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### Navigating the Central Mediterranean in a time of 'crisis'

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## **Navigating the Central Mediterranean in a time of ‘crisis’: disentangling migration governance and migrant journeys**

### **Abstract**

From 2014 to the end of 2016, over 450,000 people crossed from North Africa towards Italy via the Central Mediterranean route. The number of people recorded as dead or missing in the same stretch of water has steadily increased too. Crisis-talk in the region has led to renewed efforts by the European Union and its Member States to govern and control migration to and across the Central Mediterranean. Against this backdrop, this article draws upon over two hundred interviews with newly arrived boat migrants and fifty-five stakeholders in Italy to reveal a disjuncture between the drivers and dynamics of migration and the assumptions underpinning policy development and how it operates at three crucial junctions: along migration routes, at sea, and upon arrival in Europe. In doing so, the article problematizes existent ways of understanding journeys in research and policy, with important consequences for the governance of migration.

### **Keywords**

Borders, Refugee Crisis, Europe, Governance, Mediterranean, Migration

### **Introduction**

From 2014 to the end of 2016, over 450,000 people crossed from North Africa towards Italy and, to a lesser degree, Malta via the Central Mediterranean route.<sup>i</sup> According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the number of people recorded as dead or missing in the same stretch of water exceeded 10,000 over this period.<sup>ii</sup> During 2015, amid declarations of a ‘migrant crisis’ in the region, the magnitude of the flow and rising death rate inspired an expansion of efforts by the European Union (EU) and its Member States to control and reduce migration to and across the Central Mediterranean Sea. This heralded significant transformations in the governance of mobility and borders before, during and after the sea crossing. And yet, flows have since persisted as people have continued to attempt the journey.

Against this backdrop, in this article we closely examine the relationship between migration and the changing governance of mobility and borders in the Central Mediterranean. In particular, we highlight a disjuncture between the drivers and dynamics of migration and two assumptions underpinning policy developments at three crucial stages: along migration routes, at sea, and upon arrival in Europe. The first assumption claims that those making the journey are mostly not refugees but so-called ‘economic migrants’, as they originate from countries that are not engaged in warfare and their main motivation is seeking employment and a better quality of life.<sup>iii</sup> This has been expressed in press reports and policy debates repeatedly asking whether those on the move had left their homes for economic reasons or in

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3 search of international protection (Collier, 2014; Reuters, 2015) and reinforced by  
4 descriptions of the demographic composition of the migrant population which have referred  
5 to the low proportion of nationals from so-called 'refugee-producing countries'.<sup>iv</sup> The second  
6 assumption claims that Europe is the ultimate destination of all African migrants and  
7 constructs their presence in North Africa as 'in transit', with their mobility determined  
8 exclusively by the EU's capacity to deter or delay the journey across the sea. This has been  
9 supported by research, often carried out with migrants and refugees who had already reached  
10 Europe (a methodological bias) and which concentrates on the reasons why people set out  
11 from their home countries but says relatively little about what happens after the point of  
12 departure and before arrival in Europe (e.g. Altai Consulting, 2015; Fargues and Bonfanti,  
13 2014; Fassman and Sievers, 2014; UNHCR, 2015; contra Mallet et al, 2017; Flahaux and de  
14 Haas, 2015; Squire et al, 2017).

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18 These two assumptions have underpinned political narratives proclaiming a 'crisis' of  
19 uncontrolled migration to Europe. Representations of unceasing and linear migration flows  
20 have produced 'a politics of invasion and moral panic' (Mainwaring and Brigden, 2016). But  
21 declarations of crisis can also have a political function, enabling states to justify exceptional  
22 migration control measures and expand their geopolitical influence beyond their own borders  
23 (Mountz and Hiemstra, 2014). In this article, we highlight how the crisis narrative in Europe  
24 indeed informs and justifies an expansion of policy initiatives to seek to control migration in  
25 the Central Mediterranean. Moreover, we also present two key characteristics of migration  
26 patterns across the Central Mediterranean which underline a need to reassess the validity of  
27 its two main assumptions. First, the motivations that have led people to set out from their  
28 homes have varied widely and can rarely be reduced only to a single and exclusive economic  
29 or protection-based reason. Second, the majority of the journeys travelled prior to the sea  
30 crossing have not followed the pattern of being pulled directly to Europe. Although some  
31 people have undertaken unified journeys that were intended from the beginning to reach  
32 Europe, it has been more common for journeys to be disjunctive and protracted over lengthy  
33 periods of time. In these cases, the decision to come to Europe has been formed along the  
34 way and in response to the contexts that migrants have come across after having already left  
35 their home far behind.

