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# **The Humanitarian War against Migrant Smugglers at Sea**

Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper engages with the military-humanitarian technology of migration management from the vantage point of the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED) “Operation Sophia”, the naval and air force intervention deployed by the EU in the Central Southern Mediterranean to disrupt “the business model of human smuggling and trafficking” while “protecting life at sea.” We look at the military-humanitarian mode of migration management that this operation performs from three vantage points: logistics, with a focus on the infrastructure of migrant travels; subjectivity, looking at the migrant profiles this operation works through; and epistemology, building on the mission’s first stage of intelligence and data gathering. Through this multi-focal approach, we illuminate the productivity of this military-humanitarian approach to the migration crisis in the Mediterranean.

## **Introduction**

On June 23, 2015, the EU launched its first military operation of migration management, targeting the smuggling and trafficking of people from Libya to the EU. Deployed in the Southern Central Mediterranean, the military operation is tasked with intercepting, seizing, and diverting vessels suspected to be carrying migrants. In other words, the goal is to govern a migration route by targeting the material infrastructure of crossing, namely the informal economy of ferrying people to the European shores, and the vessels through which these trips are carried out.<sup>1</sup>

The EU Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED) Operation Sophia was issued at the 2015 peak of the migration crisis. In June 2015, in fact, more than 100,000 people had crossed the Mediterranean seeking refuge in Europe since the beginning of the year, while over 1,830 had been reported dead as they took the unseaworthy, extremely expensive, and only passage out of war and violence available to them, i.e., the smugglers’ ride across the Mediterranean Sea (Achilli and Sanchez 2017). Meanwhile the EU was struggling to reach an agreement to relocate as few as 40,000 asylum seekers across all its member states, while Middle Eastern and Northern African countries had received over four million Syrian refugees,<sup>2</sup> a situation that led United Nations rights-chief Zeid Ra'ad Al

Hussein to call upon the European Union to take “bolder steps,” as he put it, to address the crisis.<sup>3</sup>

The EU military operation was presented as one of such bolder steps. It opened with the dispatch of five warships, two submarines, three planes, three helicopters and two drones and ignited a polarized debate about the “migration crisis” in the Mediterranean. Issued in the aftermath of yet another tragic shipwreck in which about 900 migrants were lost at sea,<sup>4</sup> the Operation was presented by EU authorities as an intervention to “save” migrants from perilous waters and from pitiless traffickers and smugglers,<sup>5</sup> and as a “response”—indeed *the* humanitarian response—to the migration crisis in the Mediterranean. Critics instead contended that the EU was waging “war against migrants,” that the military disruption of “the business model of human smuggling and trafficking,” as EU documents had it, meant warfare against migrants.

In this paper we take a different approach. More than evaluating the humanitarian mission against the military operation (or the other way around), we hold on to the military-humanitarian nexus<sup>6</sup> that this operation articulates in order to study its productivity and to map its outcomes on the government of mobility.

### **Methodological approach: The military-humanitarian nexus**

What is at stake for us is neither humanitarianism nor war per se but migration management through a military-humanitarian technology, and particularly its spatial productivity. Methodologically, this means that we do not engage the humanitarian predicament and the military deployment of Operation Sophia as known units or discrete opposites—as if the militarization of humanitarianism or a humanitarian agenda of military interventions were somehow dichotomous assemblages.

Instead, our interest is directed toward the geography of military-humanitarianism that Operation Sophia stages: how does a military-humanitarian approach to migration management impact on migrant journeys across the Mediterranean Sea? And how does this military and humanitarian co-implication reconfigure migration management’s battlefields and humanitarian territories?

The engagement of the EU military in border security and human rights issues is no news. It is part of the growing role of the EU as a military actor working on security missions, which has occasionally also featured a migration chapter.<sup>7</sup> Operation Sophia, however, recasts migration management as a priority of the EU military engagements.

In this paper we study this evolution through a multi-focal approach that interrogates the spatiality of the mission: what are the outcomes of the Operation for migrant mobility and for the actors involved? How does this operation impact

migration across the Mediterranean while at the same time reconfiguring migration management through a military-humanitarian technology?

We try to answer these questions from three different angles. First, we look at the *logistics* of the operation, i.e., its focus on the infrastructure of migrant journeys, also comparing EUNAVFOR MED to previous episodes of the military-humanitarian government of migration and particularly to the Italian Navy's Mare Nostrum Operation (2013-4). Building on a critical geography approach our study of "Operation Sophia" brings a spatial engagement to the growing conversation about the "humanitarian border" carried on in other disciplines (Walters, 2011; Cuttitta, 2014 and 2015; Vaughan-Williams, 2015; Pallister Wilkins, 2015) and, to a lesser extent, in geography (Williams, 2014; 2015) In particular, our work contributes an attention to the logistics of the humanitarian frontier: first by looking at the logistics of migrant journeys as they become the target of a military-humanitarian operation of migration management; and, second, by looking at the logistics of military-humanitarianism—its deploy, protocols, and outcomes.

Building on what Deborah Cowen poignantly called "logistics spaces" (Cowen, 2014), we study Operation Sophia's outcomes on smugglers' ferrying of migrants across the Mediterranean, illuminating the workings of military-humanitarian spaces of rescue and migration control. We are interested both in the military-humanitarian logistics that Operation Sophia enlists for the government of refugees at sea and in how this intervention impacts on the organization of migrant journeys—in other words, we look at "logistics spaces" of both military-humanitarianism and smugglers' ferrying activities.

