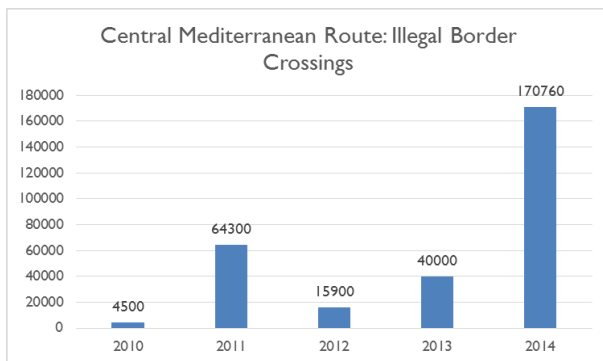




# In Focus

## The Mediterranean Migrant Crisis



Source: [Frontex](#)

In recent years, the number of migrants and refugees attempting to reach Europe via the Mediterranean Sea has [increased](#) significantly. Since 2013, the number of illegal border crossings via the '[Central Mediterranean route](#)', for example, rose from 40,000 in 2013 to over 170,000 in 2014. In comparison, the [Eastern Mediterranean route](#)—whereby migrants cross through Turkey to the European Union via Greece, southern Bulgaria or Cyprus—saw only 50,830 illegal border crossings in 2014.

### Background

There are a number of migrant routes across the Mediterranean, though it is the [Central Mediterranean route](#)—or the migratory flow coming from Northern Africa towards Italy and Malta through the Mediterranean Sea—which has been the subject of much recent concern. The passage across the Mediterranean is very dangerous for migrants. They are [typically trafficked by people smugglers](#) and travel in [unseaworthy and overcrowded vessels](#). According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the [Mediterranean accounted for 65.4 percent of migrant deaths globally in 2014](#). This [trend continued this year](#); between 1 January and 19 April 2015, 1,645 migrants died in the Mediterranean, out of 1,902 migrant deaths globally. The BBC [reports](#) that the Central Mediterranean route is the deadliest; in 2014, out of 3,279 migrant deaths in the Mediterranean, 2,447 were killed on the Central Mediterranean route alone. The *Guardian* [notes](#) that the criminal networks responsible for people smuggling are complex, observing that they are “multinational, informal and ever-changing, with the migrants themselves having minimal contact with the organising gangs”. Moreover, with Libya embroiled in a civil war and lacking an effective government, as reported by the *BBC* the country’s “local militias are often active partners with the smugglers”. This issue is exacerbated by Libya’s geographical location, which [Frontex](#)—the European Union’s border control agency—notes means the country has become the “nexus point where migrants from the Horn of Africa and Western African routes meet”.

The flow of migrants has been tied to developments in the Middle East and Africa. The *Economist* [suggests](#) that many migrants are willing to brave the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean because they are “fleeing some mixture of war, oppression, civil disorder and poverty”. In 2014, according to [figures from the Italian Ministry of Interior](#), Syrians made up the biggest number of migrants arriving in Italy by sea, at 42,323 out of 170,100. Refugees [fleeing repression in Eritrea](#) made up the second-highest group at 34,329. While the *Economist* [acknowledges](#) that people smuggling in the

Mediterranean is not new, it [observes](#) that the trade has expanded in recent years primarily because of the Syrian and Libyan civil wars.

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## EU Response: Mare Nostrum and Operation Triton

In October 2013, Italy's Government launched its [Mare Nostrum search and rescue operation](#) following the Lampedusa tragedy in which 366 migrants died. Run by the Italian navy, the [operation cost €9 million a month, consisted of a number of naval vessels, helicopters, aircraft and submarines](#) and covered 70,000km<sup>2</sup> of the Mediterranean. The operation ran for around a year and [rescued more than 150,000 people and resulted in the arrest of 330 smugglers](#). In October 2014, Italy's Government [controversially announced the cancellation of Mare Nostrum](#). According to the *Financial Times*, Italy was concerned at the cost of the operation, and there had been criticism from EU countries and right-wing Italian politicians that it was encouraging migration. The UK Government refused to support any future search and rescue operations at the time. In a [written answer on 15 October 2015](#), Foreign Office Minister Baroness Anelay of St Johns said search and rescue operations created “an unintended ‘pull factor’, encouraging more migrants to attempt the dangerous sea crossing and thereby leading to more tragic and unnecessary deaths”. Mare Nostrum was [replaced in November 2014](#) by a smaller EU-backed operation called Triton which was coordinated by Frontex. It had around a [third of the budget \(€2.9 million\) and was restricted to patrolling within 30 miles of the Italian coast](#). Amnesty International [criticised](#) the smaller operation as the “wrong answer to the refugee and migration crisis in the central Mediterranean” noting that its “ability to supplement search and rescue operations is limited”.

On 19 April 2015, around [800 migrants were killed](#) when their boat collided with a merchant vessel and capsized off Libya. The disaster prompted Italy's Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, to [call for an emergency European summit to tackle the migrant crisis](#), which was held on 23 April 2015. The European Council [committed](#) to tripling the financial resources of Operation Triton and considered ways to “capture and destroy” trafficking vessels. In response, the UK Government [deployed](#) the helicopter carrier HMS Bulwark, two patrol boats and three helicopters for search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean.

In a further development, on 13 May 2015 the European Commission published its [European Agenda on Migration](#). As well as reiterating the commitment to increase Triton's resources, it also proposed to help EU Member States facing an influx of migrants through an [emergency relocation quota system](#). This would seek to disseminate asylum-seekers among other EU Member States, based on [criteria](#) such as GDP and population size. In addition, it was also [proposed](#) that an EU-wide resettlement scheme offer 20,000 places for “displaced persons in clear need of international protection in Europe”. The *Financial Times* [reports](#) that the UK Government opposes the resettlement and relocation measures—although the UK retains the right to opt-out. Writing in *The Times* on 13 May 2015, Home Secretary, Theresa May said “we must—and will—resist calls for the mandatory relocation or resettlement of migrants” as it would “only strengthen the incentives for criminal gangs to keep plying their evil trade”. On 18 May 2015, the European Council established a [military operation](#)—EUNAVFOR Med—to “break the business model of smugglers and traffickers of people in the Mediterranean”. However, the *Financial Times* [notes](#) that it faces several obstacles, such as securing UN authorisation, potential Russian opposition and obtaining support from Libya's rival factions.

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