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41 Whereas existing research has usually relied on either relatively small samples of  
42 primary data (e.g. Altai Consulting, 2015) or secondary demographic data from governments  
43 and international organisations (e.g. Fargues and Bonfanti, 2014; Frontex, 2015; Toaldo,  
44 2015), we draw our conclusions through analysis of a large primary dataset of 202 interviews  
45 in Italy and Malta with men and women who crossed the Central Mediterranean by boat  
46 during 2015. The fieldwork took place between September and December 2015 using a  
47 combination of location and purposive sampling approaches to gathering interviews (Reichel  
48 and Morales, 2017). This enabled us to adapt to the complex and somewhat chaotic social  
49 and political environment characterising Italy's refugee reception system. As a result, the  
50 profile of the sample broadly reflects the composition of the migration flows across the  
51 Central Mediterranean, with a wide range of nationalities represented from North, West and  
52 East Africa, as well as the Middle East and further afield (see Figure 1). Our sample also  
53 included a majority of male respondents (87%) over female ones (13%), which is a similar  
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3 pattern to that found in the arriving population. This is supported by 55 in-depth interviews  
4 with key stakeholders from political institutions, non-governmental organisations, research  
5 and social movements.  
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7 The article is divided in three main sections. First, we locate our analysis of  
8 Mediterranean boat migration and the EU's responses to it within debates on mixed  
9 migration, legal categorisations of mobility and migration journeys. Second, we discuss  
10 policy responses to unauthorised sea crossings focusing on three stages: at sea, at  
11 disembarkation in the EU, and before the sea journey. Third, drawing on our empirical  
12 material, we examine the experiences and journeys of migrants and focus in particular on  
13 their motivations for setting out and for moving on along the way. In the conclusion we  
14 consider the relevance of our findings to the development of more nuanced and effective  
15 policy responses to Mediterranean boat migration.  
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### 19 **Complex process, blunt instruments**

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21 How we label, categorize and, in turn, differentiate between those who cross the  
22 Mediterranean by boat has enormous implications on the kind of legal and moral obligations  
23 receiving states and societies feel towards them (Author 2017). The distinction between  
24 refugees and migrants, or 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration has been a mainstay of much  
25 research, law and policy for decades (Long, 2013). International law defines a refugee as a  
26 person who has left their country of nationality as a result of a well-founded fear of  
27 persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or  
28 political opinion (OHCHR, no date). The term 'migrant', in contrast, does not have such a  
29 universally-accepted definition but has been equated with people who are seeking a better  
30 standard of living or who move for reasons of 'personal convenience' (IOM, 2011: 61). This  
31 distinction has a functional purpose of ensuring that people in need of humanitarian  
32 protection have a special route for admission to safe countries without needing to meet  
33 economic criteria (Long, 2013).  
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38 However, the policy reliance on sharp boundaries between refugees and other  
39 migrants is often problematic and obscures the details of complex migration processes as well  
40 as fluid bureaucratic categorisation practices (Carling, 2017). All too often, research has also  
41 concentrated on the reasons why people left the country of their nationality and arrived in a  
42 particular host country, but not the bit in between (BenEzer and Zetter, 2014: 3; Mainwaring  
43 and Brigden, 2016). Consequently, as noted by van der Velde and van Naerssen, the existing  
44 research tends to 'assume that migrants are directly moving from one place (area of origin) to  
45 another (area of destination)' when the end destination is often unclear and journeys are  
46 disjunctive and protracted over time (2011: 220). Journeys are in practice varied, non-linear  
47 and formative processes (BenEzer and Zetter, 2014). Disjunctive migration patterns require  
48 continual decision making on whether to stop, how long for and where and why to move on.  
49 People adapt to the context they are in, the information they have and dangers they may face.  
50 As a result, routes can change, attempted settlement can be cut short and intended transit can  
51 become more permanent depending on the opportunities and constraints migrants face in  
52 particular times and places (Bredeloup, 2012; Hagan-Zanker and Mallett, 2016;  
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3 Schapendonk, 2015). Moreover, journeys are also part of broader life trajectories, sometimes  
4 stretching back before moments of departure from one place and last after arrival in another  
5 (Mainwaring and Brigden, 2016: 244). As a result, multiple events and considerations can  
6 contribute to people's decisions to move, making it difficult to pinpoint one single, precise  
7 motivation. These considerations destabilise existent ways of understanding the intentionality  
8 and directionality of migration experiences. As a result, we should be wary of the teleological  
9 connotation of the 'journey' as short cut to capture extended and fragmented migration  
10 projects, as the term essentialises the standpoint of the observer, suggesting that the place in  
11 which the interview was carried out was the destination and interpreting whatever happened  
12 before as a transit towards that specific point.  
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16 Although contemporary patterns of migration are complex and shifting social  
17 processes, this is often not reflected in political and policy responses (Authors, 2016). Indeed,  
18 as argued by Hagan-Zanker and Mallett (2016: 6), the responses from the EU and its Member  
19 States to migration across the Mediterranean Sea have often relied on 'blunt instruments'  
20 such as fences, walls, detention and deportation to respond to complex social processes.  
21 However, being able to categorise people as refugees who deserve protection or as migrants  
22 who can be deported is key to these approaches to migration management (Zetter, 1991,  
23 2007; Inda, 2005). These legal categories and bureaucratic labels reveal more about the  
24 assumptions underpinning the politics of the time rather than the nature of migration patterns.  
25 In the public debate of much of contemporary Europe, for example, the term 'migrant' has  
26 increasingly been associated with illegality and criminality (Allen and Blinder, 2013). In this  
27 way, the categorisation of people as refugees or migrants establishes what Carling (2017)  
28 calls a 'two kinds of people' rhetoric distinguishing between refugees and migrants by  
29 dividing 'the special people—our people, refugees' from 'the other people, migrants'. The  
30 disjuncture between how receiving states see and categorise human mobility and complex  
31 sets of drivers and motivations underpinning international migration is for Castles (2004) the  
32 main reason why immigration policies often fail to achieve their stated goals.  
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38 In this article we advance understanding of the consequences of the disconnect  
39 between immigration policies and migration through critical examination of migrant  
40 journeys. This comes at a particular historical moment when, following a period in which  
41 crisis-talk triggered repeated calls for urgent policy responses, the global governance of  
42 migration is undergoing major changes,<sup>v</sup> in which greater control over unauthorised  
43 migration is a core consideration. Our first step is to examine the narratives and assumptions  
44 that underpin recent policy interventions at sea and on land.  
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### 47 **Responding to the 'crisis'**

