
Joint operational team launched to combat irregular migration in the Mediterranean

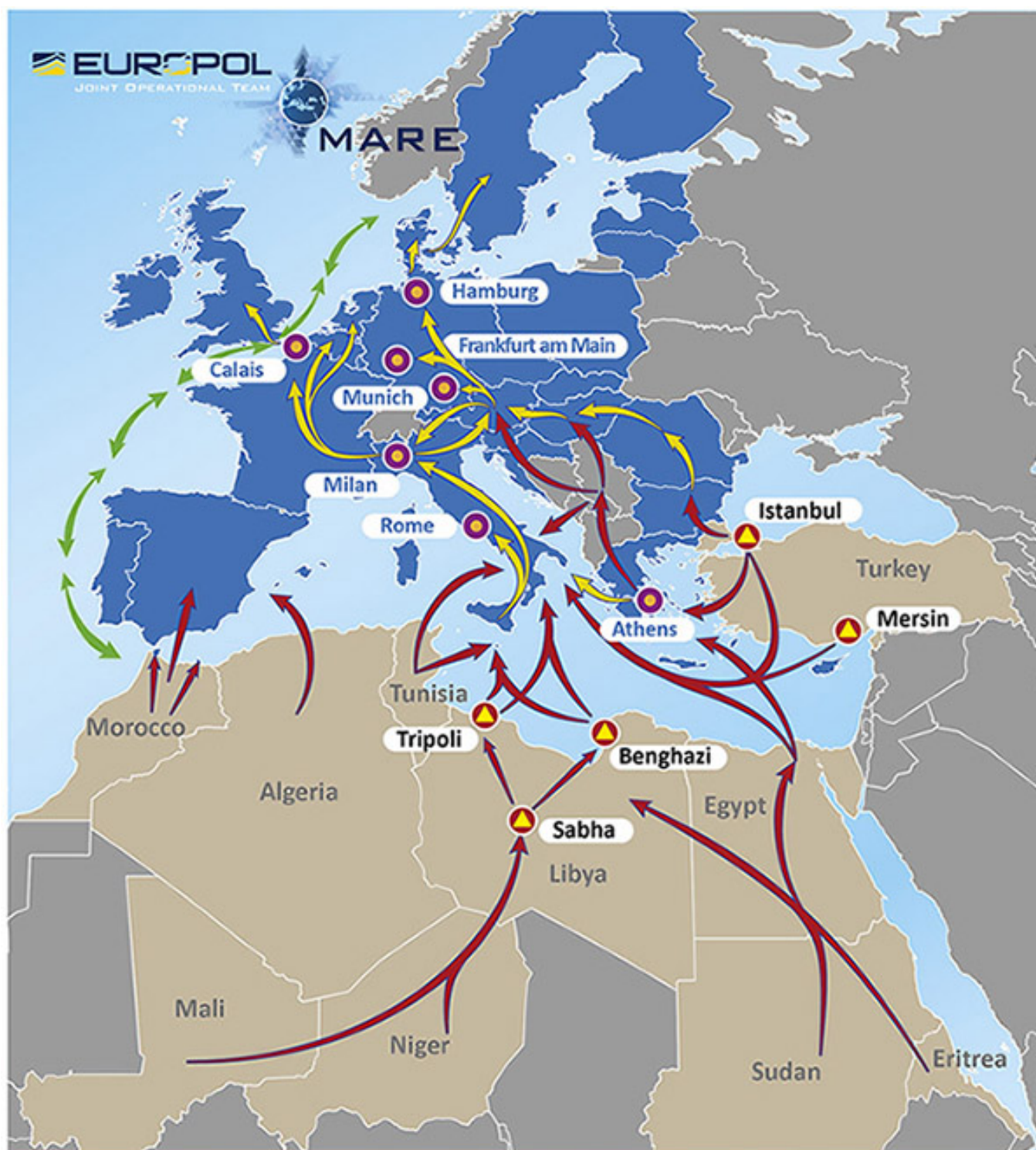
The Hague, the Netherlands
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The influx of migrants via the Mediterranean Sea has been exponentially rising, with 220 000 migrants crossing in 2014. Apart from putting intense immigration pressure on countries such as Greece and Italy, before the migrants arrive they have often taken very risky journeys across the Mediterranean to get there.

Intelligence shows that organised criminal groups are actively facilitating the transport of these irregular migrants across the Mediterranean, and these groups have also been linked to human trafficking, drugs, firearms and terrorism. The migrants are exploited by the criminal groups who give them false promises and set them out to sea on vessels that jeopardise their lives. More than 3000 people drowned in the Mediterranean en route to Europe in 2014 and there have been 1000 deaths in 2015 alone. This problem features high on the agenda of Europol, the European Commission and concerned EU Member States, who recognise that a more balanced strategy is required to combat this irregular migration as well as the refocusing of law enforcement resources to disrupt the organised crime groups involved. Shifts in volumes using different routes demonstrate how organised criminal groups are very apt at responding to law enforcement initiatives.

The intelligence-led, European response to this problem is the establishment of the Joint Operational Team (JOT) Mare, which launches today. Hosted at Europol headquarters in The Hague, JOT Mare will tackle the organised criminal groups who are facilitating the journeys of migrants by ship across the Mediterranean Sea to the EU.



Illegal immigration city hubs and routes

JOT Mare will combine Europol's unique intelligence resources and Member States' capabilities to carry out coordinated and intelligence-driven actions against the facilitators. As well as ensuring an intensified exchange of intelligence with Frontex and close cooperation with Interpol, national experts seconded to JOT Mare will facilitate the necessary cooperation between Europol and the services of the participating EU Member States.

Rob Wainwright, Director of Europol, said on the launch: "The tragedies we have seen at sea involving migrants requires prompt and coordinated action at EU level. The launch of JOT Mare could not be more timely. Europol and our partners attach great importance to the fight against criminal groups facilitating illegal migration and will combine all available resources to provide a proactive law enforcement response."

This proactive law enforcement response will build on Europol's capabilities, identifying concrete investigative leads and supporting Member States in initiating new investigations. As well as collating and distributing appropriate intelligence, the data on the organised criminal groups will be analysed, from which specialised intelligence reports will be produced.



European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, Dimitris Avramopoulos and Rob Wainwright, Director of Europol

Speaking at the launch of JOT Mare, European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, Dimitris Avramopoulos said: "I am very pleased to be able to personally witness the official launch of this very important initiative. This dedicated maritime intelligence centre, hosted and supported by Europol, has great potential: it will reinforce our actions against people smugglers; against the ruthless criminals who facilitate irregular migration to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea. We will continue to encourage close cooperation among all national and European stakeholders, in order to pursue further our common objectives and to deliver concrete results."

The launch was attended by an audience of the heads of law enforcement, among which was Interpol Director Jürgen Stock, Frontex Deputy Director Gil Arias Fernandez, and other high ranking officials from the EU Member States involved in JOT Mare.