It is important to clarify that the focus on migration and logistics does not correspond to a functionalist view of the border regime. On the contrary, our contribution highlights that military-humanitarian spaces are unstable battlefields, where refugees' desire to reach Europe, smugglers' ferrying activities, and military-humanitarian interventions against the smugglers' business result in contested geographies of escape, control, and rescue.

Second, we read the military-humanitarian nexus in terms of the *subjectivities* it shapes and posits as targets of government, also comparing Operation Sophia with the other EUNAVFOR engagement, i.e., Operation Atalanta, the EU counter-piracy mission off the Horn of Africa and in the Western Indian Ocean, launched in 2008 and which served as a model for "Sophia". In this regard it is important to stress that we take subjectivities in the plural, in order to bring attention to the multiplicity of migration profiles that are produced and targeted by a military-humanitarian approach to migration management. Most importantly, cautioning against the risk of an ontologization of migrant subjectivity, we look at the processes of subjectivation ignited by military-humanitarianism, and map how migrants are depicted both as "risky subjects" and as "subjects at risk" (Aradau, 2004).

Processes of subjectivation remain under-explored in geographic approaches to the study of migration. Migrant subjectivity, in fact, tends to be conceived as the agency that underpins the spatial struggles at the center of geographers' attention. In this capacity, subjectivity is assumed as the starting point of the analysis and posited as a subject positions. Migrant subjectivity also features in spatial analyses through the study of the normative profiles which b-order migrants' turbulent geographies. Our work has certainly contributed to this second conversation (2013a and b, 2016, and forthcoming [with DeGenova]). Here however we are interested in taking a different approach to the study of migrant subjectivity. In particular, we are interested in studying the Operation Sophia's predicaments about migrants' subjectivity and mapping the discursive spaces that military-humanitarianism produces as it profiles its interventions' targets. In other words, we are interested in the use of migration profiles as one of the technologies of the military-humanitarian re-organization of migrant journeys.

Third, we look at the *epistemological* component of the mission, focusing on the mission's first stage (concluded at the time of revising this article) of intelligence and data gathering, and building on the conversation about the role of epistemic communities in the reconfiguration of migration control as management (Geiger & Pécoud, 2013; Garelli & Tazzioli, 2013; De Genova, Mezzadra, & Pickles, 2014).

A methodological clarification is due. We write on an a very contested, still unfolding, and highly unpredictable political process, i.e., the first of its kind EU military-humanitarian operation targeting the economy of migrant smuggling which epicenter is the politically unstable Libyan context. This means confronting the methodological challenge that emerges in the attempt to critically evaluate and unpack the outcomes of the Operation when the main available sources about it are governmental documents produced to promote it.

As academic researchers, in fact, we lack the skills for an embedded observation of the smuggling industry in Libya, as well as the clearance to conduct participant observation of Operation Sophia's operations. Given these limitations, the methodological challenge we tried to overcome concerned how not to get stuck in the governmental narratives of Operation Sophia (e.g., the military arm enlisted to fight the humanitarian tragedy, the EU "response" to the migration crisis) and instead retain our interest in mapping the spaces of military-humanitarianism the Operation enlists and reconfigures.

In order to confront this situation, our research design combines different approaches to data collection: interviews with the EUNAVFOR militaries and Italian Navy officials overseeing the planning and command of the Operation<sup>8</sup>; interviews with border enforcement officials who have been working in Italian piers for several years, also before Operation Sophia was launched; analyses of official and the leaked documents about EUNAVFOR MED; interviews with NGOs and activists involved with migrant issues and working in the central and

southern Mediterranean; and analyses of Operation Sophia circulated through the Watch the Med Alarm Phone<sup>9</sup> newsletter.

In sum, our contribution maps the different and overlapping spaces of governmentality that Operation Sophia opens up: the material spaces of migrant crossing and migration control (logistics), the political geographies of migratory profiles (subjectivities); and the epistemic spaces of information flows (intelligence).

### **Logistics: Disrupting a Business, Seizing Vessels, Re-routing Protection**

Critics of Operation Sophia focused on condemning the militarization of a humanitarian crisis that the EU Naval Forces performed. As a result, the field of governmental intervention posited by the Operation has been left problematically under-researched. “*Disrupting the business model* of human smuggling and trafficking”—the official aim of Operation Sophia (EU NAVFOR 2015)—is, we contend, one of the new military-humanitarian approaches to the government of migration. In this section we unpack the framing of migrant travels’ “business model” as the target of the military-humanitarian intervention and follow Operation Sophia’s spatial outcomes on migrant journeys and on the agenda of migration management.

Let us briefly situate our interest in business models and transport logistics as the new targets of the military-humanitarian approach to migration control. Enlisting military operations in the name of protecting life is a deep-rooted tenet of humanitarianism (Barnett, 2012; Fassin and Pandolfi, 2010; Orford, 1999, 2003). And of course when the EU Naval Forces are deployed in the Mediterranean as “part of our effort to save lives”—as the official message put it the day of the mission’s launch—this humanitarian agenda (as well as its military arm) gets reiterated. Operation Sophia, however, adds an economic predicament to the military-humanitarian assemblage of migration management, i.e., the predicament to “disrupt the business model” of migrant travels.

So how does the military-humanitarian government of migration work when its intervention is bestowed with an economic rationality and when the business model of smuggling and trafficking migrants becomes the target of the military-humanitarian intervention?

