

# The Price of Hope: Traffickers Profit as Asylum Seekers Head for Europe

By Walter Mayr



Photos ▶

Thomas Kern/ DER SPIEGEL

**More than 150,000 refugees have landed this year on the Italian coastline, most of them hoping to continue north. As the EU struggles to find an answer, human traffickers are raking in billions.**

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Behind the La Grotta bar, Italy comes to an end. But a narrow road continues onward across the border into France, hugging a cliff above the sea. It is a bottleneck for illegal immigrants and traffickers.

Hidden behind agave bushes, three young men from Mali are crouching on the steep slope, staring at the border. Just a few meters away, a group of Syrian refugees are camped out in

front of La Grotta, like pilgrims searching for a hostel: men carrying backpacks, women wearing headscarves and a little boy.

Ahmad, as he asked to be called, is the gray-bearded spokesman of the illegal immigrants. Formerly a software developer in Damascus, he left his wife and children behind. Ahmad pulls a crumpled piece of paper out of his jacket pocket, the official certification of his arrival in Italy -- as refugee number 13,962.

But this number is a reflection of statistics kept in merely one place -- the police headquarters in Crotone, located in southern Italy's Calabria region. All in all, more than 150,000 migrants and refugees have landed on Italy's shores nationwide since January and almost half of them -- more than 60,000 men, women and children -- were never registered in the European Union's Eurodac database. They have long since disappeared, heading north toward the rest of Europe.

There was an unwritten rule after [the tragic shipwreck off the island of Lampedusa](#) on Oct. 3, 2013, in which 366 people drowned: Rome sends naval ships and coast guard vessels into the Mediterranean as part of the "Mare Nostrum" rescue operation, but it lets most of the migrants continue northward without further ado, so that they will not apply for political asylum in Italy as the country of their arrival, as required under the Dublin II agreement.

But in late September, Italy changed course. In a confidential communiqué, which SPIEGEL has seen, Interior Minister Angelino Alfano ordered that henceforth migrants "always" be identified and fingerprinted. Alfano noted that various EU countries have, "with increasing insistence," complained that the immigrants are left to continue their "journey to northern

European countries" without being challenged by Italian authorities.

## Struggling to Find a Strategy

Preferred destinations include Sweden, Germany and Switzerland, countries with social welfare and the possibility of political asylum. Italy, on the other hand, as confirmed once more by a Nov. 4 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights, cannot even guarantee suitable accommodations for asylum applicants. More than ever, the Dublin system is degenerating into a farce, with only about 6 percent of all [asylum seekers in Germany](#) actually being returned to the country where they first set foot in the EU.

Fortress Europe is currently struggling to [come up with a new strategy](#) to cope with the mass influx of migrants and refugees from Africa and the Middle East. Italy suspended its "Mare Nostrum" operation on Nov. 1, both to reduce costs and to spur a Europe-wide solution. Since then, ships have been patrolling off the Italian coast as part of the EU's "Triton" mission. But the mission is not tasked with rescuing refugees on the high seas.



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In the face of the worst refugee influx in decades, [wealthy countries have "miserably failed,"](#) concludes Amnesty International, noting that only half of the \$3.74 billion (€ billion) in funds requested by the United Nations has been made available. Instead, the EU has opted to seal itself off. The results of the latest Europe-wide police operation, "Mos Maiorum," will be released on Dec. 11. Its main purpose was to investigate the destinations, origins, background and paths of asylum seekers coming to Europe.

Meanwhile, the dream of a better life in the EU is a source of income for an entire industry of criminals: human traffickers. Very few Syrians, Eritreans or sub-Saharan Africans hazard the journey to Europe on their own, most opting to pay others for help. Extrapolations from current market prices indicate that traffickers have likely earned several hundred million euros in 2014 just from migrants who landed on the coasts of Italy. The higher the hurdles along the path northward, the bigger the traffickers' profits.

But there is also a second group that has become active in response to the stream of immigrants. Called "la rete" -- the network -- it is an informal collection of bloggers and human rights activists. They too accompany migrants on their perilous journey from the coasts of the Middle East or Anatolia, across the Mediterranean to Europe. But they do so using the tools of the 21st century.

### **'Practical Assistance'**

The Network operates a tightly organized early warning and monitoring system via Facebook, email, satellite phone and Skype. Its aim is to ensure that no migrant can quietly disappear from the radar and that no fishing cutter laden with hundreds of migrants can go unnoticed off the Libyan coast.

