

Figure 1: Map of migratory incidents that occurred within and from the Middle East and North Africa during the first quarter of 2021 (each dot represents an incident)

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OVERVIEW

Despite COVID-19 mobility restrictions impacting Northern Africa and Western Asia in 2021, many migrants traversed dangerous routes within and from the region. The Missing Migrants Project (MMP) has recorded 67 migrant deaths and disappearances on land routes in Northern Africa and Western Asia, however there are many limitations on data collection – especially in areas such as the Sahara Desert – and the number is likely much higher. Mediterranean Sea crossings – involving departures primarily from North Africa – continued to constitute the most dangerous known routes for migration in the world, accounting for more than half (392) of the total recorded migrant fatalities worldwide during the first quarter of 2021. Reports on “invisible” shipwrecks¹ on the Central and Western Mediterranean routes reiterate that the data is largely incomplete, as is the case on the Western Africa-Atlantic Route to the Canaries where at least 42 migrants lost their lives.



Figure 2: A Sudanese family of eight lost their lives in the desert from hunger and thirst while crossing from El Fasher, Sudan to Kufra, Libya in this SUV. – found in February 2021. © Kufra Prosecution

DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES IN THE DESERT

NORTHERN AFRICA

No one knows how many migrants perished while crossing the Sahara Desert. During the first quarter of 2021, 59 migrant fatalities were recorded in Northern Africa, including 54 migrants who died or disappeared while crossing the Sahara Desert. All incidents for this quarter that MMP was able to record took place in Libya, mainly due to improved IOM data collection in the country. The causes of death equally ranged between vehicle accidents; violence; and harsh environmental conditions or lack of adequate shelter, food and water, taking the lives of migrants mostly from Chad, Egypt, Niger and Nigeria. Figure (3) represents the available data on desert deaths between 2014 and 2020, for the most part provided by the Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi) surveys. 4Mi has unfortunately changed their methodology so data on individual incidents involving a person’s death during migration is no longer available.

