

Operation Sophia

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This part of our strategy is up and running, it's operational, it's producing results, and it's something on which Europe is united, not only in decision making but also in operational terms." With these words, the High Representative of the European Union for External Action Service, Federica Mogherini, commented on the results achieved by the initiative known as EUNAVFOR MED - Operation Sophia.

In the night of April 18, 2015, a small boat with about 700 migrants aboard capsized in Libyan territorial waters, about 130 miles south of the Italian isle of Lampedusa. Despite the brave efforts of the Italian and Maltese navies and of other boats in the area, only 28 survived. The UNHCR labelled this event as the greatest tragedy ever happened in the Mediterranean from the beginning of the migration crisis. Since then, the Italian Navy has been conducting operations to recover bodies from the wrecks that lie more than 300 metres deep.

The European Union reacted immediately and two days later, during an extraordinary session, the Conference of Ministers of Interior and Foreign Affairs of the Member Countries agreed on an action plan to fight illegal migration and human trafficking. The second point of the plan, which is labelled "Systematic efforts to capture and destroy vessels used by traffickers", translated into a naval military operation known as EUNAVFOR MED, with a view to attacking the very foundations of the traffickers' and human smugglers' business model, inhibit their freedom of movement, and

"Fighting the smugglers and the criminal networks is a way of protecting human life"

Federica Mogherini

High Representative of the European Union
for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

neutralise the vessels and infrastructures they take advantage of.

Through Decision 778/2015, the European Council launched a military missions and designated the EU HQ located within the former 'Francesco Baracca' military airport in Rome as operational headquarters. At the same time, Rear Admiral (UH) Enrico CREDENDINO was appointed Operation Commander. The transition from concept to action took place at light speed. Within the following 30 days, the Operational Plan was approved and another Decision of the European Council dated June 22 officially sanctioned the beginning of Operation EUNAVFOR MED.

The Operational Plan

The operational plan for the mission, or OPLAN, includes 4 phases:

- Phase ONE, which ended on October 7, was dedicated to force deployment and to gathering information about the modus operandi of illegal traffickers and human smugglers.
- Phase TWO, during which the assets of the deployed Task Force, in full compliance with international law, engage in detaining, inspecting, seizing, and diverting ships that are suspected to be engaged in human trafficking. This phase has been divided in two sub-phases, the first of which is currently ongoing and takes place on the high seas. The second sub-phase will take place in the



Human Traffickers receive a Huge Blow

from a talk with RAdm (UH)

Enrico Credendino

by Mario Renna



"The traffickers and smugglers of today know they cannot venture out to sea more than 12 miles off the coasts of Libya. This is the limit beyond which the European naval force is deployed. Nor can they recover their wooden boats, as these are seized on the spot", Rear Admiral Credendino said about the progress of Operation Sophia. The Admiral is at the helm of the most important current European military mission, to which 22 countries contribute their assets, including maritime, air, and land assets. The Flagships – the 'Cavour' Carrier, and later the 'Garibaldi' Carrier – fly the Italian flag. Cooperation is one of the keywords of this operation against people smugglers. *"We cooperate with the National Anti-mafia and Anti-terrorism Directorate (Direzione Investigativa Antimafia e Antiterrorismo), whose activities include – inter alia – the fight to human smuggling and with many other European bodies, namely Europol, Eurojust, and Frontex. The constant exchange of information has been instrumental to understand the business model of traffickers from the very beginning. This operation, in fact, relies on intelligence and first-rate technologies to acquire images that can be used as evidence in court. I am referring to airplanes and helicopters, but also to the two Italian and Greek submarines – indeed a precious resource that operated in stealth mode."* *"Operation Sophia is a European success",* the Admiral added. *"It was sanctioned in record time thanks to a strong spirit of cohesion; its chain of command is lean to ensure command action is prompt and effective. The results achieved are the best evidence of that: 43 people suspected of smuggling people have been detained by the Italian authorities and 54 boats have been seized by our units. Overall, more than 7,000 migrants have been rescued. Our core mission is to fight human trafficking, but rescue is a moral obligation. We rescued people in the past and we will continue to do so".*

Libyan territorial waters following a United Nations Security Council Resolution and the invitation from Libya itself.