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49 Throughout history, the Mediterranean Sea has been shaped by intertwined social, political  
50 and economic relations among and between countries of the region (e.g. Braudel 1949).  
51 However, over recent years the dynamics of migration flows by boat across the Central  
52 Mediterranean route from North Africa have evolved significantly, resulting in a dramatic  
53 growth in their scale, diversity among the arriving population and increasing deaths recorded  
54 along the way (see Figure 2).  
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3 The evolution of migration flows can be seen particularly clearly in data from the last  
4 decade. Whereas between 2005 and 2010 an average of 23,000 migrants travelling by boat  
5 were detected reaching Italy per year, in 2014 and 2016 it was over 170,000 (with a slight  
6 decrease to 153,800 in 2015). In recent years, the arriving population has included mostly  
7 men from a wide range of countries of origin, with the top five nationalities of arrivals  
8 representing only 61% of the total in 2014 and 59% of the total in 2015. In Italy in 2014, the  
9 largest single nationality group was that of people from Syria, totalling 27.5% of arrivals. A  
10 year later, however, less than 5% of arrivals were from Syria and the largest single population  
11 was from Eritrea, making up 25.5% of the total, whilst there were another eighteen  
12 nationalities which each represented more than 1% of the total each. This diversity of  
13 proveniences stands in stark contrast to the composition of the migration flow on the Eastern  
14 Mediterranean sea crossing in 2015, when the top 5 nationalities arriving in Greece  
15 represented 96% of all arrivals, and hints at a complex range of routes and migration  
16 experiences that are evolving and shifting over time.  
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21 The response from EU and Italian governments has represented this migration across  
22 the Central Mediterranean as a crisis to be resolved through restrictions to unauthorised  
23 population movements across the sea before, during and after the sea crossing. Here we will  
24 look in more detail at the developments at each stage, with a particular focus on the  
25 assumptions that have informed them.  
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### 28 *At sea*

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30 Since 2014, increasing migration across the Mediterranean has been met with intensified calls  
31 by the Italian and Maltese governments for closer cooperation at sea among EU institutions  
32 and Member States. Migration by boat has repeatedly come to the forefront of political  
33 agendas in Italy in particular, where emergencies have been declared in response to  
34 increasing numbers of arrivals and dramatic disasters in which hundreds of people have  
35 drowned attempting to make the journey (Author 2012; Tazzioli 2016). Early in 2011, for  
36 example, when thousands from North Africa arrived on the shores of the island of  
37 Lampedusa, the Minister for the Interior, Roberto Maroni, declared a humanitarian  
38 emergency whilst warning of an impending internal security threat to Europe (*La Stampa*, 11  
39 February 2011). A few years later, in 2015, then-Prime Minister Matteo Renzi stated 'we  
40 must stop this carnage' (*The New York Times*, 22 April 2015) in response to the drowning of  
41 hundreds of people at sea and European leaders met repeatedly to 'prevent further loss of life  
42 at sea and to tackle the root causes of the human emergency that we face' (European Council  
43 2015).  
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48 The declaration of a crisis has lent urgency to the unification of the maritime  
49 governance of the Central Mediterranean route, pooling together resources from governments  
50 and humanitarian organisations and expanding their operations significantly. Through the  
51 Mare Nostrum operation led by the Italian Navy throughout 2014 and Joint Operation Triton,  
52 under the command of the EU border agency Frontex since 2015, border security and  
53 humanitarian rescue operations have intersected at sea (Tazzioli 2016). Humanitarian  
54 organisations have contributed with their own rescue missions too. The EU's Joint Operation  
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3 Sophia was also established with the objective of seeking to destroy boats potentially used for  
4 smuggling, but which faced a range of legal and logistical difficulties in carrying this out in  
5 practice (Author 2015). Cooperation among EU institutions and Member States also  
6 progressed during 2015, bringing about the establishment of a series of four ‘hotspots’ at  
7 Italian ports where new arrivals could be contained, identified (even by physical coercion)  
8 and relocated (to the Italian reception system, to other EU Member States or to countries of  
9 origin) and the European Asylum Support Agency (EASO) was given greater resources and  
10 responsibility, involving the EU in the status recognition of asylum applications.  
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13 While the overarching aim of maritime missions has ostensibly been to save lives at  
14 sea, they have also functioned as a first stage of regulating the journeys towards Europe’s  
15 southern shores. This is because they ensure that migrants are brought to land and disembark  
16 in an orderly way at ports that are securely closed off from public access and where each  
17 arrival should have a name, nationality, age, fingerprints and photograph recorded. This has  
18 been termed ‘pre-identification’ and it facilitates the containment of people for categorisation  
19 as a likely refugee or an economic, and therefore illegal, migrant to be expelled. The Interior  
20 Minister Alfano showed this clearly in his claim that ‘it is essential that economic migrants  
21 are repatriated. We need to identify them and hold them in places so that we can make them  
22 leave’ (*Reuters* 17 June 2015). The Vice-Secretary of the left wing Partito Democratico  
23 similarly declared that ‘we will apply strong, determined pressure so that the only line that  
24 matters is held: redistribution and selection between war refugees and economic migrants’  
25 (*La Stampa* 14 June 2015). Pressure from EU and neighbouring governments adopted the  
26 same tone, with Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission stating that  
27 ‘people must be registered. No registration, no rights’ (European Commission 2016) and  
28 France’s Interior Minister Cazeneuve declaring that ‘there are many irregular economic  
29 migrants who are, therefore, not victims of persecution. We cannot host them’ (*Giornale di*  
30 *Sicilia* 15 June 2015). Thus the evolution of interception at sea and measures for  
31 disembarkation has been strongly influenced by the view that refugees and migrants are  
32 clearly distinct and should be efficiently separated.  
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### 39 *On land*