The digital activists operate 24 hours a day and, unlike the criminal traffickers, they work without pay.

There is another key difference as well: Men are in charge of the network of human traffickers, while women have the say in the network of human rights activists.

"Assalamu alaikum," says Fatima, as she maneuvers her Fiat into a parking space in front of the La Grotta bar at the Menton bordering crossing. She had just spotted Ahmad, the software developer from Damascus, and his companions. The night before, the Syrians had made it into France, but they were picked up and deported again. Now they are back on the Italian side, not knowing what to do next. Fatima, 24, a Moroccan-born chef, has been assigned by the Network to cover Italy's northwestern flank. She commutes back and forth between the French Mediterranean city of Menton, where she lives, and the Italian border town of Ventimiglia. Increasing numbers of migrants have been gathering at the Ventimiglia train station, now that the authorities have cracked down on the northern Brenner Pass route through the Alps.

Fatima usually brings along food, and she always has good advice for the migrants. "Practical assistance is part of our religion, part of Islam," she says. By providing assistance, she is encroaching on the territory of the Tunisian traffickers lying in wait at the Ventimiglia train station for helpless migrants with the funds to pay for their services. For Fatima, payback comes in the form of scratched paint on her Fiat.

Facilitating illegal immigration in Italy is punishable by years in prison. But is it a crime to give refugees a ride in your car? Fatima hesitates. It's clear that Ahmad and his group need to leave the border zone before their next attempt to continue northward. But Fatima prefers not to take the risk, so the

exhausted Syrians, together with the four-year-old boy, walk off into the night on foot, until a taxi driver is found to take them to Ventimiglia.

There, on the seedy square in front of the train station, with its portable toilets set up for the migrants, Fatima offers her support until late into the night. The next train to Milan, from where Ahmad and his group intend to depart for Germany via France using a different trafficker, leaves Ventimiglia at 4:37 a.m.

It's an opportunity for Ahmad to tell the story of his journey, from the bombed-out streets of Damascus to the French-Italian border.

### **Frame By Frame**

"My first contact," says the Syrian, "was through a middleman in Damascus named Abu Jafir." Jafir had insisted that the total fee for the trip to Italy -- €7,000 (\$8,735) per person -- be paid in advance.

Ahmad doesn't comment on the amount, which corresponds to at least two average annual salaries in prewar Syria. He describes his odyssey matter-of-factly, as if he were showing a long film backwards, frame by frame.

"We took a bus from my neighborhood, which is controlled by pro-regime troops, to an area near the airport. From there, we continued toward Aleppo, where we boarded minivans that took us to the Turkish border. There were constantly new traffickers," says Ahmad. He likens the human trafficking business to "an endless chain that no one can figure out."

The refugees crawled through underground tunnels into Turkey. Judging by the license plates they saw, they were now

in Kilis Province in southern Anatolia. A bus took them to Istanbul, 1,200 kilometers (745 miles) away.

"We stayed there for two weeks, half of that time in hotels," says Ahmad. "The \$500 I had brought along with me was already gone by the time we left for a place near Izmir. First we had to walk for eight hours. We arrived at a concealed harbor at about 9 p.m. Our boat was more than 20 meters (66 feet) long, and it was flying the American flag."

Ahmad and 126 other refugees boarded the vessel. "We were lucky and the boat had a powerful engine," says Ahmad. "We reached Italy four days later."

It didn't escape the notice of Ahmad and the others that, after landing in Capo Cimiti on the Calabrian coast, their skipper -- a 28-year-old Turk named Koç Can -- tried to masquerade as a deaf-mute refugee. But they didn't know who the masterminds behind their journey were. They didn't know who collected the proceeds of at least €800,000.

Istanbul has long been notorious in the law enforcement community as a hub of international human trafficking. In 2011 alone, more than 9,000 traffickers in Turkey accumulated \$303 million in profits, according to a report by the International Terrorism Center of the Turkish Police Academy. A guard assigned to protect the refugees in Istanbul, for example, charges \$30. Boat renters demand at least \$3,000 a week. And the captain of an expedition to the Italian coast collects up to \$10,000 per trip.

Muammer Küçük, currently in hiding, has made a fortune in the human trafficking business -- at least according to the book "Confessions of a Human Trafficker," by northern Italian criminologist Andrea De Nicola and his co-author, Giampaolo Musumeci. Küçük, who has a long criminal record, lost 77

ships off the Italian coast in 2010 alone -- a number that offers insight into the enormous scale of the overall operation.

