

SMALL BOATS, BIG BUSINESS

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THE INDUSTRIALIZATION OF CROSS-CHANNEL MIGRANT SMUGGLING

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FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: THE INDUSTRIALIZATION OF MIGRANT SMUGGLING

s of January 2024, over 100 000 people had crossed the English Channel using small boats since 2018. The current peak came in 2022, when over 45 000 people were detected arriving in the UK illegally using small boats launched from the coast of northern France.¹ Although small in comparison with the flows of migrants risking the journey across the Mediterranean to reach Europe each year, this figure marked a record high for the UK since records began in 2018.² The spike in the number of arrivals can be largely explained by the 'industrialization' of a system of smuggling migrants by boat, a process that began in 2018.

Crossing the English Channel by boat is a technique developed by human smugglers in response to tighter security in northern France adopted in an attempt to stem growing waves of migrants – the so-called 'migrant crisis' of 2015–2018. Smugglers had previously sought to hide their clients in trucks using the Channel Tunnel, but faced with heightened surveillance and interdiction by the authorities, began to shift towards small boats as a means of transport at once simple and efficient, yet far more perilous for the passengers. Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic are also factors behind this shift: the former raised fears among migrants that they would be subjected to tougher border controls, while both Brexit and the pandemic raised the price migrants had to pay for passage by truck (although this method has continued to be used).

These factors are not the only reason. Human smuggling networks have commercialized the smallboat route, keeping prices competitive and launching persuasive recruitment campaigns in migrants' countries of origin. Operations have become more sophisticated and efficient. Smugglers manage the flow by temporarily holding migrants away from the coast, where law enforcement attention is concentrated. Once a boat or a flotilla has been dispatched, the next is prepared, reducing the time migrants spend in makeshift camps, and thus their likelihood of being apprehended. Law enforcement operations have driven innovation among smugglers, who have become adept at using small boats, from supply of the vessels to the point they are launched, and using departure points that are out of the spotlight of security agencies.

Iranian Kurdish criminal actors were the first to organize this method of crossing, but control over smuggling in the coastal region was quickly asserted by Iraqi Kurdish groups, who now are the arbiters of when migrants depart and from where.³ These groups have defined zones of interest,

although violent competition over departure sites as well as pragmatic cooperation between clans are common. Albanian people smugglers – perceived in the British media as the most significant actor in this space – work under the auspices of Kurdish actors. During fieldwork for this study, Albanian migrants said that their Albanian smuggler reported to Iraqi Kurd networks, who made the decisions about departures.⁴





SOURCE: UK Home Office, Irregular migration detailed datasets and summary tables, https://www.gov. uk/government/statistical-data-sets/irregular-migration-detailed-dataset-and-summary-tables#detaileddatasets

According to one smuggler based in Germany, a smuggling network tends to consists of between eight and twelve people.⁵ The kingpin usually lives in another country, together with a trusted person who controls the network for the kingpin. (Some smugglers continue to operate their networks from inside prison, often having smuggled in a mobile phone.) On the French coast, the other network members are assigned functions: three or four guide the migrants to the entry point; another three to four take care of logistics, involving transporting the boat engines, hulls and fuel to the launching point. The rest work as guards, monitoring the area for rival networks and law enforcement agents. It is a highly lucrative business, with one source estimating that smuggling networks can earn more than a million US dollars (approximately €920 000) a month.⁶ Xavier Delrieu, head of the French Office for the Fight against the Illicit Trafficking of Migrants, estimated that the value of the migrant smuggling industry in 2022 was €150 million.⁷

The migrant bears the overwhelming burden of risk – physical, psychological and legal. The boats are often overloaded with passengers to maximize profits, and structurally unsuited for such dangerous seas and capsize. Some make the journey successfully; others are intercepted, but many drown at sea. According to the IOM Missing Migrants project, between 2014 and September 2023, 220 migrants and refugees went missing or died, including children, when attempting to cross the Channel.⁸ The greatest proportion of deaths – almost 60% – have occurred since 2019 (see Figure 2).⁹



FIGURE 2 Migrant deaths in the English Channel, by year. SOURCE: IOM, Missing Migrants

This report explores how the English Channel has become a commercialized human smuggling route. It analyzes the shift in the mode of human smuggling transportation from land to sea, from trucks using the Channel Tunnel to rigid inflatable boats (RIBs).¹⁰ It explores how the smuggler networks manage payments for migrants, enforce control at the coastal areas and secure the supply of vessels. It also provides an anatomy of a typical crossing on this route, highlighting the complex nature of migrants' journeys, and provides recommendations for how to delink the steady demand among migrants to reach the UK from the criminal smuggling networks that organize the crossings.

The report draws from triangulated fieldwork that engaged with people working in the smuggling trade; this was conducted in the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Afghanistan, Iraq and Albania in 2022 and 2023. It also uses material from interviews with migrants and researchers who have experienced the crossing, reviews of court proceedings, as well as a literature review.

INTRODUCTION: THE PROMISED LAND

twenty-mile stretch of water: the last step in a long, arduous journey. As night falls, migrants waiting in Calais can glimpse the distant lights of their ultimate destination, the United Kingdom. All that remains is that last leg, crossing the Channel.

For these migrants, the prospect of linking up with family members, the economic opportunities in the UK afforded by the informal labour market, combined with the relative ease of learning English (for those who are not already familiar with the language) are powerful incentives to undertake the perilous final leg of their journey to reach the UK. For many, despite the hardships of relocation, the quality of life they will experience in the UK is a marked improvement on the prospects in their country of origin.¹¹ These potent pull factors – as well as push factors, such as civil unrest, conflict or lack of economic opportunity in their countries of origin – explain why the migrants keep coming. This clear linkage is seen in the data of arrivals: the annual number of migrants from Afghanistan rose sixfold in 2022 after the Taliban returned to power in August 2021.¹²

Since around 2015, growing numbers of migrants have been turning to small boats to make the journey to the UK. Although data for small-boat crossings has only been available since 2018, the rise has been dramatic. According to official data, almost 110 000 migrants attempted to cross the Channel between 2018 and September 2023.¹³

The general increase in global illegal migration over the past two decades, and the 'small boats crisis' – as some are wont to describe the phenomenon – in particular, have put illegal migration firmly in the public and political eye in the UK. The Conservative Party has explored several means to deter irregular migrants, including by deporting some to Rwanda. British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak pledged to 'stop the boats' as one of his five key priorities at the beginning of 2023. In December 2022, Sunak announced a new programme to return Albanian migrants to Albania, and said that the current rejection rate of just 45% of asylum applications from Albanians was much lower than in several European countries and 'must not continue'. In his statement, the prime minister said guidance would render the vast majority of such applications as 'clearly unfounded'.¹⁴ The Conservative Party's flagship piece in its legislative armoury, the Illegal Migration Act, was granted royal assent in July 2023, removing the right of asylum for those who had entered the country illegally after having transited another country where they did not face persecution, regardless of their personal circumstances.¹⁵



Migrants set sea from the French coast in an inflatable boat, June 2023. © Volke/DeFodi Images via Getty Images

In the debate over small-boat arrivals, the authorities have highlighted the role of organized crime, and validly so. In December 2022, Sunak said in Parliament: 'Today far too many of the beneficiaries of [the UK's] generosity are not those directly fleeing war zones or at risk of persecution but people crossing the Channel in small boats. ... Their journeys are not ad hoc ... but coordinated by ruthless, organised criminals.'¹⁶

It is ironic, however, that the central, coordinating role played by organized crime in small-boat crossings to the UK stems in large part from earlier efforts by the state to secure the Channel against irregular migration. As such, and very much in line with lessons learnt elsewhere, efforts by the UK and France to raise the barriers to migration will most likely have the effect of tightening the grip of those 'ruthless organised criminals' Sunak refers to, and not breaking it.

