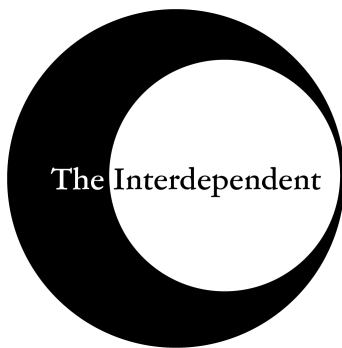


# **An Analysis of Competing Complexities of Search and Rescue Operations on the Mediterranean Sea**



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## **Abstract**

This article analyzes the evolving complexities of search and rescue (SAR) operations in the Mediterranean Sea, arguing that the persistence of migrant deaths is not an inevitable humanitarian crisis but the product of deliberate policy choices and fragmented governance. The article situates SAR within the broader “Mediterranean borderscape,” where international conventions mandate rescue but are unevenly implemented. It finds that the EU’s sustained “crisis” framing has enabled ad hoc and discretionary responses, facilitating the criminalization of non-governmental rescue actors, the prioritization of border enforcement over lifesaving, and the outsourcing of migration control to countries such as Libya, where human rights violations are well documented. These dynamics have increased operational uncertainty, reduced rescue capacity, and contributed to rising mortality despite declining crossings. Ultimately, the paper contends that current governance strategies obscure accountability and perpetuate preventable loss of life, calling for a shift toward coherent legal frameworks, expanded safe migration pathways, and a re-centering of human rights in Mediterranean migration policy.

## **Keywords**

Migration; MENA; Search and Rescue; Human Rights; Mediterranean; Border Studies; Politics

## **Introduction**

The human cost of immigration and asylum policy is embodied by corpses that wash up on North African and Italian shores. The policies are manifested on beaches littered with the remnants of makeshift rafts and tattered orange life vests, and etched in the traumatized faces of children who escaped abusive prisons or witnessed their family members killed at the hands of EU-armed militiamen in states like Libya.<sup>1</sup> The UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) has declared 2026 the “deadliest start to a year” in over a decade, with at least 765 people already reported dead or missing at sea in the Central Mediterranean alone.<sup>2</sup> Grieving families and migrant advocates continue to decry that these figures are not natural and can be prevented. They contend that this mass migrant graveyard is profoundly exacerbated by EU policy decisions.<sup>3</sup> In probing the EU’s strategies of maritime migration governance and barriers to search and rescue operations, this article underlines the shortcomings of a modern approach to securitization and border externalization. It refutes the notion that migrant deaths at sea are a natural and unavoidable crisis.

The realities of Mediterranean search and rescue operations are shaped and defined by the myriad of international and regional legal frameworks, and agreements pertaining to the law of the sea and European borders. These frameworks attempt to reinforce state sovereignty, the concept that a state has the supreme authority to manage its own demarcated territory without any external interference, onto a nebulous maritime area. Yet this occurs in a setting that

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<sup>1</sup> “Libya: Horrific Violations in Detention Highlight Europe’s Shameful Role in Forced Returns,” *Amnesty International*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/07/libya-horrific-violations-in-detention-highlight-europes-shameful-role-in-forced-returns/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Over 180 Feared Dead as Mediterranean Death Toll Nears 1,000 in 2026,” *International Organization for Migration*, April 7, 2026, <https://www.iom.int/news/over-180-feared-dead-mediterranean-death-toll-nears-1000-2026>.

<sup>3</sup> Elisabetta Povoledo, “More Than 70 Migrants Missing After Boat Capsizes Off Libya,” *The New York Times*, April 5, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/05/world/europe/migrants-missing-boat-capsize-libya.html>.

inherently challenges the viability of traditional notions of statehood in the face of permeability and dynamism. The sea, by its very nature, is fluid and expansive, defying cleanly drawn state lines, while exposing the persistence of cross-border movement.

The Mediterranean Sea has become a locus of international attention as a “migrant graveyard.” In recent years, roughly 3,000 deaths have been reported annually.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, since IOM began to record deaths and disappearances in 2014, more than 33,450 individuals have been reported missing.<sup>5</sup> Due to the clandestine nature of maritime journeys, it is likely that actual figures are far higher. The Mediterranean is a flashpoint for grief, politicization, and contested identity; throughout the past few decades in particular, the ensuing result has been a microcosm of the complexities of multilateral governance, civil society, grassroots humanitarian action, and the tension between security and human rights protections.

There are multitudes of actors involved in search and rescue (SAR) operations, which contribute to a dynamic array of collaborative, oppositional, and competitive relationships at sea and on land. This article investigates the reality of sea migration by considering overlapping jurisdictions, competing interests, border externalization, and varying obligations under international conventions or treaties. It builds upon a growing body of literature by examining general trends alongside recent case studies of rescues, standoffs, and shipwrecks.

The ‘migration crisis’ in the Mediterranean Sea has persisted in European consciousness since before 2014, allowing an ad hoc, reflexive approach by governments. Sustained ‘crisis’ operations cost thousands of lives each year, subjecting many to maritime deaths, life in detention camps, or sub-human conditions. ‘Crisis’ operations also fail to address repeated rescue patterns and strategic nonaction. By extrapolating concrete patterns and de-facto

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<sup>4</sup> “Mediterranean,” *Missing Migrants Project*, accessed April 30, 2026, <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.

<sup>5</sup> Povoledo, “More Than 70 Migrants Missing.”

frameworks in the context of recent SAR cases, I will explore how the prevailing narrative of ‘crisis’ is used to subvert accountability and illuminate the growing threats to the lives and protections of individuals at sea.

## **Conceptualizing the Maritime Borderspace**

The sea itself as a border, and the journeys for which it has become a backdrop, have captured the attention of scholars and analysts for decades. Scholarship on Mediterranean migration generally falls into three overlapping approaches: theoretical work on borders and mobility, critiques of the Mediterranean as a space shaped by colonial power dynamics, and studies examining the ethical and operational realities of search and rescue.<sup>6</sup> Recent studies, synthesize current trends and phenomena in light of historic agreements, and illuminate how scholars have come to conceptualize migration governance and mobility in the Mediterranean. Together, these works make sense of the nuanced institutional, social, and human processes of border-making, migration, and European collective identity.

