

NGO-led rescue operations in the Mediterranean: Saving people, alleviating EU responsibilities

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Several EU governments have sent ships to the Mediterranean as part of efforts to tackle the ongoing migration crisis, but a number of non-governmental actors have also been involved in conducting operations. [Daniela Irrera](#) writes on the role of these actors and whether overreliance on NGOs could prove problematic if there is an upturn in attempted crossings in the central Mediterranean following the EU's agreement with Turkey.



Only a few weeks have passed since the [Refugee Facility](#) with Turkey was warmly celebrated as a way to manage the refugee crisis and prevent future humanitarian crises. The EU is deeply concerned with monitoring whether Syrian refugees are suitably treated according to the agreement and in accordance with basic principles of human rights protection. The Balkan route is relatively calm (at least it appears calm, if compared to the previous period) and tensions expressed by member states located in the area are presently easing or shifting towards other hot topics.

But the Central Mediterranean will increasingly become troubled waters again. With summer, new waves of migrants, mainly from northern Africa and not primarily escaping conflicts but looking for better economic conditions, will attempt to make the crossing. Additional losses of life and humanitarian emergencies are expected. Additionally, the migrants will meet the usual confused, uncoordinated welcome at landing.

Non-governmental search and rescue operations

Search and rescue operations, which were expected to be at the core of EU emergency policy, are controversial and resource-consuming. Italy's [Mare Nostrum](#) operation was replaced by Triton (managed by Frontex) and the military mission [EUNAVFOR MED](#), but these operations failed to accomplish their first objective: saving lives. Consequently, the task passed to 'willing' member states to deploy ships and provide assistance and the initiative increasingly fell on private actors to fill in the gap.

Presently, four non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are active in search and rescue operations, three of them explicitly funded for managing emergencies and rescuing people in the Mediterranean. Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), Sea-Watch, and SOS Méditerranée will be running missions until August and are still waiting to announce whether they will continue their future missions. Médecins Sans Frontières joined MOAS in April 2015, adding the deployment of two ships to their usual tasks.



During last spring, search and rescue operations carried out by NGOs have been able to save around 8,000 people, providing support and medical assistance. Considering the ships deployed by the EU and those deployed by the member states (Italy, Greece, Belgium, Ireland, the UK and Germany), the Mediterranean remains a huge space in which several highly varied actors operate the same tasks, with no coordination – and also no friction. NGOs

declared their commitment to fill the gap left by the inefficient EU response, in line with the critical positions of other UN agencies, like the UNHCR. At the same time, they prefer to keep a neutral position of constructive criticism, while focusing on coherent action. Their commitment has therefore been considered as a positive and useful factor, which is necessary to complement the institutional interventions being undertaken.

From a theoretical perspective, this opens up a broader debate on the potential consolidation of this new practice and on the evolving parallel privatisation of the management of the humanitarian side of the crisis. NGOs are presently providing a wide range of services to migrants, and their ability to deploy necessary equipment, and their level of coordination with other ships operating in the area is also significant. Indeed, the continued and structured set of operations carried out by NGOs are pushing observers to affirm that a practice which can be labelled 'non-governmental search and rescue operations' is emerging and can potentially work wherever there are people to rescue at sea. If this is the case, non-governmental search and rescue operations could become consolidated as a legitimate tool in their own right, independent from and complementary to the state search and rescue systems.

From a practical point of view, non-governmental search and rescue operations already constitute a relevant tool that is mitigating the effects of the crisis. Cooperation between states and NGOs is not a new phenomenon: it already works in several other policy fields and is a sign of how the global system has changed deeply in recent years. However, in this case, the problem is that NGOs are becoming the unintended recipient of specific tasks that the EU cannot fully accomplish on its own.

And the present situation also raises a number of problems. What if NGOs decide to interrupt their missions on the eve of the forthcoming new season of arrivals? Can we expect the EU and its member states to enlarge their level of investment in Triton and EUNAVFOR? Can we hope that willing member states will continue their unilateral efforts?

Ultimately, we should wait to see whether the agreement with Turkey has definitively closed one route for migration, moving individuals to the Mediterranean as an alternative. It also remains to be seen whether search and rescue operations will resume as the only established crisis management tool, with the relevant support of non-governmental ships.

Both theoretical and practical perspectives can be summed up in the fact that non-governmental missions are expected to continue, but not as a way to replace states or EU tasks, rather as part of a coordinated collective EU effort, in order to strengthen the overall capacity to rescue people in need, in the name of solidarity. This should happen soon, since the Mediterranean's waters are becoming blighted again by the desperation and death which has become a common feature of the area in recent years.

And the same solidarity and coordination is required on land as well: saving Syrian refugees and accomplishing humanitarian duties, without the establishment of expensive and politically constraining 'facilities' with our most controversial neighbours.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Daniela Irrera is Associate Professor of Political Science and IR at the University of Catania. She is the author of 3 monographs, 5 edited volumes (including the forthcoming Palgrave Handbook on Global Counterterrorism Policy) and more than 40 articles and book chapters in the areas of International Relations and EU politics, dealing with global terrorism, transnational organised crime, civil society and humanitarian affairs. She is a member of Transcrisis and acts as an expert for the EU-CIVCAP project, on improving EU capabilities for peacebuilding.



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