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## TRAGEDIES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: Analyzing the causes and addressing the solutions from the roots to the boats

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In the wake of the April 19 tragedy in the Mediterranean, in which more than 900 migrants died when the boat taking them to Italy sank, politicians and experts from across Europe were swift to give their analysis of the causes of this dramatic event. In most cases, the geopolitical instability in Libya and Syria was held up as the cause, and a range of immigration policies were suggested to prevent the deaths of other migrants in the Mediterranean. After meetings and negotiations, the European Union agreed on a 10-point action plan on migration to address the urgent situation in the Mediterranean. This primarily consists of implementing migration control measures, such as the reinforcement of Joint Operations in the Mediterranean (namely Triton and Poseidon), or military operations to destroy boats used by smugglers, and it concentrates most of its efforts in two geographic areas, Libya and the Mediterranean. However, the analyses offered so far have overlooked two key elements for understanding the root causes of the tragedies and to propose effective and lasting solutions.

This article reassesses the tragedies in the Mediterranean in terms of these two key elements. First, the need to analyze the push-factors of flows of irregular migration and asylum-seekers in the Mediterranean from a global and international perspective. To this end the present analysis takes into account not only the geopolitical context in the Mediterranean and Africa, but also traces the migratory routes from the Mediterranean back to their origin. Second,

the analysis of the repeated tragedies has mainly focused on immigration and EU migration policies, but not from the perspective of international relations and EU foreign policy. In other words, there has been very little discussion about the likelihood that migratory flows currently targeting Europe via the Mediterranean may be a direct or indirect result of the decisions and inactions of the EU and its member states in relation to conflicts and tyranny in Africa and the Middle East. I argue that an approach based on a foreign policy perspective is needed (rather than an approach based exclusively on rigid and security-based immigration

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### Analyzing the tragedies from their origins

To date all the attention has been directed at the Southern Mediterranean doors of Europe without taking into account the push-factors that lead migrants to leave or flee their countries of origins, nor the sheer length of the journey and many dramatic obstacles they face during it. Metaphorically, the current international context has become one large tragic human river, with a multitude of tributaries from countries in Africa and the Middle East, and the EU is literally concentrating all its efforts at the mouth of that river rather than intervening upstream. For example, the EU decision to reinforce the Triton operation and to destroy boats embarking from Libya would be like building a prey at the delta of this river, ignoring what takes place at the source of the river and at the source of every single tributary.

Any effective analysis must focus on the roots of the problem and not simply on Syria, Libya and the Mediterranean. While these three areas have been identified as the key geostrategic points of the problem, very few have noted that most migrants actually originate in other countries and regions. In 2014, 170,099 migrants arrived in Italy by sea, of which 41,941 were Syrian nationals with Eritrean migrants ranking as the second largest group (33,451), but the EU and its institutions do not appear to

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have addressed the issue. In 2014 there was a significant drop in the number of migrants from Mali (9,314), Nigeria (8,570), Palestine (6,024) and Somalia (5,644), arriving in Italy by sea but once again the EU has not sought an explanation for this. Moreover, from January to April 2015 the trend was reversed and more Eritreans (3,248), Somalis (2,566), and Nigerians (1,991) have arrived on the Italian coast than Syrians (1,596).<sup>1</sup> It is clear that in order to find solutions for the tragedies in the Mediterranean, we first have to understand events occurring far away from Syria and Libya (in fact, Libyan migrants do not even rank among the top ten nationalities to reach Italy by sea in 2014).

Curiously enough in all the different analyses given by experts, politicians and even journalists, few have paid any attention to the current situation in Eritrea or the possible reasons for the substantial migratory flows leaving the country. Eritrea is one of the most closed and repressive regimes in Africa governed uninterruptedly by Isaias Afewerki for over twenty years. Both men and women aged 18–55 must complete compulsory military service for a period of around 18 months, but this can also last indefinitely. During this period conscripts are regularly subject to torture and sexual abuse, and many are used as forced labor in government construction projects. For all these

reasons, and also because the police operate a shoot-to-kill policy to prevent Eritrean citizens from approaching the border, Eritrea has been described as an open-air prison.

To date the role of conflicts and armed groups in the displacement of thousands of people has not been taken into account in the analysis of the causes of these tragedies in the Mediterranean. While the Islamist militant group al-Shabaab imposes terror in Somalia on a population already combating famine, the north of Mali has also experienced the insurgency of a jihadist movement since 2012. This movement provoked a civil war and French military intervention since 2013 (authorized by the UN Security Council). The conflict in northern Mali lasted until February 2015 when the ceasefire was signed, and this probably accounts for the drop in the number of Malians arriving in Italy from third (2014) to seventh (2015) position in the nationality ranking (1,279 Malians arrived from January to April).