The conceptualization of ‘borderland’ on the Mediterranean Sea has been popularized as maritime migration has become more visible in the news and international consciousness. The ‘Mediterranean Borderscape’ is a social construct, created from interactions between humanitarian, securitization, and religious-cultural discourse themes,<sup>7</sup> and defined by its “pluritopical and plurivocal” nature.<sup>8</sup> The ‘Mediterranean Borderscape’ is pluritopical in the sense that it is multifaceted—a kaleidoscope of often-conflicting cultures, places, and perspectives. The sea must be analyzed through a plurivocal lens because it contains a myriad of

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, ed., *A Companion to Border Studies* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Paolo Cuttitta, “Repoliticization Through Search and Rescue? Humanitarian NGOs and Migration Management in the Central Mediterranean,” *Geopolitics* 23, no.3 (2017): 632–60.

<sup>8</sup> Chiara Brambilla, “Shifting Italy/Libya Borderscapes at the Interface of EU/Africa Borderland: A ‘Genealogical’ Outlook from the Colonial Era to Post-Colonial Scenarios,” *ACME* 13, no.2 (2015): 245.

voices and realities. Thus, the Mediterranean Sea, acting as a border between Africa and Europe, has been fundamentally shaped, reshaped, and defined by numerous contexts and actors.

The pluritopical characterization of the borderscape allows for an analysis of the sea as a neocolonial space, separate from the European identity that has been projected on it.<sup>9</sup> The extension of EU policy, funding, and influence into and across the sea demonstrates an unequal power dynamic and perpetuates colonial precedent. Moreover, the EU “cosmopolitan liberal order” is continuously interacting with and building upon the shadow of empire and regional hegemony.<sup>10</sup> The European identity becomes defined by its exclusivity, constructed by European aesthetics in contrast to the outsiders vying for entry.<sup>11</sup> Some scholars narrate a particular “Mediterranean identity” grounded in the region’s unique characteristics.<sup>12</sup> These studies provide compelling evidence that maritime migration is fundamentally shaped by the presence of a European identity—a regional sense of nationalism coupled with countries’ own national identities. These identities are dynamic, and the right-wing wave sweeping the continent continuously redefines migration policy and discourse.<sup>13</sup>

Other scholars utilize a moral, individual perspective when analyzing the Mediterranean borderspace, shifting from institutional frameworks to individual decision-making in SAR and border enforcement. Attention is given to the deliberations of humanitarian and security workers across the sea and to the narratives individuals use to motivate their responsibilities.<sup>14</sup> As a result,

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<sup>9</sup> Gabriele Proglia, ed., *Decolonising the Mediterranean: European Colonial Heritages in North Africa and the Middle East* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017); Cetta Mainwaring and Daniela DeBono, “Criminalizing Solidarity: Search and Rescue in a Neo-Colonial Sea,” *Env. Plan. C-Polit. Space* 39, no.5 (2021): 1030-1048.

<sup>10</sup> Gurminder K. Bhambra, “The Current Crisis of Europe: Refugees, Colonialism, and the Limits of Cosmopolitanism,” *European Law Journal* 23, no.5 (2017): 395–405.

<sup>11</sup> Helge Vidar Holm, Sissel Laegreid, and Torgeir Skorgen, *The Borders of Europe: Hegemony, Aesthetics and Border Poetics* (Aarhus University Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Ricard Zapata-Barrero, “‘Mediterranean Thinking’ for Mapping a Mediterranean Migration Research Agenda,” *Comparative Migration Studies* 8, no.1 (2020): 6.

<sup>13</sup> Christoph Hasselbach, “Far-right parties surge across Europe,” *DW*, June 12, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/far-right-populists-eu-germany-afd/a-72888389>.

<sup>14</sup> Deanna Dadusc and Pierpaolo Mudu, “Care Without Control,” *Geopolitics* 27, no. 4 (2022): 1205–1230.

the tension between securing and life-saving, as highlighted in competing paradigms, becomes especially pronounced.<sup>15</sup> Moreno-Lax, in particular, finds evidence that the current narrative includes ‘rescue-through-interdiction’ or ‘rescue-without-protection’ as an ethical approach, under the guise of humanitarianism. Moreno-Lax’s findings complicate the binary of what is ‘good’ for those rescued, ‘acceptable’ considering human rights protections, and ‘sufficient’ for governments fulfilling international obligations.

Finally, the ‘Mediterranean Borderscape’ is defined by the practicalities of search and rescue capabilities. These include the hyperpolarization of the maritime space, strategic extraterritorial migration control,<sup>16</sup> capture and policing,<sup>17</sup> and varying migration management strategies.<sup>18</sup> A practical analysis of SAR here can adopt a disaster management lens, with success measured by the capacity to reduce the loss of life. Uncertainty is endemic to the work of SAR operations, which further coincides with the EU ‘crisis operation.’ In other words, the current EU policies and operational responses at sea attempt to manage the inherent unpredictability of SAR efforts in a manner that both informs and antagonizes EU governance strategy.

## **International Frameworks**

To better understand the tension, it is important to understand how leaders and lawmakers have attempted to make sense of state sovereignty in the Mediterranean on both functional and legal terms. The sea is broken into zones, from which rules and regulations are articulated and

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<sup>15</sup> Violeta Moreno-Lax, “The EU Humanitarian Border and the Securitization of Human Rights,” *JCMS* 56, no. 1 (2017): 119–40.

<sup>16</sup> Marta Esperti, “Rescuing Migrants in the Central Mediterranean: The Emergence of a New Civil Humanitarianism at the Maritime Border,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 64, no. 4 (2019): 436–55.

<sup>17</sup> Polly Pallister-Wilkins, “Humanitarian Rescue/Sovereign Capture and the Policing of Possible Responses to Violent Borders,” *Global Policy* 8, no.S1 (2017): 19–24.