Preliminary evidence indicates that despite the years of stern political rhetoric and hundreds of millions of pounds spent on deterring migration, the migrants keep coming. While the UK government has been keen to highlight the fall in the number of migrants detected on small boats in 2023 – adducing the drop to its strategies of up- and downstream interventions¹⁷ – a spokesperson for the UK Immigration Services Union cited bad weather as the cause for the drop, and said they expected numbers to rise again in 2024.¹⁸

Yet even if smugglers do come under pressure, they are well positioned – and incentivized – to adapt. As the next section explores, this multi-million-pound illicit industry has professionalized and centralized over the past five years, and there has been no diminution in demand. Should the government continue to raise barriers to legal migration, making it increasingly difficult to cross the Channel, agile smugglers will continue to pioneer new methods and their profits will only get higher.

As one French fisherman interviewed for this study said, the only solution is to take the United Kingdom and put it in the middle of the Atlantic. 'Although,' he reflected, 'the boats will still try to get there.'¹⁹

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HUMAN SMUGGLING ACROSS THE CHANNEL

Since around 2015, the human smuggling system behind illegal Channel crossings has changed dramatically. The smuggling industry, which formerly relied on transporting migrants to the UK in trucks, has been complemented – although not completely replaced – by a new approach: maritime crossings using small boats. Meanwhile, the ethnic assortment of smuggling networks controlling the industry, whose clients were usually fellow nationals, has been largely replaced by a more structured system dominated by Kurdish groups, who have long been major players in the industry. The reasons behind this shift in the human smuggling landscape – explored below – are various, but growing demand, state responses, Brexit, the covid pandemic and technological developments have all played their part.

The smuggling ecosystem before 2018

Large-scale human smuggling across the English Channel is not a new phenomenon. In 2005, for example, a major operation by the British Metropolitan Police uncovered a vast human smuggling network run by Turkish Kurds that had helped tens of thousands of Turkish nationals reach the UK by truck, ferry, car and light aircraft.²⁰ Until 2018, concealment in vehicles using the Channel Tunnel and rail were the most common means of smuggling migrants to the UK. Small-boat crossings – a method pioneered by Kurdish Iranians – were then rare and appeared to bear a low success rate.²¹

In the early 2010s, migrants seeking to reach the UK would typically use the services of smugglers of generally the same ethnicity.²² Around this time, the migrant routes leading to Calais and Dunkirk were controlled by Iraqi Kurds and Vietnamese networks, but no single group wielded control of the key coastal departure points. There were, however, signs of collaboration between different ethnic groups: in 2011, a Europol operation discovered that a Vietnamese network smuggling Vietnamese nationals in the UK was cooperating with Iraqi Kurd smugglers in a migrant camp in the Grande-Synthe suburb of Dunkirk.²³



The 'Jungle' near Calais, where migrants in their thousands would camp, awaiting their crossing, until it was shut down by the authorities in 2016. © Moment Open via Getty Images

Bilateral efforts: Combating irregular migration

he opening of the Channel Tunnel in May 1994 transformed the transport links between the UK and mainland Europe. The bilateral Sangatte Protocol, which entered into force August 1993, was intended to recalibrate frontier controls to the new arrangement, but with irregular migration a continuing issue, the British and French governments entered into further agreements, most notably the Treaty of Le Touquet (2003) and bilateral accords in 2009, 2010 and 2014, that effectively made France responsible for intercepting irregular migrants trying to cross into the UK. The UK undertook to fund border security measures on French soil, to the tune of at least £232 million between 2014 and the end of the 2022/23 financial year.²⁴

As irregular migration shifted to small boats – and the role of organized crime grew – further agreements were struck, including the 2018 Sandhurst Treaty and November 2022 joint declaration of the countries' Interior Minister and Home Secretary. Later, a UK–France Joint Leaders' Declaration in March 2023 pledged further cooperation 'to undermine human traffickers' business model' and increase the number of crossings intercepted.²⁵ The UK pledged funding of £541 million over the next three financial years, some 500 additional personnel and additional infrastructure and surveillance equipment. Both France and the UK committed to making increased use of covert intelligence sharing and 'joint efforts to tackle the supply chain of equipment that enables dangerous and illegal small boat crossings'.²⁶



Migrants board a truck bound for Britain at the entrance to the Channel Tunnel in Calais, December 2020. © Denis Charlet/AFP via Getty Images

The outbreak of the Syrian war and resultant exodus of millions of refugees precipitated the so-called 'migrant crisis' from 2015 to 2018, which transformed the human smuggling landscape. There was a surge in numbers in migrant camps, such as the notorious 'Jungle' in Calais, where up to 10 000 migrants and refugees lived.

In response to this situation, the British and French governments hardened security at major French ports, increasing surveillance, installing heat, heartbeat and carbon dioxide sensors, and adding miles



Security was increased along the Channel Tunnel lines to deter migrants following the 2015 'migrant crisis'. *Photo supplied*

of extra security fencing.²⁷ Moats were also dug and barbed wire laid along the railway line, and motion detection barriers installed. Fuel stations were surrounded by seven-metre-high concrete walls to prevent migrants from accessing trucks.²⁸ The Jungle was shut down in October 2016 by the French authorities, who subsequently instituted a *'zéro point de fixation'* policy, which directed that makeshift camps for migrants in Calais be systematically disrupted every 48 hours to prevent informal settlements from becoming established.²⁹

To evade detection, Albanian and Kurdish smugglers increasingly resorted to riskier methods, including concealing migrants in containers and refrigerated lorries.³⁰ In some cases, these resulted in tragedy, most notably in the 2019 Essex lorry incident, where 39 people died after suffocating or freezing to death during the journey.³¹

It was around this time that smugglers also began to industrialize an even riskier way of helping migrants into the UK: deploying small boats to make the crossing.³²

The growing number of small-boat crossings

Crossing the Channel in a small boat is a highly dangerous undertaking. Although the distance is relatively short, conditions can be highly hazardous, both due to marine weather and because the Channel is the busiest shipping route in the world, used by between 500 and 600 vessels every day.

