

Changing Routes: The Adaptability of Somali Migrants and Their Smuggling Networks

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Abstract : The migration routes linking the Horn of Africa to Europe shift in response to political and humanitarian developments across the region. Abrupt changes to those routes can have profound effects on the relative ease of movement and the well-being of migrants. Somali migrants have traditionally been able to rely on a sophisticated, well-established, and reliable network of smugglers to facilitate their journey through the Sahel to Libya, but changes to the routes have undermined those networks. Recently, these shifts have made the journey from Somalia to Europe much more perilous. As the Libyan coast guard intensifies its efforts to stymie boats leaving its coast for Italian shores, arrivals in Spain are trending upwards. This paper thus, will examine how the instability in transit countries that are most commonly used by Somali migrants has had an impact on the reliability of their massive network of smuggling, and how resurgence in the Western route toward Spain provides a potentially new opportunity to reach Europe—a route that has rarely been used by the Somali migrant population in the past. First, the paper will discuss what scholars have called the pastoralist, nomadic tradition of Somalis which reportedly has allowed them to endure the long journeys from Somalia to their chosen destinations. Facilitated by relatives or clan affiliation, Somali migrants have historically been able to rely on a smuggling network that – at least tangentially – provided more security nets during their travels. Given the violence and chaos that unfolded both in Libya and Yemen in 2011 and 2015, respectively, the paper will, secondly, examine which actors in smuggling hubs increase the vulnerabilities of Somalis, pushing them to consider other routes. As a result, this paper will consider to what extent Somalis could follow the stream of other migrants to Algeria and Morocco to enter Europe via Spain. By examining one particular group of migrants and the nature and limitations of the networks associated with their movements, the paper will demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of both the migrants and the networks regardless of the ever-changing nature of migration routes and actors.

Keywords : Europe, migration, smuggling networks, Somalia

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