

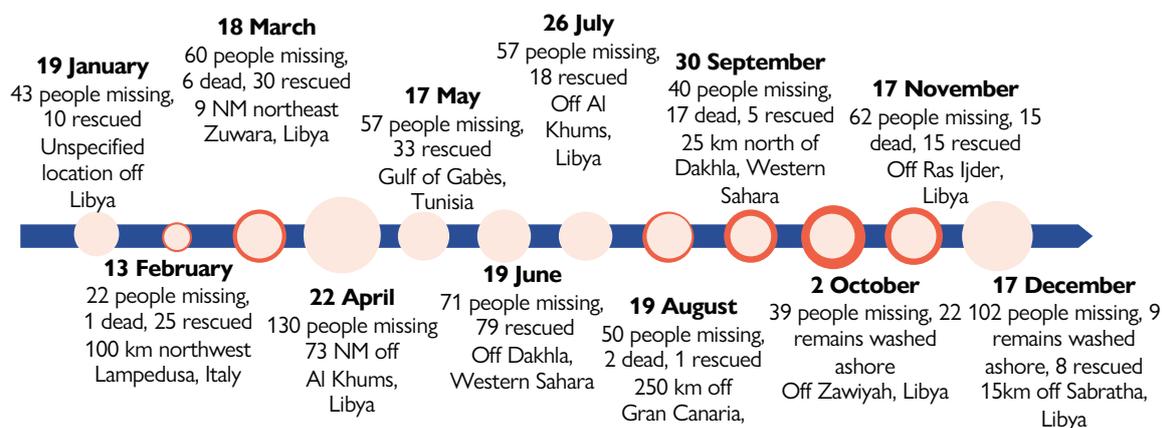
ANNUAL REGIONAL OVERVIEW
Middle East and North Africa
January 1 - December 31, 2021


Figure 1: Major incidents on maritime routes via Northern Africa to Europe during 2021 by month

EVERY NUMBER REPRESENTS A MISSING PERSON
AND A FAMILY LEFT BEREAVED.

OVERVIEW

In its second year, the COVID-19 pandemic has been exacerbating both the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of many people and the existing restrictions on regular pathways to migration, from work permits and family reunification to asylum. This has compelled many people to undertake perilous irregular journeys within and from the Middle East and Northern Africa, where deaths have soared in 2021 compared to the previous year. The deaths of 185 people were recorded on land routes within Northern Africa in 2021, and 35 deaths were recorded within the Middle East. However, many limitations on data collection and the nature of clandestine crossings suggest that the real number of lives lost may be much higher. Deaths on maritime routes via Northern Africa to Europe have also increased in 2021 with 2,084 deaths recorded in the Mediterranean Sea in 2021 – an increase from 2020 (1,448) and 2019 (1,885). On the Western Africa Atlantic route to the Spanish Canary Islands (WAAR) another 1,109 deaths were also recorded during 2021 (915 of which occurred after confirmed departure from North Africa), an increase from 2020 (878) and 2019 (210). The phenomenon of “invisible shipwrecks”¹ has also tragically persisted along maritime routes with limited surveillance and reporting such as the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR) and the Western Africa-Atlantic Route (WAAR). During 2021, four invisible shipwrecks were recorded on WAAR, seven were recorded on WMR and four were recorded on the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) – social media and civil society reports indicate that many more likely occurred but could not be verified.

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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.

DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES DURING TRANSIT WITHIN MENA

Northern Africa

We will never know the true scope of migratory deaths in the desert due to the lack of official data sources and the vast geographies traversed. During 2021, the deaths of 185 people were documented while transiting in Northern Africa. These include 133 deaths in the Sahara Desert crossing in Northern Africa. The figures for 2021 are considered an undercount, as several social media reports which could not be verified at the time of publication indicate that the number of lives lost are likely higher. Similarly, many deaths that could be verified are not known to any specific incident involving a migrant death. For example, 14 decomposed remains of people from Sub-Saharan African origin were found by the local authorities in different locations along desert routes between 10 and 13 December and no information could be established about the circumstances of their deaths.

