GLOBALDETENTIONPROJECT

PHYSICAL FENCES AND DIGITAL DIVIDES

PART II: "WHY WOULD YOU GO?" CASE STUDIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

OCTOBER 2018

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THE GLOBAL DETENTION PROJECT MISSION

The Global Detention Project (GDP) is a non-profit organisation based in Geneva that promotes the human rights of people who have been detained for reasons related to their non-citizen status. Our mission is:

- To promote the human rights of detained migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers;
- To ensure transparency in the treatment of immigration detainees;
- To reinforce advocacy aimed at reforming detention systems;
- To nurture policy-relevant scholarship on the causes and consequences of migration control policies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Front cover image: Refugees charge their mobile phones in Idomeni refugee camp on the Greek-Macedonian border. © Picture Alliance / imageBROKER

This report is also available online at www.globaldetentionproject.org

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ABOUT THIS SPECIAL SERIES

Since the start of the "refugee crisis," the role of social media in the migration phenomenon has been repeatedly debated, studied, denounced—and frequently misunderstood. Although officials and politicians often present new digital platforms as security threats that enable traffickers and illicit enterprises, these technologies also have played a critically important role in aiding refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants in need. They help people connect to the outside world from inside detention centres, provide desperately needed information about sources of humanitarian assistance, and enable the creation of digital communities that give migrants and their loved ones' agency to proactively search out solutions.

This three-part Special Report from the Global Detention Project, "Physical Fences and Digital Divides," aims to improve our understanding of how people use social media during their migration journeys, with a special emphasis on their use in the context of detention and migration control in North Africa and the Mediterranean. Part I "Exposing the Crisis," published earlier this year, charted the historical relationship between migration and social media, reviewing the various tech responses to the "crisis," and demonstrating that while officials and politicians often present new digital platforms as facilitators of migration and security threats that enable traffickers, these technologies have also played an important role in aiding refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants in need. The present report, Part II "Why Would You Go?" follows on this by providing an on-the-ground report of the diverse ways migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers use social media today, and the varying factors—including socio-economics, nationality, and smuggling *modus operandi*—that affect the use of such resources in migratory contexts. The final instalment in the series, which will be released in late 2018, reflects on the lessons learned from this research to provide suggestions and recommendations for human rights practitioners who seek to harness social media in ways that emphasise harm-reduction.

> "People have no other choice than to move."
> *- Abir, Bangladeshi migrant in Sicily*

> "Going to throw your life away? And what for? You are not only throwing your life away, you are throwing away your dreams and your family."
> *- Excerpt from an IOM "awareness-raising" film intended to dissuade Egyptian youth from attempting irregular boat migration*

1. INTRODUCTION

Groups of youths from around West Africa are sitting in a cafe-cum-community space down a Palermo back-street. There's free Internet at the Arci Porco Rosso Centre—something of an essential round here—and the table in the corner is a tangle of phone chargers and accents. For some of the mostly young men here, this is the first time they have owned a smartphone since leaving home and crossing the perils of the Mediterranean to reach Sicily.

"I never used social media before," says 23-year-old Moussa, from Guinea.[1] "I had a phone during the journey but it was just an old phone—it didn't have WhatsApp or Facebook, or even the internet."

Academic literature and journalistic coverage of migration and social media (as well as migration and tech more generally) have taught us that smartphones are a "migrant essential," a very modern feature of 21st-century migration. Europe is familiar with the sight of refugees employing phones to get to their destinations, and the role of social media has been endlessly discussed and debated since the advent of the so-called refugee crisis that began some time in 2015.

The first instalment of this special report argued that while officials and politicians often present new digital platforms as hand-held facilitators of irregular migration and security threats that enable traffickers and illicit enterprises, these technologies have also played a critically important role in aiding refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants in need. Online platforms, the first instalment argued, help individuals connect to the outside world from inside detention centres, provide desperately

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[1] The names of the sources in Sicily who were interviewed for this report have been changed at their request.

needed information about sources of humanitarian assistance, and enable the creation of digital communities that give migrants and their loved ones' agency to proactively search out solutions.[2] It also suggested that journalists, researchers, and policymakers had focused too much on the Balkan Route to understand social media use by people on the move—and that various factors impacted social media in different migratory contexts.

However, there are gaps in the literature about how new information and communications technologies (ICTs) are used both for and during irregular migration.[3] Clearly, to better understand this, it is necessary to speak to refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants themselves.

Previous reports have revealed that the use of social media by people on the move varies depending on different factors. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), for example, has found that Syrians and Afghans using the same

Syrian refugees check their phones as they wait at the Serbian-Hungarian border. (Getty)

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[2] T. Rollins, "Physical Fences and Digital Divides. A Global Detention Project Investigation into the Role of Social Media in the Context of Migration Control. Part I: Exposing the 'Crisis,'" *Global Detention Project*, 22 May 2018, https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/physical-fences-and-digital-divides-exposing-the-crisis

[3] B. Frouws *et al*, "Getting to Europe the 'WhatAapp' Way: The Use of ICT in Contemporary Mixed Migration Flows to Europe," Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat Briefing Paper, June 2016, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2862592

migratory route from Turkey to Greece and the Balkans use Facebook and other apps in different ways, and that their reliance on and trust of smuggling networks through social media is also different. Journalists have reported that refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants passing through the Central Mediterranean appear to use social media (and carry smartphones) less frequently than those on the move elsewhere. Migration experts have noted how the use of social media in origin, transit, and destination countries remains "uneven," depending on a range of factors like age, gender, nationality, and basic socio-economics back home—which have led to the emergence of "digital divides"—while differing smuggling *modus operandi* on a given route leads to contrasting uses of social media.

The European Commission (EC) has also produced studies investigating these differences.[4] According to a recent EC report on West African migration, people from this region tend to "rely on word-of-mouth communication to devise and implement migration plans" because "people smugglers play a diminished role in motivating migration journeys." It found that communication from an origin country tends to depend on encouragement from diaspora networks, peer pressure from local networks, or the presentation of opportunity by a recruitment agent, broker, or smuggler. In contrast to the activities reported by some of the other populations covered in this GDP report—particularly people fleeing Syria—the EC report found that few migrants from West Africa "actively searched for information online before migrating." Social media and ICTs were "more commonly used as channels of communications rather than platforms to gather information on migration," and their primary role was to "facilitate private communication between migrants, potential migrants, and their networks."[5]

In early 2018, the author travelled to Egypt and Sicily to speak with refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants about how social media and other tech were employed during their migration journeys. This second instalment of the GDP Special Report "Physical Fences and Digital Divides" details lessons learned from these on-the-ground investigations. One broad finding is that usage of digital tools is far more varied than the extant literature generally reports. Many sources, for example, emphasised the importance of community and diaspora networks during the various stages of their journeys and downplayed the role of social media and smartphones, which were often barely used—and sometimes not at all. Ultimately, the material presented here challenges some of our current assumptions about the relationship between digital media and migration, including oft-repeated claims that social media can serve as an "awareness-raising" tool to help limit migration flows.