“The aim of this military operation is to undertake systematic efforts to identify, capture and dispose of vessels as well as enabling assets used or suspected of being used by migrant smugglers or traffickers.” (EU NAVFOR 2015)

To seize its target, Operation Sophia directs naval and air warfare against smugglers’ and traffickers’ informal fleet. In fact, as the initial surveillance and

assessment phase of the Operation has concluded (as of September 2015) gathering information on how smugglers' networks operate, the operation will now focus on the actual seafarers and the very infrastructural assets used for ferrying people across the Mediterranean. The goal will be the "search and, if necessary, diversion of suspicious vessels," and "the disposal of vessels and related assets, preferably before use." (EU NAVFOR 2015). The Resolution adopted by the UN Security Council on October 9, 2015 offers a political backing to EUNAVFOR MED Operation and clarifies that "member states are called to inspect and seize "vessels that they have reasonable grounds to believe have been, are being, or imminently will be used by organized criminal enterprises for migrant smuggling or human trafficking from Libya"(United Nations, 2015).

We cannot yet comment on actual operations of vessels' seizure, disposal, and eventual disruption since the operation is still underway. While the operation only recently moved beyond the data gathering phase to become fully operational on the logistics of migrant travel, its goal was already clear at the planning stage: Operation Sophia aims to produce a "humanitarian" blockage of migrants and refugees in transit countries like Libya. By stopping and eventually destroying the means of transportation at origin, the Operation results in the attempt to close off the last and only "escape route" (Papadopoulos et al, 2008) left to people fleeing war, famine, and persecution—a dangerous, violent, abject escape route (Amnesty International, 2015) but the only one available to them in the current EU regulatory framework.

This military-humanitarian preventative border (Garelli, 2015) builds on one of the EU staples for migration management, i.e., its approach to migration containment through the externalization of border work to third countries, outside the EU territory. In this military-humanitarian enactment, however, the EU vision for off-shore containment comes to an apex and ends up corresponding to the attempt to produce a full-fledged blockage. It is important to underline that the blockage of migrants and refugees in countries of transit has been one of the assets of the EU approach to migration management in the Mediterranean region in the post-Arab Uprisings era (Garelli & Tazzioli, 2017) and is also part of the 2015 *European Agenda on Migration* (European Commission, 2015: 3), which was presented only a few days before news of EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia reached the public eye via journalistic leak.<sup>10</sup> Situating this operation as a military-humanitarian enactment of a larger EU strategy of migration governance is an important critical move.

Building on this overview of the Operation's role in the EU migration management strategy, we now turn to a close examination of its focus on logistics. Destroying the vessels used for ferrying people across the Mediterranean, the EU strategy contends, will prevent shipwrecks and hence "protect human life." But how is protection delivered and what type of protection is enacted by this military-humanitarian operation? More than providing protection, we argue, Operation Sophia achieves a displacement. More precisely,

it *displaces the site of death-risk* for migrants and refugees. The intended outcome is in fact to remove the risk of dying from the doorsteps of Europe in the Mediterranean Sea (where the risk is undoubtedly high but where search and rescue missions are deployed<sup>11</sup>) to Libya where abduction, sexual violence, and abuse against migrants and refugees are the rule (Amnesty International, 2015).

Moreover, such military-humanitarian preventative protection actually infringes on the freedom for anyone to leave any country and obstructs individuals' access to international protection. Hence, the preventative intervention against possible shipwrecks results in the attempted blockage of a migration route.

In short, the humanitarian regime<sup>12</sup> flips over. Instead of working as the selective mechanism that grants access to international protection to some migrants, the humanitarian regime becomes an instrument for preventing migrants' and refugees' arrivals to the European shores. In this sense, the humanitarian regime contributes to the "migrantization" (Tazzioli, 2015) of asylum seekers in a place of abjection—either in Libya or in some other neighboring country. Hence the distinction between economic migrants and refugees that grounds the government of mobility and its regulations is erased by the military-humanitarian move that Operation Sophia stages. To be more precise: the subject of the humanitarian regime, the refugee, is made-disappear through the military-humanitarian attack on the economy of smuggling and finally further "vulnerabilized" as a migrant stuck in a dangerous transit country.

In this regard, EUNAVFOR MED opens a new chapter in the military-humanitarian approach to migration management in the Mediterranean. Whereas the Italian Mare Nostrum Operation<sup>13</sup> approached the migration crisis "in search and rescue mode," intervened in suspected distress situations, and mainly brought those it rescued across shore to Italy, Operation Sophia instead enters the scene of the crisis "in combat mode," fighting smugglers in the name of protecting migrants, but finally aiming to prevent migrants from crossing the Mediterranean Sea into Europe.<sup>14</sup>

So from Mare Nostrum to Operation Sophia, in the span of less than two years, the military-humanitarian predicament of protecting migrants and refugees has shifted terrain in several ways. First, it has re-territorialized protection: from disembarkation in Italy upon rescue to the blocking of departures with the alleged goal to prevent shipwreck, what we would call "preventative rescue enforcement." It has also lost specificity in terms of juridical profiles: from the asylum seekers and repatriated migrants of Mare Nostrum to the blocked potential asylum seekers of EUNAVFOR MED. Finally, the military-humanitarian approach progressively abstracts away from refugees and migrants themselves in the passage from Mare Nostrum to Operation Sophia. The direct engagement with bodies to be rescued from shipwrecking boats (as per Operation Mare Nostrum) now switches into Operation Sophia's military-humanitarian attack on smugglers' boats and assets "preferably before use," as the policy document puts



it.

