

EU's Military Strategy to Deepen Mediterranean Tragedies

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More than 800 migrants died on April 19 this year when their overcrowded boat capsized in the Mediterranean Sea off the Libyan coast. The tragedy sent soaring this year's Mediterranean death toll which was by then around 1,500 – 10 times the deaths during the same period last year.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), between 23,000 and 24,000 migrants had tried to cross over to Italy since the beginning of the year, while just under 21,000 migrants made the same journey between January and April 2014. While the number of migrants rose to some extent, migrants perishing at sea have hit the roof.

Things are bound to get worse before getting better. It is estimated that in 2015, between 500,000 and one million refugees will cross the Mediterranean and land in the European Union. So far some 1,600 people have died during crossing. These figures are the known cases, many more having died in undetected vessels. The numbers are on the rise. In 2011, 58,000 people tried to enter the EU across the waters, while the figure grew to 218,000 in 2014.

Most of the migrants crossing the Mediterranean in fact are not Libyans. They come from as far as the Sudan, Central African Republic, Nigeria, Eritrea, Somalia, Senegal and Ghana, running for their lives due to either sectarian conflicts at home or pervasive poverty.

They scraped together US\$ 2,000 for the trip across the sea on wobbly vessels, run by gangs of human traffickers. Many more come from Syria. These are the countries that face serious internal crises intensified by western military interference.

Italy, Malta and Greece coastguards have rescued thousands of such migrants from the hazard of Mediterranean Sea. They have been feeling isolated and left alone to deal with what they termed “the cemetery of the Mediterranean Sea.”

European Union (EU) put forward a proposal to rescue the African migrants, but the suggestion went under with a deadlock as to who is going to “share the burden”. The proposals included joint search-and-rescue patrols, establishing resettlement quotas.

Some EU members such as France, Spain, and Britain rejected the idea of quotas for sharing migrants among them, while others suggested deploying military forces to Libya to keep migrants as far away from Europe as possible.

European Commission reacted to the boat tragedy with plans to set up of offshore camps in Libya

and Tunisia, to lock up and pre-empt asylum seekers before they cross the Mediterranean. It has been described ingenuously as “outsourcing border control and containment mechanisms to prevent departures.”

Italy's foreign minister even called for air strikes in Libya against ISIL positions there.

The general agreement among EU is that something needs to be done and their first proposal was to send more ships to the Mediterranean so as to ensure that fewer people die due to unseaworthy vessels crammed with their human cargo.

On the other hand, some European bureaucrats are toying with the idea of military strikes to destroy smuggling vessels before they leave Libya. However, they have been cautioned by activists that the last thing the African refugees need is more assaults and bombing—especially coming from the very countries that they expect to beg for asylum.

EU ministers sanctioned a plan for a new naval force to intercept smugglers before their boats reach Europe. It was reported that the EU parliament was drafting a United Nations resolution to authorize the deployment of military off the coast of Libya in order to “capture” and “destroy” the boats.

The problem is that two rival ‘governments’ in Libya have indicated their rejection to the plan, saying any deployment of troops to Libyan waters would be a violation of the country's sovereignty.

Meanwhile, some European political parties have embarked on their anti-immigrant and xenophobic tendencies to obstruct immigrants from entering their countries while deporting those who managed to sneak in. Italy’s ultra-nationalist Northern League called on the authorities to stop “by any means” any accommodation of further refugees. The party said it ‘was ready’ to take steps to prevent their arrival.

Similarly, Germany refugee centers have been targeted with fire bombings, while ultra-right groups such as Pegida have conducted racist campaigns, attacking immigrants as ‘social spongers’.

Such right-wing ultra nationalist groups have even received implicit sympathy from governing parties such as Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Meanwhile, it is revealed that EU is planning military strategy against the refugee transport networks in the Mediterranean. Documents disseminated by WikiLeaks say the operation contains “detailed plans to conduct military operations to destroy boats used for transporting migrants and refugees in Libyan territory, thereby preventing them from reaching Europe,”

The whistle-blower website exposed two classified documents, with the plan being approved by delegates of all 28 EU member states on May 18. The project has no well-defined “political end state” which means they are looking at a sweeping military operation without an unambiguous end goal.

In reaction to this, more than 300 European migration academics and scholars have condemned the EU’s envisioned use of military might against migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean. They have come out against the EU's plan of military intervention against the boats crossing the Mediterranean.

The academics argued that any attempt to justify military intervention by comparing the Mediterranean boats with the 18th century clampdown on the slave trade is “entirely self-serving” and based on “a parody of history.”

It is widely believed that military option will do nothing to curtail the flow of immigrants escaping conflicts in their destabilized countries or looking for jobs. For them the long-term solution lies in social development of the countries they come from.

What is needed is a total prohibition on the sale of weaponry to these countries. EU countries have to criminalize the arms trade, thus abolishing wars in countries such as Syria. It means investment in sustainable development, an end to plundering of resources. It means better education systems, better medical system and better shelters.

Europe and NATO countries have to take responsibility because they have in one way or another created the current turmoil. They can find money for global warfare yet they can't find the money to rescue the refugees running away from the war zones.

Apart from the influx of migrants from Africa, we have also to look at those coming from the Middle East. This is the direct result of the military invasion carried out by the US, and its NATO allies.

They have sustained and shared the military operations in Iraq, Libya, Syria and now Yemen. As a result the Middle East and large portion of Africa has plunged into disarray and disorder. By 2014, it is estimated that two million of the six million inhabitants of Libya fled the country, as a result of US-French-British bombardments.

The current US-led drive at regime change in Syria has immersed the country into total disarray, disorder and deaths, with subsequent exit of estimated four million refugees. Most of them fled to the neighboring countries, while many others take the difficult and deadly path to Europe.

A new theater is unfolding with the US and Saudi Arabia embarking on a new battlefield in Yemen. This is bound to lead to a great number of refugees seeking asylum.

Meanwhile, as increasing number of distressed citizens seek sanctuary in Europe, the EU is converting the Mediterranean into a graveyard, hoping that this will serve as deterrent to others.

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