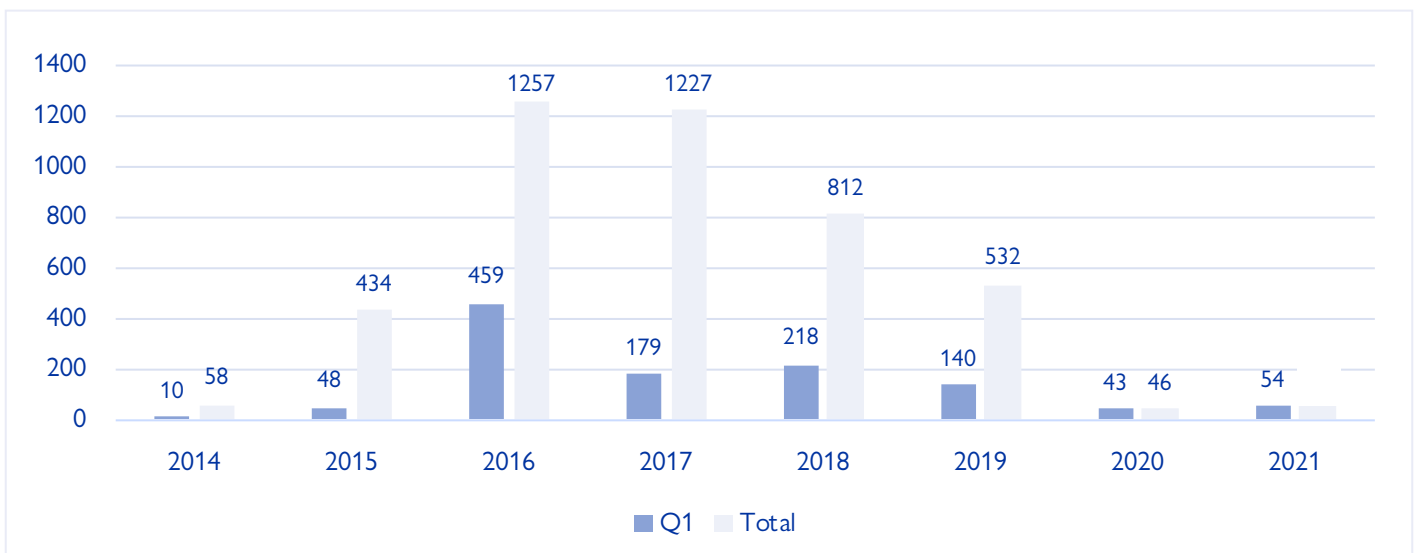


Figure 3: Sahara Desert Fatalities (Q1 and full year 2014-2021²)³

1. An invisible shipwreck is an incident that is believed to have occurred but cannot be officially corroborated due to the absence of survivors or insufficient information about the location of the vessel, since it occurs away from the eyes of authorities, search and rescue operations and other actors at sea.
2. For 2021, the 'Total' bar shows data only for the first quarter of the year (January-March).
3. Data for 2020 is mainly for Q1. 4Mi ceased collection on fatal incidents after Jan 2020.

WESTERN ASIA

At least five people were killed crossing the Syrian border towards Turkey and Lebanon between January and March. While just one death involving a Syrians crossing toward Turkey and Lebanon was recorded in 2020, likely due to COVID-19 mobility restrictions, the first quarter of 2021 was marked by an increase in deaths on these borders. In January, a Syrian man died while crossing the Syria-Turkey border close to Harim, Idlib. In March, two Syrian women and two children died from hypothermia while crossing Ainata-Oyoun Orghosh area in the Mount Lebanon range, as they allegedly tried to reach the Syrian Arab Republic from Lebanon.