Indeed, migrants are the unexpectedly absent figures in the military-humanitarian planning of Operation Sophia. The *migrant ship* is instead the main target of a military action aimed at dismantling the logistics of migrant crossing. Policy documents about the Operation, in fact, seldom talk about migrants and are instead “populated” by boats and vessels to identify and seize. In other words, naval and aerial efforts are all directed towards identifying and fighting networks of smugglers and traffickers and migrants are rarely mentioned when the dynamics of the mission are illustrated (e.g., as possible victims of “collateral damage” during the military-humanitarian intervention). Their “safety” is finally posited as the indirect outcome of a destructive action undertaken against smugglers’ ferrying business.

A war on smugglers’ vessels goes a long way in terms of public and political support. Presenting his work on “viapolitics” William Walters recently suggested that “certain vehicles function as *visual operators* in what is emerging as one of the most significant developments in migration politics, namely the humanitarianization of migration control.” (Walters, 2014: 8; emphasis added). The rickety, overcrowded, and unseaworthy boat has certainly become the icon of the “Mediterranean migration crisis”: first, it stages a humanitarian tragedy while it conveniently erases the EU’s own visa politics that forces people onto these boats in the first place; second, it fixes the risk of death at the moment of crossing while glossing over the politics these people are running away from and are forced to face when they decide to take a chance on a boat.

Vessels played a key role as part of the political marketing for the operation also in another way. Illustrating the need for a military-humanitarian intervention, politicians talked about the need to save migrants and refugees “from the 21<sup>st</sup> century slave trade” of organized human trafficking (e.g., Mogherini, 2015). So migrants and refugees were portrayed as slaves traded by traffickers across the Mediterranean Sea.

Such portrayal seemed to call for a military-humanitarian intervention: in an uncanny historical manipulation, migrant vessels were posited as slave ships and the activity of smuggling migrants across the Mediterranean as the transatlantic slave trade. Yet, the fact that risking their lives at sea is the only way out of certain death at home is the outcome of the institutional violence of European migration politics. The network of smugglers is the *response* to the EU visa politics of border-deaths. In other words, crossing the Mediterranean through smugglers is an illegalized border crossing on the way to refuge in the absence of legal and safe means of escape, an absence that allows a market for the services of the smuggler to emerge (Costello and Giuffre’ 2015).

## **Subjectivities: Unruly Conducts and Governmental Action**

### *From Pirates to Migrants: The Continuum of Unruly Conducts*

Operation Sophia's economic re-assembly of military-humanitarianism may be best illuminated by looking back at the history of the European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) and reflecting on the economic matrix of its operations. Operation Sophia, in fact, is shaped after EUNAVFOR "Operation Atalanta," the counter-piracy military mission off the Horn of Africa and in the Western Indian Ocean. Still underway, the mission started in December 2008 with the aims of protecting Somalia-bound humanitarian shipments from pirates' actions, disrupting piracy and armed robbery at sea, and safeguarding fishing and commerce in the area.<sup>15</sup>

When Operation Sophia was launched in 2015, its continuity with Operation Atalanta<sup>16</sup> was simultaneously a key asset for its institutional support and the target of harsh political criticism. On the opponents' front, the radical discontinuity between the two operations' targets, i.e. pirates on the one hand and migrant smugglers on the other, became the tenet of arguments against the legitimacy and competency of the mission (Faleg & Blockmans, 2015; Vézian, 2015).

While we certainly share the political preoccupations grounding these positions, we however contend that EUNAVFOR introduces an economic parallelism between these two groups. Pirates and smugglers are targeted for a military-humanitarian intervention along the lines of an economic rationale, which matches the economic activities of these two very different groups. We are interested in investigating the economic space that EUNAVFOR profiles as the common ground of pirates' and smugglers' activities. Both the piracy trade and the migrant smuggling business are highly unpredictable economies that escape states' control and present the challenge of unruly conducts to governmental action. As Deborah Cowen eloquently demonstrated in her work on logistics (2014), Somali pirates belong to those groups of actors who disrupt the efficiency of trade flows and are hence confronted by governmental actions that include the military but enlist more complex assemblages than outright warfare. In the case of Operation Sophia, such complexity comes in the form of the military-humanitarian approach to migration management.

The notion of organized economic groups—the smugglers and the pirates—that interject and reroute economic flows with their unruly and unpredictable conducts is the gist of the parallelism posited by the EUNAVFOR missions: pirates and smugglers become governmental targets along an economic continuum. With Operation Atalanta, EUNAVFOR is targeting the action of Somali pirates against national economies and the international provision of aid. With Operation Sophia, EUNAVFOR is targeting the informal economy of ferrying migrants, which inserts an element of unpredictability in the government of the national economies.

Migrant smuggling is a practice that partially escapes states' control and requires multi-layered and complex interventions, along similar lines to what Cowen describes for pirates. The government of smuggling in this sense outsteps migration management as such and instead aligns with the broader issue of governing *unruly conducts and populations*. It is this governmental program to manage transnational movements and populations—part “motley crowd” (Linebaugh & Rediker, 2000:20) and part “international gangster syndicate” (Rediker, 1997)—that marks the continuity<sup>17</sup> between pirates and smugglers in these two European Naval Forces Operations.