Yet another root cause of migration which has been ignored is the link between irregular migration flows in the Mediterranean and the activity of the terrorist group Boko Haram in Nigeria. The terrorist group emerged in 2009, but it was only in April 2014 with the kidnapping of hundreds of schoolgirls that it made the headlines around the world. The increasing presence of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria in the last couple of years and the escalation of their actions meant that by the end of the 2014 over 1.5 million people had fled the conflict zone. In this sense, there is a link between the increasing violence in the

country in 2014, and the dramatic increase in the number of Nigerians arriving in Italy which shot up from 358 in 2012 to 8,570 in 2014. This is certainly not a coincidence.

As already explained, Syrian refugees have been the largest single group of migrants arriving in Italy by sea, fleeing not only the civil war in their country, but also the advances made by the Islamic State in Syria and the areas hosting Syrian refugee camps. In the second half of 2014, these Syrian refugees were joined by a significant number of Palestinians in their attempts to reach Europe. While only 37 Palestinians were intercepted in 2012 off the southern coast of Italy, this number rose to 6,024 in 2014. This startling increase can be explained by two major events. First, Israel's 51-day summer offensive on Gaza in 2014 pushed hundreds of Gazans to flee and head for Europe. Among these refugees, 700 migrants, mostly Palestinians and Syrians, drowned when traffickers forcibly capsized the boat off the Egyptian coast. It is significant that European leaders, experts and media did not react to this event, although the death toll in this single tragedy was higher than the tragedy in October 2013 (350 dead), and close to an earlier tragedy in April 2015 (900 dead). Second, Palestinian refugees are in a very difficult situation in the Middle East. Since mid-2014, they have had to flee not only from refugee camps devastated by the fighting in Syria and the advance of the Islamic State, but also Palestinian refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria were denied entry by countries such as Lebanon and Jordan, and were forced to return to the conflict-stricken country. For all these reasons, a large number of Palestinians chose to try to reach Italy via Libya.

1. See Fargues and Di Bartolomeo (2015).

Finally, although our attention has focused on Africa and the Middle East, the EU should note that migration flows may also come from nearer home. Frontex has recently reported that while the number of Syrians and Afghans asylum-seekers detected at EU borders with the Western Balkans tripled in recent months, Kosovo nationals were the main nationality identified at this border in 2014. Frontex (2015) has attributed this increase of Kosovar migrants and refugees to the “reopening of asylum centers in Hungary in July 2014 and various rumors spread by facilitators to encourage migrants to head for the EU.”

### **The journey: tragedy and humanitarian crisis before even boarding a boat**

Wars and Islamic military movements are not the only causes of Africa–Europe migratory flows, other factors have been overlooked. For example, while the Commission is struggling to persuade EU states to share the burden of processing a relatively small number of asylum claims, no measures have been taken to improve the living conditions of the over 4 million Syrians currently living in refugee camps in Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan or Turkey. This is despite the UN reporting that a total of 12 million people have fled Syria and are now living in these countries. Moreover, the UN has recently announced the reduction of the budget allocated for the refugee camps housing them. The EU does not seem to have reacted to this information and has not proposed any measures to deal with the situation.

The EU’s 10-point action plan on migration only cites two countries: Libya and Niger. More specifically, the EU plans to enhance “engagement with countries surrounding Libya through a joined effort between the Commission and the EEAS; initiatives in Niger have to be stepped up” (IP/15/4863). Although not clearly explained by EU representatives, the inclusion of Niger in this plan is because the city of Agadez, in central Niger, is Africa’s main transit and convergence point for migrants arriving from Western sub-Saharan Africa and Central Africa who reassemble here before travelling on to Libya and finally Europe. Therefore, the EU seems to be targeting the main transit city where migrants recover their strength and resources before starting on the penultimate stage of their journey to Europe (the last one is from Libya to Italy by boat). But once again, the EU has not specified the nature of the actions that it plans to step up, and there is no mention of measures in the countries of transit and origin.