<sup>18</sup> Cuttitta, “Shifting Italy/Libya Borderscapes.”

enforced.<sup>19</sup> Coastal states are bordered by territorial waters that stretch out 12 nautical miles from the state's baseline. In this zone, outside vessels must seek the nation's authorization to enter. These are similar but distinct from internal waters, which fall into the landward side of a state's territorial boundaries, such as rivers or small bays.

Next is the contiguous zone,<sup>20</sup> which extends 12 nautical miles further beyond the territorial waters. Here, the state has the authority to enforce immigration, customs, fiscal, and sanitary laws as it would within its own territory. Any country's ships and aircraft may pass freely, given that they abide by the laws of the coastal state. Beyond this zone lie the international waters or the High Seas. This area is subject to several regulations and international expectations under Part VII of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The most pertinent provisions from the convention appear in Article 98 and assert the duty to render assistance to any person in need of rescue as soon as possible.<sup>21</sup> Article 98 also states the responsibility of every coastal state to establish, operate, and maintain an "adequate and effective search and rescue service" at sea, which emphasizes regional cooperation.<sup>22</sup> Thus, international bodies and conventions compel states to cooperate under a framework of shared commitments, in which they voluntarily cede some degree of autonomy for the sake of mutual benefit.

Additional agreements and treaties lay the groundwork for individual state actions at sea and on land, specifically concerning interactions with asylum seekers and migrants. An example relevant to the situation of individuals at sea is the 1951 UN provision for the right to non-refoulement.<sup>23</sup> This principle asserts that no refugee may be returned against their will to a

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<sup>19</sup> "Convention on the Law of the Sea," *United Nations*, 1833 United Nations Treaty Series (U.N.T.S.) 397, Dec. 10, 1982, [https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos\\_e.pdf](https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> William J. Clinton, "Proclamation 7219—Contiguous Zone of the United States," *Federal Register*, 64 FR 48701, August 2, 1999, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1999-09-08/pdf/99-23460.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> *United Nations*, Convention on the Law of the Sea.

<sup>22</sup> *United Nations*, Convention on the Law of the Sea.

<sup>23</sup> "Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees," *United Nations*, 189 U.N.T.S. 137, July 28, 1951, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-relating-status-refugees>.

place that poses a threat to their life or freedom. More broadly, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights also asserts that no *human* may be arbitrarily arrested, detained, or exiled (Article 9), every person has the right to leave any country and to return to their own country (Article 13), and all have the right to seek asylum (Article 14).<sup>24</sup>

The legal framework has also been constructed by the 1974 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea.<sup>25</sup> Many amendments have been subsequently adopted by the Maritime Safety Committee, including one that obligates ships to assist vessels in distress. The 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue built upon these agreements and developed an international, coordinated SAR plan. The Maritime Safety Committee of the International Maritime Organization, established in 1948, divided oceans into 12 search and rescue areas, while outlining necessary obligations and requirements for adequate SAR capabilities. These are nuanced, multilateral frameworks that have been applied inconsistently across different states. Nonetheless, they form the foundational expectations for treatment in contested international spaces and territorial boundaries—dictating norms and behavior amidst an otherwise nebulous borderscape.

## **Governing the Mediterranean Borderspace**

Perhaps most indicative of the EU's changing approach to search and rescue are the specific operations launched by both individual member states and Europe as a collective body. October 2013 marked a notable shift in policy approach, with the launch of Italy's "Operation

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<sup>24</sup> "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *UN General Assembly*, A/RES/217(III), adopted December 10, 1948, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>25</sup> This legal framework is generally regarded as the most important international treaty concerning the safety of merchant ships. Informed from Arsenio Dominguez, "International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), 1974," *International Maritime Organization*, 1974, [https://www.imo.org/en/about/conventions/pages/international-convention-for-the-safety-of-life-at-sea-\(solas\)-1974.aspx](https://www.imo.org/en/about/conventions/pages/international-convention-for-the-safety-of-life-at-sea-(solas)-1974.aspx).

Mare-Nostrum.”<sup>26</sup> Following a tragic shipwreck off the Italian island of Lampedusa, which killed over 368 men, women, and children, the perils of the Mediterranean Sea caught the world’s attention.<sup>27</sup> Italy responded with an operation aiming to identify boats in distress and launched a proactive SAR operation, including initiatives for policing and anti-smuggling. Maritime migration became intertwined with notions of humanitarianism and a sense of good-faith duty among many European citizens.<sup>28</sup>

*Mare nostrum*, or ‘our sea,’ represented a change in perception of the borderspace. It had hitherto been thought of as *mare nullius*, a space not owned by anyone, and thus the responsibility of no one. “Operation Mare Nostrum” distinguished itself by its scale, employing 1,000 workers, 6 naval units, infra-red light-equipped helicopters, maritime patrol aircraft, drones, and coastal radars. However, the operation sparked immense political controversy, both for ushering in some 150,000 migrants safely to European shores as well as costing more than €9 million per month.<sup>29</sup> “Operation Mare-Nostrum” concluded in October 2014, and ultimately illuminated the fragility of state-led humanitarianism in the face of concerns about the stability and insulation of the European bubble in the wake of an influx of migrants.<sup>30</sup>

## **Border Surveillance and Securitization**

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<sup>26</sup> Joel Millman, Flavio di Giacomo, and Christiane Berthiaume, “IOM Applauds Italy’s Life-Saving Mare Nostrum Operation: ‘Not a Migrant Pull Factor,’” *International Organization for Migration*, October 31, 2014, <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-applauds-italys-life-saving-mare-nostrum-operation-not-migrant-pull-factor>.

<sup>27</sup> Teklemariam Bekit, “Lampedusa Shipwreck: Sirens Sound to Remember Eritrean Victims,” *BBC News*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66996543>.

<sup>28</sup> Moreno-Lax, “The EU Humanitarian Border.”

<sup>29</sup> “Search and Rescue,” *Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) International*, accessed April 7, 2026. <https://searchandrescue.msf.org/history.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Mainwaring and DeBono, “Criminalizing Solidarity.”