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41 Once disembarked and passed through pre-identification, new arrivals in Italy would enter  
42 into a complex, multi-layered refugee reception system. This system was basically two-  
43 pronged, with an ‘ordinary’ system (the *SPRAR*) providing accommodation, legal support and  
44 measures for integration for asylum claimants for six months extendable to a year, and an  
45 ‘emergency’ one which provided only short-term accommodation and basic services.  
46 Alongside these two, a relocation programme was established among EU Member States with  
47 the aim of releasing the pressure on the country’s reception system. People arriving who were  
48 considered to be ‘in clear need of international protection’ would be separated at hotspots and  
49 invited to relocate to another EU Member State. This need for international protection was  
50 assumed according to nationality: if the individual was from a country with an acceptance  
51 rate in asylum cases of 75% or more they could be put forward for relocation. In this way, the  
52 relocation programme was based on separating people according to whether they had  
53 originated in a ‘refugee producing country’ or not, using nationality as a proxy for someone’s  
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3 need for international protection. Regardless, the programme has failed to reach its objectives  
4 and by the end of 2016, a year after being established, only 2,654 people had been relocated  
5 from Italy, far behind the target of 39,600.<sup>vi</sup> In contrast, throughout 2015 alone there were  
6 25,000 requests for Italy to take asylum seekers back from other EU Member States.<sup>vii</sup>  
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8 In response to the increase in arrivals in 2014 and 2015 and growing pressure from  
9 European partners, the Italian emergency regime underwent a major and rapid expansion:  
10 whereas in February 2015 there were 37,028 people recorded in temporary reception centres  
11 within the emergency system (the *CAS*), by the end of the year this had increased to 76,683.  
12 One year later, by the end of 2016 it had risen to a total of 137,218 people housed in  
13 temporary reception centres.<sup>viii</sup> The focus on the emergency system over the ordinary one  
14 points towards a view that the majority of the people arriving in Italy via the Central  
15 Mediterranean crossing would not need to be housed for an extended period of time or  
16 encouraged to integrate in Italy. This is supported by data on asylum claims during 2015  
17 which show how the Italian authorities' adopted a less benign approach to asylum  
18 applications from 'non refugee-producing countries'. Over the course of the year, the rate of  
19 rejection of initial applications to Territorial Asylum Commissions rose considerably from  
20 48% in January to 68% in December. By the end of the year, less than one third (29%) of  
21 applicants would be given a temporary form of protection, and only 3% would be granted  
22 asylum. During late 2015, 'deferred expulsion orders' became common, given mainly to  
23 people from West African countries and demanding that they leave Italy within seven days.  
24 These processes have limited the chances that newcomers would previously have had to  
25 regularise their position in Italy as workers after a period of subsidiary or humanitarian  
26 protection or to transit through towards another desired destination. Measures designed to  
27 deter secondary migration towards the north of Europe, in practice created a large  
28 undocumented and yet non-deportable population in Italy with fewer rights and no access to  
29 formal reception facilities and support networks.  
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### 36 *Before the sea*

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38 The array of documents, policy statements and position papers issued over the last few years  
39 by EU institutions highlights an anxiety about the movement of people from Africa towards  
40 the northern shores of the Mediterranean. They also highlight an unresolved tension in the  
41 EU between internal and external dimensions of migration governance (Author 2012). The  
42 EU's Global Approach to Migration and Mobility paper (GAMM) of November 2011 tried to  
43 reframe the EU's approach around four "equally important" pillars: facilitating regular  
44 migration and mobility; preventing and reducing irregular migration and trafficking;  
45 maximising development impact and promoting international protection; and "enhancing the  
46 external dimension of asylum policy" (European Commission 2005). However, as a number  
47 of our stakeholder informants pointed out, subsequent developments have changed the  
48 balance between the pillars, with the goal of stemming migration becoming the overriding  
49 principle informing EU interventions. This in turn has reshaped other policy areas, as for  
50 example with the redirecting of development aid and its conditionality to assist with  
51 immigration enforcement and asylum externalisation.  
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3 As part of stemming African migration, the EU and its Member States have  
4 accelerated the externalisation of border controls to North African and sub-Saharan states.  
5 The EU-Turkey deal which came into force in March 2016 and has been accompanied by a  
6 dramatic reduction in irregular crossings across the Aegean Sea has been referred to by  
7 European politicians as a blueprint for new partnership agreements (Author 2017; Gabrielli  
8 2016). This externalisation of migration control through package deals and diplomacy has  
9 been taking place for years (e.g. Gabrielli 2016), but the current process has broadened its  
10 geographical focus with a number of high profile diplomatic initiatives including the  
11 Khartoum and Valletta summits, and state visits by Member States to key countries. A  
12 securitisation of African borders has been pushed by EU politicians who conceptualise  
13 African migration as intrinsically directed towards Europe. The result, Gabrielli (2016: 30)  
14 argues, is ‘a repeated displacement of the border between EU and Africa vis-à-vis migratory  
15 flows every time more to the South, as well as the creation of a series of buffer zones in the  
16 African continent.’  
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21 A news story widely reported in European media exemplifies this attitude. Early in  
22 2015 Frontex’s executive director said he expected the number of asylum seekers crossing  
23 the Central Mediterranean to skyrocket in 2015 and urged EU governments to ready  
24 themselves to face ‘between 500,000 and one million migrants ready to leave from Libya’  
25 (*Ansa*, 6 March 2015). This statement supposed that all foreigners in Northern Africa were in  
26 ‘transit’ on their way to Europe (Author 2017). Needless to say, the mass exodus did not  
27 eventually materialise and in 2015 arrivals across the Central Mediterranean route recorded a  
28 7% decrease (153,000) compared with 2014. The story encapsulates the power of numbers in  
29 firing up public and political debate, raising fears of unceasing African migration to Europe  
30 and sustaining the ‘crisis mood’ that pervades policy responses (Del Biaggio 2015).  
31 Furthermore, externalisation leads to unintended outcomes: by restricting cross-border  
32 mobility within Africa, the EU may impact on one of the reasons why African migrants  
33 choose *not* to move to Europe, namely the capacity to engage in circular migration and move  
34 unrestricted between places for family or business reasons alike (Authors 2016).  
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### 40 **Unpacking journeys to and across the Central Mediterranean**