The number of casualties in the Mediterranean has been highlighted by actors from different sectors and political views, but few have mentioned that the number of migrants who died during their journey from their country of origin, before even catching sight of the Mediterranean Sea, is probably higher than the numbers of casualties who drowned while en route from Libya to Italy. For this reason, instead of just focusing on Libya and Niger, it is necessary to think about solutions for the 1,800 km that Eritrean migrants cover before reaching Egypt, or the 1,500 km that Syrians have to travel from Damascus before reaching Tripoli.

During this journey, migrants are likely to face violent and dramatic situations comparable to the tragedies in the Mediterranean. In fact, the IOM has reported that the Western Sahara is the forgotten graveyard of thousands of migrants who die from famine and thirst while crossing hundreds of kilometers of the hottest desert in the world. Migrants also suffer abuse and torture during their journey. For example in the Sinai, Egyptian traffickers capture, rape, burn and mutilate Eritrean migrants in exchange for a ransom. Migrants are imprisoned for months until their relatives at home pay thousands of dollars to ensure their release. Human Rights Watch has reported that traffickers have been carrying out these abuses for almost a decade, without the Egyptian government taking effective measures to stop them.

Finally, an in-depth analysis of the transit states needs to be carried out before considering implementing a violent response such as bombing smugglers’ boats. Not only the political but also the geographic situation of a transit state, plays a key role when it comes to trafficking or smuggling, and as a consequence, on the strategies used by migrants to enter Europe. In this respect, the EU seems to view the boats arriving from Libya as the consequence of a modern-day slavery business and a trafficking network that exists in Libya due to the country’s severe political instability. However, it would take more than a military option to put an end to the current tangled and complex trade in Libya. An analysis of this trade reveals unusual facts such as that migrants often steer the boats themselves or that the boats are in fact fishing trawlers rapidly converted

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into boats for trafficking. Moreover, professional smugglers are now competing with fishermen who have opted to trade in their fishing boats for smuggling boats in order to earn more. In the present civil war context in Libya, militias, tribes and armed groups, such as the Islamic State, are all using irregular migration as a business to finance their military action. Some of these groups are part of the factions negotiating the peace draft agreement under UN mediation, which makes it even more difficult to understand the trade in irregular migrants and which makes the implementation of destroying migrant smugglers’ boats even more complicated.

### **A change of approach: an EU foreign policy response to tackle international problems**

The High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, insists that the EU is a foreign policy community and a security and defense provider not only for citizens within EU borders, but also for those in the rest of the world. Yet despite this declaration, the EU only has responded to the Mediterranean tragedies by implementing migration policies, which are detached from concrete foreign policy strategies, and with a 10-point action plan that seems to be far from offering security and defense to the people beyond the EU’s borders.

My analysis clearly shows that currently the EU is not only facing the challenge to manage the economic migration en route for Europe generated by oft-cited North-South inequalities, but is actually facing the consequences of what can be considered the most turbulent and instable regional context in decades. This context cannot be managed by implementing measures on boats used by smugglers, but rather with policies that address the root causes that pushed people to migrate in the first place. In other words, we are not only facing the challenge of managing the arrival of economic migrants, but the challenge of regulating an inflow of refugees that is the consequence of humanitarian, military or political crises in several countries. It is vital that the EU finds solutions for migrants coming to Europe, but above all for those fleeing to Europe. Thus, a violent response on Libyan shores will have no impact on the factors that make people flee, and therefore they will persist in trying to enter Europe one way or another.

Only foreign policy measures can deal with wars, political conflict or terrorism. Therefore, a change of approach is needed to consider measures to prevent the tragedies in the Mediterranean effectively. This approach must be based on a combined foreign policy and international relations perspective rather than on rigid and security-based immigration policies.

## The EU 10-point action plan seems to be far from offering security and defense to the people beyond the EU's borders.

Such an approach would mean that the EU would not have to put all its efforts into a reactive response such as bombing traffickers' boats in Libya, but would focus on the promotion of political stability in Libya. In June 2015 the EU pushed the Libyan factions to accept a peace deal, backing the UN attempts to end the conflict and form a government of national unity. Yet, it is also true that the EU could have endorsed the UN mission in Libya months ago, rather than waiting for several migrant tragedies in the Mediterranean and after the gains made by Islamist militants in Libya.

The key element that EU leaders have to understand is that the only way to reduce migration flows in the Mediterranean is to take firm decisions and actions in relation to the conflicts mentioned. In other words, the role played by the EU and its member states in relation to these conflicts will have a direct or indirect result on the migratory flows currently targeting Europe from across the Mediterranean.