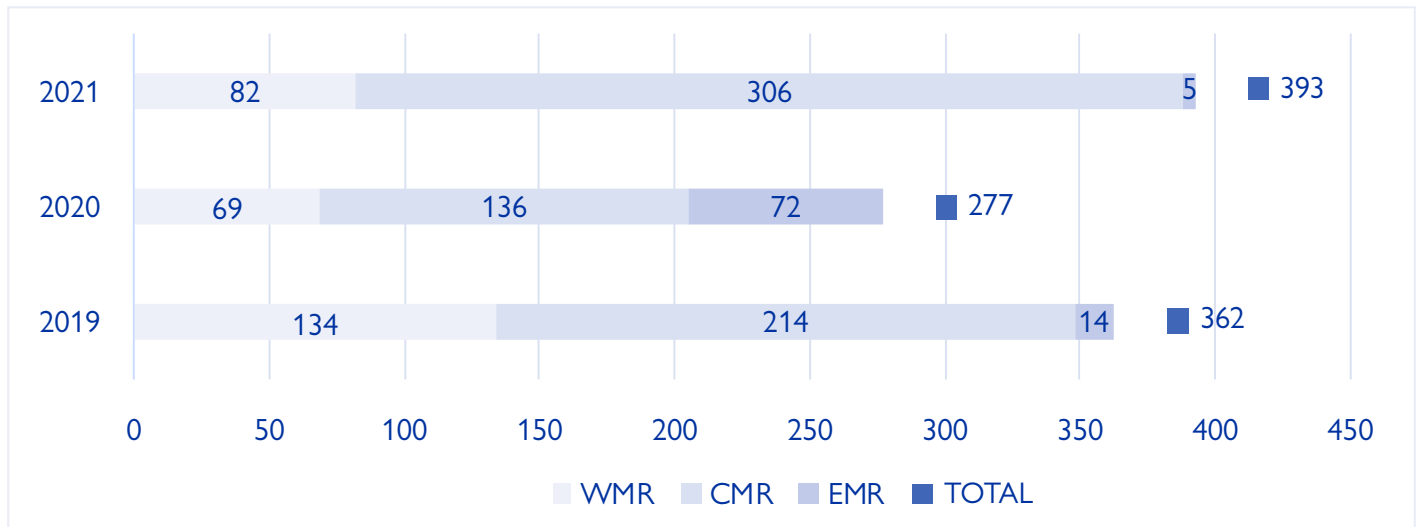


Figure 4: Mediterranean fatalities in Q1 2019-2021

DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES ON MARITIME ROUTES THE MEDITERRANEAN ROUTES

Deaths have drastically increased on the Western Mediterranean route (WMR) and Central Mediterranean route (CMR) in the first quarter of 2021 compared to the same period in 2020. An increase of 125 per cent in migrant deaths was observed on the CMR, where at least 306 deaths were caused by 33 incidents of shipwrecks and instances of remains washing ashore that were often close to the main shores of Italy, Libya and Tunisia. More people died at sea off the coast of the governate of Sfax, which is likely related to the three-fold increase in departures from Tunisia in the first quarter of 2021 in comparison to the same period in 2020.

Along the WMR, a 19 per cent increase in migrant deaths was observed during the first quarter of 2021 in comparison to the same period last year. Thirty two tragic incidents

took the lives of at least 82 migrants, mostly Algerians and Moroccans, indicating an increase in the attempted crossings by North African nationals as opposed to West African nationals who constituted the majority in prior years. While some incidents in the WMR occurred off the northern shores of Morocco, most of the deaths occurred on the route from west Algeria to Spain. The remains of 14 people were found washed up to Algerian shores in the first quarter of 2021, which could not be linked to any known shipwreck. This suggests multiple invisible shipwrecks went unrecorded, which is also supported by multiple social media posts by families of missing migrants on both Western and Eastern fronts, who have not heard from any of the passengers until now.

WHAT WERE THEIR LAST WORDS?

“To whoever finds this paper, this is my brother’s number. I entrust you with God and forgive me that I did not bring my mother to you. To father and Nasser, I love you. Pray for mercy for us.” – words written by Muzna Seif El Din on a carton piece before she perished with of her seven family members in the desert East Kufra, Libya while crossing from Sudan – found on 10 February 2021.⁴

“Please go to my mother and tell her not to worry about me. We are 50 kilometers away from Habibas [Algerian islands].” – words from a voice note that Soheil Al Sagheer sent to his friend before he went missing at sea on March 24. His remains washed up the coast of Aïn Témouchent, Algeria on April 5, to the agony of his parents who never found out what truly happened to him.⁵

4. [Al Arabiya](#) (author’s translation)

5. [Ennahar TV](#) (author’s translation)

WESTERN AFRICA-ATLANTIC ROUTE

A dramatic increase in the attempted crossings to the Canary Islands has been observed since 2020. In the first quarter of 2021, Moroccan migrants have also been joining the boats departing from Dakhla en route to the Canaries. At least 42 migrants died while crossing the Western Africa-Atlantic Route (WAAR) towards the Canary Islands in the first quarter of 2021. One major shipwreck occurred off the North African coast of Dakhla on 20 January claiming at least 12 lives. Most of the other deaths recorded during the first quarter involved bodies found onboard boats rescued off Gran Canaria, El Hierro and Tenerife, after those onboard spent many days at sea without assistance.

