

Mare Europaeum? Tackling Mediterranean migration

by Hugo Brady

The irregular migration crisis on the EU's southern border reached a new level when it became clear that the number of migrants picked up in Italian waters this year had tripled to around 108,000. On 27 August, the EU unveiled its response: it will largely replace *Mare Nostrum* – Italy's ambitious 'military humanitarian' mission launched last year, after some 360 migrants died at sea – with a Union-wide effort.

Known as *Triton*, the new search-and-rescue mission is a critical test for the governance and sustainability of the EU's passport-free Schengen area. It will not only be a major operational challenge for the Union's small border agency, Frontex. The support given by individual member states to the mission will show outsiders where the EU is at in terms of delivering an overall border, asylum and immigration policy for the Schengen zone.

Even assuming that Operation Triton will receive adequate assets and financing, it will also need to be flanked by a robust set of EU foreign policy objectives to succeed. Governments need to target the Union's foreign aid and technical assistance to the African and Middle Eastern countries from and through which migrants are travelling.

Annus horribilis in the Med

Since January 2014, over 100,000 irregular migrants have reached Italian waters from North Africa, sometimes in craft as basic as partially inflated rubber dinghies. The overall number making the crossing is far greater than during and after the Arab Spring in 2011, when a figure closer to 60,000 was deemed an emergency. Around 1,900 have died in the attempt so far this year – with *Mare Nostrum* pulling almost 2,000 migrants out of the sea over a single weekend in August.

The unprecedented surge is driven by continued instability in North and sub-Saharan Africa, as well as conflict in the Middle East. Scores of people from Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Sudan have died. But the largest groups of migrants have come from Syria – from where three million have fled an ongoing civil war – and Eritrea, where roughly 4,000 people a month flee the social malaise of life under President Isaias Afwerki's government.

The crossings are mainly organised by well-equipped – often lightly armed – smuggling groups based in Libya. The deteriorating security

situation there makes for an ideal location from which to operate: the country has split into warring militias and its remaining governing institutions are barely functioning. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) now thinks that a recent eruption of violence between rival factions in Tripoli may lead to an all-out civil war and a further spike in crossings as more desperate Libyans take their places on the boats, many of which never even reach international waters.

Italy has borne the main brunt of the recent rise in irregular arrivals. But the Greek coastguard has also reported hundreds of deaths this year as asylum seekers, mainly from Syria, attempt to reach Europe by crossing from Turkey to nearby islands such as Samos and Lesbos. Even neighbouring Bulgaria has begun detaining boats crossing the Black Sea – albeit still in small numbers. Both cases demonstrate how migrants are attempting more maritime crossings due to the construction of wire fences on the Greek and Bulgarian land borders with Turkey. These frontiers have also been secured by major deployments of police officers and border guards in Greece (known as Operation Aspida ‘Shield’) and in Bulgaria, under Operation Poseidon: a permanent land operation involving several EU countries and coordinated by Frontex.

Towards Operation Triton

Italy created *Mare Nostrum* (an ancient Roman term meaning ‘Our Sea’) in response to the deaths of over 360 migrants – mainly Eritreans – off the island of Lampedusa in 2013. The operation employs both naval and coastguard vessels suitable for search and rescue missions: amphibious craft, patrol boats, a floating hospital, and frigates capable of escorting other ships into port with the assistance of helicopters. Reconnaissance aircraft and unmanned Predator B drones search the sea for suspect vessels and monitor activity at the Libyan ports from which most of the boats set sail. A control centre in Poggio Renatico in northern Italy analyses the incoming data in real time and allocates the mission’s daily priorities accordingly. *Mare Nostrum* is also capable of engaging and apprehending human traffickers and smugglers who may be armed and are subject to between 5 and 15 years in prison in Italy, if found guilty of facilitating irregular migration.

Its predominantly military design notwithstanding, *Mare Nostrum* has saved an estimated 70,000 lives in less than a year at a monthly cost of €9 million a month to the Italian government. The mission also patrols Malta’s large search-and-rescue zone which Valetta has long said is far beyond its capabilities.

For *Triton* to achieve something similar will mean a monumental effort: while Frontex’s annual operating budget to support border control across the entire Schengen area is only €90 million, diplomats estimate that the set-up costs alone for *Triton* will be €20 million.