41 In this section we juxtapose the assumptions underpinning policy developments with our  
42 findings from interviews with people who had crossed the Central Mediterranean. Our  
43 interviews show how the distinction between refugees and migrants that has been influential  
44 in policy does not accurately reflect the diversity of motivations and experiences that lead  
45 people to depart from their places of origin. They also show the assumption that migrants are  
46 all intending to migrate straight from their place of origin to Europe to be misplaced. This  
47 illustrates how policymaking responds to a crisis narrative that is not reflective of the  
48 dynamics of migration to and across the Mediterranean.  
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#### 52 *Motivations to move*

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54 In our interviews we used open questioning to ask people for the reasons why they moved  
55 away from their place of origin. The responses highlighted multiple and often intersecting  
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3 motivations that did not easily fit into a dichotomy of forced or voluntary migration. Security,  
4 political, economic or personal concerns were not mutually exclusive influences.  
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6 Two thirds of our respondents (66%) explicitly mentioned motivations that could be  
7 described as 'forced migration', such as moments of violence (29%), death threats (25%),  
8 political tensions and discrimination (21%), or civil unrest caused by militias or  
9 confraternities (12%). Over one third (39%) of our respondents also discussed economic  
10 factors, such as seeking employment (18%), moving out from extreme poverty (often so as to  
11 send money home to support a family) (13%), or to get away from corruption (5%). Others  
12 also mentioned personal reasons, such as tensions and fighting within a family (10%) or  
13 being in a relationship that was disapproved of (2%).  
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16 The most common motivations for leaving places of origin were related to insecurity  
17 and a lack of safety, principally experiences of violence and death (of someone close to the  
18 interviewee or threats to the interviewee's life). These were widespread among people from  
19 all backgrounds. People from countries in West and Central Africa, for example, did not  
20 come from countries at war but often mentioned the threat posed by violent groups, as well as  
21 speaking of localised cases of violence arising from political protests, land disputes or fights  
22 among neighbours and extended families:  
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25 "I tried to fight back the Muslims [Boko Haram] but I had to run away. I had nothing  
26 in Nigeria. They burned everything. There was nothing left there. They tried to kill  
27 me". (Nigerian man aged 26)  
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29 People from the Horn of Africa also mentioned tribal and militia-based violence, such as that  
30 of Al Shabaab in Somalia:  
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32 "Originally, I was just aiming to get out of Somalia, away from Al Shabaab and to a  
33 safe place. My father and brother were killed by Al Shabaab and soon after, when my  
34 uncle was killed, I eventually decided I needed to leave". (Somalian man aged 18)  
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37 One fifth of the interviewees spoke of political tensions or discrimination contributing to their  
38 decision to leave. Interviewees from places as diverse as Gambia, Nigeria and Pakistan  
39 experienced violence due to their membership of a political party or faced imprisonment  
40 through corrupt or unfair legal processes. The threat of permanent conscription into the  
41 military and a general lack of freedom were key reasons for those who left Eritrea.  
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43 Finally, economic reasons were also mentioned, with 18% of our respondents  
44 mentioning unemployment and the need to find a job, usually in order to improve their own  
45 wellbeing, move beyond living a hand-to-mouth existence, or to be able to send remittances  
46 from abroad to a family back home. In West Africa in particular, there have been widespread  
47 labour migration patterns of this type for decades, the vast majority of which remain within  
48 Africa (Altai Consulting 2015).  
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51 Interviewees often rarely spoke of only one reason for leaving their place of origin.  
52 Instead, multiple motivations for migration could be inter-related. Violence, political  
53 persecution or corruption could not only put someone's life in danger, but also harm their  
54 capacity to provide for themselves and their families. People from countries such as Gambia  
55 or Ivory Coast, for example, revealed how contexts of crime, political corruption and  
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3 violence restricted their ability to complete their education, find employment or gain access  
4 to economic opportunities. The capacity of a family to provide for itself could be harmed by  
5 insecurity or persecution, removing a breadwinner and creating a need for new sources of  
6 income, as illustrated by the following description from an interview with a Bangladeshi  
7 man:  
8