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[4] See: European Commission, "A Study of the Communication Channels Used by Migrants and Asylum Seekers in Italy, with a Particular Focus on Online and Social Media," January 2018, http://www.statewatch.org/news/2018/jul/eu-com-migrant-info-channels-in-italy-study-6-18.pdf; European Commission, "How West African Migrants Engage with Migration Information en-route to Europe," September 2017, http://www.statewatch.org/news/2018/jul/eu-com-migrant-info-channels-west-african-migrants-en-route-to-europe-6-18.pdf

[5] European Commission, "How West African Migrants Engage with Migration Information en-route to Europe," September 2017, http://www.statewatch.org/news/2018/jul/eu-com-migrant-info-channels-west-african-migrants-en-route-to-europe-6-18.pdf

2. THE NORTH AFRICAN MIGRATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS CONTEXT

Public understanding of the hazards people face transiting North Africa during their migration journeys has arguably never been higher. News outlets are frequently dominated by reports about everything from the horrors faced by migrants in smuggling vessels plying Mediterranean waters to the involvement of corrupt officials in trafficking networks or the inhuman conditions of detention centres. Although migrants and refugees face severe and life-threatening situations across the region, from Egypt to Morocco, the main focus of European attention has been Libya, where the inhuman treatment people often suffer at the hands of officials and non-state actors alike has been well documented.[6] Political instability and violence, pervasive lawlessness and corruption, and apparent EU acquiescence in partnering with people accused of committing grave abuses have conspired to turn transit migration in Libya into a "human rights crisis," as the UN human rights commissioner has exclaimed.[7]

But this increased public awareness is also tempered by numerous misconceptions. For instance, although people arriving in Europe via Libya are typically called "economic migrants," such a characterisation masks the extreme vulnerabilities faced by particular groups. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), for instance, has warned about the high numbers of unaccompanied minors transiting Libya and their vulnerability to abuse. The IOM estimates that nearly 10 percent of the more than 400,000 migrants in Libya are children, including a staggering 14,000 unaccompanied children.[8] Nigerian women are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking, and the irregular movements of Nigerian migrants are sometimes facilitated by brutal, coercive Nigerian and Sicilian organised crime networks.[9]

European migration management policies have aggravated protection problems. Given Libya's position as a key transit country for those seeking to enter Europe, the EU and its member states have long seen the country as a vital target for

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[6] United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Detained and Dehumanised: Report on Human Rights Abuse against Migrants in Libya," 13 December 2016, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/DetainedAndDehumanised_en.pdf

[7] United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "UN Report Urges End to Inhuman Detention of Migrants in Libya,"
http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21023&LangID=E

[8] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "36,000 Child Migrants in Libya in Need of Assistance – IOM and UNICEF," 18 December 2017, https://www.unicef.org/media/media_102341.html

[9] N. Elbagir, "Human Trafficking in Nigeria: "Don't Struggle if You're Raped,"" *CNN News,* 27 February 2018, https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/27/africa/nigeria-migrant-smugglers-intl/index.html
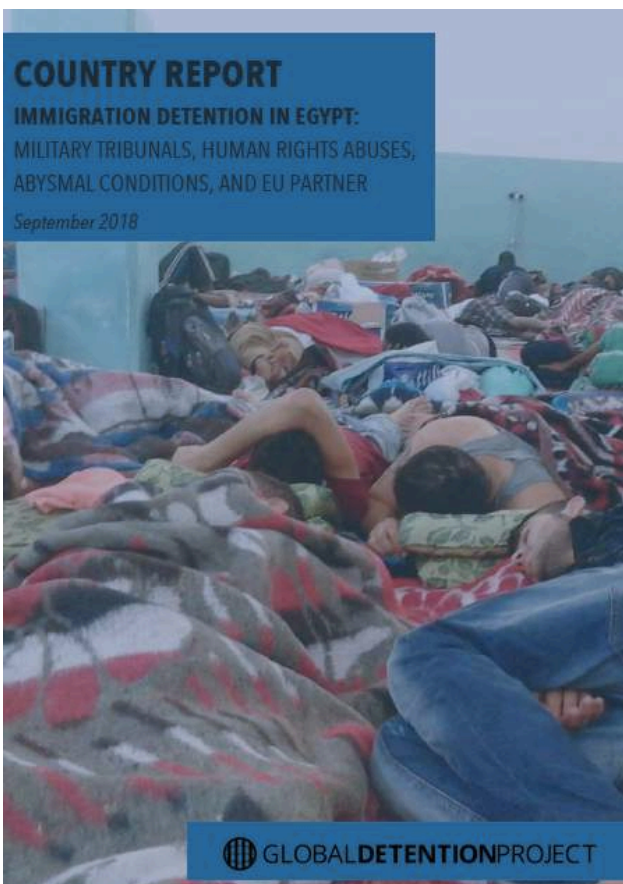
A member of an "Anti-Illegal Immigration" force stands guard during a UN visit to the Abu Saleem detentyion centre in Tripoli, Libya, 19 May 2016. (Reuters / Ismail Zetouni)

externalisation policies designed to reduce migratory flows across the Central Mediterranean. Since 2015-2016 in particular, the EU and individual member states have sought to work closely with Libyan authorities to outsource search-and-rescue (SAR) and in some cases to support militias that operate detention facilities.[10] UN reports have warned about the consequences of an EU agreement outsourcing SAR to the Libyan coastguard and, in November 2017, Human Rights Watch (HRW) called on the Libyan authorities to "end the torture, forced labour, and sexual violence that has been the lot of detained migrants for years."[11]

Although it received much less attention, Egypt has also witnessed mixed migration flows for many years. While asylum seekers (mostly from Eritrea and Sudan) have used Egypt as a transit-point towards Israel or Libya, a wave of departures by Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria beginning in summer 2013 expanded a route directly from Egypt's north coast and a dynamic smuggling infrastructure developed alongside it. Today, Syrians have essentially stopped migrating from Egypt—either from the north coast or across the border, into Libya—although INGOs and community activists have observed a significant number of Syrians crossing from Sudan into Egypt in the hope of accessing work, family reunification, and

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[10] Global Detention Project (GDP), "Libya Immigration Detention Profile," August 2018, https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/africa/libya

[11] Human Rights Watch (HRW), "Libya: End 'Horrific' Abuse of Detained Migrants," 14 December 2016, https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/14/libya-end-horrific-abuse-detained-migrants

COUNTRY REPORT
IMMIGRATION DETENTION IN EGYPT:
MILITARY TRIBUNALS, HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES,
ABYSMAL CONDITIONS, AND EU PARTNER
September 2018

GLOBAL**DETENTION**PROJECT

resettlement opportunities.[12] Other nationalities have instead taken their place, or been diverted to Libya.