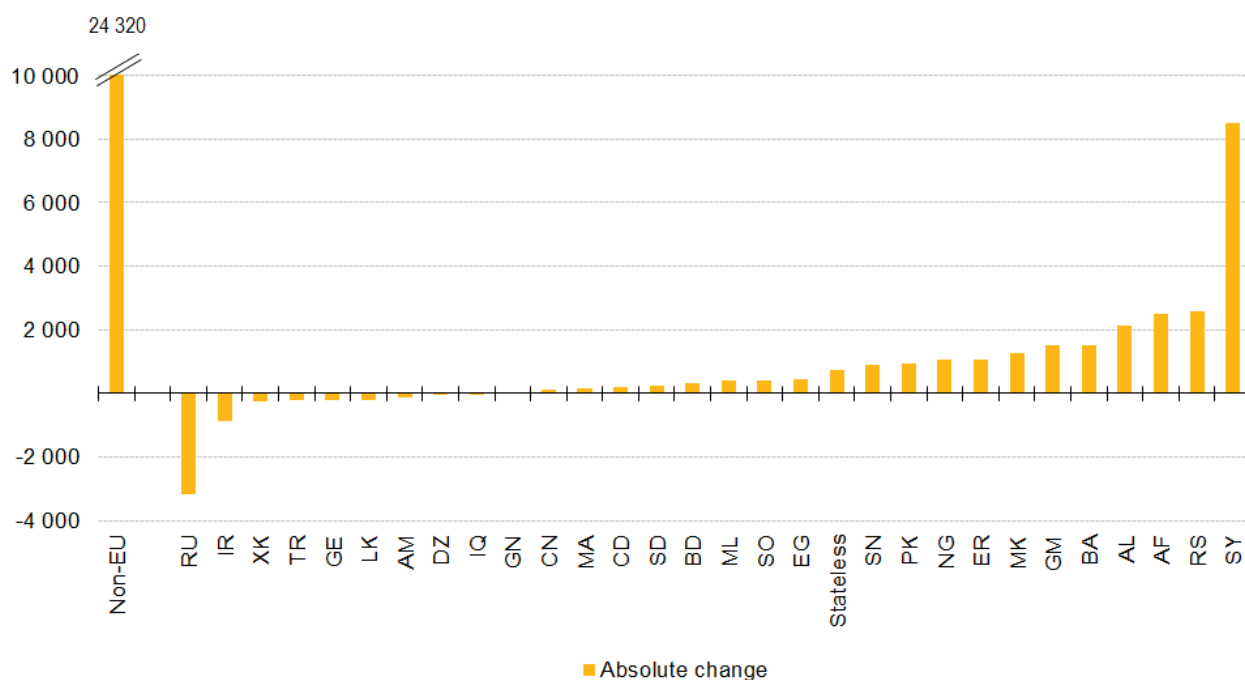
Frontex owns no naval or airborne assets of its own. Member states donate ships and aircraft to each joint operation, according to calls for ‘mandatory solidarity’ made by the agency’s director and officials of the country where the mission is to be deployed. EU home affairs Commissioner Cecilia Malmström recently announced that *Triton* will be formed from two former EU border operations in the central Mediterranean, *Hermes* and *Aeneas*; and that the necessary air and naval assets should be pledged and ready by November 2014. Malmström also noted that the agency’s budget would have to be “vacuum cleaned”, and topped up further in order to finance the new venture.

The intention across the EU was probably always that Frontex would take over from *Mare Nostrum* in some form. Over the last year, the agency has acquired new powers and played a central role in the rolling out of Eurosur – a new pan-European information network for coastal surveillance – to 19 member states. These will enable it to take over some of the functions of the national mission as long as Italy and others lease the agency equipment. But it seems unlikely *Mare Nostrum* will be wound down completely: Frontex has never hitherto tackled a mission of such a size or complexity. It also currently lacks a director after the departure of Finland’s Ilkka Laitinen earlier in the year. The new mission will hence be limited in scope initially: it will not patrol international waters or Malta’s search-and-rescue zone. The enhanced assistance from the EU, however, will give Italy some breathing space to implement an ambitious reform of its asylum system which needs upgrading to cope with the pressures arising from the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war.

A refugee crisis in the making?

EU countries took in around 135,000 refugees last year, with Germany and Sweden offering shelter to some 20,000 Syrians. But although 2013 marked the highest ever number of applications to the EU since its statistical office began compiling records in 2008, asylum requests jumped a further 30% in the first quarter of this year. The final figure for 2014 will be much higher not only because of this summer’s migrations but also because the crossings now happen all year round. Syria still accounts

Asylum applicants by citizenship, EU-28 (*), absolute change between Q1 2013 Q1 2014



Source: Eurostat (*) Excluding Austria due to missing Q1 2014 data

for the lion's share of asylum applicants, followed by Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia, and Somalia. A large number of applications are also received from Serbia and Albania each year but these consist mainly of Roma and other minorities.

Sweden, Germany, France, Italy and the UK took in 70% of those granted refugee status. So many asylum seekers are now camped outside the French town of Calais – in an attempt to reach Britain through the Channel Tunnel – that the local mayor has threatened to close the port. Even Bulgaria and Romania, countries with little experience of acting as safe havens, have experienced a spike in asylum requests.

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the number of refugees worldwide has passed 50 million for the first time since the end of the Second World War. This trend is likely to continue into 2015 following the partial US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the ongoing dramatic expansion of the Islamic State (IS) on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border, and the aftermath of Israel's summer incursion into Gaza. It is also not unreasonable to assume a spike in refugee applications over the next 18 months from Europe's eastern frontier given conflict in Ukraine and rising tensions with Russia.