These considerations perhaps explain why small-boat crossings remained a relatively small market in the early 2010s (although one should nevertheless take into account that official data began to be recorded only in 2018). Between July 2014 and May 2016, the Home Office noted only nine small boats crossing the English Channel.³³

This began to change in 2018, when 299 people – mostly Iranian, and some Iraqis – were recorded as having made the crossing in small boats.³⁴ Syrian and Afghan migrants and refugees also started to use this route, alongside smaller numbers from other nationalities, predominantly Africans.³⁵ By November 2019, crossings using rigid inflatable boats (RIBs) had become the main method used by smuggling networks offering services from the EU to the UK. Some 8 500 people arrived in the UK on small boats in 2019, representing more than a sixfold increase against the year before. By 2020, crossings by small boat amounted to 50% of all irregular arrivals in the UK, compared to 11% in the previous year.³⁶ As demand grew, smugglers began to seek disembarkation points further afield, including Zeebrugge, in Belgium, and Petit Caux, some 150 kilometres south of Calais.³⁷

The economics of the small-boat crossing were also changing, making it a more attractive option for migrants than the truck route from a financial perspective as demand increased. Before 2018, the price of a small-boat crossing had been much higher – reportedly €14 000 per person – but two major events would soon change this calculus.³⁸ Firstly, the implementation of post-Brexit border controls raised the already high price of travelling by truck,³⁹ while the coronavirus pandemic also

saw the number of truck journeys plunging, making the maritime route the more viable option. As a consequence, crossing by boat became comparatively cheaper (between £2 500 and £4 000 per person, or $\leq 3\ 000-\leq 4\ 700$))⁴⁰ than travelling by truck, where prices rose to between £20 000 and £25 000 ($\leq 23\ 600-\leq 29\ 500$) for Albanian migrants, although for other nationalities the maximum reported price was £17 000 ($\leq 20\ 000$).⁴¹

To maximize profit, smugglers began to increase the number of people they put on each boat.⁴² According to the central director of the French Police aux Frontières (border police), cited in a media report, there was an average of 27 people occupying each boat in 2021, up from 12 per boat in 2019.⁴³ Our research in 2023 has seen these numbers rise to, reportedly, between 45 and 65 crammed into one boat.⁴⁴ In some sense, this can explained by smugglers turning to bigger boats (see 'Buying a boat' below) but in the majority of cases smugglers are simply packing each boat with more and more people, dramatically raising the risk of capsizing. The risk is heightened by the fact that the structural quality of the boats is generally very poor. One French coastal lifeguard noted: 'The handles come off very fast and the floor of the boat is very fragile.⁴⁵ According to the UK's National Crime Agency (NCA), substandard materials are often used to reinforce the floor (to enable the boat the carry more people), with the result that the floor sometimes gives way at sea, plunging the passengers into the water.⁴⁶

In terms of the actors involved in the crossings, Kurdish Iranian smugglers pioneered the mass use of small boats in the early days of the industry. As is often the case, many Iranian smugglers were migrants themselves in Calais in 2018–2019, and turned to smuggling when they saw the money to be made.⁴⁷ Networks of Kurdish smugglers were instrumental in driving the expansion of the small-boat crossing in 2019–2020, assisting migrants and refugees from Iraq, Iran and Syria, which have significant Kurdish populations.

From 2021, Albanian criminal networks also became increasingly involved in RIB crossings. The number of Albanian migrants travelling on this route reached over 12 000 in 2022, according to the UK government – more than any other nationality making the crossing that year.⁴⁸ According to the British authorities, this 'exponential' rise was 'due to the fact that Albanian criminal gangs have gained a foothold in the north of France.⁴⁹ However, it may be that smugglers' upstream tactics also had a shaping influence on demand. Recruiters (posting under fake identities) frequently target potential clientele in Albania using social media, especially TikTok, with up-beat messages: 'To England. 4 000 GBP. With boats. Every day', or 'To London. 100% sure, no chances of failures. These are the best prices in the market.'⁵⁰ Smugglers also played on fears that tighter post-Brexit border controls would make it more difficult to reach the UK without the assistance of a smuggler.



Tiktok channel in Albanian advertising cross-Channel smuggling services from France to the UK. *Photo supplied*

The lower price of boat crossings may also have opened the market to more Albanian migrants. Previously, when expensive truck passages were the only option, Albanians would have to take out loans, sell land or livestock, or become indebted to smugglers or relatives.⁵¹

But contrary to the popular perception in the UK that Albanians are responsible for running the Channel-smuggling operations, our fieldwork found that, although Albanians are present as an organized group within the supply chain, they work in fact as clients and middlemen for the dominant actors in the world of small-boat smuggling: the Kurds.

Buying a boat

Any migrants attempting to make the crossing without the aid of smuggling networks use whatever vessel they can get, including dinghies, pool boats, kayaks and paddle boats. Sudanese migrants, who often have limited financial means, were reported to make use of such vessels (although some Sudanese were reported to pay a reduced fee (€700) to smugglers, perhaps in exchange for having worked or promising to work for the network in the future).⁵² This situation has led to sports equipment store Decathlon refusing to stock such items in areas where migrants are known to attempt the crossing, forcing them to buy them further afield, including in Paris.

The equipment and its supply chain used by smuggling networks are more complex. Most of the RIBs are manufactured in China. While the boats vary in size, they are usually approximately 8 metres long and just under 2 metres wide. By 2022, the engine types commonly used were Yamabisi (30 or 40 horse power) manufactured in China, which are available on the Chinese online platform Alibaba for around €1 300.53 From China, the boat equipment is sent by container to Turkey and then moved to Europe. The boats are transported from Germany, Belgium or the Netherlands to the French coast in vans, SUVs or recreational vehicles. Germany is a particularly important transit point on these routes, as many of the drivers are asylum seekers in Germany who typically earn between €300 and €2 000 for transporting a boat to France.⁵⁴ Investigations into smuggling networks have also identified a number of storage facilities for boats in Germany.⁵⁵ According to German Press Agency DPA, 90% of the equipment used to

cross the Channel is transported from Germany.⁵⁶ Recently, Romania has emerged as a hub for boats coming from China.⁵⁷

In some cases, groups of boat transporters appear to provide their services to several smuggling rings. In Lille, one group of 30 predominantly French transporters composed of young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods reportedly made an average of four boat deliveries to the coast each night in good weather.⁵⁸ This group allegedly supplied several different networks, with a flat fee of €200 paid per delivery of a boat. Their warehouse was shut down by French authorities in 2022, who also seized 700 lifejackets.⁵⁹ As part of its efforts to disrupt smuggling supply chains, in November 2022, the NCA carried out a joint operation with French police to dismantle a crime group that had been involved in supplying boats that could carry up to 60 people, resulting in 18 arrests.⁶⁰

The price for a boat, including the logistics costs, is about $\[mathcal{\in}10\]$ 000.⁶¹ This relatively modest outlay translates into extraordinary potential for profit: assuming an occupancy of 50 people, each paying $\[mathcal{\in}2\]$ 000, a single trip can generate $\[mathcal{\in}100\]$ 000 (although the smuggler will of course have other costs to pay besides the hardware used in the crossing).⁶² Indeed, this scale of return has itself given rise to a new criminal business, identified in 2023, whereby criminal networks act as facilitators for individuals wishing to set up their own smuggling operations. For $\[mathcal{e}10\]$ 000, a would-be smuggler can buy their own RIB, with delivery included to the coast, although Kurdish networks still retain overall control over who is allowed to cross, and when.