Egypt is sometimes an "overlooked player in trans-Mediterranean smuggling,"[13] but the EU has not ignored the situation in the country. Concerned about rising numbers of migrants attempting to reach Europe and a possible displacement of irregular routes in the Mediterranean, the EU has sought to work more closely with Egypt in halting flows from the north coast.[14] In 2016, Egypt passed landmark counter-smuggling legislation that criminalised people smuggling for the first time in Egyptian law.[15] The Egyptian government and its inter-ministerial migration body, the National Coordinating Committee for Combatting and Preventing Illegal Immigration (NCCPIM), present this legislation as proof of Egypt's expertise in, and commitment to, addressing migration. These claims, however, are contradicted by the severe lack of adequate SAR on the north coast, the country's punitive immigration detention practices (including arbitrary arrests, administrative detention without a time-limit, and *refoulement*), and the notoriously poor state of the human rights landscape in the country.[16]

More recently, in September 2018, European officials (including Donald Tusk and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz) met with Egyptian counterparts in Cairo and

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[12] M. Mahmoud, "Syrians Take Lethal Desert Road to Egypt: "We Went Through Death to Live,"" *Middle East Eye,* 8 March 2017, https://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/syrians-entering-egypt-through-borders-sudan-1289316019

[13] Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, "Integrated Responses to Human Smuggling from the Horn of Africa to Europe," May 2017, http://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/global-initiative-human-smuggling-from-the-horn-of-africa-may-2017-web.pdf

[14] Global Detention Project, "Immigration Detention in Egypt: Military Tribunals, Human Rights Abuses, Abysmal Conditions, and EU Partner," September 2018, https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/immigration-detention-egypt

[15] M. al-Kashef and T. Rollins, "Egypt's Anti-Smuggling bill: New Criminals, Old Victims," *Mada Masr*, 19 October 2016, https://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/10/19/feature/politics/egypts-anti-smuggling-bill-new-criminals-old-victims/

[16] NCCPIM representatives did not respond to several interview requests before, during, and after the author's trip to Egypt.

then—later in the month—in New York. Migration was at the forefront of both meetings. Sebastian Kurz has stated that Europe must "ensure that as few people as possible leave northern African countries for Europe," and that, "If they do, the situation should be dealt with as close to the African coast as possible."[17]

> **Concerned about rising numbers of migrants attempting to reach Europe and a possible displacement of irregular routes in the Mediterranean, the EU has sought to work closely with Egypt in halting flows from the north coast.**

It is also important to highlight that EU policymakers have discussed creating reception centres in North African countries for processing asylum seekers. Although some people would presumably be successful in their asylum applications and be granted entry to an EU country if such a system were created, these proposals are part of EU efforts to externalise border controls and shift responsibility for the caring of migrants and refugees. Similar ideas, in fact, have been on the agenda for decades, going back at least to the early 1990s, when the Tony Blair government in the United Kingdom suggested establishing "transit processing centres" outside the EU.[18] To date, however, there has been little interest among North African countries in hosting such centres.[19]

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[17] L. Cook, "EU Looks to Egypt, Africa for Help with Migrant Challenge," *Associated Press*, 20 September 2018, https://apnews.com/d058f70d8aab401fa6f1d4bd2a47561f

[18] M. Flynn, "There and Back Again: On the Diffusion of Immigration Detention," *Journal on Migration and Human Security,* 2014, http://jmhs.cmsny.org/index.php/jmhs/article/view/31

[19] Global Detention Project, "Immigration Detention in Egypt: Military Tribunals, Human Rights Abuses, Abysmal Conditions, and EU Partner," September 2018, https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/immigration-detention-egypt

3. HOW DO MIGRANTS IN NORTH AFRICA USE SOCIAL MEDIA?

Al-Rayih remembered the sea at midnight, and the fear of drowning. He vowed to never try his luck in the Mediterranean again.

A Sudanese asylum seeker originally from Darfur, Al-Rayih fled to Egypt in the hope of receiving protection from UNHCR and ultimately resettlement for himself and his young family. But long waiting times and a perception that UNHCR wasn't doing enough for Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers pushed him towards the Mediterranean—a journey he would attempt twice. Before setting off, Al-Rayih learned about the trip from his community rather than researching online.

> Before I came to Egypt, my use of social media was very limited. At that time we only used social media socially—within the community— and it didn't have any connections with migration, or connecting to people who were smuggling or being smuggled.

Al-Rayih also says that social media played little or no part in his decision to seek asylum or in his route to finding a smuggler.

> Even if you trust someone who took the journey before and who is now outside Egypt—maybe in Europe—then he'll tell you, 'Don't try this migration. It's dangerous.' He's seen what he's seen, and so he tells people not to follow.

Al-Rayih had little awareness of what a trip from Egypt might actually involve other than what he'd heard from friends and smugglers' go-betweens (*simasra*—literally, brokers) who are, for obvious reasons, often viewed as untrustworthy. Still, Al-Rayih was horrified by what he experienced.

> The first time, we were at sea for 13 days just going around in circles, cruising around. We didn't know at the time that that was what was happening, but the smugglers were keeping us waiting at sea so they could wait for other groups to join the boat. They lied to us and said things like, 'We're close to Italy,' and 'We'll reach Europe soon.' In that time, we ran out of food and fuel for the ship—even the water on-board finished—so that we were just waiting for death.

After 13 days at sea, Al-Rayih's boat was apprehended by the Egyptian authorities and towed back to Alexandria. The group were divided-up across several detention facilities, and Al-Rayih was held for two weeks.

> We spent 14 days moving from prison to prison before we were released. When we were released, UNHCR didn't help us at all, though. We were released and they just told us, 'Go.' Afterwards I felt that there was no protection from UNHCR [in Egypt] so I tried the journey again. It started all over again.

Al-Rayih's second attempted journey was more or less similar to the first—although this time the group were initially held in *takhzeen* (storage), what he called a "detention site used by the smugglers," without adequate food or water. One man drowned during a transfer from one vessel to the next.

It was then that he decided never to try the sea again.

3.1 "Telephones were forbidden": Why social media often has less impact than is commonly thought

What is striking about Al-Rayih's testimony is how it immediately distinguishes itself from testimonies about social media use elsewhere in the Mediterranean. Social media had played little or no role in his preparations for migration, and there was no possibility to mitigate risks or remain in contact with friends or loved-ones during the journey.

> Telephones were forbidden. We weren't even allowed to take telephones with us because the smugglers control you. Phone calls weren't allowed, even. We had to hide our phones somewhere because if they saw you had one, they'd take it from you. And because we were trying to cross the sea, we covered our phones in plastic and hid them so as to protect them from the water.

That meant stowing-away telephones during periods of *takhzeen* on-shore as well as on the boat. Egyptian smugglers will often threaten violence against passengers seen to be disobedient or unruly, something that NGOs and activists in Alexandria have previously pointed to when suggesting that smugglers are known to employ practices "halfway between smuggling and human trafficking."[20]

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[20] T. Rollins, "Smugglers Threw Asylum Seekers into the Mediterranean," *Al-Monitor*, 18 September 2014, https://www.globalresearch.ca/smugglers-threw-asylum-seekers-into-mediterranean/5403554

Of course, another element limiting the use of social media, and its usefulness, is purely the fact of how far one has to travel between Egypt and Italy. Al-Rayih added that although the internet is important, once a boat reached international waters, "there was never any connection anyway. There wasn't even phone-signal to make calls on the boat. The smugglers only have the *thuraya* [satellite phone]."

Stories like Al-Rayih's are not uncommon. Aisha, a 37-year-old woman from Darfur, headed with her son for Egypt's north coast in 2016 in search of a "better life because our people don't have good educational prospects." She had been in Egypt for two years before that, but her plan was always to reach "Egypt to [then] go by the sea."

"That was the idea for my journey," she said. "Sudan, Egypt, and then Europe." And much like Al-Rayih, Aisha did not conduct research through online resources or social media before leaving for the north coast.

> I didn't have any idea about the dangers we'd face or how the route would be. But I asked the smugglers and they'd told me, 'The trip will be safe, the boat is very big and you'll reach Europe without a problem.' I didn't do any additional research or ask the community about it. I just decided to take the journey and believed what the smugglers told me.