The instability on Europe's southern borders shows no sign of abating in the short-to-medium

term, either. Morocco and Tunisia offer some hope: they are internally coherent and capable of cooperating with EU countries to jointly patrol their Mediterranean borders. Morocco wants to establish a functioning asylum system and has regularised the status of thousands of sub-Saharan migrants. Tunisia's coastguard functions well. But elsewhere the political and economic prospects are far from promising, given escalating civil strife in Libya and Egypt's turbulent political scene. The memory of a horrendous civil war in the 1990s keeps Algeria stable but stagnant for the present. Yet there is a wellspring of discontent amongst the country's youth towards an aging ruling elite.

On 29 August, Kristalina Georgieva, the EU's outgoing humanitarian aid commissioner, characterised the three million refugees who have fled Syria as both "an emergency and a protracted crisis", citing that the EU has already committed €2.8 billion in relief. However, the pressures on EU countries are modest compared with neighbouring Turkey. Ankara is sheltering roughly one million Syrian refugees at the cost of at least \$3 billion, despite real security risks and tensions between the newcomers and Turkey's Alevi and Kurdish communities. Notwithstanding rhetoric to the contrary from President Erdogan, Turkey's border agency has cooperated to some extent with efforts by Bulgaria and Greece – in conjunction with Frontex – to enhance surveillance along their shared frontier.



Migration as (part of) EU foreign policy

In July 2014, the incoming president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, laid out 'political guidelines' for his term in office that specifically addressed the situation in the Mediterranean. Juncker wants a stronger EU asylum policy – which reflects the Union's recent adoption of a stricter set of common refugee rules in 2013 – and more funding for Frontex. He has also committed to a more substantial EU policy on labour migration for third country nationals. That will be tough to sell even to those countries which comprise the Schengen area (Britain and Ireland do not wish to join, while Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia and Romania are not in yet). But Europe does appear to be losing a global race for talent: a recent poll re-published by Bruegel, an economics think tank, indicates that not a single European city made it into the top ten destinations favoured by high-earning IT workers.

Juncker also proposed the creation a stand-alone commissioner for migration. The idea has some merit. The EU is struggling to be strategic on immigration issues because the work is divided up between a plethora of agencies and institutions involved variously with visa liberalisation, border control, refugee protection, trade, development, humanitarian aid and foreign policy. But some say, even allowing for the time needed to create a specific directorate-general for migration, an *ad hoc* commissioner would find his/her hands too far away from the levers of power to make a real difference. Others – like Emma Bonino, a former commissioner and Italian foreign minister – argue that such a position would work better as a regional specialist. A commissioner dedicated to the Mediterranean could escape the silo effect whilst delivering on the EU's 2011 promise to offer money, markets and mobility to countries that want closer relations with Europe.

Both Juncker and Bonino have stressed that the main innovation needed in EU migration policy is for it to be aligned properly with the Union's foreign relations with the countries which either send migrants or are used by them to transit to Europe. Migration diplomacy is in its infancy worldwide. But Juncker's proposed commissioner for migration would specialise on relations with third countries, and few have picked up on his emphasis on the need for both Frontex and the EU's Asylum Support Agency (EASO) to work closely with key immigration authorities outside the EU – wherever possible. In fact, *Triton* has little chance of success unless its efforts are flanked by a diplomatic approach that focuses on building up third countries' capacity to manage migratory flows and cripple smuggling networks. Perhaps the most important priority is to

ensure the proper protection of refugee communities as close as possible to their home country and through resettlement schemes for those most in need. The Union is currently designing a resettlement scheme and a 'regional protection programme' in which asylum seekers in North African countries can apply for refugee status without having to brave the Mediterranean crossing.

To that end, Juncker and the incoming High Representative for Foreign Policy, Federica Mogherini, might consider, *inter alia*, the option of double-hatting whatever commissioner has responsibility for migration issues as a Special Representative. Stronger cross-institutional collaboration would help the EU to bring both political clout and technical expertise to bear in its relations with Egypt, Ethiopia, Niger, Mali and Sudan – all countries which function as key gateways for the migrants that eventually arrive in North Africa. There is also a clear need – in conjunction with the UNHCR and the IOM – to find a *modus vivendi* with Eritrea on the refugee question, as its military government is increasingly realising that the current exodus of young people is ultimately bad for the ruling elite.

Furthermore, it may prove necessary for the Union to cooperate more closely with Turkey, a critical partner which is absorbing much of the refugee pressure from Syria. Ankara has also just taken up the chair of the Global Forum on Migration and Development, one of the few arenas in which immigration issues are seriously discussed between rich and poor countries. The double-hatted position might also encourage a more strategic use of the EU's budget for migration issues – which accounts for a mere 1% of the Union's overall spending – and also ensure that migration issues and potential refugee crises are better factored into the EU's Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity (SIAC), which briefs the High Representative. That way the EU's foreign policy structures would receive early intelligence on migratory flows and their possible impact on the EU.

In the immediate term, another idea worth exploring is to merge *Triton* with an enhanced version of the EU's small border assistance mission (EUBAM) to Libya, creating the first operation to be organised jointly by the Union's border agency and its civilian crisis management staff. This would bring *Triton* closer to the *Mare Nostrum* concept of blending together intelligence, military and humanitarian tools for the broader objective of border management.

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