### *Smugglers, Migrants, Refugees: the Politics of Military-Humanitarian Interventions*

The governmental hold on smugglers' practices is part of a larger territorial politics that goes beyond the issue of economic profits—either the gains of smugglers' transnational networks or the economic stability of the nation-states these practices infringe upon. To put it simply, what is at stake with this military-humanitarian operation is the *route* of the smuggling business, the central Mediterranean maritime corridor through which migrants and refugees are ferried into Europe.

In the paper's second section (“Logistics: Disrupting a Business, Seizing Vessels, Re-routing Protection”) we highlighted the border-work performed by the humanitarian war against smugglers' fleets. Here we want to approach the spatial politics of the Operation from the angle of the *migratory profiles* posited as Sophia's military-humanitarian targets. Three groups feature in the Operation's objectives and supporting rhetoric: first, smugglers and traffickers; second, migrants themselves; third, potential terrorists hiding among refugees on the boats crossing the Mediterranean. How are these different groups featured as part of Operation Sophia's military-humanitarianism, or, in other words, as part of a belligerent intervention and of a purported action of protection? What are the geographies of military-humanitarianism articulated through these different targets?

First we'll focus on smugglers and traffickers. As these figures are presented as the intended offensive aim of the Operation (the disruption of the “business model of human smuggling and trafficking” is Operation's stated goal), they are at the same time posited as specific subjectivities targeted for governmental action. While they are diligently distinguished in their different profiles in official documents, smugglers and traffickers are presented as *the* criminals of the Mediterranean migration crisis and as *the* threat to vulnerable migrants and refugees, whom the Operation will protect by disrupting the business of ferrying migrants across the central Mediterranean.

Operation Sophia is the first EU-wide military initiative directed against the business model of smuggling and trafficking. While the economic dimension of this target is certainly a distinctive trait of this military-humanitarian technology as we argued above, the offensive against smuggling and trafficking is a long established field of EU governmental action. It is important to situate EUNAVFOR MED in this context to avoid falling into any form of “presentism” (Foucault, 1975) that would exceptionalize this Operation, hence losing track of the policy landscape to which it pertains and on which it intervenes.

Let us briefly reconstruct this genealogy. The EU-declared fight against migrant smugglers dates back to the 1990s and early 00s, when an international call for fighting smuggling was launched. At the EU level, important normative steps were taken to frame smuggling as a crime<sup>18</sup>. In this context, the discussion about the categories of the “smuggler” and the “migrant” grew in academic literature.<sup>19</sup> At the borders of the EU, these conversations resulted in the implementation of visa restrictions to regulate the access of certain heavily racialized groups of third-country nationals (Van Houtum, 2010) in line with the global approach to migration management that was being framed exactly at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Geiger & Pécoud, 2011). The imposition of visas on certain mobile subjects resulted in a selective political economy of access. In this context the economy of “illegal” smuggling flourished.

Prior to Operation Sophia, the EU engagement with smugglers had always been a sub-set of irregular migration (Koser, 2001): the criminalization of smugglers was a product of their facilitating illegalized crossing, in a process where migrants were heavily criminalized too. In the context of Operation Sophia, instead, smugglers are portrayed as hyper-criminals, both as potential murderers of migrants at sea and as heading a lucrative illegal business.

Second, as for migrants, they are decriminalized and double-victimized as those who are either fatally shipwrecked due to the rickety fleet of an informal business, or as the vulnerable target of different types of violence perpetrated by smugglers. Let us be clear on this characterization: those who have to resort to smugglers to flee via the Mediterranean Sea are subjected to all sort of violations, including many different forms of violence by the people who organize their trips (see, for instance: Amnesty International, 2015). Our analysis highlights another layer of violence migrants are targeted for, i.e., the border-violence that characterizes visa regulations and access to international protection. As Anna Gallagher and Fiona David remark, “the politics of migrant smuggling are also, very much, the politics of asylum” since in order to access Europe, asylum seekers have to resort to being ferried by smugglers (2014: 12).

Yet, Operation Sophia works through multiple migration profiles, which correspond to different military-humanitarian logics. Alongside the decriminalized, victimized migrant profile we talked about above, in fact, another characterization emerges as part of Operation Sophia’s working logic, i.e., the profile of migrants as risky subjects.

The figure of the vulnerable, shipwrecking migrant has so far been the hallmark of military-humanitarianism and supported the deployment of massive search and rescue missions, as was the case with Mare Nostrum. Operation Sophia introduces a shift in this approach, where the subject whose life is at risk of drowning is also (and primarily) posited as a possible risky subject. Such framing comes with a reconfiguration of the migration government component of military-humanitarianism: the interventions is pushed at the pre-frontiers of Europe, before people come into the EU member states' territorial waters' jurisdiction for rescue, i.e., before migrants become shipwrecked lives the EU would need to rescue as per international regulations about human life safety at sea.