There was a small decision-making process regarding whether to travel from Egypt or Libya but the information that Aisha discussed was very general, and the discussions she had were with smugglers in Egypt who would clearly have had a vested interest in persuading her to travel via Egypt as opposed to Libya.

> In Libya, they say, there's only a small boat and it's extremely dangerous. Most of the people die crossing the sea. So [the smugglers] told us that Egypt was a safer way to go.

Possession of phones was also forbidden during Aisha's trip.

> The smugglers told us to hand over our mobile phones; they said that we were already on the way to Europe and so we wouldn't need them. They also asked us if we had Egyptian money, but we didn't so we gave them our phones instead. Then we were transferred to the bigger boat—the ship.

By the time Aisha and her son were at sea, in late 2016, Egypt had started to actively crack down on smuggling networks and irregular departures. This partly explains what happened to her next: apprehended at sea, she was briefly detained before being deported back to Sudan. Aisha was not registered with UNHCR at the time, which meant that the Egyptian government was able to expedite her deportation. She later returned to Egypt irregularly, again with the help of smugglers

Physical Fences and Digital Divides – Part II: "Why Would You Go?" Case Studies of Social Media Use in North Africa and the Mediterranean

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A Janjaweed militia walks through the marketplace in Geneina. (Wikimedia Commons)

whom she contacted through familial and community networks. Importantly, Egyptian law prohibits deported persons from re-entry unless granted explicit permission by the Interior Ministry, and violations of this law can lead to imprisonment. Aisha nevertheless remains in Cairo, where she apparently intends to stay for the time being.[21]

If Aisha's journey seemed extreme, it pales when compared to the almost 10-year trail of border-crossings and deportations undertaken by 30-year-old Adam. An asylum seeker from Sudan who said he had well-founded fears of individual persecution by the notorious *Janjaweed* militia in his native region of Western Darfur, Adam had decided to migrate from Sudan to Egypt, and then to Israel in 2008. He was later deported from Israel to Uganda where, that first night in his hotel, armed men arrived and robbed him along with the other deportees. So began a journey across most of north-east Africa: Uganda to war-torn South Sudan, South Sudan to Sudan while hidden in the boot of a car, and onwards.

In South Sudan in particular, Adam said, possessing a smartphone exposed you to risks. He concealed his whenever possible. A smartphone was seen as a "sign of wealth," and everyone from militia-men and armed criminals to geared-up civilians were more than happy to relieve you of it.

> If you had a smartphone, they'd say that you had money. And instead of stopping to ask you about it, they'd shoot you before asking. That could happen to anyone. Everyone at that time in South Sudan had guns—even the civilians.

In Egypt, sources recounted how smugglers either stole or confiscated individuals' phones, prompting migrants to instead rely on community/social networks for contacts in smuggling networks in order to facilitate their migration. Based on the interviews conducted in Egypt, it seemed clear that social media was used less in general than what has been reported elsewhere in the Aegean, with more of an emphasis on social networks than digital networks.

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[21] Articles 31 & 39, Law of Entry and Residence. See also, Global Detention Project, "Egypt Immigration Detention Profile," September 2018, https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/africa

This lesson was reinforced by West African migrants interviewed in Sicily, who down-played social media use—as well as the significance of apps like Facebook. On the whole, West African migrant communities have comparatively less financial resources and education than their counterparts from Syria or Sudan, and the majority engage in migration for economic reasons. This impacts social media use in a number of ways. West African migrants appeared to have less access to phones, smartphones, and the internet before and during transit migration through North Africa, meaning that only limited research of routes was conducted prior to departure and there was less awareness of migratory risks and alternatives. Freedom of movement within and between the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) also means that there is a "culture of circular migration from the Sahel and West Africa to Libya," so in the past it was not unusual for West African migrants to travel around the region—and to Libya—in search of work.[22]

In Egypt, sources recounted how smugglers either stole or confiscated individuals' phones, prompting migrants to instead rely on community or social networks for contacts in smuggling networks.

At the same time, several participants even said that the first time they owned a mobile phone—let alone a smartphone—was after arriving in Sicily, and so they had not conducted research online or even contacted smugglers before leaving home. Abu, a Ghanaian migrant in his 40s who arrived in Sicily more than a decade ago, joked, "I barely even knew what Facebook was when I came here. People do not use their phones for things like that when they travel." A Nigerian migrant named Frank, who also reached Sicily before social media became widespread, similarly down played the role of social media in migration when considering a question about whether social media had facilitated migration amongst Nigerians. "I can see where you're going with this," he said, suggesting both an awareness of, and frustration with, notions that social media facilitates migration.

> Look, we could think before Facebook. We could think before social media. How many people came to Europe before social media? These people who were in Libya don't have social media, they don't have a phone. They might be kept in a camp in Libya without a phone, even on their own. Maybe one person has a phone and so everyone in there uses that one phone. I think that social media has nothing to do with this.

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[22] Peter Tinti (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime), Skype conversation with Tom Rollins (Global Detention Project), 27 December 2017.

As an asylum seeker from Biafra who clearly saw himself as a political actor from that area, Frank described social media in more political terms rather than as a facilitator for migration.

> What I think that social media *does* do, is what the world saw in 2011. That power. There you can point to social media and say, 'Yes, that has done something in the world.'

For Frank, social media platforms—and particularly Facebook—have facilitated his political activism and criticism of the Nigerian government for its policies vis-à-vis the Biafran community. It has also helped ensure the maintenance of contact with his family, friends, and community in Nigeria.

> We use social media to connect people in the diaspora and tell them what's going on. This is what I use social media for. And I also stay in touch with the guys that I grew up with.

Some participants tied this lesser importance of social media to trends back home—namely literacy and poverty rates. Asked whether migrants in Libya used social media or ICTs during their journey, Modou from Gambia explained:

> Some people might use social media like this, using GPS and their phones to know where they're going, but that's people who were educated back home, people who went to school.

> People who are not educated basically just go into the hands of the traffickers and say, 'I want to go to *this* place.' They give them the money, the vehicle comes and takes them away. That's it.

Moussa, a 23-year-old from Guinea, also referred to this digital divide between the illiterate and those "who'd been to school" back home when describing his own social media use.

> I never used social media before because I didn't go to school. I didn't know about these things. I had a phone during the journey but it was just an old phone—it didn't have WhatsApp or Facebook or even the Internet.

3.2 Using social media to mitigate risks

Another important take away from the interviews was that lack of access to smartphones and social media can make it harder for people to know about and mitigate risks. As Sekou from Mali said:

> When you are in West Africa, you hear that if you go to Libya that
> there'll be work. But when you get there, you realise the situation is
> different. You might be killed, beaten, detained. …So many things can
> happen to you. But West Africans think that if they go there then there'll
> be work.

Sekou did not have access to social media before he left Mali for Libya, nor did he on the journey itself, meaning he was less able to navigate the situation and avoid risks. Then again, Modou from Gambia said he "knew there were some difficulties, at different points," but did not have "much" information or awareness beyond that. However, he then spoke hypothetically about "where I'm from" and "where I'm going," to explain why sometimes the concern is not about Libya and the risks one might face there, but the possibility of a better life at the destination and its role in motivating one to migrate.

> Where I was going—maybe I could have peace there?—and where I'm
> from, there was no peace. So where I'm going is better than where I'm
> from. Maybe the government is trying to put you in prison and then
> you'll be in prison for the rest of your life? Or maybe you have family
> problems back in Gambia? It means you can't stay and you have to
> move. So you might have heard about what's happening [in Libya] but
> you don't know for sure if it's real. I found that out later.