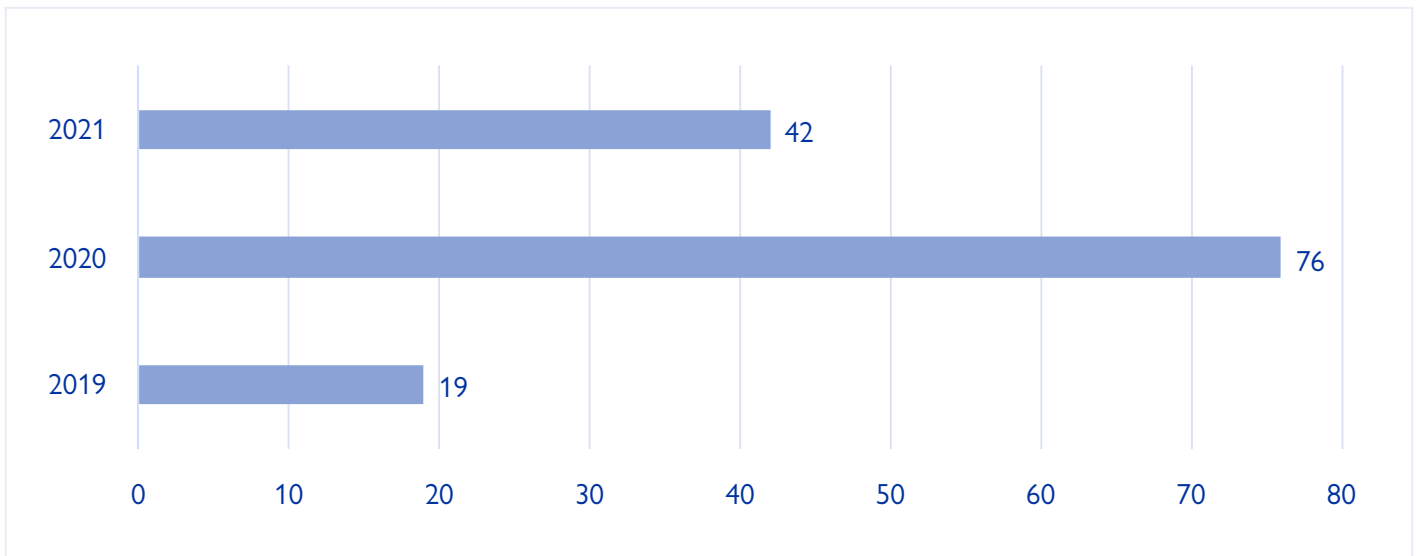


Figure 5: Western Africa-Atlantic Route fatalities in Q1 2019-2021

METHODOLOGY AND DATA QUALITY

IOM's Missing Migrants Project (MMP) counts migrant fatalities only at the external borders of a state or during the process of migrating towards an international destination. Collecting data on migrant deaths and disappearances remains challenging due to the lack of systematic reporting on the deaths of non-nationals in transit, and when available, data are often incomplete, particularly in terms of nationality, age and gender. MMP collects data through official sources such as the coast guard and local authorities; non-governmental civil society organizations such as Alarm Phone and focal points in IOM country offices; and media monitoring. However, media sources can have an incomplete or incorrect coverage, which poses an additional challenge on routes with no public official records such as the WMR. This means that the data collected by MMP represents an undercount of the true number of missing migrants worldwide.

| Region/Route | Official Sources | Civil Society Organizations | Multiple Media Sources | One Media Source |
|-----------------|------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| Northern Africa | 16.7% | 50.0% | 33.3% | 0% |
| Western Asia | 36.4% | 27.3% | 9.0% | 27.3% |
| EMR | 66.7% | 33.3% | 0% | 0% |
| CMR | 7.7% | 84.6% | 7.7% | 0% |
| WMR | 0% | 14.6% | 63.4% | 22.0% |
| WAAR | 10.5% | 5.3% | 63.2% | 21.0% |

Figure 6: MMP data sources by region and by source for Q1 2021

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 had a double-effect on migration. While the pandemic increased the existing restrictions on regular pathways to migration, its socioeconomic impacts have further pushed people to undertake dangerous migratory journeys on routes across the desert, sea and ocean, which witnessed a rise in the use of makeshift and unseaworthy boats. The increasing fatalities in transit, despite a reduction

in attempted crossings in comparison to 2020, can be partially attributed to the absence of proactive SAR on routes from North Africa. Nevertheless, incidents remain underreported due to the lack of access to reliable data on migrant deaths and disappearances – thus limiting a full understanding of the migratory trends during the first quarter of 2021.