



Migrant deaths on the Mediterranean soar to new heights EUROPE IS LOSING THE FIGHT AGAINST HUMAN SMUGGLING IN LIBYA

Paradoxically, at a time when the Mediterranean Sea has never been more militarized and monitored, more people than ever have drowned or disappeared. This year, more than 4,500 people have died so far on the journey to Italy.

For sub-Saharan migrants and refugees, their reasons for leaving Libya are many and varied. Some are looking for better opportunities in Europe, some are fleeing from conflict, and some are simply seeking shelter from the anarchy that is engulfing post-Gaddafi Libya. Since the emerging Libyan state collapsed in 2014 following intensification and militarization of unresolved conflicts dating back to

RECOMMENDATIONS

- In the short term, European decision-makers should downscale military solutions off Libya and upscale humanitarian rescue missions.
- In the medium term, Europe should align migration concerns with Libyan priorities and intensify efforts to bring the country back from the brink of political and economic collapse.
- In the long term, Europe should substitute containment policies in migrant transit countries with investment and stabilization efforts in the migrant-sending countries.

the collapse of the dictatorship in 2011, arrivals in Italy predominantly of sub-Saharan Africans from Libya have stabilized at a historically high level of about 150,000 or more per year.

Recent reports suggest that the majority of sub-Saharan migrants arrive in Libya with the intention of staying and finding work, which has for decades been the normal migratory pattern. However, as the UN-backed Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) is struggling to provide security and livelihoods for its own population, migrants are having an even harder time. Seen in this light, the sea journey may seem to be the lesser of two evils.

Contrary to what is sometimes reported in the media, high-risk migration in Libya has weak or insignificant links to militant jihadism. There is no evidence to suggest that, for instance, Islamic State is involved in human smuggling or benefits from the profits of such smuggling. There are many reasons to oppose these jihadi groups, but to hope that their defeat will have an effect on human smuggling is not one of them.

Last year, the EU sought to 'disrupt the business model of the smugglers' by deploying a naval operation in the Mediterranean. However, Operation Sophia has been largely ineffective. One year on, more people than ever are coming to Italy, and more people than ever are dying at sea. The smuggling business on Libya's Mediterranean coast is thriving and operates with impunity. Open competition between smugglers has reportedly led to a sharp drop in prices. To improve profitability, smuggling rings are increasingly using more dangerous and more unseaworthy equipment.

In fact, one unintended consequence of Operation Sophia may be that it has made a dangerous journey even more dangerous. To prevent the smugglers from recycling migrant boats, the EU fleet destroys larger wooden vessels from Libya as they enter international

waters. However, that has not made a difference to the number of arrivals, but instead, has simply led smugglers to revert to smaller and cheaper disposable dinghies.

In this light, it is difficult to see the justification behind the recent NATO decision to initiate Operation Sea Guardian, an extension of NATO's Aegean mission into the central Mediterranean. As a mediator between two of its member states, Greece and Turkey, NATO may have played a part in bringing high-risk migration from Turkey down, but in the international waters off Libya there is no clear role for NATO to play.

Generally, anti-immigration naval missions face the challenge that the UN-backed Libyan government does not allow foreign interventions into its territorial waters, yet does not have the equipment or resources to conduct its own operations against smuggling. This should send Europe a message: combatting high-risk migration to Europe is not a priority in Libya. Its first priority is to create economic and political stability; only then can the question of smuggling be addressed.

However, not even a stable Libya can be expected to embrace Europe's anti-immigration agenda. When stability does come, hopefully soon, Libya can be expected to make significant financial and political demands along the lines of those made by Turkey to bring down arrivals in Europe.

What does the near future hold for migration from Libya? Weather is a decisive factor in the long sea journey to Italy. Therefore, due to sudden storms and low temperatures, the number of people crossing to Italy and consequent migrant deaths are expected to drop during the coming winter months. However, unless Europe rethinks its approach to high-risk migration, it is likely that both the number of people crossing and migrant fatalities will pick up again in the spring of 2017.

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Cover photo: Migrants landing in Vibo Marina, Italy, after a rescue operation in the Mediterranean Sea © Italian Red Cross via Bestimage

