emergence of a new (and safer) migratory route from Tunisia directly to Serbia, enabled by Serbia's visa policy. (Following the outreach by the EU and its Member States, Serbia has already announced the decision to cancel the visa waiver agreement with Tunisia, starting from 20 November).

However, the asylum recognition rate remains extremely low in case of Tunisia (1% in July 2022, according to EUAA). The situation is further worsened by the fact that returns of Tunisian nationals still present a large obstacle for many Member States, primarily to due lack of co-operation from the side of the Tunisian authorities.

Similarly to Egypt, the migration drivers can be manifold, reflecting the complex economic and social tensions in the country. The Covid-19 pandemic and the food and energy insecurity caused by Russia's war of aggression further exacerbated the situation of the already struggling Tunisian economy which is strongly dependent on cereals and energy imports.

So far, the social situation remains relatively calm, with increased localised protests over the past weeks, mostly linked to the socio-economic conditions. The resilience of the population could be partly explained by the size of the informal economy and the volume of remittances (5,000 million TND by July 2022 and expected to increase, accounting for 20 % of Forex Reserves).



Around 12% of Tunisia's population lives abroad (with 85% of them staying in the EU) and sustaining the flow of remittances thus plays an important role in upholding Tunisia's economy. At the same time, Tunisian authorities have regularly expressed their concerns about possible brain drain, in detriment for the Tunisia economy in the long run. However, the lack of socio-economic prospects, as well as pessimism about the political outlook, has also lead to an increasing number of persons with higher education, but also unaccompanied minors and whole families being observed in the migration flows.

Although a wide range of support activities and projects aimed at stabilisation of the domestic situation and addressing the root causes of migration has been launched, there is room for improvement in co-operation of the Tunisian authorities. Tunisia has expressed availability for further discussions and engagement, including on legal migration. It has also accepted support in the area of border management (the number of interceptions have substantially increased in recent years), but still rejects any cooperation with Frontex.

### ***EU reaction***

The Valetta summit on migration in November 2015 served as a starting point for the EU's reaction to the dramatic upsurge of migration flows not only the on the Central Mediterranean route, bringing together heads of EU and African states to strengthen the co-operation and reaction to the migration crisis, resulting in the Valetta Political Declaration and Action Plan.

One of the outcomes of the Valetta summit was the establishment of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF for Africa). Under this framework, the EU has committed itself to address the root causes of instability, forced displacement and irregular migration and to contribute to improved migration management. Specifically, four strategic objectives have been identified: greater economic and employment opportunities, strengthening resilience of communities, improved migration management and improved governance and conflict preventions. Programmes implemented under the EUTF for Africa cover 26 countries across three regions – the Sahel and Lake Chad, the Horn of Africa and North Africa. To date, 254 actions have been approved across the three regions for a total amount of approximately €4.9 billion, divided as follows: Horn of Africa – €1808 million, North of Africa – €900 million, Sahel/Lake Chad – €145 million.

As for the most recent initiatives, a new Team Europe Initiative has been developed with the aim of addressing the situation along the Central Mediterranean Route. The activities undertaken under this TEI will derive from five main areas identified: legal migration and mobility, protection and assistance to migrants and refugee resettlements, prevention and fighting against migrants smuggling, return, readmission and sustainable reintegration as well as the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement. Supported by 8 Member States, the TEI will cover 12 North African and sub-Saharan countries.

The financing available under The Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – NDICI-Global Europe – is another a crucial component in cooperation with the relevant countries, with an indicative 10% spending target for the period 2021-2027 for migration and forced displacement. The Presidency will focus on the issue of financing of external dimension activities in more detail at the level of COREPER and also at the following EMWP meeting.

In additional to financing, there is also ongoing operational support provided by the EU agencies. Although the scale of the support is limited due to the hesitance of many African countries to cooperate with the EU in this regard, new initiatives are being developed, most prominently the possible conclusion of the Frontex status agreements with Senegal and Mauretania.

Under the Czech Presidency, the contribution of CSDP missions (EUCAP SAHEL Niger and EUBAM Libya) in the area of migration was also assessed. The potential of further synergies between CSDP and JHA is to be developed further.

### *Questions for the Member States*

- 1) *How do you assess the current situation on the Central Mediterranean Route?*
  - 2) *How do you evaluate the shift in the composition of the migration flows and the rising number of some of the nationalities and how can these trends be addressed?*
  - 3) *What additional tools should be mobilized and how do we ensure increased cooperation in crucial migration-related areas with the most relevant countries, including through support of the agencies?*
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