The following EU effort was Italy's "Operation Triton," facilitated through a partnership with the private firm Frontex in November 2014.<sup>31</sup> Frontex, or the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, is an agency tasked with "border surveillance, fighting cross-border crime, and assisting in return operations."<sup>32</sup> Rather than focusing on search and rescue, Triton emphasized border protection and operated closer to the Italian coast. The cost was estimated at roughly €2.9 million per month, a staggering decrease from the prior monthly budget of €9 million. As Italy and the EU, writ large, rolled back state-sponsored SAR measures at sea, the first NGO rescue ships formed—with the Malta-based charity Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) deploying the *Phoenix* to the Central Mediterranean in August 2014.<sup>33</sup>

Under Triton, which lasted until April 2015, the Mediterranean experienced a ninefold increase in deaths at sea. Additionally, official personnel were instructed to direct their attention towards deterrence in European waters, not distress signals or patrols at sea. The pointed operational pivot towards security coincided with a palpable escalation in the precarity of maritime journeys. This move catalyzed a "civil fleet" of NGO and humanitarian vessels that mobilized in response to devastating life-saving deficits and remain on mission to this day.<sup>34</sup>

## **Anti-Smuggling Enforcement**

The 2015 "refugee crisis" in Europe prompted critical shifts in governmental response, with the EU Mediterranean Naval Force launching "Operation Sophia" in May 2015 to target

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<sup>31</sup> "Frontex Joint Operation 'Triton' - Concerted efforts to manage migration in the Central Mediterranean," *European Commission*, October 7, 2014, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/memo\\_14\\_566](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/memo_14_566).

<sup>32</sup> "Who we are," *Frontex*, accessed February 2025, <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/about-frontex/who-we-are/tasks-mission/>.

<sup>33</sup> "On August 25<sup>th</sup> 2014, MOAS launched its first operation in the Central Mediterranean," *Migrant Offshore Aid Station*, accessed April 30, 2026, <https://www.moas.eu/central-mediterranean/>.

<sup>34</sup> Nathan Akehurst, "All in the Same Boat: A Decade of Civilian Search and Rescue in the Central Mediterranean," *The New Humanitarian*, July 14, 2025, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/first-person/2025/07/14/humanity-1-decade-civilian-search-and-rescue-central-mediterranean-migration>.

smugglers. Funded at €1 million per month, it sought to “disrupt the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Central Mediterranean” using intelligence and efforts to identify and capture suspected smuggling vessels.<sup>35</sup> Given that smugglers were defined as the target of naval efforts, the operation amplified the trend of securitization and criminalization of journeys at sea. An increase was also seen in enforcement powers (albeit with truncated finances), expanded activity toward Libyan waters, and increased cooperation with extra-EU forces like the Libyan coast guard.

The European navy prioritized surveillance, research, and assessment of human smuggling and trafficking networks at sea. As the operation developed, it initiated procedures to board, search, seize, and divert vessels on the High Seas suspected of smuggling. Consequently, this phase moved those same operations into Libyan territorial waters and provided training for the Libyan coast guard. And just as the operation continued the shift from life-saving to securitization, it also began placing more emphasis on efforts outside European territory, effectively externalizing the EU border itself.<sup>36</sup>

It was also during this period that non-governmental SAR efforts surged. In 2016, the total number of operational NGO rescue vessels increased from four to thirteen. By 2018, they accounted for over 40% of total maritime rescues.<sup>37</sup> In the initial swell of civil actors at sea, the EU largely adopted a *laissez-faire* approach, not providing express support, but allowing NGO operations to become a de facto pillar of the borderspace.

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<sup>35</sup> Benjamin Bathke, “EU Extends Operation Sophia, Libyan Coast Guard Cooperation Despite Hefty Criticism,” *InfoMigrants*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/19802/eu-extends-operation-sophia-libyan-coast-guard-cooperation-despite-hefty-criticism>.

<sup>36</sup> Pallister-Wilkins, “Humanitarian Rescue/Sovereign Capture.”

<sup>37</sup> *Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) International*, “Search and Rescue.”

## **Criminalization and Antagonism**

The EU's attitude toward civil SAR vessels was only temporarily defined by permission and convenience.<sup>38</sup> As funding for Frontex increased exponentially—now standing as the EU's best-funded agency, with an annual budget of over €922 million<sup>39</sup>—and partnership with non-EU states ballooned, so did efforts to inhibit NGO rescues. Rather than disparate phenomena, these occurrences were part of a stringent effort by the EU to continue decreasing arrivals by sea and drive deterrence further from European consciousness.

With regard to criminalization by EU member states, NGO rescue ships have become subject to, as well as plagued by, legal injunctions and adverse obstacles to their continued work.<sup>40</sup> States commonly blockade or strand rescue ships at sea by barring them from ports, or opt to send the ships to distant ports for disembarkation. Italy's Piantedosi Decree was codified in 2023 and requires civil rescue ships to navigate to an "assigned place of safety," after which they are usually detained and fined.<sup>41</sup> For instance, SOS Mediterranee's Ocean Viking was authorized to disembark seven minors and three family members to the Italian Coast Guard off Trapani. The other 15 passengers were forced to continue on another 48-hour journey to Marina di Carrara, the assigned place of safety. Marina di Carrara was 1,222 km away from the rescue site. The ship was forced to spend days at sea instead of being free to respond to additional distress signals and remain near rescue areas.

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<sup>38</sup> Isabella Lloyd-Damnjanovic, "Criminalization of Search-and-Rescue Operations in the Mediterranean Has Been Accompanied by Rising Migrant Death Rate," *Migration Policy Institute*, October 9, 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/criminalization-rescue-operations-mediterranean-rising-deaths>.

<sup>39</sup> "Annual Budget of Frontex in the EU 2005-2024," *Statista*, November 11, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/973052/annual-budget-frontex-eu/>.

<sup>40</sup> Anita Orav, "Search and Rescue Efforts for Mediterranean Migrants," *European Parliament*, October 2022, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733712/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)733712\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733712/EPRS_BRI(2022)733712_EN.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> "Piantedosi Decree: The Price of Disregard for Maritime Law," *SOS Mediterranee*, November 25, 2023, <https://www.sosmediterranee.org/consequence-of-the-piantedosi-decree/>.