Inflatable boats and outboard engines in a Port Authority site in Dover in March 2023, believed to have been used by migrants to make the crossing. © Daniel Leal/AFP via Getty Images

THE KURDS TAKE CHARGE

ieldwork conducted for this study found that there has been a shift in ethnic power dynamics over the maritime route. Since 2019–2020, Iraqi Kurd smugglers have taken control of key coastal embarkation points in northern France from Iranian Kurdish criminal actors. Although Iranians continue to operate, their stretch of coast is clearly demarcated (Figure 3). Calais and areas east of the city are now predominantly controlled by Iraqi Kurd networks, who are overall the most powerful networks with the largest market share, with other nationalities (such as Africans and Afghans) working under them (although Dunkirk is under the total control of Iraqi Kurds).⁶³ The area to the west of Calais is predominantly controlled by Kurdish Iranians.⁶⁴ Along the coast, territory is divided according to the smugglers' home regions, such as Erbil, Sulaimaniya, Ranya, Sharazoor, in Iraqi Kurdistan, and Sardasht in Iran, with each smuggling group controlling an exclusive point. Smugglers from Ranya reportedly control a large part of territory in Calais and Dunkirk. Conflict breaks out when these territorial boundaries are encroached upon by rival smugglers.⁶⁵

Although Kurdish actors have been involved in smuggling migrants to the UK for decades, they have garnered less attention in the UK in recent years than Albanian networks, perhaps due to the huge spike in Albanian migrants in 2021 that dominated media coverage. As yet, much remains unclear about the evolution and political economy of Kurdish groups in Europe, especially as they connect to Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria – all countries with significant Kurdish minorities.

Yet in other ways, the Kurds' prominence in human smuggling is perhaps unsurprising. The Kurds have always been in a precarious situation: as a millions-strong minority with ambitions for an independent state, they have often led an uneasy existence in their home countries – as one Kurdish saying puts it, they have 'no friends but the mountains'. Over the years, these dynamics have resulted in varying forms of repression and persecution, which has driven an exodus of Kurds (often facilitated by smugglers) to Europe and elsewhere, creating diaspora communities that serve as a positive feedback cycle for further waves of migration. Once a community is established in a



FIGURE 3 Kurdish smugglers' embarkation territories.

new country, it becomes easier for new migrants to integrate – although they are often at the mercy of their smugglers for work and accommodation in the new country.⁶⁶

Another reason for the Kurds' modern-day involvement in human smuggling may simply be geography. Their presence in the arc of land that transects Turkey, north-western Syria, northern Iraq (where the Kurds have their own autonomous region) and the Zagros Mountains in Iran may also explain their prominence in human smuggling, as this region lies along the overland migrant routes from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Iran. For Kurdish smuggling actors, the Syrian War most likely provided a fillip, as many Syrian migrants fleeing conflict attempted to enter Turkey and, to a lesser extent, Iraqi Kurdistan.⁶⁷

They may have 'learnt the trade' at home, but, today, Kurdish smugglers are not limited to their own countries, but operate wherever business is brisk. In December 2021, for example, it was reported that Kurdish smugglers were meeting African and Middle Eastern migrants in Minsk, Belarus, before sending them on to Western Europe.⁶⁸ Our fieldwork also confirmed the use of Belarus as a transit hub before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.⁶⁹



FIGURE 4 Areas with significant Kurdish populations – the so-called Kurdish arc. SOURCE: Adapted from The Kurdish Project, https://thekurdishproject.org/kurdistan-map/

It is also clear that, while many bosses may be based in Western Europe, the link to the Kurdish arc is still strong in some cases. Some of the profits from smuggling in Europe are reportedly reinvested in their home country (in real estate, for example). In the case of Iraqi smugglers, this process is facilitated by the fact that their earnings are held in the trust office in Iraq and they usually have a family member who can take care of local affairs.⁷⁰ Research conducted in Sharazoor District in Iraqi Kurdistan discovered a luxurious villa built in the area of Said Sadiq, the owner of which is reportedly known for having made his fortune in migrant smuggling in Calais.⁷¹ He also reportedly owns a car repair garage, which also serves as a hub for migrants seeking to make the journey to London. The Union Jack and EU flags hoisted above offer a hint as to the business's dual purpose (see photo).⁷²

Some smugglers are alleged to invest profits made in France in other illicit economies, such as drug and arms trafficking, but more research is needed to substantiate these links and the extent to which such groups maintain a presence in Europe.⁷³





The Iraqi home of an alleged Kurdish human smuggler and his car repair workshop. *Photos supplied*

During research for this report, several characteristics emerged regarding the structure and nature of Kurdish groups operating on the French coast: the importance of territory; the use of the *hawala* system to facilitate migrants' payments; and the role of violence in imposing control over migrants and challenging other groupings for market share.

Territory and geography

The Kurdish smuggling networks on the northern French coast are not centrally coordinated. In other words, there is no mafia-style Kurdish group with complete dominion over human smuggling along the French coast. Rather, the smuggling landscape resembles the territorial nature of drug dealing in the sense that each Iraqi Kurdish and Iranian group has its own territory; if a clan attempts to usurp the beach of another clan, violence often ensues, including murder.⁷⁴ That said, shared financial interests, including the benefits of cooperation, act as a counterbalance against disputes.

And, as is the case with the drug trade, the bosses usually remain far from the area of active business. Fieldwork conducted in June 2023 suggests that the network heads usually reside in one of the principal countries of origin for migrants and refugees (predominantly Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan or Albania); others are likely to stay in the UK or Germany.⁷⁵ It was said that many network chiefs lived in Turkey, where Istanbul acts as a funnel for Middle Eastern and Asian migrants, and where there is also a significant Kurdish population.⁷⁶ This geographic distribution may also reflect the focus of business: smuggler networks that are predominantly focused on the maritime crossing will be based in Western Europe, while others focusing on overland routes will be based in the sending countries. Yet as the case of 'Karwan' illustrates (see the profile below), there are also strong ties between smugglers in Western Europe and elsewhere that enable the full package model to function.

Profile of a smuggler

arwan (not his real name) is a well-established smuggler, having been in the business for five years and supervising a 15-person outfit in Calais.⁷⁷ From Sulaimaniya, in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, he is now based in the UK. While his group comprises operatives from various nationalities, such as Albanians and Arabs, those involved in surveillance belong to his home town, highlighting the importance of trust in the higher-level roles.

His extensive network of alliances extends to smugglers based in Iraq, Turkey and Greece, who provide the migrants wishing to make the journey to the UK. Payment is usually made through a mutual trust office in Kurdistan. Upon the migrants' arrival in France, Karwan's men stationed in Paris take over the task of the migrants' onward journey to Calais. To provide protection against rival networks, Karwan's team are well armed with automatic weapons and handguns (he joked that they have more weapons than NATO in Calais). His weapons are sourced from contacts in the Balkans; another smuggler said that his group secures everything they need (including pistols, AK-47s and ammunition) from the black market in France through contacts from North Africa.78 Boats are procured from associates, including Germans, who also sometimes collect and transport migrants to the launching point. To avoid detection, the group frequently change their phones and use WhatsApp numbers originating from their home countries (according to Karwan, it is a widely known fact that local phone numbers are under surveillance: he uses a WhatsApp number from Irag). Members who are arrested are provided with legal assistance.