Third, terrorists are mentioned as one of the threats the military-humanitarian Operation protects against. When this target is evoked the characterization of migrants as smugglers' victims is reworked. In terms of juridical profiles, in fact, EUNAVFOR MED tends to boost up the figure of the smuggler as "the" criminal, while it posits the migrant as the victim that should be protected from smugglers' risky and illegal ferrying. When the protection scope of the Operation touches on the goal of protecting the EU (not just migrants), the figure of the foreign fighter is evoked, with a strong impact on the migratory profiles of Operation Sophia, i.e., from smugglers' victims to potential terrorists. The contention that terrorist criminals may infiltrate the smugglers' fleet as fake migrants or fake refugees, introduces the scenario of hybrid flows in the conversation, and shifts EUNAVFOR MED's protective mission from migrant and refugees' bodies to the territory of receiving countries. Such displacement and territorialization of vulnerability is not new in migration management (Catania & others, 2012; Garelli & Tazzioli, 2013; Martin, 2011, 2015; Mountz, 2010, 2014); what's interesting here is that the military action is envisaged also as a tool for "skimming" the profiles of threatening conducts.

The military-humanitarian intervention against smugglers and traffickers contributes to widening the field of EU states' action by producing a "gray zone" of military-humanitarian targets—spanning from the fake refugee, to the terrorist in migrant disguise, to the trafficker. This is the cornerstone of the EU strategy for blocking migrants before departure from

More than simply working through a sharp opposition between migrants and smugglers, Operation Sophia contributes, we contend, to "broadening—instead of narrowing—the range of subjectivities targeted for a military-humanitarian intervention in the field of migration . It is important to underline that it is not the illegalization of migration per se that is criminalized in the military-humanitarian warfare against the logistics of migrant crossing. We want to suggest that it is rather a whole series of "unruly" conducts that are politically sanctioned, resembling what Foucault has called "infra-legal illegalities" (Foucault, 2013: 177)<sup>20</sup>.

The figure of the smuggler works as the catalyst for the different subjectivities that are posited as targets of Operation Sophia. The smuggler stands for different

unruly conducts, starting from its own profile of organizer of an illegal and risky ferrying business, and extending to fake refugees, and even possible terrorists. To put this logic into a formula, it is not only the act of smuggling (someone else) that is criminalized but also what could be labeled as “self-smuggling”: fake migrants who are actually potential terrorists who try to enter Europe, fake refugees who are undocumented economic migrants trying to access the EU labor market, or finally “real” asylum seekers who, nevertheless, would be a burden for EU member-states and are hence targeted by actions of preventative containment.

### **Knowledge Extraction: Migration Intelligence, Spying on Migrants, and Closing a Migration Route**

“Know your enemy!” is the slogan used to summarize some of the continuities between the anti-piracy and anti-smuggler operations of EUNAVFOR. As the Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC) underlines, both operations heavily rely on the production of information about their target of action (CIMSEC, 2015). According to the article, this intelligence approach to military targets is obtained through air observation and imaging; according to our fieldwork evidence, military-humanitarian operations in Italy also heavily rely on “spying” on migrants, so to speak, i.e., interviewing rescued migrants in order to “know the enemy,” to get to know smugglers’ networks and operations.

In the summer of 2015, a few months into Operation Sophia’s first stage of “surveillance and assessment” of smuggling and trafficking networks, we had a glimpse into the process of knowledge extraction associated with military-humanitarian technologies, as we observed the EU Border Agency Frontex interviewing migrants and refugees upon rescue<sup>21</sup> at the Pozzallo and Augusta docks.<sup>22</sup> In Augusta, Sicily, for instance, after migrants had disembarked and were waiting to be escorted to the first aid and fingerprinting stations, Frontex agents approached them on the dock, asking about their reasons for being there and the details of their travels across the Mediterranean. In Pozzallo we observed similar procedures at the first aid center, where the Frontex unit was stationed and where a coordination team was in charge of triangulating the information gathered in Sicily from migrants with the EU archive of migration knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

The epistemic component of the government of migration has been widely documented as part of the reorganization of migration governance toward soft modes of migration management in the Mediterranean (De Genova, Mezzadra, & Pickles, 2014; Garelli & Tazzioli, 2013; Geiger & Pecoud, 2013). In this capacity, the government of migration acts as a proactive politics, a politics that keeps multiplying borders, normative frames, legal statuses, processing practices and regulations through different activities of knowledge production (Feldman, 2012; Friese, 2012; Mezzadra, Neilson, 2013).<sup>24</sup>

The epistemic component of migration management is an expanding field that invests initiatives targeting the smuggling business. Information on smugglers' activities has historically been extracted in the context of judiciary inquiries when smugglers are arrested and brought to trial. Most recently, intelligence activities targeting smuggling are rapidly entering the world of social media, searching for smugglers' online marketing activities to advertise their trip packages (Boyd, Musto, 2014). Operation Sophia embodies the military-humanitarian declination of this activity, which consists in mapping the economic space and logistics of the business of ferrying migrants and refugees across the central Mediterranean route. While in policy language and official military documents this component of the military-humanitarian operation is designated as "intelligence," "surveillance and assessment," and "data and information gathering," we propose instead to look at it as an operation of *knowledge extraction*.

We use the notion of extraction in two senses. First, we refer to the process whereby a military-humanitarian technology works on the people it declares to save by turning them into informants, and by acting on rescued bodies as reservoirs of knowledge to be extracted by an "epistemic power" (Foucault, 2000). Second, we talk about extraction to point to the economic matrix of this process of gathering data and intelligence: as much as extraction is a constitutive part of the operations of capital and logistics that characterize capitalism today (Gago, Mezzadra, 2016; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, 2017), it is equally at the center of a military-humanitarian operation of migration management and of operations of governing, channeling, and preventing migratory movements.