In the two years following the enactment of the Piantedosi Decree, the Ocean Viking sailed an additional 63,381 km just to reach distant ports and disembark survivors. This constitutes the equivalent of 171 days of sailing, during which the rescue ships are preoccupied and unavailable to provide additional rescues to people in distress. So, while ships like the Ocean Viking are equipped with personnel to provide emergency medical and psychological care, they lack the capacity to care for hundreds of rescued migrants for prolonged periods of time—especially when many are rescued in life-threatening conditions.

Vessels are also refused permission to disembark and have been held at sea with survivors while EU member states engage in political standoffs. In August 2019, two rescue ships carrying over 500 migrants were forced to remain in international waters, waiting for a government to open a safe port.<sup>42</sup> The first ship had begun its series of rescues on August 9 and was authorized to transfer survivors to a Maltese Armed Forces vessel on August 23 after one week of standing by in an overlapping Italian and Maltese search and rescue region in international waters.<sup>43</sup> However, the Italian government barred the ship from entering its territorial waters.

Meanwhile, the second ship, *Open Arms*, was stranded in Italian waters for 19 days awaiting permission to dock.<sup>44</sup> The ship was seized by authorities and survivors were forced to disembark after health and sanitary conditions on board began to deteriorate. Though a court ruling had decided that the ship should be allowed to dock, Italy's far-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini again refused, aside from allowing selective disembarkation of unaccompanied minors and eight people with critical health issues. A crew member aboard *Open Arms* tweeted:

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<sup>42</sup> Megan Specia, "Hundreds of Migrants Stranded in Mediterranean in Standoff Over Aid Ships," *New York Times*, August 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/12/world/europe/mediterranean-migrant-ships-italy.html>.

<sup>43</sup> "Situation Recap: Operation - 4-23 August 2019," *SOS Mediterranee*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.sosmediterranee.org/operation/operation-4-23-august-2019/>.

<sup>44</sup> Livia Borghese and Ivana Kottasová, "Italy Seizes Migrant Boat Stranded Off Coast for 19 Days," *CNN*, August 20, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/20/europe/open-arms-italy-migrants-jumping-intl/index>.

Day 19. Delirious night and a man in the water. First an urgent medical evacuation, then this morning a man threw himself into the water... In the middle (of the night), a woman had a panic attack. The situation is hopeless. Words are missing.<sup>45</sup>

This was one of numerous instances when Salvini required ships to wait in limbo or remain docked for days at a time. In 2018, roughly 600 migrants aboard the *Aquarius* were redirected to Spain when Salvini demanded the Spanish government take the “burden” of arrivals.<sup>46</sup> Following this development, in July 2019, dozens of migrants were again kept onboard their rescue vessel in a Sicilian port until the minister secured assurances of support from other EU member states.<sup>47</sup> Throughout his political career, Salvini has relied on harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric as a means to gain popularity at home. As scholars like Holm, Laegreid, and Skorgen predicted, the topic of migration was exploited for the sake of stoking nationalist and regionalist sentiments, and invoking a notion of a coherent Euro-Italian identity.<sup>48</sup>

In recent years, disembarkation has become the most politically charged point in immigration politics and has prompted tense diplomatic negotiations within the region. As politicians fuel anti-immigrant sentiment within the EU, SAR efforts have only grown costlier and more challenging. Repositioning the locus of interactions and interceptions at sea closer to North Africa further removed the human element of precarity and loss of life at sea from European consciousness.

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<sup>45</sup> Borghese and Kottasová, “Italy Seizes Migrant Boat.”

<sup>46</sup> Gaia Pianigiani, Jason Horowitz, and Raphael Minder, “Italy’s New Populist Government Turns Away Ship With 600 Migrants Aboard,” *New York Times*, June 11, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/11/world/europe/italy-migrant-boat-aquarius.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Sertan Sanderson, “Migrants Stuck on Italian Coast Guard Vessel Allowed to Disembark after EU Nations Agree on Redistribution,” *InfoMigrants*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/18511/migrants-stuck-on-italian-coast-guard-vessel-allowed-to-disembark-after-eu-nations-agree-on-redistribution>.

<sup>48</sup> Holm, Laegreid and Skorgen, *The Borders of Europe*.

In addition to being kept at sea for extended periods before disembarking survivors, civil rescue ships are also restricted through legal and administrative penalties. NGO vessels are frequently detained in ports by maritime authorities, and are frequently fined up to €1 million. Because most rescue organizations are privately funded by donations and subsist on relatively modest budgets, these fines often prove detrimental to the organization's viability. Ships are seized if they have a prior violation, and captains have been arrested on charges of human smuggling.<sup>49</sup> Over the course of 2023 alone, Italy detained eight ships on the basis that they ignored instructions from Italian authorities, although several organizations argue that the instructions were contrary to international maritime law.<sup>50</sup>

One such case occurred when the Ocean Viking was detained and accused of non-compliance with Libyan and Italian authorities. The vessel successfully rescued 244 people from the sea, and then set course to disembark in Bari, Italy. En route, the Ocean Viking was alerted to a distress call from a boat supposedly 15 nautical miles away. However, as the ship began to adjust course, the crew received updated information that the boat in distress was 60 miles north, outside of their vicinity for rendering assistance. The Ocean Viking resumed its initial course to the open port, but when they disembarked in Bari, the vessel was charged with failure to comply with the instruction to keep its direct route. However, the organization maintains that those charges are unfair. The vessel's Search and Rescue Coordinator argued:

Without any indication that anyone else was coming to the rescue of these people in distress, we simply didn't have a legal or moral choice but to respond to this alert—anything else would have been a breach of international law.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Elisabetta Povoledo, "Italy Arrests Captain of Ship That Rescued Dozens of Migrants at Sea," *New York Times*, June 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/29/world/europe/italy-migrants-captain-arrest.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Giulia Messmer, "Crackdown on Civil Sea Rescue After Italy's Rights Abuses Revealed," *Sea-Watch*, December 4, 2024, <https://sea-watch.org/en/crackdown-on-civil-sea-rescue-after-italys-rights-abuses-revealed/>.

