



The humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean: urgent EU action required

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Nearly 3,000 migrants rescued, more than 300 dead – such are the statistics of the latest tragedies in the central Mediterranean for the first half of February. With these disturbing numbers, the humanitarian crisis is back on everybody's radar screen. Never before have more migrants arrived at the EU's southern shores and their number is set to grow in the face of the massive displacement of people in parts of Africa and the Middle East, where the entire regional order is dissolving.

Libya: no means to contain migration

Even though it is one of the most dangerous routes, the hot spot for departures to the EU remains Libya, which has slid over the past years into total state failure. Here, the EU has no partners left to cooperate with in the management of migration flows. While countries like Morocco work together with the EU to a certain extent in patrolling borders, fighting smugglers or extending their own capacities to deal with migrants, there are no such structures left in Libya. On the contrary, human trafficking is thriving and the country's further descent into chaos is on the horizon with the Islamic State gaining in influence quickly.

Even when Italy ended its extensive – and costly – search and rescue operation Mare Nostrum in front of the Libyan coast at the end of 2014, migration did not drop as many had hoped. To be sure, such rescue operations have a certain “pull effect”. However, the reason for the strong flows is not the rescue activities at sea but the high migratory pressure. These migrants set off towards the EU at almost any risk, knowing about the dangers of drowning, abuse by organised traffickers or forced return if denied asylum in the EU. As this situation is not going to change any time soon to a certain extent work should be prepared for high migration flows across the central Mediterranean for a long period of time.

Back to start

Yet, the EU is still ill equipped to deal with this situation. After the end of Mare Nostrum, Italy and other EU Member States installed the Frontex-coordinated EU operation Triton. This operation, however, has limited resources and is focused on patrolling Italian coastal areas. It therefore plays a restricted role in the current disaster management in the Mediterranean. The most recent rescue of 3,000 migrants is mainly down to Italy reinforcing its search and rescue activities in front of the Libyan coast again. This humanitarian success comes at significant monetary and social costs. Which is why Member States again face the same question as after

the tragic events off the coast of Lampedusa in 2013: what will happen when Italian rescue efforts reach their limit in the near future?

If the EU wants to prevent further catastrophes, it needs to step up its rescue action quickly. There are two obvious ways to do so without putting into place new rules or institutional structures. For one, the EU and its Member States can prop up their financial support to Italy so that the Italian authorities can continue their increased efforts. Much more promising, however, would be a genuinely common effort. This would be a welcome signal of solidarity, underlining what not everyone seems to have understood: the management of migration is a common, EU-wide challenge. There is no reason why such a concerted action could not take place under the aegis of Frontex. Though the agency is first and foremost tasked with border control, in practice search and rescue activities take up an important part of its work. In the Mediterranean, the dividing lines between these tasks – which are legally and institutionally embedded in separate structures in many Member States – have blurred for some time now. With a broader mandate and more resources, Triton could substantially contribute to rescue operations.

Long-term solution

While stepping up rescue efforts is vital to ease the immediate crisis, it is, of course, not a long-term solution for the management of high migratory flows. Here, other instruments need to be put into place. Above all, Member States need to agree on legal ways for people to enter the EU and apply for asylum. Despite years of discussions, there is, for example, still no common approach and consent to increase the use of humanitarian visas or resettlement programmes, which would offer people true alternatives to boarding dinghies at the shores of Libya.

A second and more fundamental challenge is to foster a less short-sighted foreign policy towards the EU's southern neighbourhood. There is wide spread agreement that the EU has responded poorly to the Arab spring and the continuing disintegration of the states and societies in the MENA region. Member States by and large stay at the side lines of the complex conflicts and the humanitarian catastrophes evolving at their door step. Even now only few EU states put, for example, measurable effort into supporting increasingly fragile countries like Lebanon that struggle under the weight of millions of Syrian refugees. Here, new conflicts are in the making and further destabilisation of the region is a serious risk. A similar argument can be made with regard to conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the number of people fleeing from the growing tensions in and around Nigeria towards the EU has strongly increased over the past year. Yet, this region does not figure prominently among European foreign policy priorities.

A simple choice

In the end, the message to drive home is straightforward. There is no cheap and short-term solution to the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean. As Member States failed to put into place a sustainable migration policy in the past decade, they are for the moment left with a simple choice: They either rescue migrants at large scale, in a concerted effort and with everything that entails in terms of migrant integration, or they accept the foreseeable death of thousands of people in the Mediterranean in the coming months and years.