In order to find solutions to the current humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean, the EU has no other option than to discuss and adopt a stronger role and strategy in relation to the war in Syria and the advances of the Islamic groups in Mali and Nigeria. French military intervention in Mali, in the wake of the coup that provoked the Islamist takeover of a large part of the country, managed to tackle a conflict that could have had wider consequences for the region. At present, Boko Haram seems to be losing part of its territory thanks to a coalition of African states, while in Syria the Islamic State continues to

gain ground. The limited intervention of the EU and the West in general in Libya has been cited as the cause of spillover effects that have exacerbated the situation in the region and have led to the rise and consolidation of Islamic forces in Mali and Syria. The lessons of the past and the present situation in Libya and Syria alone are sufficient arguments to stimulate debate on the need for a prompt, robust and pro-active EU strategy in relation to these conflicts. Failure to do so could lead to dire consequences for the region as a whole.

Another robust and active strategy that the EU has to develop is how to tackle the slavery networks in the Sinai and the Sahara desert. At present, the EU is committed to a military response along the Libyan coastline, under the pretext that "violent humanitarianism" is needed to combat modern-day slavery. Meanwhile, the Egyptian army has suffered dozens of casualties in their few attempts to weaken the human trafficking networks in the Sinai. This raises the question of whether the EU should redirect its "violent humanitarianism" approach towards trafficking networks in the Sinai and Sahara which fall more clearly within the definition of slavery than their Libyan counterparts.

The EU also needs to establish the exact terms of its relations with countries such as Eritrea. On this matter, the EU and Eritrea are close to signing the 11th European Development Fund (EDF) cooperation agreement for the period 2014–2020.

While this agreement is designed to reduce poverty and to boost economic and social development, it is debatable to what extent the best EU foreign policy strategy towards this extremely repressive country is to offer economic support instead of adopting other more punitive measures. In much the same way, each EU member state has to reconsider its own foreign policy with repressive countries. For example, it is inadmissible that countries such as Norway are currently negotiating with the Eritrean government to forcibly return Eritrean asylum seekers.

Moreover, the EU is currently focusing all its efforts on preventing boats from Libya from reaching Italy, while the greater part of irregular migrants have now shifted to other routes to reach Europe. In this sense, the increasing arrivals of Syrian refugees from Turkey to Bulgaria or the rise in illegal border crossings at the Hungarian–Serbian frontier raises the need for prompt measures in other areas of the Mediterranean. The fact that migrants from Kosovo are trying to reach the EU from within geographical Europe, and that EU neighbors seem to be overwhelmed by the impact of migration, indicate that the EU needs to reinforce and develop its comprehensive cooperation and relation with its neighbors.

In recent years, the pro and cons of the Mare Nostrum and Triton operations have been at the center of debate, but it is important to remember that since the early 2000s the EU and member states such as Spain and Greece have carried out migration control strategies particularly in cooperation with Morocco and Turkey, respectively. This bilateral and multilateral cooperation (including the implementation of Readmission Agreements and joint patrols) have been built

on different pillars and factors, each case producing different results. While Moroccan–Spanish migration control cooperation has managed to make a big dent in the number of irregular migrants reaching Spain, the number of irregular migrants entering EU territory from Turkey has increased dramatically in recent years. Yet the need to reinforce this bilateral and multilateral cooperation with transit states has not been sufficiently stressed by EU leaders in recent months, although the tragedies in the Mediterranean are a daily reminder that it is the time for a reappraisal and enhancement of the pillars and principles of comprehensive cooperation with transit states.

Another key focus of action should be the refugee camps and cooperation with Syria's neighboring states. At the time of writing, these states are together hosting 95% of Syrian refugees. In Lebanon, for example, one in five people is a Syrian refugee, the per capita equivalent of Spain hosting nearly 9,5 million refugees. Due to a lack of resources and infrastructure, these states are already imposing restrictive measures preventing the entry of new refugees. To ensure humane living conditions in these camps and to offer unconditional economic and technical support to these neighboring states must be one of the EU's greatest foreign policy priorities.

The EU cannot continue to adopt reactive, securitarian and isolated actions exclusively focused on the Mediterranean and based on a migration control approach. The present unstable regional and international context requires a broader and more comprehensive political and geographic approach. This article sheds light on the issue using data to support the need for such an approach. Failure to adjust the EU approach combined with a certain reluctance and even fear to implement a more pro-active and broader foreign policy will inevitably mean that Europe will witness many more human tragedies on its doorstep, both at sea and on land.

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