<sup>51</sup> "Ocean Viking Detained on New Year's Eve," *SOS Mediterranee*, December 31, 2023, <https://www.sosmediterranee.org/ocean-viking-detained-new-year-eve/>.

The Ocean Viking is operated by the non-profit SOS Mediterranee, which attempts to fund SAR operations through donations and function at a limited capacity. Its missions demand at least €24,000 per day at sea, resulting in more seizures, higher delays in dispatch rescue ships, and a serious threat to the ability to fund future operations altogether.

## **Recommendations**

It is crucial that the EU cease its ongoing crisis operation, which has permitted a sustained lack of official legal framework to guide consistent SAR efforts. Existing policies and agreements produce a number of patterns that consistently exacerbate unnecessary loss of life and, in cases of rescue, neglect to develop viable pathways toward migrant regularization and protection.<sup>52</sup> Taken together, the paradoxical reliance and criminalization of civil SAR organizations leaves civil SAR organizations carrying out responsibilities that EU policy simultaneously depends on and seeks to constrain in adhering to the fundamental obligations enshrined in international humanitarian law.

Since 2015, the EU has continued to operate under full activation of the Integrated Political Crisis Response regarding the migration and refugee crisis, formalizing and sustaining a prior rhetorical strategy that depicts migrant crossings as both a humanitarian dilemma and a security threat.<sup>53</sup> That year recorded 1.04 million irregular arrivals, primarily by the Eastern route from Turkey to Greece, prompted by war and conflict.<sup>54</sup> Operating under the crisis response extends typical timelines to register applications for international protection and border

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<sup>52</sup> Moreno-Lax, "The EU Humanitarian Border."

<sup>53</sup> "Migratory Crisis: EU Council Presidency Steps up Information Sharing Between Member States by Activating IPCR," *Council of the EU*, October 30, 2015, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/10/30/>.

<sup>54</sup> "Irregular Migrant, Refugee Arrivals in Europe Top One Million in 2015," *International Organization for Migration*, December 22, 2015, <https://www.iom.int/news/irregular-migrant-refugee-arrivals-europe-top-one-million-2015-iom>.

procedures. It allows states to change the criteria for asylum to reduce the number of applications examined at the border and relieves states of the obligation to take back asylum seekers under their jurisdiction from another EU country. In effect, the crisis response grants states greater flexibility to narrow access to asylum procedures and to avoid responsibility for asylum seekers who would otherwise fall under their jurisdiction.

Crisis operation entails a selective level of adhocism which muddles the standards and protections of the EU Agency for Asylum. Consequently, the inconsistent procedures within and among member states further encourages reliance on discretionary decision-making. Unfortunately, this often circumvents certain human rights provisions guaranteed to migrants and asylum seekers, such as the right to seek asylum in a fair and efficient manner.<sup>55</sup> By contrast, the only other instances of full IPCR activation followed discrete eruptions of violence, namely Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Hamas' attack on Israel.

In both cases, the crisis response immediately ensued from a distinct moment of violence. The continued full activation of the IPCR for refugees and migrants constitutes a notably more nebulous decision, without clear guidelines for what would constitute a resolution to the problem. Instead, EU-wide efforts must commence to bring about a legal and operational framework which neither forces unsustainable burdens on coastal member states, nor permits the Mediterranean and its southernmost reaches to become veiled graveyards at the behest of external actors.

In place of a crisis operation preoccupied with thwarting arrivals, the EU should invest time and resources into developing legal migration pathways. Having feasible means to apply for asylum or seek to gain regular status within the EU diminishes the impenetrability of "Fortress

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<sup>55</sup> Judith Sunderland, "European Parliament Tries to Bury the Right to Seek Asylum," *Human Rights Watch*, February 10, 2026, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/02/10/european-parliament-tries-to-bury-the-right-to-seek-asylum>.

Europe” and allows for more precise allocation of immigrants to different member states by EU authorities.<sup>56</sup> In other words, rather than irregular arrivals plaguing coastal states like Italy, immigration officials would have an enhanced opportunity to influence the destinations of prospective migrants. Importantly, this would serve an additional purpose of countering labor shortages and population decline in certain regions—a growing issue that threatens the economic and social flourishing of many European countries.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, intentional legal pathways allow people to be matched to job opportunities where their skills are most needed, and decrease black market labor systems.<sup>58</sup>

Secondly, Libya must not be permitted to persist as a central actor at sea, particularly one funded and trained by the EU. The current official strategy, Operation *Irini*, reconfigures the spatial arena for rescues and migrant detection towards North Africa.<sup>59</sup> *Irini* was created during the January 2020 Berlin Conference, which aimed to peacefully resolve the Libyan Civil War, and resulted in a UN arms embargo on Libya. The embargo deliberately included inspections of vessels on the High Seas and Libyan territorial waters suspected to be carrying arms or related material to and from Libya, as was established by the 2016 UNSC Resolution 2292. Moreover, it seeks to provide capacity-building and training to support Libyan SAR institutions. A fortified partnership with Libya, thereby, underlines the EU strategy to impress its security operations to the southernmost border of the sea—minimizing salient issues of human rights abuses in North Africa for the sake of de facto maritime territorial expansion.

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<sup>56</sup> Pia Klemp, “Fortress Europe Keeps Cruelly Raising its Walls Against the Global South,” *The Guardian*, September 11, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/sep/11/europe-migration-asylum-seekers>.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Bosch and Sophie Walravens, “Navigating the Population Change in the EU: Possible Pathways to Demographic Resilience,” *Egmont Institute*, December 2, 2025, <https://egmontinstitute.be/navigating-the-population-change-in-the-eu-possible-pathways-to-demographic-resilience>.

<sup>58</sup> Catherine Woollard, “Migration: There are Alternatives!” *Foundation for European Progressive Studies*, October 12, 2018, <https://feps-europe.eu/migration-there-are-alternatives/>.