In other words, the warfare on smugglers entails the invention of ways of extracting knowledge from migrants in order to sabotage their "illegal" channels for accessing Europe. The European Naval Forces will be assisted in this operation of "knowledge extraction" by other actors involved with migration in the central Mediterranean. A coordination mechanism was established during the first phase of Operation Sophia to try to ensure sustainable long-term collaboration. Among these actors are: EU member states' officers; and EU agencies and bodies like Frontex, Europol (with its recently launched Joint Operation Team "Mare"), Eurojust, and the European Asylum Support Office (European Parliament, 2015).

On a Sicilian dock, in the aftermath of a recently concluded rescue operation, a Frontex agent explained the epistemic component of military-humanism in very simple words to us during an interview in July 2015: "migrants are like books", the agent stated; and continued explaining that these migrants/books will tell you about their journeys, who organizes them, and how.

In other words, migrants are the informants in the military-humanitarian intervention staged by Operation Sophia. The disruption of smugglers' business is based on the intelligence and information gathered during the first stage of Operation Sophia. In a context where informal networks for ferrying migrants are still partially unknown and where the unpredictability and mutability of their

practices are the rule, having access to the in-depth and geographically-specific knowledge of migrants and refugees is key.

As part of this military-humanitarian approach to migration management migrants are victimized as targets of smugglers' violence (and targeted for rescue from them), while they are at the same time vehicles of stories, data, and information about the transnational smuggling economy.

## **Conclusion**

This paper contributed an analysis of the military-humanitarian reconfiguration of migration management in the context of the migration crisis in the Mediterranean. Focusing on the EU Naval Force "Operation Sophia" we mapped the impact of military-humanitarianism on migrant journeys and on the government of migration.

We showed the economic geography that grounds the military-humanitarian engagement of the EU in the field of migration. First, the Operation's focus on disrupting the "business model" of smugglers and traffickers works as a driver of public support in the name of rescuing and protecting migrants, while in fact resulting in the attempted blockage of migrants in transit countries away from Europe. In other words, the economic activity of ferrying migrants becomes the pursued target of a military-humanitarian approach to the migration crisis. In this context, humanitarianism becomes the framework for refugees' blockage in transit— through measures of rescue-and-capture.

Moreover, our research showed that the EU Naval Force's military-humanitarianism is rooted in targeting economic activities that pose a threat to the stability of national economies. Tracing the genealogy of EUNAFOR military-humanitarian operations, we showed how they aim for activities that threaten to disrupt the efficiency and predictability of national economies. Finally, our analysis showed the migratory profiles through which Operation Sophia works, illuminating the different categorizations migrants are depicted through as part of a military-humanitarian governmental approach.

In closing, we want to reflect on three considerations we draw from the analysis carried out in this paper.

The first is an economic consideration. The military-humanitarian fight against smuggling networks does not undermine the "illegal" economy of ferrying people across the Mediterranean as such, but, rather, it impacts on the *logistic of migrant crossing* on a particular route. What gets disrupted is not "the business model" of smuggling, as the Operation's planning documents contend. Instead, what gets disrupted is the infrastructure that allows migrants and refugees to flee into Europe across the Mediterranean. "Migratory struggles play out not just in fixed settings and structures but in and around vehicles, routes and



infrastructures” as William Walters eloquently put it (2014: 9). The governmental “sabotage” of smugglers’ logistics opens another struggle for migrants and refugees in relation to their having to overcome yet another border, this time a military-humanitarian border, in order to seek rescue and protection in Europe.

The second consideration has to do with circulation. The warfare on smugglers is not a restriction to the general mobility of refugees per se. The target of the EU strategy of military-humanitarian containment is *not* circulation as such, since the forced mobility of people to non-European countries is not considered a “problem” for the EU, as the EU financial support to Turkey and Lebanon to host Syrian refugees demonstrates. Ultimately, Operation Sophia works along the lines of other measures of *migrants’ preventive containment and even detention* that the EU is negotiating with third countries.

The third consideration has to deal with the notion of crisis. The military-humanitarian government of migration at sea illuminates the epistemic and political crises that characterize the current approach to migration across the Mediterranean. On the one hand, the functions of warfare and of humanitarianism have become entangled, and migration management has been reshaped by humanitarian warfare. On the other hand, the EU intervention in the Mediterranean crisis has shown that the re-assemblages of migration governmentality require an analysis that goes beyond the boundaries of academic disciplines. By studying Operation Sophia we sketched an approach to the military-humanitarian *government of populations on the move* **and hope to see more critical engagement with military-humanitarian approaches to migration containment (their extractive geographies, logistics, and biopolitics) within the field of radical geography.**

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<sup>1</sup> The modularity of the Operation's stages reflects this focus: first, gathering intelligence on smuggling and trafficking networks; second, search and diversion of vessels suspected to be carrying migrants; third, disposal of vessels and other assets used by smugglers, preferably before their use.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of revising this article (October 2015), there are 4,052,723 Syrian refugees in the MENA region: 1,938,999 in Turkey; 1,078,338 in Lebanon; 628, 887 in Jordan; and 247,352 in Iraq. Source: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=103>

<sup>3</sup> Source : <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/justice-home-affairs/un-says-one-million-refugees-should-be-no-problem-eu-315413>

<sup>4</sup> On April 18, 2015, a boat sank in the Sicily Channel: 28 people survived, 58 were found dead, and between 700 and 900 are missing.

