

Search-and-rescue operations did not appear to drive migrant crossing attempts in the central Mediterranean: Study

August 3 2023



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Search-and-rescue operations of boats carrying migrants across the central Mediterranean Sea did not appear to affect the rate of crossing attempts between 2011 and 2020, according to a modeling study published in *Scientific Reports*.

The findings appear to contradict previous claims that search-and-[rescue operations](#) led to an increase in crossing attempts and a higher risk of death for migrants.

The stretch of the Mediterranean Sea between North Africa and Italy is one of the routes most frequently used by migrants, refugees, and [asylum seekers](#) attempting to reach Europe by sea. Alejandra Rodríguez Sánchez and colleagues modeled changes in the [number](#) of attempted crossings across the central Mediterranean Sea between 2011 and 2020 using data on the number of crossing attempts, boats returned to Tunisia and Libya, and documented migrant deaths.

Data was taken from the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX), the Tunisian and Libyan Coast Guards, the International Organization for Migration and UNITED for Intercultural Action.

The authors then performed simulations using their model to identify the factors that best predicted variations in the number of crossings observed during this period. The factors assessed included the number of state and private-led search-and-rescue operations, [currency exchange rates](#), international commodity prices, [unemployment rates](#), conflicts, violence, the flow of air traffic between African, Middle Eastern and European countries, and [weather conditions](#).

The authors found that changes in the number of sea crossings did not appear to be driven by state-led and private-led search-and-rescue operations, indicating that they may not incentivize further crossing attempts. However, the number of border crossings did appear to be driven by some changes in conflict intensity, commodity prices and [natural disasters](#), as well as weather conditions, currency exchanges and air traffic between North African and Middle Eastern countries and the EU.

In contrast, increases in the involvement of the Libyan Coast Guard in intercepting and returning boats to Libya after 2017 appeared to drive a reduction in crossing attempts and may have deterred migration. While boat interceptions and returns may have reduced the number of crossing

attempts, the authors note that this coincided with reports of a deterioration in the human rights situation of prospective migrants in Libya during boat interceptions and returns, as well as in detention centers.

Together, the findings indicate that migration across the central Mediterranean Sea between 2011 and 2020 may have been driven by factors such as conflict or economic or environmental conditions, rather than search-and-rescue operations. The authors suggest that future research is needed to investigate the potential impacts of search-and-rescue operations on the decision-making processes of individual migrants and the smugglers that coordinate crossing attempts.

More information: Alejandra Rodríguez Sánchez, Search-and-rescue in the Central Mediterranean Route does not induce migration: Predictive modeling to answer causal queries in migration research, *Scientific Reports* (2023). DOI: [10.1038/s41598-023-38119-4](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-38119-4). www.nature.com/articles/s41598-023-38119-4

Provided by Nature Publishing Group

Citation: Search-and-rescue operations did not appear to drive migrant crossing attempts in the central Mediterranean: Study (2023, August 3) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-08-search-and-rescue-migrant-central-mediterranean.html>

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