- Phase THREE will focus on the neutralisation of ships and logistic infrastructures used by smugglers and traffickers at sea and on land, with a view to supporting the efforts of the international community to deter the continuation of operations by the very smugglers and traffickers. This phase will also rely on a UN Security Council Resolution and the cooperation of Libya.
- Phase FOUR, during which the forces will be re-deployed.

All the activities developed during the four phases will be fully compliant with the current international laws and regulations, especially those concerning the status of refugees and human rights. Moreover, the transition from one phase to another will be approved and endorsed by the European Council based on a proposal by the Operation Commander and an evaluation by the 28 Member States.

The Route of Death

During last October, various initiatives were promoted by many international organisations and institutions, both governmental and not, to celebrate the second anniversary of the awful shipwreck where at least 366 people lost their lives off the coasts of Lampedusa on October 3, 2013. Since that dreadful date, the migration flow has never stopped. The Italian Navy and Italian institutions have addressed the issue relentlessly through operations “Mare Nostrum” and “Mare Sicuro”, to which initiatives by other non-governmental organisations and EU institutions, including FRONTEX’s Operation TRITON and Operation EUNAVFOR MED, added. To date, more than 640,000 migrants have successfully reached Europe in 2015. While the flow along the Balkan route has increased tenfold in September, a 8% decrease along the Central Mediterranean route has been observed for the first time in three years.

The Mediterranean Sea has always been known as peaceful and tranquil. Unfortunately, recently, due to political instability, in some parts of Africa, particularly North Africa, this sea has sadly become a sea of tears, a sea of misery. (...) So many thousands of people have lost their lives in their pursuit for a better future.

Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary General

Based on these figures, we can conclude that much has changed in the four months since Operation EUNAVFOR MED was launched. In May, the migratory flows along the Central Mediterranean and the Eastern/Balkan routes were quite balanced. As of today, less than 25% of migrants choose the former. The change in trend depends on several factors, including deterrence through the action of many naval assets deployed to the area, enhanced border control activities by the Egyptian authorities, and the lower risk associated with the Eastern/Balkan route. Unfortunately, despite the efforts of the international community, the sea route has been confirmed to be the most dangerous, with a death rate of 2% as opposed to 0.1% along the Balkan route. More than 2,800 migrants in 2015 alone have lost their lives while attempting to reach Italy and Europe from the Libyan coasts.

Phase I: Force Deployment and Information Gathering

Thanks to the contribution by 22 Member States – namely Italy, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Hungary – Operation EUNAVFOR MED entered its first live phase on June 26, as the Flagship of the soon-to-be European Naval Task Force, the ‘Cavour’ Carrier, left the Port of Taranto, Italy. Rear Admiral (LH) Andrea Gueglio, in his tenure of Naval Force Commander, was at the helm of an international staff comprising about 80 Officers and NCOs.

Libya, Daesh, and Migrations in the Central Mediterranean Sea

An interview to:
Mattia Toaldo, EU Council on Foreign Relations

by Mario Renna

In a paper of yours published recently you describe the issue of human trafficking that originates in Libya. What's the actual situation of this phenomenon?

Libya is today the major crossroad for the traffic involving migrants due to a widespread instability and the absence of the rule of law. Tens of thousands of people cross Libyan borders every year and the networks of traffickers have grown stronger as they infiltrated the political and social sectors in the country. Between 2008 and 2014, the number of migrants travelling towards Italy has increased four times, i.e. from 38,000 to 170,000 people. In the last ten months of 2015, however, a decrease has been recorded between July and October. The composition of migratory flows has also changed, with Syrians having been replaced by nationals from sub-Saharan Africa, where instability and violence are widely present.

What are the major push factors associated with this form of immigration?

The major one is violence. A vicious circle exists between violence and the traffic of human beings. This is the case in Libya itself, as the peaks of violence observed outside Tripoli between 2013 and 2014 pushed many people to opt for the sea corridor. Also, as a result of the expansion of Daesh, the migrants present in Libya have been targeted. I am referring to the Egyptian Copts, Eritreans, and Asian nationals employed in oil extraction fields, who were forced to escape the country across the Mediterranean. Economy is another significant push factor. For many Libyan communities at the borders, either to the south or along the coast, the traffic of human beings is the only lucrative activity not related to the oil business. Last, but not least, we are aware of violations of human rights, i.e. the inhuman conditions in which migrants in Libya live: that is another factor that pushes towards the sea path.

Does an 'optimal' strategy exist to contain this phenomenon?

