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The Human Smuggling Industry: Nuances and Complexities

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Abstract

Despite the popular depiction as immoral and deceitful villain who do not hesitate to toss human beings in the sea or abandon them under the scorching desert sun, human smugglers' services seem to be in high demand lately. Little is known about how human smugglers operate and the reasons that push millions to rely on their services. Scholarly and mainstream understanding of human smuggling is often plagued with fragmented perspectives on the socio-cultural dynamics of the migratory journey, the facilitator-traveler relationship and their community dimensions. A truly effective answer to human smuggling requires a better understanding of the phenomenon. Based on data collected during extensive ethnographic research conducted in the Eastern Mediterranean route and the Central American corridor, this lecture aims to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of human smuggling and the actors involved.

Introduction

The Mediterranean Sea and the US-Mexico border are the deadliest and most travelled routes for undocumented migrants (IOM, 2017a). The number of clandestine crossings and fatalities have turned attention on the human smuggler – the hardened criminal dedicated to the systematic deceiving of migrants. The rhetoric that characterizes smugglers as greedy and immoral has also portrayed migrants as irrational and desperate victims. The potency of these narratives has been effective in igniting the public's moral outrage against human smuggling and supporting the progressive criminalization of irregular migration across the EU and US-Mexico border. However, while successful at activating public opinion and policy intervention (Andersson, 2014), this series of representations has consistently failed to address the complex social and cultural dynamics behind human smuggling.

An effective eradication of these organizations without an adequate understanding of the social and community dimension of smuggling may thus prove difficult because smuggling groups are deeply enmeshed within migratory flows. It is thus hardly surprising that current immigration policies have neither undermined the number of facilitators nor reduced the number of deaths.

Here we depart from the idea that smugglers obey only to a profit-making logic, inviting instead for a more complex understanding of their roles. In so doing, the paper is grounded with the scant, yet growing critical literature of human smuggling. Specifically, it capitalizes on the empirical value of an important scholarship that has questioned over-simplistic depictions of the facilitator-traveler relationship and their community dimensions. Over a decade ago, the pioneering work of Doomernik and Kyle already summarized the complex relationship between smugglers and migrants as a spectrum that ranges from the altruistic assistance provided by family members or friends to dynamics of exploitation based on the intent of hardened criminals (Doomernik and Kyle, 2004). Since then, empirical research has shown that trust and cooperation seem to be more the rule than the exception in the interaction between smugglers and migrants (Zhang et al., 2018). However, while this body of work has begun to dismantle common stereotypes about the smuggler-migrant relationship, the assumption that smugglers are criminal businessmen driven exclusively by profit remains evident in much of the literature (Ahmad, 2013). As a matter of fact, the over-emphasis on the criminal elements around smuggling and irregular migration in much of mainstream narratives neglects the direct relationships that current migration policies have on constraining traditional patterns of mobility for many people around world today (De Genova, 2002). Where patterns of exploitation and

forms of trafficking occurred among migrants, these were more often the consequence of the protracted condition of deprivation and irregularity than the precise criminal intents of mafia-like organizations.

While many recent studies on human smuggling represent empirical and theoretical advancements in the field, studies that combines extensive research with smugglers with comprehensive comparative investigations of different geographical contexts are still scant. By building on a mixed method approach that combines the use of secondary source with ethnographic research, this paper compares two separate smuggling contexts – the Mediterranean Sea and the US-Mexico border – in order to identify similarities and differences in the organizational structures of smuggling networks, the smuggler-migrant relationship, and the profile of the facilitators. In so doing, it aims to obtain a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of smuggling and the actors involved by bringing more attention to smugglers-migrants' social interactions and local economies.

The comparison of the Mediterranean with the US-Mexico border is propitious for the drawing of wider conclusions about the nature of smuggling today in a broad context. First, the two routes are among the most important smuggling hubs in the world (UNODC, 2018). Second, the US and EU responses to human smuggling are very similar – both being overwhelmingly focused on the criminalization of clandestine migration and the concomitant militarization of borders. Third, because in contrast to Europe where it has reached an unexpected scale only over the course of the past few years, irregular migration of similar magnitude to the United States has a much longer history – dating back to the early 90s. Fourth, the existence of different techniques employed by human smugglers respectively in the Eastern Mediterranean region (mainly maritime) and across the Central American route (largely overland) will give us a better understanding of how modus operandi affects the smuggler-migrant relationship.