9           The interviewee comes from a poor family ... His eldest brother was the only one  
10 with a regular job and he provided for the family: he was a “big politician”, but he has  
11 been killed by members of the rival party ... the interviewee decided to emigrate in  
12 order to find a job and maintain his family. At that time the only possibility was to go  
13 to Libya, as there he could obtain a visa (Bangladeshi man aged 18)  
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16 Similar cases were presented by people from other nationalities, such as an Eritrean man who  
17 moved to a refugee camp and then on to Sudan after his father was unjustly imprisoned and  
18 he had to seek safety and economic opportunities in order to take on the role of supporting his  
19 family. These and other examples highlight the ways that security, political, economic and  
20 personal reasons for leaving places of origin often fed into each other to inform the decision  
21 to migrate.  
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#### 24 *Routes and journeys: pulled to Europe?*

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26 As already mentioned, policy developments in response to the arrival of migrants across the  
27 Mediterranean Sea during 2015 were often informed by the assumption that migrants  
28 underwent more or less direct journeys seeking to reach Europe. However, our interviews  
29 indicate a broad variation of migration routes leading to and across the Central Mediterranean  
30 route. We identified 36 different countries that our interviewees had traversed before  
31 reaching Italy or Malta, with 68 different combinations of routes passing through them. These  
32 journeys often took a long time. Only two interviewees (1% of the sample) arrived in Europe  
33 within one month of setting out from their place of origin. 32% had left their country of  
34 origin between one and six months before arriving. Over one third (34%) had been travelling  
35 for between seven and eighteen months, and another third (34%) had left their place of origin  
36 more than eighteen months before arriving. This paints a picture of journeys that were  
37 protracted over time and involved a variety of routes and experiences.  
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42           Moreover, despite the diversity of migration patterns recorded two general types can  
43 be distinguished.  
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45           First, there were cases that can be considered as unified journeys. These are cases of  
46 people who set out from their place of origin already with a clear intention of moving to  
47 Europe. One third (35%) of the interviewees who spoke about the intentions that they had  
48 when they left their place of origin spoke of moving to Europe. Of the people who described  
49 why Europe instead of other destinations, 61% spoke of improving their standard of living,  
50 usually through employment or education whereas 46% stated that they thought it was the  
51 only place to find safety, security and freedom (respondents could present more than one  
52 reason). Often, these impressions were built on little specific knowledge about particular  
53 countries but rather mentioned general hopes of what life in Europe would be like.  
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3 Moreover, unified journeys did not always bring migrants directly to Europe. Rather,  
4 people could spend many months travelling before arriving at their intended destination. Of  
5 those who set out seeking to reach Europe only 5.5% of them arrived less than one month  
6 after departing. For 61% of the respondents who had originally intended to come to Europe,  
7 up to six months were required before they arrived in Italy. For 25% it was up to a year and  
8 for 14% it was longer still. This indicates that unified journeys were not always short or  
9 direct, but could be interrupted such as by kidnappings and being held for ransom in Libya,  
10 which would result in being kept in a prison for weeks or months until money could be sent  
11 to enable their release. Yet despite this, decisions to continue moving were motivated by the  
12 original intention of arriving in Europe.  
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16 Second, there were disjunctive journeys that could be considered to be made up of  
17 multiple separate decisions made in different times and places regarding where to move and  
18 why. A majority of our interviewees' migration experiences followed this pattern. Over a  
19 quarter (28%) stated that when they left their place of origin they sought either a nearby place  
20 or had no specific destination in mind. People moving in this way had originally intended to  
21 get away from a particular situation of harm, with little time to prepare, or were seeking  
22 labour opportunities that were not too far from home so that they could eventually return.  
23 Over one third of the respondents (37%) also stated that when they left their country of origin  
24 they were seeking to move to Libya. Many expected that there would be readily available  
25 employment and support from social networks of past emigrants, but they also lacked an  
26 awareness of the severity of the ongoing conflict and security situation, as this Ghanaian man  
27 told us:  
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31 "I wanted to go to Libya. In Libya there are some problems, I knew there was a  
32 conflict there but I had one friend who said they would help me to find a job"  
33 (Ghanaian man, aged 29)  
34

35 The persistence of this view of Libya as a destination country is a reflection of the strength  
36 and durability of pre-existing migration networks from Africa and further afield, as Libya has  
37 been both a destination and a transit country since the 2000s. In 2006 it was estimated that  
38 between 65,000 and 120,000 sub-Saharan Africans were entering the Maghreb yearly and  
39 that several tens of thousands of them would try to cross the Mediterranean (de Haas 2006).  
40 By 2011 figures suggested that there could be 2.5 million foreign nationals residing in Libya  
41 (MPC 2013).  
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44 Disjunctive journeys could extend over many months or years, with stops in multiple  
45 locations along the way. For people originating from countries in West Africa, for example,  
46 initial migration patterns from countries of origin were usually directed at nearby locations  
47 where it would be possible to rest, find employment, connect with friends or kin or find  
48 someone to facilitate onward movement. This local and regional mobility could be organised  
49 at short notice by travel agencies, friends or family members within the free movement area  
50 of the ECOWAS region. The opportunities and information available in each particular  
51 location would inform the evolution of onward movements that could shift and develop over  
52 time, as shown by the following interview:  
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3 “I was never targeting Europe, but you keep moving from country to country and you  
4 never know how hard the journey is going to be or how the conditions and  
5 opportunity for work will be in the next country. ... So initially I targeted any other  
6 country in Africa that wasn't Gambia. Then I realized that the situation in the next  
7 country was not any better, so I kept moving” (Gambian man, aged 20)  
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10 Onward movement after lengthy periods of settlement and attempts to start a new life were  
11 similarly reported among East Africans who had stayed in the Sudanese capital Khartoum,  
12 for example, or among Syrians who had been in Egypt. Onward movement would come when  
13 economic opportunities appeared to have run out, corruption was seen as too much of an  
14 obstacle or changing political contexts brought new dangers, as expressed by one Syrian  
15 interviewee:  
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17 “Syrians could enter by plane. They were welcome in Egypt. I lived there about a year  
18 and a half ... When the Morsi government fell and Al Sisi arrived things for Syrians  
19 changed. Strong discrimination. We were even insulted in the street. Even renewing a  
20 residence permit was difficult. So I went to Libya.” (Syrian man, aged 23)  
21  
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23 In other cases, where stops were short, people would use them to rest, gather information  
24 about a connection, seek a smuggler or to find temporary work to pay for moving on. This  
25 was particularly the case in Burkina Faso and especially Niger where extreme poverty and a  
26 harsh climate meant few people considered staying for long.  
27

