



## THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE: THE DEADLIEST MIGRATION ROUTE

Photo courtesy of Associated Press (AP)

The increase in the numbers of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers traveling in mixed migratory movements continues to be a major political and humanitarian challenge. North Africa is affected as a region of origin, transit and destination for those who have left their homes fleeing war, conflict, discrimination, and those seeking to improve their opportunities and to build a better future. North Africa is a complex migratory hub characterized by major inter-regional movements which in the last several years has witnessed a large increase in the numbers of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers looking to reach Europe.

Equally, thousands of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers continue to be claimed by the Mediterranean as they attempt the journey by sea from North Africa. This document aims to shed some light on the factors contributing to the increased risk to life and safety along one of the world's deadliest migration routes.

### THE ROUTES

The Mediterranean is home to three main migratory routes used by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to cross irregularly into Europe. They are the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) which refers to the sea journey from North Africa (mainly Libya) to Italy, the Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR) which refers to the sea crossing from Turkey to Greece and the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR), the sea crossing from Morocco to mainland Spain and land crossings into the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla.

While the number of arrivals through the EMR had decreased significantly in recent years, and some decreases were recorded along the CMR, the Mediterranean continues to be a major transit point. The CMR saw its largest arrival numbers in 2016, with 181,436 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers arriving to Italy by sea. 2017 saw the arrival of 119,369 persons which marked a 34% decrease from the previous year. Between 1 January and 14 February 2018, 8,407 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have arrived by sea to Italy, Spain, Greece and Cyprus through the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes. <sup>(1)</sup> Children are increasingly making up a significant portion of those traveling and accounting for 14.7% <sup>(2)</sup> of all travelers. Furthermore, 92% of all children arriving to Italy between January and September of 2017 were unaccompanied or separated.<sup>(3)</sup>

1 IOM Data.

2 UNHCR Mediterranean Portal. Available from: <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>

3 UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM, "Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe Accompanied, Unaccompanied and Separated" (September, 2018). Available from <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/61915>

## INCREASE IN THE RATE OF DEATH

Deaths along the Mediterranean, especially along the CMR, have been a consistent point of concern for many international and humanitarian organizations for the last three years. <sup>(4)</sup> The CMR has accounted for almost 88% of all recorded deaths along the Mediterranean since 2014 while only accounting for 25% of arrivals. <sup>(5)</sup> The CMR has claimed an estimated 10,311 lives between 2015 and December 2017. <sup>(6)</sup> While comparisons between the first two months of 2017 and 2018 may show that arrivals to Italy and deaths dropped from 13,446 in 2017 to 5,247 in 2018; and from 442 to 316, respectively, the rate of death along the CMR has actually increased. By February 2017, for every 30 people who arrived to Italy, 1 person had died; while at the same time this year, for every 16 people who arrived, 1 person had lost their lives in the Mediterranean. <sup>(7)</sup>

This increase in the rate of death in the face of decreases in the total number of arrivals is a concerning development. It is imperative to examine the various factors affecting and influencing both the drop in arrivals and the increasing risk to the lives and safety of the children, women and men embarking on this journey. This is especially the case as these mixed migration flows in the Mediterranean lie at the complex intersection of the ever evolving humanitarian and the political developments mainly focused at hemming in the irregular movement of people producing ripples of consequence for states, smuggling operations and, most importantly, those vulnerable and on the move.

Three main interlinked developments seem to have contributed to the worsening of conditions for those on the move along the central Mediterranean. They are;

1. The February 2017 signature of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Italy and Libya on development cooperation, illegal immigration, human trafficking, fuel smuggling and reinforcement of border security.<sup>(8)</sup>
2. Italy's introduction of a Code of Conduct for NGOs involved in migrants' rescue at sea and;
3. EU efforts to disrupt smuggling operations in the central Mediterranean.

## MOU

In February 2017 Italy and Libya signed an MoU which outlined an agreement between the two states to “stem the influx of illegal migrants”. Since then the Italian government and the EU have provided the Libyan Coast Guard with boats, equipment and training to patrol Libya's shores and territorial waters. In 2017, about 20,000 people were reported to have been intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard and taken back to detention centers in Libya.<sup>(9)</sup>

Libyan patrols of international waters has also impacted rescue missions conducted by NGOs. It was documented that in some instances Libyan coast guard intervened in ongoing rescues and failed to provide life jackets to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. NGOs witnessed Libyan coast guard officers firing shots into the air and water after people on vessels panicked and jumped into the water.<sup>(10)</sup>

4 Amnesty International, Libya's Dark Web of Collusion: Abuses against Europe-bound Refugees and Migrants (December, 2017). Available from: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde19/7561/2017/en/>

5 IOM, Fatal Journeys Vol. 3 Part 1 (2017). Available from <https://publications.iom.int/books/fatal-journeys-volume-3-part-1-improving-data-missing-migrants>

6 IOM, Missing Migrants Project. Available from <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>

7 IOM Data

8 Memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the fields of development, the fight against illegal immigration, human trafficking and fuel smuggling and on reinforcing the security of borders between the State of Libya and the Italian Republic (February 2017) Translated version available from: [http://eumigrationlawblog.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/MEMORANDUM\\_translation\\_finalversion.doc.pdf](http://eumigrationlawblog.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/MEMORANDUM_translation_finalversion.doc.pdf)

9 Amnesty International, “A Year after Italy-Libya Migration Deal, Time to Release Thousands Trapped in Misery” (February, 2018). Available from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2018/02/a-year-after-italy-libya-migration-deal-time-to-release-thousands-trapped-in-misery-pr/>

10 Human Rights Watch, “EU: Shifting Rescue to Libya Risks Lives” (June, 2017). Available from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/eu-shifting-rescue-libya-risks-lives>

## CODE OF CONDUCT

Search and Rescue operations by various NGOs along the Central Mediterranean was responsible for the rescue of over 100,000 lives since 2014. <sup>(11)</sup> In the first six months of 2017, vessels operated by NGOs were responsible for around 38% of all recorded rescues for the year. <sup>(12)</sup> In August 2017, the Italian Ministry of Interior submitted an EU supported code of conduct <sup>(13)</sup> that aimed to regulate the search and rescue operations of NGOs in the Central Mediterranean. The code of conduct introduced 13 provisions to be followed by NGOs operating search and rescue operations including amongst other things, allowing police officers to board rescue vessels to conduct “investigations related to migrant smuggling and/or trafficking in human beings”, and requiring vessels to take migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to a safe port themselves rather than transferring them to other vessels. <sup>(14)</sup> This meant that rescue vessels could not stay in search and rescue zones to carry out additional rescues. Four of the eight NGOs that had active search and rescue operations (SOS Mediterranee, Doctors Without Borders (MSF), Sea-Watch and Jugend Rettet) during the time refused to sign the MoU. <sup>(15)</sup> A month after the Italian authorities announced the code, three organizations, Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF), Save the Children and German NGO Sea Eye, suspended their rescue operations citing safety concerns and hostility from the Libyan coastguard.<sup>(16)</sup>

## OPERATIONS SOPHIA, TRITON AND THEMIS

The EU's interventions <sup>(17)</sup> in the Mediterranean have largely been split between naval military activities and operations by Frontex, the bloc's border and coast guard agency. The European Union Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED), otherwise known as Operation Sophia, is the primary, EU-wide naval military operation in response to large-scale mixed migration movements in the Mediterranean. Frontex's interventions have taken the form of variably named operations with changing mandates over the past few years with Operation Themis the most recent. These interventions have shaped the current Mediterranean situation, influencing migrant, refugee and asylum seeker safety and smuggling operations in the process.