Despite the territorialism, if a group has an oversupply of migrants and not enough boats to service them, it may transfer some migrants to another clan. Albanian and Vietnamese smugglers also work with Kurdish smugglers, using them as providers of boats and to supply migrants. As such, there is an organic flexibility to the nature of operations at the coast, which is interestingly married to a sophisticated means of regulating the arrival of batches of migrants from waiting zones inland (see below 'Anatomy of a crossing').

According to migrant testimonies, dozens of smugglers operate on the coast with clearly demarcated territories.⁷⁹ Networks were described as divided into several 'units' with different functions: those who take the migrants from a city such as Paris or Brussels to the camp; those who take the migrants from the camp to the coast, those who cook and those who accompany migrants to the point of departure at the beach.⁸⁰ From the point of view of the migrants, it is not clear who is leading the smuggling process, and as is typical with smuggling operations globally, it is rare that migrants will encounter the heads of these criminal networks, even though they may be well known (see 'Apple – an Iranian smuggling kingpin').⁸¹ It is also unclear whether those described as the kingpins by migrants and lower-level operatives will even be the senior most smuggling organizer, or the one providing the financial backing. Often the very top of the chain will never be known or seen.

Profile of an Iranian smuggling kingpin

ach of the four main Iranian networks we identified is allegedly led by a named individual. The most infamous is nicknamed 'Apple'. He reportedly has a Kurdish-Iranian accent and uses a UK WhatsApp number (the other kingpins use French or Iranian numbers). Some Iranian kingpins are more careful of their reputation (and clients) than the Kurdish, aware this is a key selling point among clients

(and they can charge more as a result). Apple is known to use good-quality boats and engines, and not to overload the boats. For an additional fee of $\leq 1 \ 000 - \leq 1 \ 500$, he also coordinates legal support if a migrant is arrested upon arrival. Apple is also known to use violence against any who fail to pay.

Paying your passage: The hawala system

Kurdish smugglers offer both full package services from countries of origin (mainly Iraq and Iran) or transit (predominantly via Turkey or Germany), alongside standalone Channel crossing services. In reality, these packages are executed by a diverse range of smugglers, from those located in sending countries to intermediaries in Germany and France, and those responsible for the actual crossing in northern France.

Full package services sometimes include fraudulent or illegally procured documentation. Most of the fake passports are reportedly made in Turkey, although according to one source, the most expensive and highest-quality passports are fake Israeli passports that are made in Thailand and are generally unchallenged by customs officials.⁸² Such packages are often advertised online, including on encrypted services such as Telegram. One Telegram channel offered Iranian and Iraqi would-be migrants a full package service via Turkey and Belarus (before the Russian invasion in 2022) to Germany for a set price of €8 000. Many videos and photographs of the one-week journey accompanied the advert, which is also used by migrants to find information and smugglers (the Farsi-language 'Calais Dunkirk' channel is well known).

Informal money transfer networks are used by migrants and refugees of a range of nationalities, including Iranians, Iraqis, Sudanese and Afghans, to make payments to networks across the journey, either in the full package scheme or in pay-as-you-go. The *hawala* payment system, which relies on a trusted network of transfer agents to make payments outside the banking system, is being widely used to facilitate the payment of migrants' journeys from mainland Europe to the UK.⁸³

With the full package system, travellers in Iran, Iraq or Turkey typically deposit payments with money transfer agencies (known as Sarafi) allied with the smuggling network. Networks will share a list of allied agencies with clients ahead of time. *Hawaladars* are present in the country of origin, at nodes across the journey (including in and near transit camps in coastal areas) and in the UK.⁸⁴ One migrant, speaking to the press, noted that smugglers asked which country the client wished to pay in, with options including Germany, the Netherlands, Kurdistan, Iraq, Syria or Turkey. Once the choice was made, the client was furnished with the number of the relevant *hawaladar* to make payment.⁸⁵

The *hawaladar* network not only enables payments to be made to members of the smuggling network elsewhere, but also empowers migrants and refugees to collect money from home at later stages in the journey. *Hawaladars* can also play a role in networks' recruitment strategies. In Iraq, for example, they often connect prospective clients with networks offering the maritime journey across the Channel. Migrants report that they prefer not having to carry large amounts of cash and that this mode of payment reduces the risk of being swindled or robbed.⁸⁶ The payment network, which operates largely without an easily traceable paper trail, helps smugglers mask transactions from authorities and avoids the risks inherent in taking cash across borders.



Researchers encountered an Afghan former special forces soldier who was staying at this site near Calais Hospital while waiting to make the crossing. *Photo supplied*

According to our fieldwork, fees appear to be relatively high, however, for such payment services, with up to 10% commission being cited by one Iranian money transfer agent operating in Créteil, near Paris, who also reportedly provides other services to migrants and refugees, including accommodation and false documents. These high fees are notable, as *hawala* is generally a less expensive method than other remittance services, which either charge higher fees or have less favourable exchange rates.⁸⁷ Sometimes money transfers are made using the *hawaladar* system, while the online platform Western Union is also used.

A violent business

Control by violence is a defining feature of the Kurdish smuggling system at the French coast. The highly lucrative nature of the business means that competition between, and within, networks is sometimes fierce. There has been frequent media coverage of shootings since 2020.⁸⁸ A 2023 investigation by the GI-TOC in Iraq found that two main Kurdish groups from Erbil and Sharazoor had fought for control over the migration route in Dunkirk. Eventually, the Sharazoor faction achieved supremacy, and the activity of the Erbil group reportedly declined.⁸⁹ There have also been reports of violence associated with an Iraqi Kurdish group over control of the business and launch sites for the boats, leading to two attempted murders, in Germany and France.⁹⁰

Our fieldwork also discovered that Iraqi Kurds hire third parties, commonly referred to generically as 'mafia', who may be armed with AK-47s, grenades and revolvers.⁹¹ Gun casings on the ground in areas close to the Loon-Plage camp are common.⁹² In the past, only senior elements in the network hierarchy were reportedly armed, but more recently weapons have been distributed to lower ranks, including for purposes of intimidation, and because of growing tensions between networks. This trend in more widespread arming could also be an indication of the increasing profits flowing through the smuggling business since 2020. Either way, incidents of violence between competing 'mafias' have become more common. According to sources, gunfire is commonly heard in areas near the camp in Grand-Synthe, particularly late in the day, although this is not necessarily always a sign of hostilities: the release of a smuggler from prison or a successful crossing may be celebrated by bursts of gunfire in the air.⁹³

Violence is also used to control migrants. One interviewee, a female Afghan migrant, recounted the harrowing scene of minor who was suffering from hunger and cold, and passed away: 'He was beaten by the smugglers. ... He was not able to walk, and we lost him. Still I can't forget that scene and it is like a nightmare to me. That boy was saying, "I

'I want to send money to my family, so that they have a better life.'

want to go to Europe and work hard. I want to send money to my family, so that they have a better life. I want to earn so that my old mother should not work as a servant, and work to pay my father's medical payment."⁹⁴ During fieldwork other migrants corroborated that those who do not pay risk being killed by the mafia.⁹⁵

ANATOMY OF A CROSSING

rguably, the key concern for smugglers is managing their 'stock' of customers. Given the extensive security measures put in place by the authorities at the departing areas, the earlier system whereby migrants were kept waiting for months in large camps on the coast (such as the infamous 'Jungle' that existed between 2015 and 2016 in Calais) is no longer tenable. In response, the smuggling economy has developed a 'long tail' – essentially a 'route to market' – in which migrants are accommodated mostly inland from the departure points before being moved into position when conditions become favourable.