Another problem is that the information that is available online can be subject to projection. According to Richard Brodie from Palermo's Arci Porco Rosso Centre, an activist-run community centre that provides legal aid and other services to migrants and refugees, most people migrating from Libya to Sicily are doing so for economic reasons and are therefore less collective.

> I feel that West Africans do not share information about the route as
> much, because they are less collective in their aspirations. Again this
> might be really wrong, but I feel like their migratory objectives are more
> individual and less aspirational as a collective. And I think people hoard
> the information and their contacts more.

By way of example, Brodie referred to past discussions between Euro-Mediterranean activist initiatives concerning how to raise awareness about risks among West Africans and other migrants who are heading to Europe. One such discussion, he recounted, focused on a proposed project that would use audio/video messages from Sudanese refugees already in Europe to communicate the risks of crossing the Mediterranean from Libya. There had been some discussion about whether to attempt something similar for West Africans.

> The project just made very little sense [to me] because the idea of
> West Africans—or at least the West Africans that I know (and we talked
> about this)—was that if you're posting things on your Facebook profile

about the migratory route then firstly, you're sharing precious information; and secondly, your Facebook profile is your way of communicating back home about your success. Often a lot of people post pictures of themselves on planes, for example, or maybe some guy sitting next to me *here* might be posting pictures making it look like he's in Paris. Because you want to show that you've made it, not that you're stuck in Palermo helping other people escape from war-torn Libya. So information gets blocked like that. So I don't think Facebook gets used to communicate *anything* about the journey.

The projection of such "success" exists in an ecosystem in which not everyone is aware of the risks involved in migrating, to the point that it's not so much that Libya's myriad risks exist, but that the situation is so perilous and uncontrolled that even migrants with a pre-existing awareness of what they were heading into couldn't expect the extent of it. Testimonies often focus on extortion or summary violence from local communities, kidnapping or detention by militias (commonly referred to as "mafias"), trafficking and extortion, and summary executions. Amadou, A 21-year-old from Senegal, first experienced such treatment while in Mali.

Small kids were carrying knives and bottles in the streets, and if they saw you walking alone then they'd attack you—stab you or beat you. They would demand money from you and if you didn't have it, they might even kill you. I was with my friend there, and he told me that once he was caught by these boys. They asked him for money and then stabbed him with a knife. Luckily someone was there to help him, otherwise they would have killed him.

Once in Libya, armed civilians were replaced by armed militias. Amadou's *passeur* convoy was stopped by a militia while passing through the Libyan desert.

The mafias attacked us on the route. When we were heading through Libya, this mafia took my phone and my money and everything. Wherever you kept your money, they'd find it—undressing you and telling you to strip-down so they could find the money. And they'd be beating you. If you didn't have money, maybe they'd kill you.

By contrast, on Syrian Facebook community pages and groups, such risks might be shared and collectively discussed. Friends and family would be warned, and statements issued. However, for the reasons mentioned above, West Africans and other migrant populations transiting through Libya might not share such information online, relying more on social networks as opposed to social media.

Nigerian migrant Frank, for example, said he had never used social media to tell Nigerians to come to Italy: "I've never asked or told anyone to ... cross the sea." This, however, suggested some do just that. And other participants would also mention this, again suggesting that some migrants either explicitly use social media to encourage friends, family, or others to make the journey, or project images of success that encourage others to follow.

> *"The mafias attacked us on the route. When we were heading through Libya, this mafia took my phone and my money and everything."*

Amadou said that, "I used to call my boys [friends] who were here, in Sicily, and they'd say, 'Come! The route isn't that dangerous.' But later you realise that it is dangerous." Such communication isn't always remote, with Ebrima stating that it was face-to-face contact that encouraged him to travel towards Libya for work (before he was then pushed towards the sea).

> I went to Senegal and met with one of my friends there, he told me, 'Let's go to Libya. You can find work there.' People were saying there was work in Libya. I'd heard that there were so many problems there and I wasn't sure.
>
> But that boy was like, 'No, no it's fine, there are opportunities there.'
>
> That boy convinced me to go to Libya, but I wasn't really willing to go before.

Commonly, this type of communication takes place privately through Whatsapp or phone-calls, but the projection of success is perhaps easiest to find on Facebook because—rather obviously—it is a forum with greater public visibility that allows users to post photos. It is the perfect place for migrants to market themselves as success stories, and several participants referred to fellow community members posing besides expensive-looking cars or designer clothes to create such an image. Facebook tended to be a site of projection rather than sharing genuine information—something that Ebrima explained when discussing a similar point.

> Social media at times will convince people to come to Europe, because of the things people put on Facebook—the lifestyle and so on. Maybe it does that. But I would never tell people to come through Libya, to make this journey.

Brodie, from Arci Porco Rosso, suggested that ecosystems of false information actually exist on WhatsApp more than Facebook.

> There are round-robins on WhatsApp. A lot. And aside from the religious messages, there are—and this is particularly among Nigerians, although that might be that it's different among the French speakers—there are messages about being scared of deportations. Things like, to pick an example (and this was among Gambians actually), there was a photograph of…like a legal aid form. And it was going round saying, 'Don't sign this! If you sign this then they're going to deport you.' And so on. This went round hundreds of people, all around the island. There were protests in some of the camps.

Brodie added that this mode of communication exists as "mass messages through WhatsApp, sent to everyone in one person's contacts—'Send this to 25 people you know…'—you know?—classic round robin messages."

In reality, both Whatsapp and social media platforms are often used to share false information, and some participants suggested that this mode of communication had damaged community trust for online sources of information, or information distributed through social media. As Patrick, from Gambia, commented:

> Most people don't trust things posted on Facebook. Nowadays you see so many things on Facebook that say, 'Do this, do this…if you don't then something bad is going to happen to you.'
>
> Or like, 'If you don't share this message on WhatsApp with people then you'll have bad luck.'
>
> It means people don't trust social media anymore.

3.3 Connecting the community: How social media helps real-world community-building

For Adam (from Western Darfur), the most important social media app through his journey was Facebook. In the same way that "The Cloud" allows people to save and back-up all of their files in a secure and remote digital location, Facebook kept Adam's contacts intact—despite the fact he was deported from Israel, robbed of everything in Uganda, and transiting irregularly through two countries afterwards.

> When I got to Uganda, I lost all of my contacts—phone numbers and everything—because my phone was taken by those people in the hotel. But afterwards, once I'd logged into Facebook again, I found all my contacts and I contacted people and told them what happened.

Facebook would then assist Adam in his plans to head back to Sudan, and eventually back to Egypt all over again, after that. He outlined the various ways that Facebook helped him during that time through contact with family, contact with

community members who advised him on routes and risks as well as useful people to know, and contact with smugglers.

> You can contact your family and ask them about the journey that you're going to take. I talked to people in South Sudan when I was in Uganda, and asked them how to get there.

> I asked like, 'Which way is better to go to Sudan?' I was given two options. One was that I could go to the UN in Uganda and I'd get a travel document to Chad, and then from Chad go back to Sudan from the west.

> But in the end I decided to go through Juba because this would take a long time, to get this document, and also I'd face other problems. To get from Chad I'd have to go through Geneina and that's the place that I fled in 2003. Almost all the people in Geneina know who I am—like now, the whole state is controlled by the *Janjaweed* and if I came home, they'd know. I'd face problems and it'd put my family in danger as well.