Current Trends in Migrant Smuggling

There is a plurality of different techniques that human smugglers employ to move migrants respectively in the Mediterranean corridor and across the US-Mexico border. The most obvious difference entails the use of maritime routes in the former region, and the prevalence of overland paths in the latter. Equally significant is the different approach vis-à-vis border control. In the Mediterranean, smugglers capitalize on the presence of aid and control agencies, counting on the moral and legal obligations to assist migrants in distress at sea. They operate remotely and generally maintain contact by phone with migrants who pilot the boat. On the other hand, concealment and hiding is the most common strategy to smuggle people across the US-Mexico border – for example, by circumventing border control by moving migrants through desertic areas or hiding them in concealed departments in trucks, private vehicles, and train freights. In other words, whereas smugglers generally instruct migrants to seek for detection in the Mediterranean, avoiding detection is the way to smuggle migrants along the US-Mexico border.

Notwithstanding smugglers' different modus operandi across these two major corridors, the security and enforcement imperatives that have guided the border policies implemented in the United States and Europe, especially after September 11, 2001 have not meant the end of human smuggling in both regions (Massey et al., 2016; cf. Manjarrez, 2015). Rather, a comparison of the US-Mexico border and the Mediterranean Sea shows that current border policies have led to

a change in the composition of the migratory flows and the redirection along different routes as well as a sharp increase in the risks faced by migrants.

The Mediterranean Sea

Irregular migration to Europe has developed along three major sea routes. The first pathway is the eastern Mediterranean route through Turkey and Greece; it has become in 2015 the most popular route for African and Asian labor migrants and refugees wishing to access Europe. However, already between 1991 and 2001, the Eastern routes was one of the most travelled points of entry for migrants – originally Albanians – who fled economic and political distress. After a drop in the detection of illegal immigrants since the early 2000s, the area re-gained its popularity as an important point of arrival in 2015 and early 2016. Frontex reported a resurgence in detections of illegal border-crossings (FRONTEX, 2017). Most detections were Syrians, Afghans and other asylum seekers who enter Europe via Turkey (ibid.).

Displacement patterns from Turkey to Europe vary considerably depending to the fast-changing scenarios of border control. Prior 2016, the journey to Sweden, Germany or another European country was relatively easy. In 2015, transit countries' policy vis-à-vis refugees and migrants veered toward a facilitation of irregular migration by issuing temporary transit papers for asylum seekers and migrants crossing their territories. The vast majority of those interviewed indicated that they had reached Greece from the isolated areas near the Turkish port of Izmir and Bodrum. Here, smugglers arranged transportation, for around 1200 USD per person to Lesbos or the numerous Greek islands near the border with Syria. The proximity of the departure points with the Greek islands often meant a one-hour journey with a ten-meter rubber dinghy. Time and price, however, were likely to change according to a number of factors that ranged from the type of boat and number of people aboard to the weather condition and the relationship with the smugglers. It is important to notice that smugglers do not generally board the boats, rather, to reduce chances of apprehension, they delegate the piloting of the boat to one or two of the passengers.

The situation has changed since early 2016. The EU-Turkey agreement on March 20 and the decision of many Western Balkan countries to seal their borders in winter 2016 have considerably stemmed the flow of people (ibid.). Yet, if the number of people crossing irregularly through Balkan countries dropped, the risks faced by migrants on the move increased substantially (Achilli, 2018; Mandic, 2017). Different sources report that effectively blocking smuggling networks only redirected unauthorized migration flows on different routes. The European border agency FRONTEX concurs that even if "the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes are ever more difficult to traverse successfully, the reduction on these two routes is made up for by increases in the Central Mediterranean and Western Mediterranean" (2017, p. 7). Most importantly, despite the sharp decrease in border-crossing by irregular migrants, the number of facilitators operating across the Balkan route seems to have raised as "migrants can no longer rely on the transportation services provided by the authorities and need to bypass reinforced border-control measures" (ibid., p. 8)

With the closing of the Western Balkan route and the conclusion of the EU-Turkey agreement, the Central Mediterranean and the Western Mediterranean routes have become the main gate of entry for irregular migrants arriving in the EU mostly by sub-Saharan countries. Despite a

sudden decrease in the numbers of irregular migrants detected, the Central route is the deadliest corridor for migrants fleeing economic dispossession and warfare. The route is based out of Libya and travels across to the Italian and Maltese costs. This route has registered a peak of arrival over the last 15 years, especially between 2011 and 2016, when some 630,000 irregular migrants and refugees reached Italy (ibid). A minority of migrants were successfully smuggled across, while most were rescued at sea and disembarked in Italy.