28 Thus, our data shows that many of the people who arrived in Europe had set out from  
29 their places of origin without particularly clear plans about where their final destination  
30 would be. Their journeys were not linked to a pre-determined outcome, but evolved in  
31 response to their experiences and the information they could gather along the way. In the  
32 context of these disjunctive migration patterns the Mediterranean Sea crossing can be viewed  
33 not as the culmination of a single journey or completion of an ideal that the migrant hoped for  
34 when they left home, but rather as a response to the varied living conditions that they  
35 experienced after having left their place of origin. The situation for migrants in Libya  
36 therefore takes on a special significance as a driver of boat migration across the sea towards  
37 Europe. Over three quarters of the people that we spoke to referred directly to experiences of  
38 violence there, rising to 95% in the case of people from Gambia and Nigeria. They spoke not  
39 only of the dangers of military operations but also of armed street gangs (such as the ‘Asma  
40 Boys’) and unscrupulous employers willing to threaten or lock people up rather than pay  
41 them. Women spoke of being unable to leave their places of residence and suffering sexual as  
42 well as physical violence:  
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47 “They took us to a very isolated place and we lived in a stable for a month, where  
48 there were also animals. We couldn't leave. On the farm there were other women who  
49 had also arrived from Nigeria. The men who were supposed to watch us raped us  
50 many times” (Nigerian woman aged 25)  
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53 Such experiences appear to be more or less indiscriminate, affecting all age groups to a  
54 similar degree, except perhaps for a slight decline in experiences of violence and death  
55 among older people.  
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3 The security environment often drove people who had intended to settle, work and  
4 live in Libya to realise that they would have to move on again to find somewhere safe. Some  
5 of those fleeing had resided there for years, such as Bangladeshi workers who had moved  
6 there in the years preceding the war, arriving by plane directly from Bangladesh or following  
7 previous stops in the Middle East. The sea journey was considered to be the only way out, as  
8 described by this young man:  
9

10 “Libya is like a hole. You can enter and then you can’t go back ... they seize you  
11 when you are going, it is very difficult to get out” (Gambian man aged 19)  
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14 Crossing the sea was, in this sense, for many a new movement that was motivated by distinct  
15 drivers to their previous patterns of mobility, making Italy the first safe country that they  
16 came across.  
17

## 18 **Conclusions**

19  
20 Building on scholarly literature critiquing assumptions concerning migration drivers and  
21 dynamics, and constructions of African migration as always in transit towards Europe, this  
22 article has highlighted a disjuncture between the empirical reality and the assumptions that  
23 inform Europe’s crisis-response to Mediterranean boat migration. Our analysis identifies  
24 critical junctions at which this mismatch become more salient, namely at sea when boat  
25 migrants were intercepted, rescued and identified; disembarkation when boat migrants were  
26 channelled through bureaucratic pathways often relying on approximate assessments of their  
27 deservingness of international protection; and before the sea journey, when assumptions of  
28 the ‘economic’ nature of African mobility and its directionality informed policies aimed at  
29 strengthening border controls *en route* to Europe. In this way, we show how the construction  
30 of a crisis narrative describing migration as uncontrolled, unceasing and directed straight to  
31 Europe has driven a transformation of the governance of mobility in the Central  
32 Mediterranean.  
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34  
35 Furthermore, our empirical data has also highlighted how the assumptions  
36 underpinning the narrative of a Central Mediterranean crisis are often removed from the way  
37 that migration in the region plays out. Our evidence shows that although some journeys were  
38 indeed aimed at arriving in Europe, many more were sequences of relatively loosely related  
39 events rather than fully thought through plans. Multiple considerations can lead to people  
40 making a decision to move in the first place. Subsequent decisions are taken at different times  
41 and in responses to conditions at origin as well as *en route*, highlighting the infrapolitics of  
42 migration as people respond to the challenges and opportunities opened up by specific  
43 conjunctions they encounter. Libya in particular was not simply a country of transit that  
44 people were intending to move through, but a context in which people made new decisions  
45 about the need to move and where to. In this way, the context of insecurity and uncertainty in  
46 Libya is a clearer driver of onward migration to Europe than conditions in many countries of  
47 origin.  
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51 This closer inspection of the hiatus between mechanics of migration during the so-  
52 called ‘crisis’ in the Mediterranean and policy responses unsettles and problematizes existent  
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ways of understanding journeys in research and policy. Rather than an immediate and localised ‘crisis’ in the Mediterranean, these migration patterns had multiple footings and were produced by the interplay of contexts, opportunities and decisions occurred over a prolonged period of time and in different locations. People’s decisions to move do not easily fit into clear categories and human rights violations, persecutions, violence and loss of livelihood can arise in multiple locations along the way. As a result, we warn of the risks associated with the frequent use of ‘country of birth’ as a shortcut to channel boat migrants through bureaucratic pathways and decide on the validity of their protection claims. Finally, the proclamation of a crisis caused by the mobility of economic, and therefore illegal, migrants on dangerous journeys has also been shown to narrow the range of potential policy responses, as the urgency of resolving an apparent crisis favours short-term, immediate measures to prevent people moving rather than longer-term initiatives enabling mobility and providing asylum to those on the move.

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**Figures**

Figure 1. Nationalities of interviewees

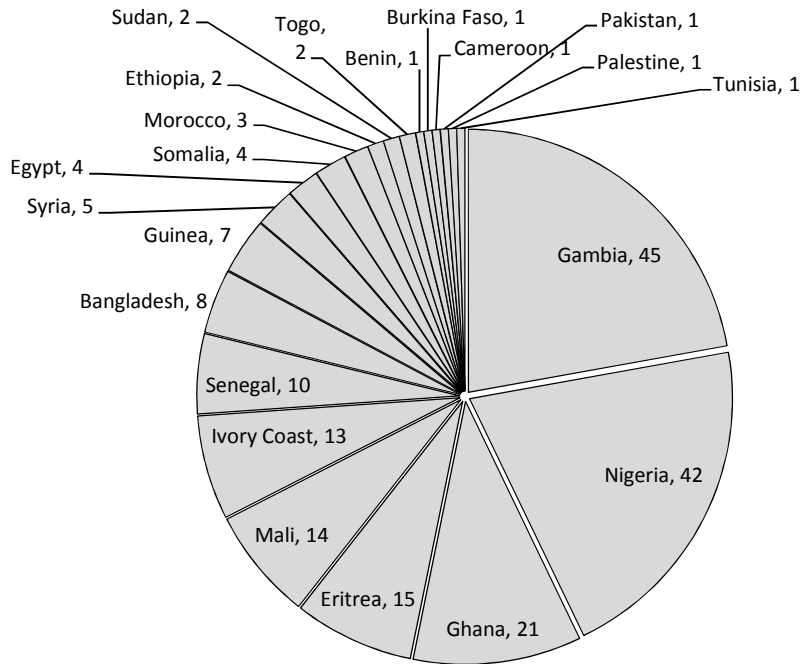
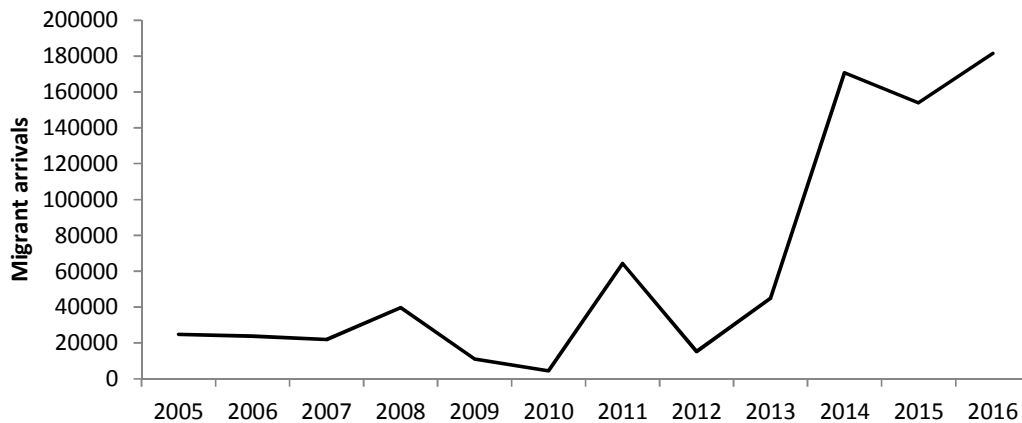


Figure 2. Migrant arrivals in Italy and Malta, by boat across the Central Mediterranean route (2005-2016). Data from UNHCR, Ministero dell'Interno, Malta Migration Police



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<sup>i</sup> Data on migrants intercepted at sea and arriving in Italy and Malta can be accessed from the Italian Ministry of the Interior, available at <http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero> (accessed 25th November 2016) and from UNHCR Malta, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/mt/charts/category/12> (accessed 25th November 2016)

<sup>ii</sup> Data on deaths at sea can be accessed at <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

<sup>iii</sup> See IOM's campaign 'Aware migrants' (2016) for example

<sup>iv</sup> This terminology can be found, for example, in material produced by UNHCR. See <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>

<sup>v</sup> This is particularly the case following the UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants. The resultant New York Declaration envisaged a roadmap for the reform of the global governance of migration and introduced changes with immediate effect as the incorporation of IOM in the UN family.

<http://refugeesmigrants.un.org/declaration>

<sup>vi</sup> A regularly updated 'State of play' of the relocation programme is available at <https://t.co/wlzda4suJL>

<sup>vii</sup> Data on Dublin returns is available from Eurostat at

[http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_dubri&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_dubri&lang=en), accessed 30 March 2017

<sup>viii</sup> Latest data on the reception system is available from the Italian Ministry of the Interior at

<http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero>