



Following the deaths of over [300 migrants](#) who drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean in October 2013, for example, it was once again stated that human traffickers are enriching themselves on the backs of people who are fleeing war and hunger, and increased patrols to target the smuggler networks.

However, the widely held perception that “human trafficker” and “people smuggler” can be used interchangeably to describe shadowy criminal networks preying on desperate and naïve people, is in fact incorrect. [According](#) to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC, the truth is often less malevolent and more complex.

To begin with, smugglers - unlike traffickers - provide a service that migrants are willing to pay for. The demand for such services has increased exponentially as states around the world have shored up their borders over the last 10 to 15 years - making it more difficult for would-be migrants and asylum seekers to enter countries legally.

Noting that at least 2,360 migrants had died trying to cross borders clandestinely in 2013 - the deadliest year on record – the International Organization for Migration, IOM, [suggested](#) that

unless the international community takes decisive action to address the causes of irregular migration, “more migrant lives will be lost at the hands of people smugglers and traffickers”.

The level of risk migrants are exposed to often depends on how much money they can afford to spend. Those who can buy plane tickets, pay for forged visas and passports, and bribes for customs and immigration officers, are much more likely to reach their destination safely.

Migrants who use longer land and sea routes, travelling with different smugglers who may or may not be linked to one another - what the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [describes as](#)

a “pay-as-you-go” package - run the highest risk of being stranded or exposed to abuse, as has often been the case in high-risk zones like, for instance, the

[Sinai](#)

desert and Yemen.

“What’s happening now is unprecedented,” Yitna Getachew, a regional thematic specialist with IOM’s East and Southern Africa office in Pretoria, told IRIN news. “Up until recently, you didn’t see abuse of migrants by smugglers.”

The extent to which abuse by smugglers occurs, even on the most notoriously dangerous routes, is unclear. Most stories that surface are the stories of the people who had a bad experience with a smuggler. The stories of the people who didn’t experience abuse tend to pass under the radar, and according to experts, a majority of migrants do not experience abuse at the hands of smugglers.

Several researchers [IRIN news spoke to](#) suggested that the most effective deterrent to smuggling may be fewer border controls, not more. “Countries tend to focus on border security, and that [doesn't seem to work](#),” according to Khalid

Koser, deputy director of the

[Geneva Centre for Security Policy](#)

. “The unintended consequence of more restrictive immigration policy is more illegal migration.”

In the West Africa region, where a protocol on freedom of movement allows people living in member states to travel within the region without visas, there is little demand for smugglers.

“Smuggling can't operate without restrictions,” according to Christopher Horwood, coordinator of the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat ([RMMS](#)).

However, the political sensitivities that [inform debates](#) about irregular migration around the world make it unlikely that such mechanisms will be introduced in the near future. As long as public sentiment remains anti-immigration, governments are unlikely to enable the access for migrants to enter their countries legally, even though it might perpetuate the demand for smugglers.