This just in time approach to the management of migrant 'stock' requires coordination between strings of smugglers and intermediaries working in tandem to manage the flow. It also relies on organic responses to dealing with surges in demand, such as cases where smugglers transfer clients to another smuggler if they are short of capacity in terms of boats.

In this sense, the industrialized economy of migrant smuggling is similar to other forms of organized crime, such as drug trafficking, mixing a deft understanding of international logistics and business acuity with the local dynamics of violent contestation and operational improvisation – all in a context of challenging and chaotic circumstances. At the bottom of the supply chain in this enterprise are the migrants themselves, who are mainly clients but in some cases also pilot the boats (work they undertake in exchange for a reduced fee or free passage). Above them are foot soldiers who do the groundwork of escorting the migrants to the beach; touts who connect migrants with smugglers in the transit hubs; and the smugglers on the ground and intermediaries further afield, managing stocks of migrants. At the top of this lucrative supply chain are the heads of the networks, who, as mentioned earlier (see the section on the Kurds), often reside overseas.

Waiting for passage

Migrants hoping to make the maritime crossing to the UK must first wait until sea conditions are favourable. Before 2016, migrants in Calais often waited for months in makeshift camps, but under the French *zéro point de fixation* policy makeshift camps in Calais are now raided by the French authorities every 48 hours. Those waiting around Dunkirk are also subject to frequent raids, making the mass clustering ('*fixation*') of migrants for long periods of time at transit hubs close to the coast impossible.

To surmount this challenge, smugglers have developed a range of solutions to house migrants further afield, bringing them to the coast only when conditions are right, akin to a holding pattern. Migrants



FIGURE 5 Commonly used inland migrant holding points in France, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands.

wait some distance inland from the coast in France (including Paris, Reims, Rouen, Arras, Lille and Cambrai); in Belgium (in Brussels and towns near the border with France); and Germany (including Frankfurt, Essen, Dusseldorf and Cologne). The smuggler will rent a property in these towns and fill it with migrants, or use an intermediary who can provide a property. Other waiting nodes include centres for reception and situation assessment (Centres d'Accueil et d'Examen de Situation Administrative – CAES), which offer temporary accommodation and assess a person's status.⁹⁶ These centres are also recruitment grounds for smuggling networks.⁹⁷ It can be a lucrative sideline: one Afghan recruiter for a Kurdish network said, 'I earn between 100 and 200 euros per passenger that I bring to a smuggler. I bring passengers of my own nationality, who contact me.¹⁹⁸

Some migrants, however, choose to stay closer to the coastal areas, often in hotels that are known for accommodating almost exclusively migrants, refugees and low-level smugglers during the summer months, when weather conditions are more amenable for the crossing. These hotels are among the cheaper options on offer and in some cases reportedly provide additional services, such as shipping migrants' luggage to the UK upon arrival. They also act as recruitment hubs for smugglers, and some hotels reportedly offer discounts on accommodation for smugglers' clients. Given that they are reportedly closely connected as a service adjunct to the smuggling industry, there have been repeated instances of hoteliers being charged and tried in courts with facilitating the journey of the migrants, and some hotels have been closed down by the police.⁹⁹

Preparing for departure

To monitor sea conditions in the Channel, smugglers use an app called Windy, which provides live information on wind and weather patterns. Attempts to cross peak in the summer.¹⁰⁰ When sea conditions are good – meaning the swell is below 0.7 metres and the wind below 15 knots¹⁰¹ – migrants and refugees travel (either independently or with the support of the smuggling network) to transit hubs around Calais and Dunkirk (Figure 6). Migrants who are unaccompanied prefer to use the Transport Express Régional (TER) rail network, where passenger checks are less stringent than is the case with France's high-speed train system (the TGV), which applies passenger check-in controls. Local train services are cheap: most migrants' destinations in the area can be reached for as little as €1 on a TER train. Buses are also free in Dunkirk and Calais, and in summer are often packed with migrants.

Others are transported to transit hubs by the smuggling network. NGOs have seen cars with Belgian, German or Dutch number plates at Grande-Synthe, suggesting the transnational reach of the enterprise (although most of the vehicles are based in the Parisian suburbs and peripheral towns). One source reported seeing 15 French taxis at the same time at Loon-Plage, and even a coach full of migrants.¹⁰² Taxi drivers in Lille spoke of the regular work they have taxiing migrants. Reportedly, when migrants leave the airport, they already know the price of the journey to Calais, according to the drivers. Their smugglers have provided them with such information. 'We don't ask questions. It's not illegal [to taxi them within France].'103

According to Albanian migrants and other nationalities, the process of meeting up with a smuggler at the northern French coast is often arranged through intermediaries. Once in France, migrants contact their acquaintances in the UK who put them in touch with the smuggler, who in turn sends them the location of the meeting point in Dunkirk or Calais, usually



FIGURE 6 Small-boat crossing points in northern France. NOTE: There was one reported attempted crossing from Petit Caux.

by WhatsApp.¹⁰⁴ Smugglers tend to send multiple locations and change them several times, should they suspect the migrant is being followed by the police.¹⁰⁵ Increasingly, migrants do not meet the organizer of their journey in person – only the smuggler's front men on the ground.

Some migrants will only seek out a smuggler for the crossing after reaching a transit hub like Grand-Synthe, which generally hosts between 300 and 1 500 individuals. There, migrants can meet touts (often fellow migrants) who connect the migrants with smugglers. Testifying to increased streamlining of operations of smugglers, migrants stay in the transit hubs for much shorter periods of time (24 hours to three weeks) compared to the two or three months that was the norm until early 2021. In good weather, hubs like Grande-Synthe are almost completely empty, such is the speed of the turnaround. After sending off boats, smugglers contact migrants on the waiting list, and the next influx begins. Tents are often left for newcomers, including sleeping bags, blankets, clothes and kitchen equipment.

Yet migrants who have not paid for such services must make their own arrangements, and support themselves while they wait for a boat to become available. In transit hubs like Grand-Synthe, this often means that migrants must deal with the 'mafia', paying them for the right to stay in a tent and to access services provided by NGOs, like phone charging or food.¹⁰⁶ The time spent in these hubs can take a noticeable toll on the mental and physical health of the inhabitants. There are reports of violence, which is said to be more commonly experienced by Afghan migrants and refugees, and less so by Albanian nationals, who also generally pay more for the crossing, and who are able to complete the journey faster, as they have negotiated a more comprehensive package from home to end point, and can move relatively easily through Europe. But for Central Asian and African migrants, whose appearance makes them more visible, exploitation is rife. This is especially so in the case of female migrants, often Eritrean and Ethiopian women, who are travelling alone or without men, and who are often forced into prostitution. Our research found that Vietnamese migrants tend to keep themselves apart in the camp, and NGOs find it challenging to reach out to them.¹⁰⁷

Once the weather conditions are judged acceptable, the smugglers give the order for the migrants to move to the beaches. Here, time is of the essence – any delay or error may jeopardise the crossing.

