

# Deconstructing Migration and Refugee “Crises” in the Mediterranean. The Need for a Broader Temporal and Geographical View for a Policy Reorientation in Europe

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During the last decade, the issue of migrant and refugee arrivals on European shores in the Mediterranean has undoubtedly been a constant key topic on European political agendas, as well as in the media and as a civil society concern.

Nevertheless, since the Arab Spring, different “crises” related to border crossings by refugees and migrants at different points of the Mediterranean (Lesbos and other islands in Greece; the islands of Lampedusa and Sicily in Italy; Ceuta and Melilla in Spain) have further increased the issue’s political relevance. The arrival of refugees, mainly Syrians, in Europe since 2015, has raised further concerns in the European capitals and also in Brussels. Critical voices in Europe and elsewhere have underlined that the “refugee crisis” of 2015 was, in reality, a political crisis of Europe, unable to deal with the limited number of arrivals, if compared to refugee figures in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan (Achilli et al., 2017), and also if considered in relation to the EU population. Therefore, it is important to note that the management of migration in the Mediterranean is being constantly developed and upgraded under the pressure of a specific border “crisis” or “emergency” (Gabrielli, 2015). This fact has serious consequences both on the policies being developed, and on peoples on the move.

Since the end of the 1990s, the main actions implemented by European countries towards migrant and

refugee arrivals in the Mediterranean have been related to the “external dimension” of migration policies, namely externalizing the task of controlling flows towards third countries (Gabrielli, 2011).

However, research into the interactions between control externalization and human flows in the Mediterranean region have already shown the flexibility and “autonomous character” of migration flows to reroute their terrestrial and maritime paths towards Europe (Gabrielli, 2011; Casas-Cortes et al., 2015), largely thanks to the journeys being so fragmented (Crawley et al., 2016). The fast adaptation of flows to migration controls in the Mediterranean push European countries to continuously extend and deepen the externalization process (Gabrielli, 2016).

The same reactive and short-term paradigm also characterizes the recent political initiatives carried out by European actors during the last few years: increased externalization of control towards neighbouring third countries, following an ubiquitous logic of providing a quick answer to a border “crisis,” without even considering alternative policies.

In this regard, we could mention the EU-Africa Valletta Summit on Migration, on 12 November 2015, where the EU Trust Fund for Africa (“EU Trust Fund for stability and addressing the root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa”) was launched. This framework of cooperation with 23 countries in North Africa, in the Sahel/Lake Chad region, and in the Horn of Africa, seeks to foster a larger and deeper extension of the externalization of control, even if partially disguised as development aid to enhance third countries’ “capacity building” in the field of border and mobility control. Another key piece of the European political architecture to outsource migration and, in this case,

control refugees is the “agreement”<sup>1</sup> between the EU and Turkey of 18 March 2016, outsourcing to Turkey the control of border crossings into Europe. A further step in this direction is represented by the EU Commission communication “Towards a new Partnership Framework with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration” presented on 7 June 2016, following the proposal of the former Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi. This new partnership explicitly links the delegation of migration control toward third countries, on the one hand, and development and trade policies, on the other. The geographic focus of this framework is an attempt at bypassing cooperation with Libya, which has become more difficult due to the country’s unstable situation, developing the externalization of control for migration flows towards surrounding Sub-Saharan countries, like Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Chad, Niger, as well as towards Mali and Senegal (Gabrielli, 2016). Nevertheless, the buffering of mobility outside Europe planned in this document is not limited to Africa, but also implies cooperation with Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. We should also mention the deepening of cooperation with Tunisia, as proved by the negotiations on readmission and visa facilitation opened at the end of 2016,<sup>2</sup> following the Mobility Partnership already signed with the EU in March 2014. Moreover, in order to fully understand the policy paradigm driving European action in the Mediterranean we should recall the declaration of the German Interior Minister, Thomas de Maizière, in November 2016. He explained publicly that people intercepted in the Mediterranean Sea, be they refugees or not, must be sent to “processing centres” in North Africa, mainly Tunisia and Egypt, where they will eventually apply for asylum and wait for an answer.<sup>3</sup> The last European initiative in this sense is the deepening of cooperation with the Libyan government of Fayez al Sarraj, settled in the informal summit of La Valletta on 3 February 2017 and set up to provide training and equipment for Libyan coastguards in order to prevent crossings to Italy.<sup>4</sup>