The majority of deaths documented on land routes in Northern Africa during 2021 occurred in Libya (113), followed by border regions in Algeria (39), Morocco (6), Tunisia (6), Sudan (6) and Egypt (1); however, the complete lack of official data on land routes means that there are likely far more deaths which go undocumented. Among those with available information on nationality, 53 were from Northern Africa, 28 were from Western Africa, seven were from Western Asia and two were from Middle Africa. The top countries of origin are Egypt (28), Sudan (23) and Niger (18). The nationalities of the rest remain unknown (81). Among those whose sociodemographic information is known, there were 47 males², seven females and six minors, with ages ranging between 10-56. The main causes of death on North African land routes in 2021 are harsh environmental conditions (leading to dehydration, starvation, exhaustion and exposure) (44%), followed by vehicle accident (33%) and unknown causes (mostly skeletal remains) (14%). Twelve people also died from violence (gunfire).

Western Asia

In 2021, 35 deaths were recorded in the Middle East.³ Five deaths occurred on land routes on the Syrian-Turkish border and Syrian-Lebanese border; all were due to violence or hypothermia. Another 30 migrants drowned in a shipwreck on 14 June in Bab el-Mandeb Strait off Yemen. However, local media has reported that between 200-300 migrants went missing, which could not be verified as of publication date. It is also important to note the lack of data sources in the Middle East and the challenges of distinguishing deaths during migration from conflict-related deaths, specifically in countries such as the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. For example, reports that could not be verified at the time of publication alleged that at least 12 migrants were shot in crossfire in Sa'dah, Yemen, while attempting to cross the border with Saudi Arabia during the fourth quarter of 2021. Outside of the region, many people from Western Asia have been stranded at the Belarus-EU border in extremely harsh conditions. At least 21 migrants died on the Belarus-EU borders in 2021, including four Syrians, two Palestinians, seven Iraqis and two Yemenis. There were three females and three minors among the deceased. The main causes of death were hypothermia or sickness.

DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES FROM MENA TO EUROPE

The Mediterranean Routes

At least 2,084 people died on routes departing the MENA region crossing the Mediterranean Sea in 2021. This marks a 44 per cent increase from 2020 (1,448) and an 11 per cent increase from 2019 (1,885).

² Information on the gender of people in MMP records are based on a third-party interpretation of the victim's gender based on information available in official documents, autopsy reports, witness testimonies, and/or media reports.

³ The MMP uses the regional classification for Western Asia per the UN Statistics Division: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/>.

The deadliest month during 2021 was December (352), while the highest month of attempted crossings to Europe was September (21,361). More than half of the remains of those who perished in the Mediterranean Sea during 2021 were never found.

Most of the Mediterranean deaths in 2021 occurred along the **Central Mediterranean Route (CMR)** (76%), an increase from the proportion of CMR deaths in 2020 (69%) and 2019 (67%). Overall, at least 1,553 people have perished on CMR during 2021, a 55 per cent increase from 2020 (999) and a 23 per cent increase from 2019 (1,262). The nationalities of most of those who died on CMR (961) in 2021 remain unknown, while the majority of those whose sociodemographic data is available were from Western Africa (234), followed by Northern Africa (119) and Western Asia (23). Among those were 566 males, 113 females and 44 minors, the youngest being 6 months old. Overall, the remains of the majority of people who died on CMR (891) were never found.



Figure 2: Recorded fatalities in the Mediterranean during 2019-2021 by routes

The majority of deaths on the CMR occurred off Libyan shores (994) where 871 people died in 36 shipwrecks. Additionally, throughout the year a concerning amount of human remains (123) washed ashore various locations and they could not be linked to any known shipwreck, which is an indication that more shipwrecks occurred than are currently recorded. Another 490 deaths occurred off the coasts of Tunisia where 436 people died in 32 shipwrecks, out of which at least eight boats departed from Libya. Another 54 human remains washed ashore various beaches in Tunisia and could not be linked to any known shipwreck. On the Eastern Algerian coasts ten deaths were recorded, including eight in an ‘invisible shipwreck’ and two remains washing ashore with no links to a known shipwreck. Additionally, 56 people died in seven shipwrecks off Italy, mainly Lampedusa, involving at least two boats embarking from Tunisia. Another boat that was rescued in the Maltese Search and Rescue (SAR) zone after embarking from Libya had the remains of three people onboard.

During 2021, 384 deaths were recorded along the **Western Mediterranean Route (WMR)**, a slight increase in comparison to 2020 (343) and a 44 per cent decrease from 2019 (552). Seven ‘invisible shipwrecks’ were recorded on WMR during 2021, however, reports by civil society organizations and families of missing migrants suggest that many more have occurred, particularly between Algeria and Spain, but they could not be verified at the time of publication. The nationalities of most of those who died on WMR (225) in 2021 remain unknown, while the majority of those whose sociodemographic data is available were from Northern Africa (159). Among those as per available data were 145 males, 28 females and 23 minors, with ages ranging between 2-60 years old. Overall, the remains of 54 per cent of migrants who died on WMR were never found.