> So I was told that in South Sudan there were Darfuri people working there and that I could get help from them.

And that's what he did. Once Adam returned to Khartoum and realised security forces knew he was back, he also used Facebook to reach smugglers to get him across the border to Egypt.

> I found the smugglers who helped me to get to Egypt through Facebook. I found a friend who was in the UK and he told me how he'd been caught [in Egypt], in the sea, and was deported back to Sudan. Then he'd gone to Port Sudan and was smuggled back into Egypt in order to try the trip again. That was all done through Facebook.

Adam preferred to use Facebook rather than WhatsApp. He explained that WhatsApp use was contingent on local country-by-country contexts (Egypt and other repressive states have blocked WhatsApp calls in the past because of its end-to-end encryption) and WhatsApp functions often depend on the availability of internet and data services which may be unavailable in some places where signal is patchy. Facebook, on the other hand, was collaborative and quick, easy to use on the move, and not dependent on internet access. "In Sudan, we have free Facebook," he said, referring to the Free Basics function used by RefUnite and others. "Even if we don't have internet on our phones, we can chat and sometimes even make calls." For all of these reasons, Facebook was key for a quick, often emergency-based community transfer of knowledge that both facilitated Adam's migration, but also kept him safe.

It's easy to find new people or new information through Facebook. For example, let's say that I have 200 people on Facebook as friends and if I made a small post asking for help—something in particular—then from these 200 people I will find help with it. That's why Facebook is the most important thing.

However, it appears that social media and WhatsApp are of more importance to refugees and migrants once they have arrived in Sicily. As well as being used to remain in contact with friends and family back home, they are used by those going through the motions of reception, integration, and so on. Facebook, according to Brodie, tended to be "more useful for people who move around a lot."

And this trend was particularly pronounced among new arrivals.

Eritrean migrants arrive in Messina, Sicily, 8 October 2015. (VOA – Nicolas Pinault)

> Usually one of the rare times that we have contact with someone who's just arrived ... people will say that they want to use Facebook. They might want to use a WhatsApp number to tell someone already in Europe that they've arrived, so they've got a German number or something that they need to contact. But they want Facebook to *get the number* that they'd left on their Facebook, and once they have the number then they use WhatsApp to call them. So Facebook acts as this repository, like a cloud.

Certain specialist functions that Whatsapp provides, and which Facebook does not, has resulted in the application bearing particular importance to West African migrants—more so than for those migrating to Europe from the Horn of Africa (and via Egypt).

Aside from offering a cheap call functionality, perhaps the most interesting use described by West African migrants in Sicily was "WhatsApp community trees." At least two participants in Sicily stated that they were members of WhatsApp community trees based either on nationality or hyper-local lines, whereby their village or local town had a WhatsApp group including members in the origin country and destination country. These community trees provided different functions for participants. Not only were they a way of staying in touch with friends, family, or fellow community members, but they also provided a two-way migratory forum in which aspiring migrants and arrivals in Europe could converse.

As mentioned previously, Moussa from Guinea did not use social media before migrating but, since arriving in Italy, he uses WhatsApp to communicate with friends back home.

> Now that I'm here, I do speak to people through WhatsApp. Those people want to come. But I want to tell them that, 'The journey is like *this*…you might experience all these kinds of things on the journey.' People might lose their lives.

Moussa elaborated that "WhatsApp has so many groups" including those used by "people from my village and the villages nearby."

> I try to use these groups to convince people not to come because of the difficulties of the journey. I try to explain everything that happened to me along the way.

> Using WhatsApp and Facebook is important for sure, but I think WhatsApp groups are more important because you're communicating with your people directly. People can post whatever they want on Facebook. WhatsApp groups are more helpful.

Marley, from Gambia, remembered the moment in Italy when he was invited to a similar group by Gambian migrants from his village and surrounding area back home.

> I was at home [one day] when I saw a lot of messages on my phone. One of my friends had added me to it. And after I started following the messages, I started hearing voices that I knew but I didn't have their contacts. But through those messages, I was able to get so many contacts that I used to see when I was in Gambia. Some of them had travelled before me.

The group allowed Gambians to discuss how to develop their local area and assist the village, whether through fundraising or exchanging social capital to organise projects such as "trying to make a new bore-hole so the village can have a better water supply" and locating "generators for electricity." It rendered the diaspora small, and WhatsApp allowed for exchanges that would usually take place at hyper-local—village, mosque, cafe—level.

> [The group] was very important because it was connecting everyone from the village who was abroad. It was connecting us together. Whatever happened in the village, you heard about it. Whatever we had to send, they knew that the boys outside would do it.

> If somebody passed away in the village, in the next three minutes we would know about it because you'd have got a message from the group. So we'd message people there like, 'Sorry … we send our condolences.'

This was community-building albeit in a more private, secure, and discrete way. Some group members wrote, and others spoke through voice-note messages, again allowing for unprejudiced communication between literate and illiterate social media users.

"Most people that left Bangladesh haven't studied or been educated, so they struggle to communicate through Facebook, or to write."

Other times, communities accustomed to lower rates of smartphone, social media, and internet penetration resorted to more traditional forms of communication that were eased by WhatsApp.

Bangladeshi migrant Abir runs an office typical of the kind of business that fuels daily life in the diaspora—somewhere to get help with documents or buy telephone cards to call home, a go-between for migrants and embassy staff, a money wire. Abir

stated that Bangladeshi migrants, who formed one of the top 10 nationalities arriving in Italy last year, did not tend to use Facebook or other social media channels in this way either.

> I've never seen that from our community. I haven't seen people on Facebook, or people using social media like that. Most people that left Bangladesh haven't studied or been educated, so they struggle to communicate through Facebook, to write. Out of 1,000 [people] you might find 10 people who use social media communications.

Instead, Abir claimed, Bangladeshis tend to rely more on community "associations" within Sicily or familial networks outside—interestingly making a similar point to Brodie that economic migration necessitated more individualistic concerns.

> Everyone is thinking about themselves. Everyone who arrived here has their own difficulties, their own problems, so they don't care. If you have parents, then you try to help them. Otherwise you don't care.

Before, a Bangladeshi migrant may have had to go to a shop like Abir's to buy an international calling card. Now it was possible to do so cheaply through a data connection, or via the internet. WhatsApp therefore hadn't innovated how people communicated, it had just made it cheaper and easier for lower-income families to stay in touch with friends and relatives on the other side of the world.

3.4 The many uses of digital tech

An important lesson from this research is that usage of digital tools is far more varied than is often reported or popularly understood. For instance, interviews with migrants and asylum seekers in Egypt and Sicily both suggested that social media use among those groups differed significantly to their use in other contexts, such as the Balkan Route circa 2015 (as explored in Part I of this series), with variations often based on:

- Age;
- Nationality;
- Literacy/education rate;
- Socio-economic/class position in origin country;
- Pre-existing awareness of migratory risks;
- Smuggling modus operandi on a given migratory route;
- Distances on route;
- Individual vs. collective migratory aspirations.

Ultimately, Facebook is the migratory app of choice. WhatsApp was sometimes more attractive because it provided one-on-one communication through calls back home, or community trees that connected community members at either end of the migration trail. But the above patterns of social media use leave migrants, to varying

degrees, vulnerable to rumours, misinformation from fellow community members, and deliberate disinformation by different actors.