The length of the sea journey, the poor quality of the boat, and the political turmoil in Libya have made the route a considerably more dangerous alternative to the safer Eastern route. More than 13,000 lost their lives attempting the crossing since 2011, 5000 in 2016 alone, and many more died on their journey through the Sahara Desert. Unsurprisingly the route has tellingly gained the appellative among Arab speaking communities of *al-tariq al-mawt* ("the death road") for the number of people who lost their lives in attempt of crossing.[1]

Mexico and the US-Mexico Border

Smuggling of migrants has traditionally played a key role in irregular immigration in North America (Zhang, 2017), the top migrant destination and the second most lethal route in the world after the Mediterranean. While there is no clear consensus and reliable data, estimates calculate that between 200,000 and 400,000 migrants reached the US transiting through Mexico per year (Paris Pombo et al., 2016; Rodriguez Chavez, 2016). Moreover, it would seem that in recent years there has been a sharp decline in the flow of irregular migrants to the United States, while the number of migrants who died or disappeared remained constant (WOLA, 2017).

Historically, the southern border of the United States has been traversed mainly by Mexicans. This group consists mainly of indigenous peasants and seasonal workers from internal states such as Michoacán, Guanajuato and Jalisco who, profiting of the proximity of the two countries and well-established migration networks, migrated to the USA for better economic prospects (Cornelius and Lewis, 2007). Starting from the beginning of 2000, however, the levels of migration from Mexico to the United States decreased steadily for a number of reasons that ranges from the growing insecurity of border crossing, to the natural shrinking of the migratory flow, and the increase in the cost-benefits of irregular migration (Zhang, 2017). Recent data indicate that these numbers have been falling steadily and reached, since 2010, levels similar to those recorded in the early 1970s (USBP, 2017). Currently, however, a new wave of migration has hit Mexico and the United States. Violence and political turmoil has led to a dramatic increase in asylum seekers and other migrants from Central America and other countries who have sought refuge and economic stability in the United States. This has led to a significant reversal of the trend. Since 2014, the apprehensions of non-Mexican migrants (OTM - Other Than Mexican) have in many cases exceeded those of migrants of Mexican origin (Sanchez 2018). As Sanchez correctly argues, "data suggest not only that migration trends to the United States from Mexico have changed, but that the numbers of migrants from Central America travelling to Mexico and through Mexico as part of their United States bound migrations continue to grow." (p. 147)

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[1] In 2016, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that 5,000 people lost their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean to enter Europe – a thirty-five percent increase since 2015. By April 2017, a further 942 people had died or were reported missing in the Mediterranean (IOM, 2017b).

Migrants on route to the United States cross Mexico by freight trains, trucks or other means of transportation, either alone or with guides-smugglers (*coyotes*). "The Beast", the train network that crosses Mexico from north to south, is surely the most visible form of the recent migration flow that has affected the country. Nonetheless, only a small percentage of migrants use the train to reach the United States. With a recent tightening of controls implemented by Mexico along its southern borders, this number has fallen even further (Leutert and Yates, 2017). On July 2014, Mexico launched its "Plan Frontera Sur" with the aim of protecting migrants entering Mexico and increasing the security and prosperity of the region. Far from curbing irregular migration across Mexico, the country's latest border program has redirected migrants along different routes and less visible means of transportation such as freight trucks, buses and private vehicles. Concomitantly with the increase in the number of border operation, the number of migrants who claim to have relied on the railway system to reach the United States has dropped from 18% to 12%, while the percentage of those who have used private vehicles has risen from 16% to 26, and for buses from 86% to 93% (ibid.).

The enhancement of border control along northern and southern Mexico has also led to sharp rise in cost of migration and migrants' reliance on professional guides (*coyotes* or *polleros*) to reach their destinations (Izcara Palacios, 2013; Sanchez, 2018). Recent data indicates that almost 90 per cent of all Mexican migrants rely on *coyotes* to reach their destination (MMP, 2017). Migrants on the move are also experiencing a concomitant increase in the challenges they face while they rely on clandestine services both through Mexico and across the US-Mexico border (Sanchez, 2018). Studies have also documented the proliferation of "cyber coyotes" – facilitators who do not accompany migrants, but they guide them over cell phones (Slack and Martínez, 2018). This strategy, devised by coyotes to escape detection and arrest in light of the enhanced US patrolling of the border, has however made the journey riskier for migrants, who are now more likely to get lost and perish in the desert.

Once in the US territory, migrants can spend up to several days in stash houses before continuing their journey north, where they will need to cross through a second layer of control – mostly Customs and Border Protection (CBP) checkpoints dislocated within the first 100 miles north from the US-Mexico border. Here, as Zhang put it (2017), strategies to avoid detection varies across smugglers: some move through checkpoint; while others seek to bypass controls by taking long detour through desert areas. The highest numbers of migrants who succumbed to the extreme high temperatures of Southern US counties (ibid).