No single strategy can solve the issue of mass migration through Libya. The country has been a gate for the migration into Europe for long time. It is unlikely that a significant improvement of the stability and efficiency of its institutions can be achieved in the short term. A possible strategy would include a proper mix of political and economic measures, in addition to the enforcement of the rule of law.

And, as a last question, what is the vision of the caliphate as to migration into Europe?

In one of the last issues of Dabiq, the magazine published by Daesh, they included a picture of Aylan Kurdi – the Kurdish child who drowned as he attempted to cross the Mediterranean with his family. The point of view they took is completely different from that adopted by the Western media. Dabiq used the iconic image of the child not to foster sympathy towards the migrants, but rather to warn people about the “dangers connected with leaving the lands of Islam”, the title of the article therein says. According to the ideologists of the caliphate, the only accepted way of leaving is by travelling from the West, i.e. to become a “foreign fighter”. “By leaving the land of Islam willingly to go to the land of the infidels they commit a severe sin”, Dabiq says. Creating a utopic idea of the caliphate is a pull factor for Daesh that – as paradoxical as it may sound – appears to stand against migration towards Europe.

On July 27, a British hydrographic ship and a German auxiliary ship joined the 'Cavour' and the Task Force reached its full operational capability in the Central Mediterranean, with its area of operations spanning across 525,000 square nautical miles, i.e. more than 6 times the territory of Italy. Just a month later, also thanks to the pivotal contribution of air assets including 3 helicopters and 3 maritime patrol aircrafts, Rear Admiral (UH) Enrico Credendino reported the success of Phase I to the EU Political and Security Committee, or PSC. The air and naval assets of EUNAVFOR MED had in fact achieved all planned objectives and collected all the information required to move to the next phase in international waters, i.e. the active fight against the illegal trafficking of human beings. It is interesting to note that by October 7, which officially marked the transition into Phase II, EUNAVFOR MED had already spotted 22 ships outside the Libyan territorial waters suspected of being used for human traffic purposes. Unfortunately, boarding these ships or detaining the criminals involved was not part of the mandate for Phase I. This is now possible thanks to a different mandate for Phase II on the high seas – which UNSCR 2240 dated October 9, 2015 also endorsed. The Resolution was approved by 15 Member States with the abstention of Venezuela.

Major Achievements

Over the last 3 months, thanks to the activities of EUNAVFOR MED Task Force during Operation Sophia, 42 suspect human traffickers have been detained and handed over to the Italian Police; 43 ships used to transport migrants have been seized to ensure they could no longer be used to perpetrate further crimes. As a matter of fact, casting them adrift was not an option, for they may represent a danger to navigation at large. These efforts involved 8 ships – including 1 carrier, 4 frigates, 1 corvette, 1 auxiliary ship, and 1 hydrographic ship – and 9 aircrafts, notably 6 helicopters and 3 maritime patrol aircrafts. The

concrete results achieved have been repeatedly acknowledged during several institutional meetings, including those held in North African countries. Operation Sophia is in fact delivering on effective deterrence, especially during the present Phase II, for its mandate allows Task Force assets to board ships and detain suspected traffickers on the high seas. Also, a significant change in the criminal *modus operandi* has been observed: in the past, a smaller ship was used to tow a larger one and transport migrants into international waters. The former hosted the illegal traffickers, who remained in the area to recover the latter, once the rescue operations had been completed. This is no longer the case. The traffickers know they will be arrested and leave the area at once.

Moreover, the vessels deployed on Operation Sophia have rescued more than 5,400 people, thus contributing to the past and current efforts in Central Mediterranean, notably Operation 'Mare Sicuro' by Italy, Operation Triton by the EU Frontex Agency, and other initiatives by national and international organisations, with which EUNAVFOR MED is collaborating strongly.

Collaboration is not explicitly mentioned in the mandate of the mission, and yet it is mandatory in the framework of international law and an obligation for every sailor. It is part of our DNA and is something to which EUNAVFOR MED – Operation SOPHIA is strongly committed to. Search and rescue operations are ensured at all times whenever the relevant Maritime Rescue and Coordination Centre issues orders in this respect. This attitude will not change as the mission continues.

Saving the lives of innocent people is the number one priority. But saving lives is not just about rescuing people at sea. It is also about stopping the smugglers and addressing irregular migration.

Donald Tusk

President of the European Council