The EU's Operation Sophia <sup>(18)</sup> was launched in 2015 and mandated to contribute “to the disruption of the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean”. <sup>(19)</sup> The operation was further mandated to train the Libyan Coastguard and Navy and to support the implementation of the UN arms embargo on the high seas off the coast of Libya in 2016. In July of 2017, the European Council further extended the operation's mandate till 31 December 2018.

A report on the operation found <sup>(20)</sup> that Operation Sophia's efforts to disrupt smuggling networks has put migrants, refugees and asylum seekers at greater risk. This increased risk relates to two aspects of the operation. The first being Operation Sophia carried out systematic destruction of smugglers' boats which in turn led to smugglers using less

11 Eugenio Cusumano (2017) Straightjacketing migrant rescuers? The code of conduct on maritime NGOs, Mediterranean Politics, DOI: [10.1080/13629395.2017.1381400](https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2017.1381400)

12 Ibid

13 Full text of the Code of Conduct is available at: <http://www.euronews.com/2017/08/03/text-of-italys-code-of-conduct-for-ngos-involved-in-migrant-rescue>

14 Euronews, “Italy's code of conduct for NGOs involved in migrant rescue: text” (August, 2017). Available from: <http://www.euronews.com/2017/08/03/text-of-italys-code-of-conduct-for-ngos-involved-in-migrant-rescue>

15 Which NGOs have signed the Italian code of conduct? ( August 2017) Available from: <http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/4529/which-ngos-have-signed-the-italian-code-of-conduct>

16 Three NGOs halt Mediterranean migrant rescues after Libyan hostility (August, 2017) Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/14/three-ngos-halt-mediterranean-migrant-rescues-after-libyan-hostility>

17 EU Operations in the Mediterranean Sea (October, 2016). Available from: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/securing-eu-borders/fact-sheets/docs/20161006/eu\\_operations\\_in\\_the\\_mediterranean\\_sea\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/securing-eu-borders/fact-sheets/docs/20161006/eu_operations_in_the_mediterranean_sea_en.pdf)

18 Fact Sheet European Union Naval Force – Mediterranean Operation Sophia( September 2016) Available at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/csdp/missions-and-operations/eunavfor-med/pdf/factsheet\\_eunavfor\\_med\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/csdp/missions-and-operations/eunavfor-med/pdf/factsheet_eunavfor_med_en.pdf)

19 European Union Committee, Operation Sophia: a failed mission (July, 2017). Available from: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldecom/5/5.pdf>

20 Ibid

A report on the operation found <sup>(21)</sup> that Operation Sophia's efforts to disrupt smuggling networks has put migrants, refugees and asylum seekers at greater risk. This increased risk relates to two aspects of the operation. The first being Operation Sophia carried out systematic destruction of smugglers' boats which in turn led to smugglers using less seaworthy, inflatable boats. A joint communication to the European Parliament and the European Council found that "the fact that such dinghies now account for 70% of all boats leaving the Libyan coast contributes to making journeys increasingly dangerous and to the rise in the number of deaths at sea. <sup>(22)</sup>" This rise in the use of inflatable boats became even more apparent with certain websites advertising the sale of "refugee boats" with "good capacity for anti-sinking" for between \$800- \$1,000. <sup>(23)</sup> According to the notice on the web page which has since been removed, the boats, constructed out of plywood, aluminum and PVC, and can carry 25-30 passengers.

The second aspect of the operation that contributed to the increased risk was the increased arrest of smugglers which in turn induced them to send out migrant and refugee boats without an escort to navigate the boats. While it is more difficult to parse the exact effects of this development on the increased risk to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, the increased threat of arrest has made getting the boats out onto the waters the chief concern of smugglers with the safety of those on board of even less importance than before.

Frontex's interventions run separately from yet in parallel to Operation Sophia. In February 2018 Frontex, launched a new border control mission named Operation Themis to replace Operation Triton which had been operational since 2014. Operation Themis was given a different mandate from that of its predecessor, Triton. <sup>(24)</sup> One of the most pivotal differences is, unlike the previous operation, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers rescued by the new mission would be taken to the nearest EU port rather than Italian ports only. The new operation places a stronger emphasis on border securitization where a) there will be a focus on law enforcement with the aim of cracking down on criminal activities; b) there will be efforts to collect intelligence.