<sup>59</sup> “Operation EUNAVFOR Med Irini: Mission,” *Operation Irini*, March 25, 2026, <https://www.operationirini.eu/about-us/>.

Transferring the burden of migrant containment to the southern border of the Mediterranean enables the EU to rely on non-European enforcement officers to patrol the sea. Paid on the basis of keeping migrants from crossing the border, these regimes have employed aggressive tactics, exploitative detention, and even been known to abandon groups of migrants in the Sahara without food or water.<sup>60</sup> Libya has been singled out among “sending” states for its blatant violations of human rights. The EU provides funds and security equipment to a handful of outside nations, particularly those that display higher levels of transit traffic, such as Tunisia, Turkey, Morocco, and Mauritania.<sup>61</sup> The express purpose is to incentivize more efficient management of migration flows before reaching the EU, but critics argue that these funds simply externalize the European border and shirk accountability.<sup>62</sup>

Chief among these offenders, Libya is notorious for its “lethal disregard for desperate people,” as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet asserted. It is a contested place of safety, which means civil society and humanitarian organizations are adamant that it must be a place of non-refoulement.<sup>63</sup> A 2022 joint analysis by Border Forensics and Human Rights Watch determined that Frontex’s practices render it complicit in “well-documented abusive and indefinite arbitrary detention and other serious human rights violations in Libya.”<sup>64</sup> Despite indisputable evidence of maltreatment of migrants by Libyan

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<sup>60</sup> “Walk or Die: Algeria Abandons 13,000 Refugees in the Sahara,” *Al Jazeera*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/6/25/walk-or-die-algeria-abandons-13000-refugees-in-the-sahara>.

<sup>61</sup> Anthony Faiola et al., “With E.U. Backing, North African Nations Aggressively Push Back Migrants,” *Washington Post*, May 20, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2024/eu-migrant-north-africa-mediterranean/>.

<sup>62</sup> Tarek Megerisi and Lorena Stella Martini, “Road to Nowhere: Why Europe’s Border Externalisation Is a Dead End,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, December 20, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/road-to-nowhere-why-europes-border-externalisation-is-a-dead-end/>.

<sup>63</sup> Marion MacGregor, “Libya’s Coast Guard Has Intercepted and Returned Nearly 21,000 Migrants in 2024,” *InfoMigrants*, December 6, 2024, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/61570/libyas-coast-guard-has-intercepted-and-returned-nearly-21000-migrants-in-2024>.

<sup>64</sup> Judith Sunderland and Lorenzo Pezzani, “Airborne Complicity: Frontex Aerial Surveillance Enables Abuse,” *Human Rights Watch*, December 13, 2022,

authorities, Frontex continues to provide the country with funding and assets. This raises a broader question, then, of how far the EU and EU-funded organizations can evade culpability for the well-being of migrants beyond European territory.

Libya received over €465 million between 2015 and 2021 through the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, primarily geared towards strengthening their ability to stop migrants from crossing the Mediterranean.<sup>65</sup> A series of agreements were signed between Italy, Libya, and the EU to train and finance the Libyan coast guard in early 2017, 2020, and again in 2022. These agreements enable the Libyan coast guard to conduct interceptions, arm their patrol vessels, increase security personnel, and facilitate returns to the country. Doctors Without Borders (MSF) has asserted that these agreements “[support] the system of exploitation, extortion and abuse,” as “virtually everyone intercepted at sea by the Libyan coast guard ends up in a Libyan detention center.”<sup>66</sup>

The European Union Naval Force- Mediterranean’s Operation Iridi, which replaced Operation Sophia in 2020, implements a UN arms embargo on Libya by increasing surveillance and maritime monitoring.<sup>67</sup> Though the operation also provides for the training and capacity building of Libyan law enforcement and SAR institutions, the German government refused to commit to that facet when they renewed participation in Iridi in 2022. The German Foreign Ministry stated, “The German government cannot currently justify the training of the Libyan coast guard by German soldiers in view of the repeated unacceptable behavior by individual units of the Libyan coast guard towards refugees and migrants, and also toward

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<https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2022/12/08/airborne-complicity-frontex-aerial-surveillance-enables-ab-use>.

<sup>65</sup> “Libya: EU and Libya,” *European Commission*, accessed April 30, 2026,

[https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/libya\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/libya_en).

<sup>66</sup> MacGregor, “Libya’s Coast Guard.”

<sup>67</sup> *Operation Iridi*, “Operation Eunavfor Med Iridi: Mission.”

non-governmental organizations.”<sup>68</sup> Even so, the other twenty-two member states continue abiding by the training provision and the Council officially extended Irini’s mandate to March 31, 2027.<sup>69</sup>

Libya’s abuses of human rights are well-documented, including numerous instances of firing at or ramming into migrant boats to capsize them, holding captured migrants for ransom, torturing, whipping and beating migrants with sticks, and funneling people into human trafficking networks. MSF’s head of programs in Libya Steve Purbrick reports, “[p]eople living undocumented in Libya have no protection, either in law or from the country’s fragile institutions...They are exposed to violence on a daily basis.”<sup>70</sup>

The relationship between Libyan patrols and non-governmental SAR efforts has grown increasingly conflict-ridden. While the Libyan coast guard seeks to intercept and apprehend migrants to sustain their security partnership with the EU, NGOs and civil rescue vessels assert that Libya is only an oppositional, not lifesaving, force. SAR efforts oftentimes seek to preempt interception by Libyan authorities with as much vigor as they seek to rescue ships in distress from the perils of open sea. As such, the two parties have become embroiled in adversarial confrontations during response missions.

For instance, on November 28, 2024 the Doctors Without Borders rescue ship *Geo Barents* rescued 70 men from Eritrea, Yemen, and Ethiopia who had been abandoned in distress

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<sup>68</sup> Frank Jordans, “Germany Won’t Train Libyan Coast Guard Due to Alleged Abuse,” *Associated Press*, March 30, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-middle-east-germany-migration-european-union-ed724be5068d95e9da907754c7e18c4c>.