The crossing

Once the decision has been made to attempt the crossing, the smuggler's 'foot soldiers' lead migrants to the dunes to await delivery of the boat, taking care to avoid law enforcement. According to our research, the boat is delivered by car or a van and unloaded in a matter of minutes. Migrants and foot soldiers together unload the vessel and equipment, inflate the boat and assemble its floor. During this time, other members of the smuggling team are stationed to monitor the roads and dunes, watching for signs of the authorities. Not all attempts go to plan, and time is often spent lying in wait in forests or dunes for several days if attempts to depart fail, such as when parts of the equipment are missing or boat deliveries are held up because of roadblocks. Smugglers often have contingency plans for such scenarios. In one instance, a crossing was disrupted when, first, one boat and then another were intercepted by law enforcement, but the smugglers persisted and the third boat got through.¹⁰⁸ Some migrants who cannot pay the fare wait in the dunes and try to sneak onto boats at the point of departure, a tactic reportedly mostly used by young Sudanese men.

Migrants usually bring minimal belongings with them, sometimes even discarding their passports out of fear that the French police will arrest and deport them. In some cases, migrants are required to leave their phones before embarking, reportedly to prevent tracking by authorities, and are instead provided with burner phones by the networks to facilitate navigation, sometimes with the number of a rescue service to call if they run into trouble.¹⁰⁹ This is reportedly becoming less common, with migrants often retaining their own phones but being forbidden from using them on the boat. They are asked by the smugglers to delete photos and videos of the camp by smugglers, so that British police are unable to accrue evidence; sometimes they are also asked to throw their phones overboard if there is a rescue operation at sea.¹¹⁰ The app Maps.Me, which works offline, is used to navigate on the boat or to reach the dunes.¹¹¹ Should a crossing attempt fail, they are forced to remain in the dunes, sometimes for several days with little to no food as they await the next opportunity to cross. In Leffrinckouke, near Dunkirk, an official from the municipality found two sheep slaughtered by migrants for food.¹¹²



A migrant boat navigates the waters and shipping vessels between France and England, November 2022. © Andrew Aitchison via Getty Images

Smugglers used to test the engines out of the water, which damages the cooling system, making it more likely that the engine will malfunction at sea.¹¹³ Today, however, much equipment is not tested at all, which can lead to difficulties in starting the engine. This is especially true in instances where the 'captain' of the boat – often a migrant or refugee – knows nothing about boat engines. One Iranian who had captained a boat in exchange for free transit had told the smuggler he had experience with boat engines, but later admitted he had only ever driven agricultural machinery.¹¹⁴ According to Albanian migrants, the captains are usually Kurdish migrants or somebody who can understand the smugglers' explanation of how to use the boat and its equipment. However, according to smugglers, Africans with experience of piloting boats are generally preferred. These are recruited if they can provide video proof that they have piloted a boat between Libya and Italy or Morocco and Spain; in return, their passage is free.

One new method involves the so-called 'water taxi', which arrives by sea to pick up passengers from the beach and then leaves for the UK.¹¹⁵ This method helps avoid the attention of law enforcement, who can detect the movement of numbers of people and seize boats as they are being delivered or prepared for launching on the beach. The arrival of a boat by sea renders these interceptions inoperable, as the police will not intercept a boat already at sea for fear of casualties. Another innovative approach was revealed by an NCA investigation in August 2023, in which an Albanian–British smuggling ring bought a boat that was moored in a marina in the UK before making the crossing to the Belgian coast, picking up migrants and bringing them back to the UK.¹¹⁶

The boats usually carry a mix of nationalities, although there are reported cases of vessels carrying passengers of a single nationality among the wealthiest clients, such as Iranians and Albanians. As one smuggler said, 'When there is money to be made, [the question of] whether one is Iraqi or Iranian no longer matters.'¹¹⁷ Migrants and refugees are often deceived regarding the number of passengers they will be travelling alongside. Boats are typically overloaded – sometimes carrying up to 65 passengers – meaning the boats ride low in the water, and passengers often need to bail out water to prevent sinking. UK Home Office data indicates a steady rise in the number of passengers per boat since 2018.¹¹⁸ In some cases, the responsibility for such overloading lies with the intermediaries

hired by the smugglers, not the smugglers themselves. Some intermediaries, who are usually Afghan or African, will add extra passengers to the boats and pocket the surplus fare. As this often leads to migrant deaths, the runners often face severe repercussions for such activity.¹¹⁹

The French police make concerted efforts to disrupt and intercept smugglers on land in northern France, including by puncturing the boats. No arrests are made, however, partly because it is not illegal to board a boat in France, but this response also follows the Smuggling of Migrants protocol, which prevents the criminalization of migrants in smuggling.¹²⁰ At sea, sometimes the French coast guard approaches boats, checks the migrants are safe and escorts the boats to the limit of French territorial waters in case of mishap, but the coast guard does not normally intervene given the risk of potential accidents.¹²¹ Migrants will sometimes threaten to jump off the boat if the French coast guard come too close.

Networks of smugglers often work together to send 'surges' of small boats across the Channel to overwhelm law enforcement capacity. Smugglers have also been known use decoy boats to distract police attention and raise the chances of other boats getting through. Migrants on decoy boats are reportedly offered a discount for the next crossing attempt.¹²²

The journey across the Channel can take between four and eight hours, depending on the skills of the person at the helm.¹²³ While some boats complete the journey to the UK coast, many, particularly in cases where the boat experiences difficulties, will dial the British emergency services once they believe they are in English waters. For many others, however, the journey ends in tragedy.

Once on land, UK Home Office officials house migrants in initial accommodation – usually hotels – before they are moved on elsewhere or assessed for rights to asylum. Due to backlogs in processing arrivals, this temporary measure may last for months.



A memorial in Calais to Vietnamese migrants who died while attempting to cross the Channel. *Photos supplied*

RESPONSES: DELINKING DEMAND FROM ORGANIZED CRIME

t is not difficult to recognize the complexity of the challenge to 'stop the boats', as Sunak promised at the beginning of 2023,¹²⁴ or the pragmatic compromise of core international norms and principles that are required once organized criminal groups are involved, and when the pressures of political imperatives are considerable.

All international experience and evidence shows, however, that securitized and punitive measures are unlikely to achieve the desired goals. Legislation to prevent migrants from staying in the country, tougher security in northern France and upstream accords with origin countries such as Albania may on the face of it present a daunting prospect for would-be migrants, but in reality are likely to only represent another iteration of the cycle that ultimately plays into the hands of smugglers. The higher the obstacle, the more people will turn to smugglers, who, in turn, will charge more for riskier approaches to infiltrate their clients into the UK.