While the full impact of the new operation is likely to be seen over the coming months, it is expected that the revised mandate and changes to the mission will have unintended and as yet unforeseen consequences to the lives of those on the move. Unless there is a substantial shift in the approach taken to migration management and governance in the Mediterranean, it is likely that the impact of this mission will be detrimental to the migrants, refugees and asylum seekers undertaking the journey to Europe. <sup>(25)</sup>

---

21 Ibid

22 European Commission, "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on Migration on the Central Mediterranean route Managing flows, saving lives" (January, 2017). Available from: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20170125\\_migration\\_on\\_the\\_central\\_mediterranean\\_route\\_-\\_managing\\_flows\\_saving\\_lives\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20170125_migration_on_the_central_mediterranean_route_-_managing_flows_saving_lives_en.pdf)

23 Horner Will, "'High-quality refugee boats' for sale on Chinese website, despite EU criticism" (August, 2017). Available from: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/chinese-businesses-target-people-smugglers-high-quality-refugee-boat-sales-350372488>

24 Deutsche Welle, "Frontex launches new EU border control mission Operation Themis" (February, 2018). Available from: <http://www.dw.com/en/frontex-launches-new-eu-border-control-mission-operation-themis/a-42417610>

25 US News, "New European Mission to Detect Threats in the Mediterranean" (January, 2018). Available from: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2018-01-31/german-police-arrest-3-in-raids-on-migrant-smuggling-ring>

## CONCLUSION

There is considerable evidence that the situation in the Mediterranean is constantly changing and almost always to the detriment of the safety of those on the move; security-based interventions designed to tackle the flow of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers has played a key role in this process. Interventions designed to stem smuggling operations have only instigated changes to the ways those networks operate and the risks they force migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers to take.

Smugglers exploit migrants' refugees' and asylum seekers' hopes and aspirations in the full knowledge that those attempting to flee violence, conflict and poverty are willing to take on untold risks to reach safety and to make better lives for themselves. These same networks care less for the individuals packed into boats and sent out to sea than for their operations and profits, as a result, extra risks and dangers are shifted onto migrants, refugees and asylum seekers whilst operations remain relatively unharmed. Unlike their intended effect of reducing smuggling and trafficking, interventions in the Mediterranean have not stemmed migration flows but have merely made the CMR a more deadly route. The worsening rate of death is a sobering testament to the increasingly perilous journeys undertaken by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Evidence has shown that security-based measures to tackle migration without adequate humanitarian response mechanisms will likely lead to more death while smuggling networks will continue to profit from those tragedies at sea. It falls to states, both European and in the region, to move beyond such approaches and to place the safety of those on the move at the heart of interventions and responses to mixed migration flows. Past and current interventions have fallen short in that regard and migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are paying the price.



International Organization for Migration (IOM)  
The UN Migration Agency

This material has been funded by the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration of the US Department of State; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the Government of the United States' official policies.

The Mixed Migration Hub (MHub) is the Secretariat of the North Africa Mixed Migration Task Force (NAMMTF). It also serves as a knowledge management, research, information collection and dissemination hub. The NAMMTF is currently made up of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) and Save the Children's Regional Office for the Middle East and Eurasia. The NAMMTF promotes a human rights-based approach to ensuring the protection of people moving in mixed and complex flows to, through and from North Africa. For more information visit: [www.mixedmigrationhub.org](http://www.mixedmigrationhub.org)

The views expressed in this briefing paper are the views of the MHub and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the individual organizations comprising the NAMMTF. Terminology used may not necessarily be consistent with the official terms used by all organizations participating in the NAMMTF. While due diligence has been taken, the MHub does not guarantee the accuracy of the information included in this brief and accepts no responsibility for any consequence of its use.