Clearly, transit migration through North Africa and the Central Mediterranean is not the same as transit migration through Turkey, Greece, and the Balkans. And on top of the differing nationalities (and socio-economic demographics) of those moving on these routes, the distances and risks involved also necessitate differing uses of social media than elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

A 2017 report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime found a "widespread and well entrenched" smuggling industry between the Horn of Africa and Europe,[23] to the extent that it is "never hard to find a smuggler in the region or throughout the journey." Journeys are long and often incredibly dangerous, and the "need for a smuggler is ubiquitous."[24] Payment models used by smuggling (and trafficking) networks are also different. Social media and social networks "are absolutely critical for the functioning of human smuggling networks…an enabling feature for both migrants and smugglers, and a crucial safeguard around which the industry is built."[25]

But the other main route leading towards the Central Mediterranean, from West Africa, appears to have its own variations. The majority of people migrating from West Africa towards Libya and the Mediterranean are classed by UNHCR and the IOM as economic migrants. The smuggling industry is different, and growing risks in Libya necessitate different—and sometimes scant—use of social media.

Speaking to the Author in December 2017, the Global Initiative's Peter Tinti compared preconceptions about social media use, largely built around the 2015 "refugee crisis," with social media use among mostly West African migrants who are now currently transiting through Niger and Libya.

> Very few people arrive in Agadez knowing who their transporter for getting into Libya is going to be, and then—once in Libya—it's a bit of a free for all. The goal is to get from Sabha where you're usually dropped off [from Agadez], and then to Tripoli in one piece, and then once in Tripoli then to try and find people who can introduce you to people to get on a boat.[26]

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[23] Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, "Integrated Responses to Human Smuggling from the Horn of Africa to Europe," May 2017, http://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/global-initiative-human-smuggling-from-the-horn-of-africa-may-2017-web.pdf

[24] Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, "Integrated Responses to Human Smuggling from the Horn of Africa to Europe," May 2017, http://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/global-initiative-human-smuggling-from-the-horn-of-africa-may-2017-web.pdf

[25] Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, "Integrated Responses to Human Smuggling from the Horn of Africa to Europe," May 2017, http://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/global-initiative-human-smuggling-from-the-horn-of-africa-may-2017-web.pdf

[26] Peter Tinti (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime), Skype conversation with Tom Rollins (Global Detention Project), 27 December 2017.

Social media and ICTs are used for advertising, and WhatsApp in particular can be useful for quick communications and transactions as well as "memes" distributed either by smugglers or fellow community members to give individuals a sense of what lies ahead. Tinti further explained how smugglers in Agadez and Libya might share, "advertising in the form of a screenshot that then kind of ricochets through WhatsApp" including, perhaps, a "photo of a migrant who is stood next to a fancy car in Italy."[27] This "meme-ified" communication between the migrant and the smuggler can be fast, dynamic, and not necessarily dependent upon good literacy.[28]

At the same time, Tinti said, growing knowledge of the risks in Libya in particular means that increasing numbers of migrants transiting through Libya are attempting to "mitigate [the] risks."

The general sense I'm getting is that migrants are more aware [of risks]. They've always been aware of the dangers it entails, but they are more aware than ever of the dangers they will face. It's not clear to me that that's translating to necessarily fewer people going, so much as it is people who are taking greater measures to mitigate the risks. The Agadez to Libya route at its height was basically operating like you would a bus company in a lot of ways. So there really wasn't vetting, it was more, 'Can I get a spot on the convoys or can't I?' [But] now migrants need to … vet their smuggler a little more or find their smuggler via things like WhatsApp or Facebook and also through *coxeurs*[29]—people from their community who are in hubs like Agadez, who can introduce them to trustworthy people.[30]

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[27] Peter Tinti (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime), Skype conversation with Tom Rollins (Global Detention Project), 27 December 2017.

[28] It also bore several similarities to the—admittedly more sophisticated—migratory memes described by Gillespie et al (M. Gillespie et al., *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks*, Open University/France Médias Monde, 13 May 2016) that, in 2015-2016, were advising Syrians about the various steps in a journey from Turkey to Germany.

[29] *Coxeur* is a word used in Francophone countries in West Africa, including Niger and Senegal, to describe recruiters, touts, or brokers working on behalf of smuggling networks. For more information on the term, see: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants 2018: Africa," June 2018, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glosom/GLOSOM_2018_Africa_web_small.pdf

[30] Peter Tinti (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime), Skype conversation with Tom Rollins (Global Detention Project), 27 December 2017.

4. HOW DOES SOCIAL MEDIA USE HELP MIGRANTS? LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE SYRIAN DIASPORA

It is worthwhile, at this point, to compare findings from filed interviews in Egypt and Sicily with experiences of Syrian refugees—arguably the most visible and written-about displaced population today. A literature review in Part I of this series found a disproportionate focus on Syrian refugees and social media use. There is some reasoning behind this—Syrians are generally understood to have used social media and ICTs in their home country more than other displaced populations, and it stands to reason that refugees from a country with higher rates of internet and smartphone penetration would be more prone to using social media before, during, and after their displacement from that same country. (The International Telecommunication Union's World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database found that in 2011, the percentage of individuals using the Internet stood at 22.5 percent in Syria, 17.46 percent in Sudan, and 0.7 percent in Eritrea.)[31]

Displacement may also have precipitated an increase in use of social media because of the need to maintain contact with distant family members and to prepare for unthinkable journeys. Examples in the literature point to Syrians in the Balkans combining Google Translate, Google Maps, and GPS to navigate language and geography, while there are countless examples of Syrian refugees self-organising and community-building through Facebook Pages and Groups. There is generally consensus that, "Refugees fleeing the turmoil of Syria are, perhaps more than any other displaced community, using their phones to plot and document their journeys to a better life."[32]

The author of this report previously observed first-hand how, between 2014-2015, Syrians in Egypt were using Facebook pages to find smugglers—Facebook pages with names that "euphemistically conjure images of tourism companies or advocacy groups, rather than smuggling routes … bearing record numbers of migrants across the Mediterranean."[33] This was usually not in lieu of face-to-face meetings with smugglers (or brokers/fixers) and/or recommendations from existing social networks, which supplement a refugee's research about who to trust and which way to go.

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[31] UN Data, "Percentage of Individuals using the Internet,"
http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=ITU&f=ind1Code%3AI99H

[32] A. Ram, "Smartphones Bring Solace and Aid to Desperate Refugees,' *Wired*, 5 December 2015,
https://www.wired.com/2015/12/smartphone-syrian-refugee-crisis/

[33] P. Kingsley, "People Smugglers Using Facebook to Lure Migrants into 'Italy Trips,'" *The Guardian*, 8 May 2015,
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/08/people-smugglers-using-facebook-to-lure-migrants-into-italy-trips

A screenshot of the Facebook group "Karajat al-Mushuntiteen," which roughly translates as "Traveller's Platform." The group has more than 312,000 members who share and access information regarding the journey to Europe. (Facebook)

Many Syrians conducted face-to-face market research within their own communities, whether by discussing the pros and cons of a particular smuggler with friends or by meeting members of a smuggling network to discuss routes, prices, and the possibility of discounts.