At least 183 migrants perished off Western Algerian coasts, including 132 people who died in 16 shipwrecks, including four ‘invisible shipwrecks’. Additionally, the remains of 51 migrants that washed ashore various locations and could not be linked to any known shipwrecks. Another 72 people died off North Moroccan coasts en route to Spanish mainland, whereas at least 66 migrants died in ten shipwrecks, including two ‘invisible shipwrecks’, while six remains washed ashore various locations and could not be linked to any known shipwrecks. Additionally, 74 deaths were recorded in the coasts of the Spanish mainland, mainly Almería, Balearic Islands and Cádiz, indicating departure from both Algeria and Morocco. 62 people died in seven shipwrecks while 12 remains washed ashore and could not thoroughly linked to any known shipwreck. Two additional shipwrecks occurred in the Strait of Gibraltar including a boat that departed from Ceuta, Spain.

The concerning loss of life has also persisted on the crossing to Ceuta and Melilla until the end of 2021.

At least 45 people lost their lives in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta (23) and Melilla (8), as well as in Fnideq (9), Nador (4) and Belyounech (1) in Morocco, an increase from 2020 (15) and 2019 (13). Of these people, 26 were identified to be Moroccan males (including two minors) while the identities of the rest remain unknown. Arrivals to Ceuta and Melilla have increased during 2021 (10,845) compared to 2020 (1,755) and 2019 (6,346), mainly due to a record number of crossings in May surpassing 9,000 arrivals. During that time at least three people died.

Another 111 deaths were recorded on the **Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR)** during 2021 between Turkey and Greece, including 18 from the Middle East (nine males, three females and four minors) among those whose sociodemographic information is available.

SEPARATED AT SHORE: A TESTIMONY FROM LIBYA

Tony* left Nigeria with his girlfriend Adaku* in June 2020 with hopes of crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Italy after he lost his job at a beach bar due to COVID-19 impacts on tourism. Tony recalls “when we walked down to the sea, we saw light and a group of people around a rubber boat... We had snickers bars and water because the journey would take about eight hours. The boat sailed for hours and suddenly we saw lights. I thought it was the coast of Italy or Malta. The smugglers told us to throw our passports or any legal papers we had in the sea, which we did. As we approached the light, the boat slowed down and stopped... we ran out of gas. Apparently, the number of people on the boat exceeded its capacity and we started sinking. This was a nightmare. We could not swim to the light because it was too far. I held Adaku’s hand and told her we would be fine, that they have beacon towers and they would see us and rescue us. The boat sank and I started swimming. I wanted to keep Adaku on the boat as much as possible. The water was deep and I had cramps in my muscles. A big ship approached us with extremely bright lights and started throwing safety vests. We assumed they were Italians until we saw that unfortunately the ship had a Libyan flag. They were shouting in the microphones but I did not understand anything. Once they approached us people started panicking. They pushed each other to get onboard first and there was general panic. We were terrified... what they will do to us?... They took us back to Libya. Adaku and I were separated once we reached the shore. I was taken to a detention center. I cried for days and I blamed myself.” “I lost contact with Adaku and I think about her every day. I don’t know if she was taken to another detention center. Is she still alive? Neither my family nor her family have heard from her...It has been almost a year... I hope she is safe.”

-Testimony provided by IOM Libya

* Names have been changed to protect identity.

Western Africa-Atlantic Route

2021 has been the deadliest year for migration on the Western Africa-Atlantic route (WAAR) to the Canary Islands since MMP started recording incidents in 2014, where deaths have surged following the rise of crossings during COVID-19 pandemic. 1,109 deaths were recorded during 2021⁴, a 34 per cent increase from 2020 (878) and a 460 per cent increase from 2019 (210). The vast majority of the remains of people who perished on WAAR in 2021 (946) were never found. Most of the deaths on WAAR occurred off North African coasts (770), mainly the cities of Dakhla and Laayoune, followed by Spain (319). It is believed that

⁴ For an overview of deaths on the WAAR including departures from Western African countries and main countries of origin from Western Africa, see Missing Migrants Project’s Western and Central Africa Annual Regional Overview for 2021, <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/2021-west-central-africa>

many more have drowned on this route, particularly in ‘invisible shipwrecks’ – cases in which boats disappear without any survivors or remains recovered – as reported by civil society organizations.⁵ The MMP has recorded ‘five invisible shipwrecks’ following embarkation from Agadir, Dakhla and Laayoune, Northern Africa, but it is likely that many more remain undocumented.

The sociodemographic information for most of those who died recorded on WAAR in 2021 is unknown (517) while there were 239 males, 257 females and 96 minors including 11 infants. The nationalities of 75 percent of the people who lost their lives on this route are unknown (831) but are mostly presumed from Sub-Saharan Africa. However, among those for whom data on nationality is available, the top three countries of origin are Senegal (109), Morocco (96) and Côte d’Ivoire (61). The main cause of death recorded on WAAR is drowning (66%). However, 33 per cent of deaths resulted from harsh environmental conditions (hypothermia, dehydration, starvation, exposure and exhaustion) or sickness, reiterating the tragedy of the SAR gap along the long and perilous route in the Atlantic Ocean. Many of the recorded incidents involved people spending days and even weeks at sea in distress.



Figure 3: Western Africa-Atlantic Route fatalities during the four quarters of 2014-2021

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. MMP collects data through official sources such as the coast guard and local authorities; nongovernmental civil society organizations and focal points in IOM country offices; and media monitoring. However, media sources can have incomplete or incorrect coverage, which poses an additional challenge on routes with limited official reporting. This data collection methodology presents some limitations in terms of consistency and comparability of data given the availability of sources of data and information, but this does not diminish the value of the reported analysis.

Region/Route	Official Sources	Inter- / Non-Governmental Organizations	Multiple Media Sources	One Media Source
Northern Africa (land)	34.2%	34.2%	31.6%	0%
Western Asia	0%	66.7%	33.3%	0%
CMR	8%	68.2%	19.04%	4.8%
WMR	23.5%	11.8%	58.8%	5.9%
WAAR	22.2%	44.4%	22.2%	11.2%

Figure 4: MMP data sources by route and by source for 2021

5 Caminando Fronteras, 2021. <https://bit.ly/352v5hB>.

Data sources and challenges remained nearly the same during this year in comparison to 2020 and 2019. This is apart from Northern Africa, when up to 95 per cent of incidents came from testimonies from the Mixed Migration Centre's 4mi surveys in 2019 before they changed their methodology. However, the proportion of official and civil society sources have drastically increased for Northern Africa during 2021, which signifies an improvement of data collection by the authorities and IOM projects in country offices such as DTM. Although CMR is usually the most visible route, official reporting has been the scarcest among all routes in 2021, with the exception of Western Asia where no incidents came from official sources. The former remains heavily dependent on inter- and non-governmental organizations for reporting. Media has been the source for more than half of the recorded incidents on WMR.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic did not significantly limit dangerous migration in the region, on the contrary, data shows how it has added another layer to complex and multifaceted drivers of migration. According to reports, at least two people who died while trying to cross Ceuta and Melilla had lost their jobs due to the pandemic related measures and were seeking employment. Many people took more perilous and remote journeys on unsafe vehicles and unseaworthy makeshift boats during 2021, particularly through North Africa, with the aim of reaching Europe. However, the records on people who have lost their lives on the different routes represent a true undercount, given the magnitude of reports by civil society, social media and families of missing migrants that could not be verified. Additionally, the phenomena of remains washing ashore with no linkages to known shipwrecks and 'invisible shipwrecks' persisted in the region throughout 2021, which indicate shipwrecks that we have no information about.

Data shows that in several incidents, migrants were also rescued by non-governmental organizations, commercial vessels, fishermen and oil rig workers. While many lifesaving state-led SAR operations were conducted at sea on the shores of MENA countries during 2021, the recorded loss of lives of hundreds of people, including those who were onboard rescued boats, demonstrate that a more proactive State-led approach to saving lives at sea without delay is desperately needed. Efficient SAR is also needed on desert routes, where many skeletal remains of migrants are found, and many more lives are likely lost without being recorded. The MMP data continues to be incomplete due to the limited political will to save lives and document deaths across MENA, as exemplified by the lack of official data, despite commitments to do so in many contexts, including the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, though these challenges exist across all regions of the world.



Figure 5: Italian Coast Guard rescues migrants and refugees bound for Italy. © IOM/Francesco Malavolta 2014



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
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Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA
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