<sup>69</sup> “Mediterranean Sea: Council Prolongs the Mandate of Operation IRINI until 2027,” *Council of the EU*, March 11, 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/03/11/mediterranean-sea-council-prolongs-the-mandate-of-operation-irini-until-2027/>.

<sup>70</sup> “Libya: Migrants Face Extreme Violence and Exclusion from Healthcare,” *Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) International*, February 12, 2025, <https://www.msf.org/libya-migrants-face-extreme-violence-and-exclusion-healthcare>.

by a Libyan ship.<sup>71</sup> The armed militia stole the men's phones, kidnapped the 24 women and 4 children, and sped off. Libyan patrols have also openly fired at NGO rescue ships,<sup>72</sup> as was the case with Sea-Watch International's *Mare Jonio* rescue ship on April 4, 2024. These actions have sparked more adamant protest by activists and civil society organizations regarding European funding and support to Libya.

Lastly, there must be a stronger sense of visibility and ownership of the Mediterranean as a borderspace itself. Despite a decrease in overall crossings, migrant deaths at sea have risen sharply as restrictive border policies and deadly weather patterns heighten the danger of these journeys. Frontex has reported 52% fewer irregular crossings, and yet deaths remain at an all-time high point.<sup>73</sup> Hardline security policies have shifted smugglers towards more precarious routes, leading to longer journeys which are exposed to more difficult wind conditions and currents. In the effort to avoid detection by the Libyan coast guard, migrant boats are also less detectable by rescue teams.

In the face of these sobering trends, the vanishing of migrants at sea has become characterized as "invisible shipwrecks."<sup>74</sup> Human rights organizations and watchdog groups are confronted with the mounting impossibility of documenting casualties and disappearances. Authorities from Tunisia, Italy, and Malta offer only sparse insight into the already limited available information about shipwrecks and rescues. In the weeks following Cyclone Harry, for

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<sup>71</sup> Colleen Barry and Trish Thomas, "Armed Men in Speedboats Make off with Women and Children When a Migrants' Dinghy Deflates off Libya," *Associated Press*, November 29, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/migrants-libya-coast-guard-families-separated-3df278b668be0926f2e2e76867f151a4>.

<sup>72</sup> Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata, "Libyan Patrol Boat Fired Shots at Mare Jonio Rescue Ship, NGO Says," *InfoMigrants*, April 8, 2024, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/56291/libyan-patrol-boat-fired-shots-at-mare-jonio-rescue-ship-ngo-says/>.

<sup>73</sup> "Frontex: 52% drop in irregular border crossings in the first 2 months of 2026," *Frontex*, March 12, 2026, <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-52-drop-in-irregular-border-crossings-in-the-first-2-months-of-2026-MmA3Ir>.

<sup>74</sup> Renata Brito and Paolo Santalucia, "Hundreds of Migrants are Vanishing in the Mediterranean. Authorities are Withholding Information," *Associated Press*, March 17, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/migrants-vanishing-missing-mediterranean-authorities-silent-ee527d91dc96550685c88e87c1ce4e6b>.

instance, journalists and advocates were met with silence from official sources regarding reports of missing groups and migrant boats. Well-respected data sources like the IOM Missing Migrants Project lament their growing inability to verify cases of drownings, wrecks, and returns.

This information shortage coincides with decreased funding and increased restrictions on humanitarian and fact-finding groups. So, as SAR operations have been hindered at sea, transparency about that reality is clouded for citizens and stakeholders in Europe, distressed family members, and prospective migrants themselves. These consequences are twofold. For one, lack of reporting prolongs suffering and grief of loved ones of those lost, impedes the work of NGOs, and perpetuates the unseen demise of nameless individuals at sea.

Moreover, it muffles visibility of the continued migration dilemma in European consciousness. The border has been forced towards the southernmost shores of the Mediterranean and security increasingly relies on non-EU actors. As such, the topic of migration governance has become abstract and distant to the average EU citizen, who then becomes susceptible to sensationalized political portrayals of immigration. The enduring loss of life at sea only breaks into headlines in exceptional cases. This silence promotes a false perception that the ‘crisis’ has been solved, when in reality the locus of responsibility and arenas of transit have simply been moved further from observation.

## **Closing**

The gradual shift by the EU towards securitization and criminalization of migrants and search and rescue groups jeopardizes lives at sea. Further, the externalization of the European border into North Africa and the shift towards using third countries like Libya as proxies for migrant containment has led to an increase of human rights violations. Migration is still being

treated as an emergency even though it has been an ongoing phenomenon for years. This reliance on a sustained ‘crisis’ response has facilitated a continued lack of coherent frameworks, especially one involving clear human rights assurances. In practice, an emphasis on security, anti-trafficking, and anti-smuggling efforts shifts attention away from preventable loss of life. Fining, detaining, and indicting captains and private organizations diminishes rescue capacity and efficiency.

The escalating antagonism between SAR groups and the European Union forebodes heightened tensions regarding the sea, where migrants themselves will be caught in the middle of political and legal battles. The EU must accept that numbers of arrivals have not slowed over the last decade, remaining largely unchanged by varying operational approaches. What has changed is the level of precarity attributed to the migration routes. Migrants now overwhelmingly take their chances with more perilous pathways in efforts to avoid detection and therefore are at greater risk of becoming lost at sea. As Libya, Tunisia, and other states intensify containment measures, migrant lives and rights will become increasingly difficult to protect.

Bodies and belongings continue to wash up on shores throughout the Euro-Mediterranean space, bearing haunting witness to a sea of unmarked graves. At the same time, available reports of shipwrecks and deaths at sea are less likely to be reported. Non-governmental actors are constrained and held at arm’s length, while much of the EU population grows numb to the persisting, preventable migrant graveyard. In the face of these conditions, there is an ever-growing importance of civil society, advocacy, and humanitarian groups to act as watchdogs for EU-sponsored actions and preserve the voices and dignity of migrants. This degree of death at sea is neither necessary nor unsurprising given the current policies and response. The Mediterranean has become a site of mass death and disappearance not by sheer chance or

startling emergency, but sustained and intentional unwillingness to rethink migration governance and SAR operation strategy.

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