This writer met several smuggling brokers in Alexandria and Cairo between 2014-2015, and noted how easily reachable they were in high-density Syrian neighbourhoods such as Al-Hossary in Cairo's 6th of October neighbourhood, or Al-Agami 20km west of Alexandria. Smugglers' names were known to almost everyone in a Syrian neighbourhood, as were their phone numbers. Sometimes the *simsar* (broker) was the man sipping tea down at one's local barber shop; other times he was standing outside one's apartment block talking amicably to neighbours.

But social media played a role, and related digital platforms played other roles, too. For instance, a Palestinian refugee from Syria recounted his and other passengers' use of Google Maps when their boat was prematurely abandoned by smugglers—they were running low on fuel and wanted to avoid arrest by European authorities. Using sporadic GPS signal and the notoriously inaccurate directional arrow function, they attempted to navigate their way to a SAR zone in Italian waters before running

out of fuel. Elsewhere, in Alexandria's Karmouz Police Station, Syrian and Palestinian refugees detained in the facility used Facebook and Twitter to campaign for their release and resettlement to Europe. Having created a dedicated Facebook page and Twitter hashtags, they were ultimately successful.[34] Meanwhile in Lebanon, community activists used Whatsapp as a community organising tool, creating a series of "local committees"—committees that exist both in the real-world and in the digital world of the Facebook-owned messaging service—for areas with high concentrations of refugees.

Community-building innovations such as that seen in Lebanon can traverse arbitrary legal landscapes, challenge discriminatory measures, and give agency back to the displaced. They are adaptable too. An Egyptian human rights defender and migration researcher remembered observing the different ways in which Syrians self-organised online—first as a displaced population newly arrived in Egypt in need of ties, social capital, and information about services (before mid-2013) and then as a migration-prone population keen to know about smuggling options and legal migration channels (after mid-2013). "Syrians use it for *everything*," he said.

> They announce jobs inside the Syrian community—in a restaurant, a supermarket, anything—by using their own groups. Every neighbourhood has a group.
>
> I remember in late 2013, they started to add me to these groups. So you'd find [listing examples of names of groups]: Syrians in Agami, Syrians in Alexandria, Syrians in Miami, Syrians in 6th of October Cairo, Syrians in Ain Shams. Also they have groups for each university college. If there is a scholarship opportunity or any new law concerning them, Syrians will publish it. They use it for every single detail in their lives.[35]

These social media functions tend to be well-connected, tailored to particular needs/causes (in some cases, emergencies), and adaptable to changing circumstances. Pages were even set up to spread word about security checkpoints and arrests in Alexandria following the 2013 popular coup against Muhammad Morsi (when Syrian refugees were targeted for perceived support of the Muslim Brotherhood). Crucially, Syrians in Egypt have created an online community infrastructure that exists but can then adapt to changing circumstances—so a local page set up by Syrians in Alexandria that might have once been warning about flying checkpoints nearby nowadays talks about resettlement and scholarship opportunities.

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[34] T. Rollins, "The Palestinian-Syrian 'Protection Gap': Inside an Egyptian Police Station," *Palestinian refugees from Syria: Ongoing Nakba, Ongoing Discrimination*, Al-Majdal, Volume 57(2), 2015, http://www.badil.org/en/publication/periodicals/al-majdal/item/2077-article-6.html

[35] Anonymous Egyptian human rights defender (name withheld for security reasons), Skype conversation with Tom Rollins (Global Detention Project), 25 January 2018.

However, it is also crucial to remember that being this "connected" can have risks. "Getting refugees online" can sound like a great topic for funding proposals, calls for tender, and fluffy web journalism, but it's also important to understand the implications of this online ecosystem. Research has found, for example, that reliance on community-built social media channels can lead to the spread of accidental (but possibly quite well-intentioned) misinformation as well as more deliberate disinformation. Refugees may migrate or seek refuge based on false information, leaving them vulnerable to dangerous journeys and false hopes. The Author met one such family in Cairo's 6th of October City, a sprawling suburb on the desert-swept western outskirts of Cairo that has become home to tens of thousands of Syrian refugees since 2011.

Abu Majed, a 41-year-old Syrian refugee from southern Syria's Druze majority city of Sweida' had been living in Jaramana (eastern Damascus) when he first heard about the possibility of migrating towards Europe. "I was walking one day in the streets of Damascus," he said, "when I heard a woman speaking […] about her son's experience traveling to Egypt, and from Egypt to Libya and Europe."

The family sat on the idea and waited because, with two young children to feed and educate, they were reticent to leave. But last year, they finally decided to leave for Egypt. A community contact garnered through Facebook had told them that if they travelled to Egypt, then they could get resettlement to Canada within a matter of months.

> We did [research online] until we found someone who had done it before us and showed us a way. We kept contacting him for two months until we made our way here.

Abu Majed said they reached this community contact over Facebook through mutual friends. He trusted the man enough to sell his home and leave Syria, taking his family on the dangerous irregular desert crossing from Port Sudan to Upper Egypt. The information seemed solid. But when the family arrived their dreams of resettlement were crushed, according to Abu Majed's wife, Im Majed.

> We were shocked by the fact that their [UNHCR's] mission was not to serve and protect refugees and provide a safe environment. We were surprised by UNHCR's disappointing performance—our first interview was two months after our arrival. The hope was that UNHCR would help to pave the way for legal travel, but I was shocked to discover that there was no clear path to resettlement [for us].

5. CONCLUSION

Social media and tech tools have become an integral part of the story of 21st-century migration. The purpose of the second instalment of this three-part Special Report is not to argue that social media, smartphones, and other tech tools are *not* "migrant essentials," but rather to encourage a corrective to widely held views that overstate the value of these resources and fail to take into account variations in usage by different groups of people in different locations. While Syrian refugees have clearly used tech tools throughout their displacement, and tailored them for community-building purposes both to stay connected and also to mitigate the risks and realities of diaspora life, other communities may use those same tools differently or not use them very much at all. Differences in literacy, socio-economics, and other factors mean that West African migrants, for example, use social media and ICTs differently to Syrian refugees.

At the same time, there are positives and negatives, risks and benefits, to how these tools are used, depending on a wide range of factors including age, nationality, literacy rates, and level of usage of devices in home countries. There are also macro-level considerations such as whether there is a pre-existing awareness of migratory risks, the smuggling *modus operandi* on a given migratory route, the distances involved, and also the presence of individual vs. collective migratory aspirations within a given community or individual.

Having better understood how different communities use tech tools in North Africa and the Euro-Mediterranean region, other questions present themselves—particularly in terms of how social media relates to borders and those crossing them. Are there ways for activists, NGOs, and civil society actors to harness social media for good, with the aim of protecting refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants—including those in detention—and if so, how? Is awareness-raising among displaced and migrant communities through social media actually effective, and are there better ways to communicate with those communities? And what attempts have the EU and national authorities made to monitor, regulate, and securitise digital spaces at the same time that they seek to securitise borders in the physical realm?

The third and final instalment of this three-part Special Report will seek to answer some of these questions by further investigating the nexus between irregular migration, tech tools, and securitisation of both physical and digital spaces. Among the topics it will assess are efforts by authorities to monitor social media and digital communications between displaced and migrant communities, as well as suggestions that social media could serve as a tool for "managing" migration. This

report, Part II of the series, has helped set the stage for the concluding report by providing testimony from migrants and asylum seekers whose words should give us pause about making grandiose claims about how social media has shaped—or could shape—the lived realities of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees during their migration journeys.

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