<sup>5</sup> Official documents importantly underline the distinction between smugglers and traffickers and at times even suggest the importance of creating legal paths to migration, albeit only for a very restricted group of people. Yet they neglect to underline that it is the EU policy regulating entry and asylum that allows for smugglers' business to flourish.

<sup>6</sup> The expression "military-humanitarian nexus" refers to an approach whereby military and humanitarian approaches are deployed together in the government of mobility. Such nexus goes beyond the mere coexistence of humanitarian and military techniques. Instead, it refers to the productivity of military-humanitarianism, i.e., both humanitarian and military approaches are re-configured as they are deployed together.

<sup>7</sup> The EU Border Assistance Missions started in 2005—one in Moldova and Ukraine, the other in Rafah at the border of Egypt and the Gaza Strip— re cases in point.

<sup>8</sup> Operation Sophia's headquarters are in Rome, Italy. The Operation's planning and command is under the lead of Italian Rear Admiral Enrico Credendino.

<sup>9</sup> The Watch the Med Alarmphone is a 24/7 "alarm number" to support rescue operations of boatpeople in distress in the Mediterranean Sea.  
Source: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/page/index/12>

<sup>10</sup> The EU operation was revealed in early May 2015 by the media organization Wikileaks, the website Statewatch, and the newspaper *The Guardian* which published and commented on a leaked EU document on EUNAVFOR MED presenting the plan "to disrupt the business model of the smugglers, achieved by undertaking systematic efforts to identify, seize/capture and destroy vessels and assets before they are used...[and] on the high seas" (Statewatch, 2015: 1).

<sup>11</sup> It is true that also Operation Sophia also performs rescue operations. For instance, on July 22, 2015 the German ship Werra—part of the EUNAVFOR MED fleet—rescued 211 migrants whose boat was in distress in international waters, north of the Libyan coast. However, such rescues pertain to the legal obligation any seafarer acting in compliance with international maritime regulations; they are not the aim of the military-humanitarian mission.

<sup>12</sup> With the notion of "humanitarian regime" we refer to any operation of migration government that deploys human rights as its technology and/or humanitarian rationales as their supporting rhetoric.

<sup>13</sup> Mare Nostrum is a year-long military-humanitarian operation launched by Italy in October 2013, aimed at identifying boats in distress, rescuing migrants, and apprehending human traffickers. The operation rescued about 177,000 people.

<sup>14</sup> In-between these two operations, stands Triton, the border control operation run by Frontex, which prioritized border enforcement over search and rescue operations.

<sup>15</sup> As Amedeo Policante (2015) illustrates, the operation was launched in response to the United Nations' call for cooperation towards the enforcement of international criminal law in the area. The United States created a Maritime Security Patrol Area in the Gulf of Aden, while the European Council launched the first joint European naval operation to disrupt piracy. Policante importantly illustrates that the war on piracy marks a rupture with traditional war, due to the transnational dimension of its target.

<sup>16</sup> The continuity between these two EUNAVFOR operations is evident from the leadership: Rear Admiral Enrico Credendino, the operation commander of EUNAVFOR MED, served as Force Commander at the European Naval Forces for Operation Atlanta in 2012.

<sup>17</sup> As Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker underline (2000), pirates intend to build counter-societies, while smugglers don't have such a political program.

<sup>18</sup> See the "UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air" (2000) criminalizing migrant smugglers. The Protocol is part of the "UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime" (adopted by the General Assembly resolution 55/25 on 15 November 2000) where the smuggling economy is officially characterized as a transnational crime activity. During the 2000's, the EU started planning to fight the migrant smuggling economy (Gallagher and David, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> As the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2011) explains, "the conceptualization of smuggling as a migration business was formally developed by Salt and Stein in 1997."

<sup>20</sup> It is not the "illegality" of migrant crossing per se to be the object of governmental preoccupation here. Rather—as Foucault sharply pointed out when he analyzed the 19<sup>th</sup> century sanctions against workers—it is a series of "infra-legal illegalities" to be at the center of governmental attention. These "infra-legal illegalities" are what is being punished and consist in unruly conducts that refuse to stay in their own place (Foucault, 2013: 177).

<sup>21</sup> In official documents and during our interview with the office of Operation Sophia's spokesperson (September 2015), the Operation is often described as part of the EU comprehensive approach to migration and as triangulating with Frontex.

<sup>22</sup> Pozzallo and Augusta are two Sicilian ports where migrants are disembarked upon rescue at sea. Pozzallo hosts a Frontex office in the first aid center (recently renamed hotspot center) and is situated in the province of Ragusa. Augusta, on the other hand, is located in the province of Syracuse: Frontex agents deployed in Sicily travel to Augusta as needed upon migrants' and refugees' disembarkation at the Augusta port.

<sup>23</sup> During an interview with Frontex and Italian police officers at Pozzallo, we were told that the information gathered in Sicily are transferred to EURODAC, the EU-wide system of fingerprint databases for asylum seekers and irregular border crossers.

<sup>24</sup> According to Gregory Feldman, the knowledge practices that are at stake in migration governmentality “become ubiquitous as they are unbound by local constraints [...] As such, they can standardize and circulate frameworks of meaning that are not tied to place but rather extend virtually across space” (Feldman, 2012: 77). Without denying Feldman’s argument, we want to stress the non-autonomy of governmental knowledge on migration and its dependence on extractive activities (e.g., spying on migrants and smugglers’ actions).