However, as previously underlined, if we take into account long-term interactions between migration policy in the Mediterranean, on the one hand, and migratory flows and paths, on the other, a desperate need emerges to change the paradigm of current policies. Understanding the real results of such policies and underlining which of their elements are counterproductive are basic steps for developing a new proactive, evidence- and ethic-based policy framework of migration and mobility in the Mediterranean. To do so, it is crucial to consider a broader temporal and geographic framework concerning irregular crossings and human flows in the Mediterranean. Firstly, analyzing a longer time frame than the usual short-term “crisis”-based one will help to fully understand the dynamic character of migration flows and the evolution of the interactions with restrictive policies. In this regard, it will become evident that the ongoing “crisis” related to irregular border crossings in the Mediterranean is a constant, structural feature of the region, since the introduction of visa obligation for citizens of non-EU Mediterranean countries, as well as for other third-country citizens (Gabrielli, 2015). Migrant and refugee arrivals on Mediterranean shores in European countries can no longer be considered as unexpected, and even the aforementioned “crisis” related to Syrian refugees’ arrivals of 2015 was in many senses unsurprising (Spijkerboer, 2016). Secondly, considering interactions in the entire Mediterranean space will allow us to overcome the narrow analysis focused on the policies of a single European receiving country, on a specific migratory route or on a single “crisis.” This will also lead to an understanding of the limitations of current European externalization in the Mediterranean and to moving on from emergency or “crisis”-based logic (Gabrielli, 2015). Indeed, beyond apparent short-term decreases in crossings, or in the use of a single route, current political measures are incapable of stopping irregular crossings in the long term, across the entire Mediterranean (Andersson, 2016). Even in the case of the

<sup>1</sup> It is really simply a political statement in the form of a press release. The legal basis of the cooperation is an agreement between Greece and Turkey; see: [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18-eu-turkey-statement/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18-eu-turkey-statement/). See also GARCÉS-MASCAREÑAS & SÁNCHEZ-MONTIJANO (2017).

<sup>2</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION. “The EU and Tunisia start negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission,” *Press release*, 12 October 2016, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-16-3394\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-3394_en.htm)

<sup>3</sup> SHALAL, A. “German ministry wants to return asylum seekers to Africa,” *Independent*, 6 November 2016, [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/german-ministry-refugee-migrants-asylum-seekers-africa-libya-tunisia-egypt-australia-a7400681.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/german-ministry-refugee-migrants-asylum-seekers-africa-libya-tunisia-egypt-australia-a7400681.html)

<sup>4</sup> Malta Declaration, see: [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/01/03-malta-declaration/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/01/03-malta-declaration/)

EU-Turkey deal, the decline in arrivals came prior to the signing of the agreement (Crawley et al., 2016), and while deportation numbers have been limited, safe corridors have not been established and refugees are piling up in Greece in dire conditions (Garcés-Mascareñas & Sanchez-Montijano, 2017). This cooperation framework aimed at buffering mobility outside Europe is also amplifying the market possibilities for smugglers and traffickers (Achilli, 2016) and, at the same time, displacing migratory paths to riskier routes.

## The fast adaptation of flows to migration controls in the Mediterranean push European countries to continuously extend and deepen the externalization process

Besides the ephemeral effects of these policies versus the adaptability of the flows, the current migration policies in the Mediterranean are worsening the already existing harmful consequences on human rights and physical integrity of refugees and migrants. In particular, the European externalization of migration control towards neighbouring countries has raised serious concerns about the violence to which refugees and migrants are exposed on their journeys. The aforementioned renewal of cooperation with Libya is, unfortunately, particularly illustrative of the risks this type of collaboration entails for the safety of migrants and refugees, as well as for the respect for their human rights, due to the worrying track record the Libyan authorities have in “managing” migrants and refugees in the country.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, this growing exposure to violence in transit spaces is also related to the rise in deaths in the Mediterranean space. Despite the political narrative linking the reinforcement of border control and cooperation with neighbouring countries with the need to reduce the risks related to irregular crossings of migrants and refugees, the number of people dying while attempting to reach Europe is

constantly growing (Last & Spijkerboer, 2014; Fargues & Di Bartolomeo, 2015). The latest data provided by IOM on dead or missing persons in the Mediterranean clearly confirm this trend: 3,279 persons in 2014, 3,784 in 2015, 5,098 in 2016, and 666 in 2017 (by 13 April 2017).<sup>6</sup>

Finally, we should also remember the limitations on human rights and the right to asylum resulting from these migration control practices (Andrijasevic, 2010; Hyndman & Mountz, 2008; Gabrielli, 2014). This combination of a strengthening of policies to control flows, a growth in border fatalities and the degradation of the human rights of peoples on the move clearly indicates that there is a crucial need for a comprehensive reorientation of the paradigms and tools of the current policy framework. There is, then, a deep ethical need to reconcile state interests with the protection of humans on the move and to reverse the current European migration policy framework in order to prioritize the safety of people over that of states (Zapata-Barrero & Gabrielli, 2017).

Furthermore, to develop a new proactive, evidence- and ethic-based policy framework of migration and mobility in the Mediterranean we need to go beyond the “crisis” framework and acknowledge that irregular crossings are a structural feature of the Mediterranean. Opening “safe channels” for refugees, as well as formal channels for recruiting foreign workers in the region will, therefore, become legitimate options for reconciling the effective protection of the rights of people on the move, their safety and the effectiveness of their right to asylum, as well as becoming a factor smoothing the path towards more symmetrical relations between Mediterranean countries.

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<sup>5</sup> UNSML and OHCHR. “‘Detained and Dehumanised.’ Report on Human Right Abuses against Migrants in Libya,” 13 December 2016, [www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/DetainedAndDehumanised\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/DetainedAndDehumanised_en.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> See: <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

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