An incontestable fact is that demand to access the UK will remain high. The enhanced measures set out by the UK and France to curb illegal migration may have an inhibitory effect on both the migrants' ability to cross the Channel, or, if they do succeed, their ability to stay in the UK. But policy

This solid demand base has been the making of the smuggler networks.

in Westminster may not register in the minds of those in Kabul, Baghdad, Tirana and Damascus setting out on their journeys, for whom the legal hurdles of entering the UK will pale in comparison with the prospect of remaining at home. Indeed, that migrants keep coming to the UK despite the much-publicized cost-of-living crisis, which has hit the UK harder than its European neighbours, indicates that the attraction of the UK is broad, multifaceted and deep-rooted. This solid demand base has been the making of the smuggler networks, who in the pursuit of profit are putting highly vulnerable people in situations of extreme risk.

That current responses are also complemented by a strong focus on organized crime is an appreciation of this reality, but despite the vast outlays, particularly by the UK, the level of blanket interdiction required to stop the boats is daunting. All a smuggler needs to do is place a boat somewhere along the shoreline of northern France (or, more rarely, Belgium) where migrants are waiting – a line more than 250 kilometres long, some in remote and inaccessible spots (as highlighted by the use of Petit-Caux,

for example). Getting the boat to the launch site may be a logistical challenge, but as evidenced by the 'water taxi' method, smugglers are always adept at finding new ways that circumvent law enforcement. The same applies to the online sphere, where the UK has cracked down on the digital communication channels used by smugglers to interact with and attract their clients: new channels are easy to establish.

Given these conditions – the impossibility of total interdiction and the certainty of demand – how can the issue of human smuggling as a dimension of irregular migration be addressed?

More important to recognize now is, firstly, how the business model of smuggling has evolved around a mass market strategy: a large number of migrants desiring to cross the Channel are needed to keep the smuggling enterprise profitable, and, secondly, that this particular route is now significantly consolidated by a set of criminal actors working in an established relationship. This explains why the Kurdish controllers of beaches and boats are readily prepared to work with other criminal groups with the capacity to recruit large numbers of migrants, as the Albanians have done. For this reason, effort needs to be placed at the major points of recruitment, using a strategic approach that is both nuanced and predictive, rather than reactive.

The key to this approach is to delink migration from the demand for smugglers' services. Those nationalities and ethnicities drawn to make the UK their final destination tend to be those with already established diaspora groups in place, and therefore it is among these communities where strong cooperation programmes need to be put into place. Migrants who cross the Channel on small boats hail from a diverse set of demographics, which can be separated into a few categories, with strategies for each.

First are the economic migrants, such as Albanians, who often end up working in construction in the UK.¹²⁵ As the arrivals data show, nationalities with long histories of migration to the UK, such as Indians and Pakistanis, have been opportunistically recruited by upstream smuggling networks to take advantage of the lower costs of the passage as an unprecedented opportunity to cross the Channel. Scrutinizing construction sites for such migrants would be one labour-intensive means of tackling this demographic, but legalizing their work may be far more effective. Offering short-term or seasonal visas that are easy to renew would enable economic migrants to undertake legal work and generate legal income that could be remitted home. Enforcing visa limits would of course be resource-intensive – but far less so than detecting 'invisible' workers, and this model could be designed to support specific domestic labour shortages. And enabling economic workers such opportunities may also reduce the incentive to bring over families and settle in the UK, as remittances from the UK would invariably carry more purchasing power in the migrants' country of origin.

Second are the migrants who are likely to have legitimate asylum claims, such as refugees fleeing Afghanistan and possibly Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Somalia. While the UK can deflect its international human rights obligations by forcing them to claim asylum in their first country of safety, as long as their preferred ultimate destination is the UK, where they have higher chances of positive integration, the problem of irregular entry will remain. This inevitably means pushing profits into the hands of organized criminal groups, possibly triggering far wider domestic security threats. Therefore, both to spare the asylum seekers the difficult and dangerous journey across land and water, these groups should be allowed to process asylum claims in safe and supportive locations closer to their country of origin, which would help prevent them from entering into the human smuggling ecosystem and allow the UK to better screen, plan for and support the transition of those deemed eligible. This has

been the cornerstone of successful efforts, such as the 2016 EU–Turkey deal, to address irregular migration in a number of migration corridors where strong diaspora ties exist.

In both cases, there is a need to think proactively. Sudan is one country where there is a long history of UK migration, where there is an ongoing conflict and a well-developed smuggling infrastructure. As a police analyst said, 'We must not underestimate the Sudanese, they are coming in force but 30 years late. They are a community and would like to stay together if they can.'¹²⁶ A Sudanese smuggling industry could start to grow by linking up with Kurdish smugglers to exploit this increasingly established route, and this is a risk that policymakers should be planning for, as it is easier to prevent than stop migration surges.

Providing safe and legal routes for these two categories of migrants would significantly reduce the number of possible clients for voracious smuggling networks who are seeking a mass market to make their business model successful. Reducing the size of the market would also reduce the visible levels of profit that attract criminal groups who have previously only shown limited activity in Europe.

The final element of the strategy has to be to tackle the dominant Kurdish smuggling groups specifically. These are not currently prominent criminal actor groups in Europe, unlike Albanians or other ethnic groupings. European enforcement agencies have limited knowledge and experience of Kurdish organized crime, their evolution, structure and political economy, and would be well served to advance it. A deep investigation is required to understand the markets that the Kurds are involved in and the protection networks that are enabling their growth.

NOTES

- How many people cross the Channel in small boats and how many claim asylum in the UK?, BBC, 30 August 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-53699511. UK Home Office, Irregular migration to the UK, year ending December 2022: Official statistics, 23 February 2023, https://www.gov.uk/ government/statistics/irregular-migration-to-the-uk-yearending-december-2022/irregular-migration-to-the-ukyear-ending-december-2022#how-many-migrants-weredetected-arriving-in-the-uk-via-small-boats.
- 2 By comparison, according to IOM statistics, which monitor mixed migration flows, there were about 190 000 migrant arrivals in Europe in 2022; in 2023, the figure rose to just over 281 000. See IOM UN Migration, Displacement tracking matrix, https://dtm.iom.int/europe/arrivals.
- 3 Based on fieldwork in northern France, UK and Belgium, including interviews with law enforcement, migrants and smugglers, civil society organizations, 2022 and 2023.
- 4 Interview with an Albanian smuggling intermediary in November 2022. The finding that Kurdish criminal networks are so influential is notable. It is the intention of the GI-TOC to conduct more fieldwork in Iraq and elsewhere to provide more granularity as to how these networks operate.
- 5 Interview with smuggler based in Germany, by phone, September 2023.
- 6 Based on interviews with smugglers, by phone, September 2023.
- 7 Louis Chahuneau, Inside France's battle against migrant smugglers: A closer look, InfoMigrants, 4 August 2023, https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/50834/insidefrances-battle-against-migrant-smugglers-a-closer-look.
- 8 See IOM, https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/ europe?region_incident=All&route=3896&incident_ date%5Bmin%5D=&incident_date%5Bmax%5D=.
- 9 Six dead after refugee boat capsizes in English Channel, Al Jazeera, 12 August 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/ news/2023/8/12/six-dead-after-migrant-boat-capsizescrossing-from-france-to-uk.

- 10 It should be noted, however, that vehicle-based smuggling is still used extensively by smugglers.
- 11 Even those who find the reality does not meet expectations rarely communicate their disappointment given the sacrifices made by family members to help them reach the UK.
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