

Migration at Sea: Unintended Consequences of Search and Rescue Operations

Abstract:

The Central Mediterranean Sea is the most dangerous crossing for irregular migrants in the world. At any point in time, over half a million potential migrants wait in Libya to travel to Italy with the aid of human smugglers. In response to high profile shipwrecks and mounting deaths, European nations intensified search and rescue operations in 2013. We develop a model of irregular migration in order to identify the effects of these operations on activity along this smuggling route. Leveraging plausibly exogenous variation from rapidly varying weather and tidal conditions, we find that smugglers responded to these operations by systematically shifting from seaworthy wooden boats to flimsy inflatable rafts. In doing so, these operations induced more crossings and had the ultimate effect of offsetting many of the intended safety benefits of search and rescue operations, which were captured at least in part by smugglers.

The paper is joint work with Claudio Deiana and Vikram Maheshri

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