The Structure or Smuggling Networks

Smuggling networks have earned worldwide notoriety as mafia-like cartels that run a number of other illicit businesses alongside human smuggling – most notably drug, human, and arms trafficking. The available evidence, however, rules out the existence of major crime syndicates operating in the Mediterranean Sea. The considerable instability of the current irregular migratory flows explains the nature of the business and the type of structure. Human smuggling involves flexible and adaptive networks that can deal with a market characterized by fast-changing scenarios and great insecurity. As a matter of fact, smuggling networks active in the area consist of a system of flexible and independent – and largely family based – organizations that enter into partnerships with one another for short periods. Even though authorities have at times reported the overlapping of people smuggling with drug, arms and human trafficking,

empirical evidence has shown that these groups do not generally run all these different 'enterprises' together. When interactions between transnational organized crime groups and smuggling networks occur, these involve smugglers paying road tolls or other taxation for moving their cargo across territories under the control of the former.

Typology & Structure
Research undertaken in different parts of the Mediterranean and along the US-Mexico border has shown that human smuggling involves a very different modus operandi depending on the origin of the smugglers, the client group, and the smuggling route. Ideally, smuggling groups can be situated somewhere in the continuum between single-service providers and multi-service networks (Neske, 2006; Triandafyllidou and Maroukis, 2012). The former are small groups that run the sea crossing and often have solid roots in the local community. They do not have ties within the migrants' countries of origin, and the recruitment happens through intermediary groups. These groups generally serve migrants who travel alone, mostly legally, for a large part of the journey. Migrants would recur to smugglers only to cross a specific leg of their journey. Between 2011 and 2015, thousands of Syrian asylum seekers going to Europe relied on smuggling services almost exclusively for crossing the Turkish- Greek border. They travelled regularly to Turkey where smugglers arranged transportation to Lesbos or any other Greek island near the Turkish sea border. Once in Greece, Syrians continued their journey to Europe on their own (Achilli, 2016).

At the other end of the spectrum, there are larger and wider-ranging networks that have offshoots in migrants' countries of origin. These organizations operate either land, air or sea routes and provide customers with a variety of services that range from border crossings to detention center releases. These types of migrant-smuggling services are often used by migrants who are barred from legal entry in the transit countries. In such cases, the smuggling of migrants occurs through a 'pre-organized, stage-to-stage' process. It is worth pointing out, however, that even wide-ranging networks do not have that sturdy hierarchical structure that researchers have observed within military or larger criminal organizations. It is more the case of a chain of independently but closely interacting 'stage coordinators' organizes the migration process by outsourcing certain smuggling activities to local coordinators – often individuals with solid ties in the local community of transit countries. The latter, in turn, subcontract the border crossing to the local service providers.

Empirical evidence has also demonstrated that smuggling groups operating both in both regions have a highly distinct yet flexible structure with roles that are not integrated into rigid hierarchies and bound by long-term agreements (see, among many others, Baird, 2016; Demir et al., 2017; Galemba, 2018; Vogt, 2016). These flexible organizations have, however, a few recurring figures that can be pinpointed – such as the group coordinator, which oversee the smuggling operations and the overall management of the organization; the recruiter, in charge of establishing contacts between smugglers and migrants; and the 'passeur', responsible for escorting migrants across the border. A number of other figures participate in the business: forgers, enforcers, receivers, and drivers. Finally, around these relatively loose and small organizations gravitate a considerable number of people – often locals – who work as freelancers. They could work for a fee as lookouts by using lights to signal the presence of police forces patrolling the shores or the border, as costly taxi-drivers by taking migrants to the crossing

points, or also as landowners, if they have land near the shore or border that they can rent to smugglers as embarkation zones or stash houses.

The heterogeneous and loose structure of human smuggling has led authors to warn to take cautiously estimates based on monetary indicators that are not backed by solid empirical research (Engle-Merry, 2016). Over the past years, reports from international organizations and law enforcement agencies have sought to outpace each other by estimating the highest annual turnover of smuggling respectively in the Mediterranean and Central American/Mexican corridors.[2] It is however, difficult to define how much flows into the pockets of smugglers as many other actors benefits from the revenues generated by this business. Not only smuggling often spawns tangential criminal markets (e.g. document counterfeiting). The flow of money does not only stream into the pockets of "criminals" and along with an illicit economy, a licit one flourishes. Ethnographic research shows how border towns and other cities located along key nodes of the smuggling trail thrive or survive thanks to the presence of irregular migrants and their facilitators (see, for example, Achilli, 2018; Brachet, 2018; Sanchez, 2014; Stone-Cadena and Álvarez Velasco, 2018). In Tijuana and other cities near the US-Mexico border, immigration lawyers advertise their fares by means of gigantic bill boards. Hotels offers half or full board accommodations at special rates for families of migrants. In Turkey and Greece, bus companies post special have special group packages for Syrians and other migrants on the windows of their shops. Grocery stores sell various types of merchandise to migrants and refugees, while money lenders thrive out of migrants' chronic need of money.

Interactions with Organized Crime Groups and Terrorist Organizations
It is also assumed that human smugglers run their business alongside a number of other illegal trades – most notably drug, human, and weapon trafficking. According to this argument, cartels and mafia organizations are increasingly taking control over the smuggling business, creating revenues that are already outpacing other illicit businesses, such as kidnapping for ransom, drug trade, human trafficking, and so on (Donnelly and Hagan, 2014). Similar imbrications have also been postulated between smuggling and terrorist organizations. According to Napoleoni, for example, human smuggling "is an easier and more lucrative business than kidnapping foreigners [and] a natural evolution of any kidnapping enterprise" (2017: 53).

If human smuggling is a booming multibillionaire business, there is indeed plausible reason to believe that larger criminal groups could rely on the practice of smuggling for self-financing. This notwithstanding, criminological models have often overestimated the extent and dimension of smuggling organizations (Baird and van Liempt, 2016). Other studies have shed light on how smugglers are often part of migrants' social and familial networks (e.g. Bilger et al., 2006; Herman, 2006; Koser, 2008; Staring, 2003) and that large, highly structured organizations usually are not involved in migrant smuggling (Kyle and Dale, 2001; Liempt and Sersli, 2013; Okolski, 2000; Pastore et al., 2006; Sanchez and Zhang, 2018). This seems to be supported by recent empirical evidence that shows how large criminal groups in Mexico and the Middle East have not consistently entered the smuggling of refugees as a means of financing. When

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[2] EUROPOL estimated that in 2015 alone criminal networks involved in the facilitation of irregular migration have had an income of between EUR 3 – 6 billion (2016); UNODC rebuts by arguing that in Central America and along the US-Mexico border it generates 7 billion-dollar – a low estimate no less, according UN officials (Blancas Madrigal, 2017).

interactions between these organizations and smuggling groups occur, they mostly involve the taxation of smugglers who move people across the areas under their de-facto jurisdiction.

For example, disaggregated data retrieved by U.S. Special Forces from the Islamic State (IS) financial records in Iraq and Syria show how this organization relies on a rather diversified mechanism of revenue generation (CAT, 2016, p. 5) but not smuggling. Whilst the sale of natural resources (notably oil and natural gas, and to a lesser extent phosphate, cement, and agricultural products) was by far the largest source of revenue, accounting for 80% and 62% of the total volume in 2014 and 2015 respectively (ibid.), the IS resorted to a variety of criminal practices as complementary means of financing (Humud et al., 2015; Stergiou, 2016). The records outline a broad range of economic activities that involve a number of external, profit-motivated intermediaries (such as truckers, traders, and cash couriers) who are taxed of passage fees and custom duties to move goods across the areas under the Caliphate's de-facto jurisdiction. Yet, smuggling of migrants is never mentioned in the budgetary documents. The absence of direct involvement into the smuggling of migrants on the parts of the IS seems to be confirmed also by ethnographic data collected among asylum seekers fleeing the territories under the control of the Caliphate (Achilli and Tinti 2019, forthcoming).

In Mexico, claims about the purported taking over of the smuggling business seem to be supported by episodes like the San Fernando Massacre.[3] However, ethnographic research conducted along the US-Mexico border dismiss the convergence of both human smuggling and drug trafficking markets (Palacios, 2016). According to Sanchez and Zhang, "the most commonly reported interaction between human smugglers and mafia organizations—and perhaps the only one pointing to the existence of a structured system of financial transactions connecting drug trafficking and migrant facilitators—involved the payment of *piso*, a one-time toll to access specific parts of the migrant trail under the control of mafia groups." (2018, p. 141). The imposition of a tax or toll to smuggling facilitators not only mirrors the same type of taxation levied by the IS over the use of specific routes, but it also recalls the modus-operandi of mafia groups in Italy. During my research in Apulia, Southern Italy, a former fisherman – who occasionally smuggled Albanian migrants – categorically denied any form of affiliation with the local mafia: "the Sacra Corona Unita (local mafia) had nothing to do with us […]. They saw in what we were doing a good opportunity to make money… so they asked us a sort of *pizzo* [roughly, "protection money"], which we were happy to pay since the money were good". All this seems to be consistent with other studies conducted in the area (see, for example, Pastore et al., 2006).

In sum, although mafia and terrorist organizations operating in major smuggling hubs in the Mediterranean area and in Mexico have imposed taxes on trade and border crossing, they seem to not have consistently entered the smuggling of migrants as a means of financing. Why?

Critical and ethnographic research on the imbrication of smuggling and larger criminal organizations remain scant. Nonetheless, we can advance a few hypotheses. To begin with, smuggling groups and large criminal groups have two distinct structures, each suited to serve a different purpose. Whereas the hierarchical bureaucracy of the Islamic State, cartels, and mafias

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[3] In March 2011, members of Los Zetas cartel abducted and murdered almost 200 migrants from across Latin America and Asia in San Fernando at La Joya ranch in the municipality of San Fernando, Tamaulipas.

are geared to exert control over the territory, horizontal smuggling "operate on a short timescale, responding to changing problems with flexible solutions" (ibid., p. 113). The considerable instability of the current irregular migratory flows explains the type of structure. Human smuggling involves flexible and adaptive networks that can deal with a market characterized by fast-changing scenarios and great insecurity. Indeed, it would hardly be possible for a single centralized organization to carry out all services alone along a route that comprises journeys of several thousand kilometers and in a market characterized by high levels of instability and unpredictability (ibid.). Furthermore, small and loose groups are not only more adaptable and functional but also appear to be more desirable than larger and highly hierarchical organizations. Critical scholarship on smuggling has stressed that these groups "are often community initiated" and "constitute a form of human security from below" (Sanchez, 2016, p. 20; see programmatically Zhang et al., 2018). The use of these networks would thus be privileged by migrants who tend to rely on ethnic and familial links in order to reach their destinations.

Patterns of Solidarity and Exploitation in SOM

Global trends of insecurity and the shrinking of legal channels of migration along both routes have fundamentally shaped the everyday lives of migrants (De Genova, 2002; Massey et al., 2016), prompting irregular journeys that have significantly increased people's dependence on mechanisms of exploitation. As it was already observed in the previous sections, the criminalization of undocumented migrants has determined their displacement trajectories and bolstered the risks that they face while on the move. Many migrants have left without the adequate social and financial resources to face long and dangerous journeys.

This has required to rely on a number of negative copying mechanisms that have favored the emergence of practices such as drug and human trafficking. In this sense, the existence of networks based on trust and solidarity does not prevent ties of reciprocity and mutuality from quickly turning into deception or even exploitation. This is most immediately evident in the increasing involvement of migrants characterized by high levels of socioeconomic marginalization in a variety of criminal businesses as an attempt to cope with the lack of resources and a protracted condition of immobility. Not only do migrants' participation to illicit markets problematize simplistic categorizations of smugglers and migrants, but, more importantly, illustrate their limited capacity to navigate changing border-control scenarios.

Smugglers and Migrants

The UN 2000 Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its accompanying "Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants" state that human smuggling is "the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident" (United Nations, 2000, pp. 54–55). Accordingly, the smuggler is a person who transports people illicitly into a third country. A plethora of studies and articles, however, have shown how violence and abuse are recurring features of the migrant-smuggler relationship, especially when it comes to collecting money and enforcing contracts (e.g. UNODC 2010). Media and political discourses have placed the emphasis more on the moral dimension of this actor than to his logistical skills. A profusion of photos and narrative accounts of migrants crammed into wretched boats or trucks circulates in the media and sketch out the moral traits of one of the

cruelest figure of our time, an individual who preys on migrants' "need for assistance and their dreams for a better life" (Europol, 2016, p. 3).

Smugglers, on the other hand, they do not usually perceive their activities as being exploitative. Studies show how they often represent themselves as service-providers who satisfy a need that people cannot satisfy through legal channels. They are aware that they are part of a highly unstable and dangerous market – this being the reason they ask such high fees from their clients. They even claim to operate a moral economy by helping people to escape misery and danger (Achilli, 2018). This perception was largely shared by those migrants who request their services for crossing the Mediterranean (ibid.) or the arid ranch lands of northern Mexico and Southern USA (Sanchez, 2014). Chin, for example, shows how Chinese migrants smuggled to the United States willingly decided to become smugglers themselves to protect their fellow migrants from the same abuses that they had to endure during their irregular journey (Chin, 2001).

It is obviously hard to draw a homogenous profile of the smugglers operating across the US-Mexico border and the Mediterranean Sea. Still, a closer look at the inner dynamics of human smuggling draws a complex picture. Violence and solidarity, deception and trust, they all can occur simultaneously in the smuggling business.

However, trust and satisfaction toward the facilitator seem to be the rule more than the exception among migrants and asylum seekers. In a recent article, Jeremy Slack and Daniel Martinez examine the smuggler-migrant relationship by drawing on more than eleven hundred surveys with recent deportees in six different Mexican cities. While only 45 percent of deportees reported that they would recommend their facilitator to friends and family member, 75 percent indicated being satisfied with the services (2018). Ethnographic data collected across the two locations seem to confirm a general feeling of satisfaction with smuggling services among migrants (see also Sanchez, 2014; Soudijn and Kleemans, 2009; Staring, 2003; Van Liempt and Doomernik, 2006). That is hardly surprising. Smuggling entails trust. The human smuggling that I encountered in the Mediterranean revealed itself to be a business that requires trust. For migrants, smugglers constitute a valuable resource, one that allows them to escape misery and extreme danger. At the same time, smugglers also depend in part on the migrants to refer other prospective "clients" because their services are tied to specific locations (Triandafyllidou and Maroukis, 2012). Those migrants who survive a journey can operate as a pull factor by tempting kin and friends to embark on a similar journey.

Qualitative research conducted across the Mexican-Central American and the Mediterranean corridors reveals patterns of interaction and cooperation between smugglers and migrants that cannot be easily explained by the business model (Ayalew Mengiste, 2018; Gonzalez, 2018; Majidi, 2018; Stone-Cadena and Álvarez Velasco, 2018). Ethnographic data show how smuggling groups are often based on pre-existing kinship and friendship connections. Moreover, migrants can get involved in the provision of clandestine journeys by accomplishing a number of tasks. This overlapping of roles introduces a further layer of complexity by blurring the boundary between smugglers and their customers. Migrants might escort immigrants across the border because of their own first-hand knowledge of the route. They might recruit clients because they share the same ethnic networks. They would provide the various services needed by the migrants (food, accommodation, and so on) because of their long-term relationship with local

communities in the transit countries. They would do all this to pay the required fees or have a decent livelihood. As we shall in the following section, the progressive tightening of border control and the concomitant increase in the costs of smuggling and its fees has favored the emergence of other negative copying mechanisms (Achilli, 2018).

The Smuggling-Trafficking Continuum
Social bonds, kinship, and friendship between smugglers and migrants do not always protect the latter against exploitation and violence. Several testimonies have documented the case of migrants being coerced or deceived into human trafficking or forced to carry drug (see, for example, Palacios, 2016; Slack, 2016). Human smugglers have hence earned notoriety especially in Western Europe and North America as orchestrators of human trafficking rings, evil geniuses behind drug trades, and amassers of untold riches made at the expense of their victims.

Although these allegations point toward a supposed convergence of smuggling and trafficking, recent ethnographic research seems to indicate otherwise. Research finding seem to suggest that interactions between drug and human trafficking with human smuggling are often negative copying mechanisms enacted by migrants as a way of increasing their mobility. In other words, while global conditions of insecurity can push migrants to embark on dangerous journeys without social and financial capital, the progressive militarization of border controls lead them to devise new strategies for moving (Brigden, 2016) such as getting involved into human trafficking (Achilli, 2017) or drug trafficking (Sanchez and Zhang, 2018).

Focusing on the alleged market convergence of drug trafficking with human smuggling, Sanchez and Zang show migrants' participation to drug trafficking as temporary strategies to bypass controls along the US-Mexico border (2018). The study highlights how the lack of financial resources often determines migrants' decision to exchange drugs transportation for a monetary compensation or in exchange of smuggling fees. In this sense, rather than the outcome of coercion, migrants' choice to transport drug was often the result of a complex, individual choice. Interestingly, ethnographic findings suggest that both drug trafficking groups and smuggling networks are not impermeable organizations, whose members hold permanent positions of power along a clearly defined hierarchy. At least at the lower levels of the structure, ordinary migrants could enter the drug market to carry out specific tasks and occasional jobs. According to the authors, the intensification of law enforcement efforts along the US-Mexico border and the War on Drug have strengthened the interdependence of human smuggling with drug trafficking (ibid.).

Along those lines, recent studies on the effects of the Syrian war and refugee crisis on human trafficking in Syria and the surrounding region indicates "that much of the exploitation taking place is not carried out by organized transnational groups, but rather involves family members, acquaintances and neighbors. Families and communities displaced by the war are often left with no viable alternatives for survival other than situations that can be characterized as exploitation. The vulnerabilities they are experiencing therefore contribute to the likelihood of both exploiting and being exploited" (ICMPD, 2015, p. 6). Other studies carried out in the area reveal how Syrian asylum seekers might reluctantly enter smuggling networks as the only way of escaping war (Achilli, 2018). Similarly, a recent report on unaccompanied minors' mobility show how the widespread perception among local authorities in Lebanon and other Mediterranean countries

that minors are potential criminals has significantly increased people's dependence on mechanisms of exploitation (Achilli et al., 2017). The systematic violations of their rights, including their immediate deportation and detention, has led many minors to consciously and willingly embrace labor exploitation and trafficking. In the war-ravaged Syria, domestic survival hinges largely on the remittances periodically sent by family members who have migrated. Engaging in harsh forms of labor exploitation is the only way that many minors have to support their own families left behind and/or collecting enough money to pay a smuggler and continue their journeys (ibid.).

Comparative analysis of human smuggling across the Mediterranean Sea and the US-Mexico border reveals that when border controls intensify and channels of legal entry diminish, the boundaries between solidarity and exploitation blur, and migrants might perceive participation to criminal enterprises and self-exploitation as the only way forward. So regardless whether exploitation is carried out by anonymous drug dealer or by well-known family members, it is often consciously embraced by its very "victims" as a mean to enhance their own mobility. The fragile status of migrants on the move reveals the ways in which border controls shape transnational mobility. It also recognizes the role of policing and surveillance apparatuses in generating the conditions for the exploitation of people. It is hard to say whether many of the migrants who get involved into drug dealing or trafficking are victims or perpetrators. What their stories ultimately tell us is that a protracted condition of illegality exacerbates the vulnerability of Syrians desperate to leave their war-torn country. In this context, more stringent border policies and practices are doomed to fail because they bolster the very phenomenon that they intend to fight.

Conclusion

A comparison of the evolution of irregular migration and human smuggling across two major hubs of human smuggling worldwide – the Mediterranean Sea and the US-Mexico border – bears to light three important findings.

First, human smuggling is a highly adaptive and flexible phenomenon. The tightening of border control and the adoption of increasing restrictive police measures by the EU and its state members and the US and Mexico have altered the composition of the flow, migrants' mobility patterns, and smugglers' modus operandi; yet, they have not meant the end of human smuggling in the two regions. If anything, the dominant policy approach to human smuggling has raised the demand in smuggling services in certain areas and led to a general increase in costs. What emerges confirms the conclusion of many other studies on the main drivers of human smuggling (see, for example, UNODC, 2018). The reliance on smuggling groups is not unilaterally determined by the volume of unauthorized migrants on the move. Rather, the complexity of the journey seems to drive the fluctuation in the demand of smuggling services. Ethnographical and secondary evidences collected across the two routes show that areas travelled by large number of migrants have not necessarily witnessed the proliferation of smuggling networks. On the other hand, smuggler groups flourish when migrants' mobility is trampled by the militarization of borders

Secondly, individuals' participation to smuggling emerges more like a negative copying mechanism than a veritable criminal career. This seems to be confirmed by the structure of

smuggling groups. In this sense, the structure and typology of migrant smuggling groups operating in the Mediterranean Sea reflect similar patterns in the United States–Mexico border. Smugglers mostly consist of a few loosely affiliated individuals who have knowledge of border control and means/skills to move migrants. The more complex the smuggling operations, the more the group will be larger. However, ethnographical evidences show that even in these cases human smuggling seldom are characterized by the lack of solid hierarchies and the existence of interchangeable figures. In other words, smuggling mostly consists of highly heterogeneous organizations – often ethnic or family based – operating on a small scale and in a short time-frame. A wide range of opportunistic free-lancers revolves around these groups offering temporarily their services. All this makes human smuggling fundamentally incompatible with the structure of larger criminal groups – like drug cartels, mafia, and terrorist organizations.

Finally, the shrinking of legal channels of migration might increase the risks faced by migrants and bolster human smuggling as well as other criminal markets. First, the tightening of border control generally exposes migrants to greater dangers. As smugglers are themselves aware of moving on hazardous ground, they seek to limit the chances of apprehension by employing a variety of strategies – such as setting off on longer and therefore more dangerous journeys, choosing unsafe points of crossing, and leaving migrants on their own during the crossing. Furthermore, studies have also demonstrated how the militarization of border control can generate a protracted condition of illegality that ultimately leads irregular migrants to enter smuggling. Most importantly, although studies have dismissed the convergence of criminal markets, human smuggling has often shaded into other criminal markets – for example, drug and human trafficking – as consequence of severe vulnerability. Even when smuggling involves more overt forms of exploitation, this exploitation might be consciously and willingly endorsed by its very "victims" as a mean to enhance their own mobility.

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