## **Part 2: Looking to Leave Italy**

According to the authors, the only business in which profit margins are larger than in human trafficking is the drug trade. "Behind every case of unregulated immigration, behind the tens of thousands of migrants who come to Europe each year, there is an industry that consists of small and sometimes miserable crooks, but also, and most of all, of major professional criminals." Those are the ones who command prices of up to €10,000 per migrant.

"The world's largest and most brutal travel agency," as the authors call it, offers custom-made solutions for every budget: from rusty fishing cutters to high-speed inflatable boats to luxury yachts flying the US flag. Traffickers, the book says, also offer the option of flying directly to Milan's Malpensa Airport complete with advance delivery of fake passports -- for those wishing to avoid a nighttime boat landing along a remote stretch of the southern Italian coast.

When scrutiny is heightened at one location, traffic increases along other routes. A route where traffic has recently picked up, for example, is from Turkey across the Black Sea to EU-member Romania. In September, a boat carrying 82 Syrians and Afghans was stranded north of Istanbul along that route. In early November, 25 refugees died in the Bosphorus on the way to Romania.

The supply of customers for the human traffickers seems inexhaustible, with more than two million Syrians currently living in Turkish and Lebanese refugee camps.



Nawal Soufi, born in Morocco and raised in the Sicilian city of Catania, is venerated as the "Angel of the Syrians." The 26-year-old's Facebook page provides a central point of contact for those providing non-commercial help to migrants and refugees.

Soufi can be reached around the clock and posts almost hourly. Refugees see her telephone number as a form of life insurance. Those aboard ships that run into problems during the crossing call Soufi, and she notifies the coast guard.

"Hello?" -- "Assalamu alaikum." -- " How many of you are there out there?" -- "300." -- "How many women and children? Is your ship made of wood or metal?" -- There is silence, except for the sound of the sea. -- "What is your position?" -- "I don't know."

### **'Pull Factor'**

More than 3,300 refugees have drowned since the beginning of the year, but more than 150,000 have been rescued, thanks in part to Soufi and her supporters. Yet the "Mare Nostrum" rescue operation has now come to an end, partly because of growing complaints that the Italian navy, with its presence near Middle Eastern coastlines, only encourages criminal traffickers to load their human cargo onto more and more dilapidated boats.

Academics and politicians [call it a "pull factor."](#) Human rights activists respond by saying that lives are being saved.

Soufi and her network know that a ship has departed before the coast guard and navy do, because refugees or their family members tell them. Should a skipper run into distress, it usually takes only a single call for the Italian navy to rush to his aid -- or at least it did until recently. Under the EU's new

"Triton" mission, coast guard and navy vessels will only patrol up to 30 nautical miles off the Italian coast.

Activist Soufi, who does her utmost to ensure that everyone makes it across the Mediterranean in one piece, is taking a look around the port of Catania with friends on this afternoon. They see the rusty Egyptian fishing cutters at anchor onto which hundreds of migrants once crowded. The blame for the trafficking business doesn't just lie with the "Mafia gangs that rake in millions of dollars for their deadly voyages," but also with European politicians, says Soufi. The EU's policy of isolation only encourages human trafficking, she explains.

Thus far, Soufi has only been reported to the police once, for facilitating illegal immigration. She benefits from the fact that many are unable to understand Arab-language comments on the Internet. "I'll kill anyone who translates these comments," she jokes on Facebook. She knows that she is treading on legally thin ice, especially with posts like: "Who can put up two Syrian boys for one night in Ventimiglia?"

Soufi, who like most other activists, is close to the Syrian anti-Assad movement, pursues a special brand of altruism -- full of emotion and free of doubt. Should a caller complain about the treatment of refugees at the Isola Capo Rizzuto reception center, for example, her version of the story disseminated on Facebook sounds like a cry for help from a victim of torture. "We have landed in Guantanamo," and "Take us back to Syria."

## **The Hub of Trafficking**

Ahmad, the software developer from Damascus, offers a more prosaic description of conditions at the camp in question, where he was housed after his arrival on the evening of Oct. 10. Of course, he says, people objected to the required

fingerprinting at registration; everyone knew that it meant they could now be sent back to Italy, even if they made it to Germany or Sweden.

But Ahmad sensed that resistance was pointless. He simply hoped that the Germans would later be merciful to him and did not put up a fight that evening. He allowed officials to scan his 10 fingerprints.

He quietly left the camp four days later, and arrived in Milan 20 hours after that.

The gateway to Europe is wide and is decorated with winged horses. Migrants walk through it as they enter and leave Milan through the ornate entrance of the city's main train station. Milan has become the Italian hub of the trafficking business.

At the main train station, where Ahmad makes his first contacts, volunteers distribute water, bread and encouragement on marble benches until midnight. Those who do not board the first available train to Munich can find Arabic-speaking middlemen on the ground floor. So many fingers have moved across the map of Europe on the wall here that it now has two large holes: around Milan and in the middle of Germany. In and around the train station here, there are refugees and there are refugees. Dirt-poor Eritreans, already forced to spend their voyage across the Mediterranean below deck, where the chances of survival are the lowest in an emergency, are now stranded in front of the main entrance, drinking white wine from cartons. By contrast, well-dressed Syrian refugees carrying smartphones are clearly on their way out of Milan. They remain in the northern Italian city for an average of just four days.

Of the more than 44,000 migrants who have stopped off in Milan since the beginning of the year, only 47 have applied

for asylum in Italy. Nevertheless, the city has been pushed to a breaking point, says Pierfrancesco Majorino, the Milan city council member in charge of migrant issues. He wants the Italian government to exert more pressure on Germany. "The refugees need a temporary residence permit with the ability to move freely throughout Europe," says Majorino. "The way things are now, the failure of EU policy is only feeding the human traffickers. A criminal network is being supported."

What Majorino means is reflected in an arrest warrant by the Milan public prosecutor's office, to which SPIEGEL has gained access. It is based on the results of last November's "Operation Jackal," when special police units smashed a ring of traffickers. The leader of the ring was a Syrian.

### **Illegal, Strictly Speaking**

The telephone surveillance logs illuminate the inner workings of a scene in which petty Italian criminals provide services for their Egyptian, Syrian and North African employers. Their preferred rendezvous points in Milan are the McDonald's restaurant in front of the main train station, the Burger King on Piazza Lima and the Molino Dorino subway station. Potential customers are recruited directly at the train station or by agents smuggled into reception centers. A minibus-driver who takes eight people from Milan to Munich charges a fee of €4,000, half of it payable upfront and the other half upon arrival. The bus usually leaves around 6 p.m., driven by "Italians born and bred," as the Arabs say derisively -- that is, people with proper EU passports. The vehicles return early the next morning.

"But sometimes they return after only an hour, when they drop off their customers, who are often unable to read Latin script, in Como or Bolzano," says Tytty Cherasien. She is part of the

volunteer network at the Milan hub, like Nawal Soufi in Catania and Fatima on the French border. She has been keeping track of the fate of Syrian refugee Ahmad and his companions since their arrival in Italy.

"Strictly speaking, of course, what we are doing is illegal. We help refugees continue their journeys. But we are actually only doing our duty as citizens," says Cherasien. She even sold her car to pay for the funeral of a boy traffickers threw out of their car in Sicily. The boy, who had leukemia, died a short time later, just before a planned operation that would have saved his life.

To this day, the humanitarian corridors demanded by politician and human rights activists, through which refugees could apply for acceptance in Europe in a regulated manner, have not materialized. The media may report on individual cases in a "somewhat pious tone," the authors of the book "Confessions of a Human Trafficker" write in an open letter to Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. But, they argue, this only distracts from the fundamental need to create new European immigration legislation. "The more Europe invests in walls, fences, surveillance and patrols, the better it is for the trafficking business," the book says.

Syrian refugee Ahmad met the Egyptian trafficker who was supposed to take him out of the country at the Milan reception center on Via Aldini. The man promised to take Ahmad and his group to a point deep inside France by car, and then to put them on a train to Germany.

But the Egyptian failed to keep his word. Instead, he dropped them off well before the city of Nice. Their journey ended when French police sent the group back across the border.

Now, it's time for a second try, and this time Ahmad is determined to succeed. Back in Milan, he pulls a fresh roll of €50 bills out of his pocket, money his relatives in Syria have just sent him. "I'll be in touch as soon as I'm in Germany and have brought my family there," he says by way of farewell.

Four days later, he is no longer reachable on his Italian mobile phone. "The number you have dialed does not exist," says a computerized voice. Instead, on Oct. 23, a new entry appears on the Facebook profile of the man from Damascus.

"Current residence: Essen, Germany."

If only his fingerprints weren't in the EU database, Ahmad would now be at the end of his road.

*Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan*