

## A EU Naval Mission Without a Navy: The Paradox of Operation Sophia

by Giulia Mantini

The recent European Council decision<sup>1</sup> to renew the mandate of the EU's maritime mission in the Mediterranean – EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia – while at the same time withdrawing its naval assets constitutes a paradox that reflects the political cynicism of EU member states, which are content to strike an agreement undermining the Union's operational capabilities in order to protect their narrow interests at home.

Launched in June 2015 with the objective of combating human trafficking in the Mediterranean, Operation Sophia has evolved in various phases and is now also tasked with overseeing the implementation of the UN arms embargo on Libya and providing support to the "Libyan coastguard and navy".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> European Council, *EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia: Mandate Extended until 30 September 2019*, 29 March 2019, <https://europa.eu/!mq43VW>.

<sup>2</sup> See Operation Sophia website: *About Us*, <https://www.operationsophia.eu/about-us>.

Expanded and renewed multiple times since 2015, the 26-nation Operation has so far contributed to the apprehension of over 151 suspected smugglers, disposed of more than 550 boats used by traffickers and provided training, both at sea and in the facilities of member states, to a total of 237 Libyan personnel.<sup>3</sup> The EU Operation has also focussed on search and rescue activities, saving over 45,000 lives, according to official sources.

Aside from the controversy over cooperation with the Libyan coastguard, which has been accused of gross human rights violations and abuse,<sup>4</sup> Operation Sophia has also been

<sup>3</sup> European External Action Service, *EU-Libya Relations*, 11 November 2018, <https://europa.eu/!FF39nK>.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Desperate and Dangerous. Report on the Human Rights Situation of Migrants and Refugees in Libya*, 20 December 2018, p. 35-38, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/>

*Giulia Mantini is a MSc graduate in European Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science and a former intern at the Istituto affari Internazionali (IAI).*

caught up in wider political disputes. These include ongoing instability in Libya, the Italian government's decision to close its ports to ships carrying rescued migrants and broader intra-EU tensions on migration management.

Italy, which has commanded Operation Sophia since 2015 and has long complained about a lack of EU solidarity on the migration issue, played a central role in determining this paradoxical outcome.

In the run up to the expiry of the operation's mandate in late March 2019, Italy's Deputy Prime Minister, Interior Minister and leader of the far-right anti-migrant League party, Matteo Salvini, conditioned Italy's acceptance on a prior agreement that any rescued migrants would be distributed among EU member states.<sup>5</sup> Italy's Minister of Defence, Elisabetta Trenta, also advanced a proposal for rotatory disembarkation ports among EU members and coordinated by Frontex.<sup>6</sup> Without an agreement foreseeing greater burden sharing, the Italian government was said to be content to see the entire operation expire.

Such brinkmanship by Italy's coalition government caused much friction with Europe. In January, when

LibyaMigrationReport.pdf.

<sup>5</sup> "Salvini: chi non ha diritto a stare in Italia deve andar via", in *Rai News*, 23 January 2019, <http://www.rainews.it/dl/rainews/articoli/Salvini-chi-non-ha-diritto-a-stare-in-Italia-deve-andar-via-6c18ce86-1049-43f6-a471-926e4bad98a6.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Italian Ministry of Defence, *EU: Vienna Hosts the Informal Defence Ministerial*, 30 August 2018, [https://www.difesa.it/EN/Primo\\_Piano/Pagine/uj.aspx](https://www.difesa.it/EN/Primo_Piano/Pagine/uj.aspx).

Operation Sophia's assets were already stretched thin, Berlin announced it was withdrawing its Augsburg frigate, citing Italy's refusal to allow rescued migrants to disembark at its ports.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, EU leaders agreed that the operation would be renewed for another six months but deprived of naval assets, while air surveillance capabilities would be strengthened instead. This was deemed an agreeable compromise for EU leaders, irrespective of the human costs and reputational damage associated with this decision.

Renewing the operation while depriving it of the naval assets needed to patrol the Mediterranean demonstrates the extents the Italian government is willing to go in order to ensure that its interests are met at the EU level. Yet, the decision also demonstrates the depths of intra-EU disagreements on migration and the lack of courage and solidarity among EU member states when it comes to taking decisive action on this issue.

Make no mistake: this was a *political* decision by the leaders of EU member states. Faced with a choice between strengthening the EU's external action and credibility, not to mention values and responsibilities, and the narrow political interests of member states vis-à-vis migration, EU leaders prioritised the former. The result is a cynical political directive to strip Operation Sophia of its capabilities in the Mediterranean, effectively

<sup>7</sup> Ben Knight, "Germany Pulls Out of Mediterranean Migrant Mission Sophia", in *Deutsche Welle*, 23 January 2019, <https://p.dw.com/p/3C02T>.

allowing member states to hide behind the smokescreen of operational shortcomings tied to a lack of EU search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean.

Problematic from a moral and human rights standpoint, the decision reflects a European *political agreement* that further strengthens the securitisation of migration and the outsourcing of migration management to countries in its neighbourhood.

The political compromise is clear: eliminate the EU naval presence in the Mediterranean as a means to skirt EU responsibilities in terms of search and rescue operations, thereby avoiding embarrassing EU-level debates on the distribution of rescued migrants caused by Italy's decision to seal its ports. The upcoming European Parliament elections may also have played a role in this game of political opportunism, allowing the various political camps in Europe to cynically argue that each is sticking to its electoral promises or the interests of its constituencies.

Ultimately, the decision is yet another example of how domestic politics is undermining multilateralism in foreign policy, with competition and conflicting national prerogatives overcoming cooperation; with populisms, nationalisms and far-right movements erecting walls and closing ports and strong personality clashes undermining integration and a human security approach to collective crisis management.

The most worrying aspect of this situation is the fact that neither Rome

nor other European capitals backed down, sticking to their positions until the very end, effectively undermining both the objectives and operational capacities of the maritime mission while causing serious reputational damage to the EU.

In this sense, the decision reflects another paradox. On the one hand it demonstrates the depths of political divisions at the EU level on the migration issue, which in turn are weakening the EU's ability to act as a unit. On the other it reflects the extent to which EU leaders are willing to strike a compromise to protect the narrow interests of national governments but which is simultaneously undermining the very functioning of the EU.

The recent outbreak of hostilities in Libya will only exacerbate the dilemmas of European policy vis-à-vis the Mediterranean, Libya and Operation Sophia in particular. EU member states are likely to be forced to review their recent decision on Operation Sophia, which will further bring to the fore the short-sightedness of this European move. The withdrawal of naval assets has widened the gap between European rhetoric and action, harming EU credibility and legitimacy in the process.

With international NGOs no longer able to patrol the Mediterranean and Operation Sophia deprived of all naval assets, the question must be asked as to who will be responsible for search and rescue operations or for establishing whether violations are committed by Libyan authorities, within or beyond Libya's national waters. Yet, it is precisely

the lack of courage in answering this question that motivated EU leaders to embrace a cynical political compromise to consolidate short-term political support at home while undermining long-term collective security in Europe and the broader Mediterranean.

Indeed, it is not only values but European security that is at stake. It should be abundantly clear by now that Europe's future is inherently intertwined with that of Africa and that EU security will in large part depend on African stability and prosperity as well as Europe's ability to behave as a unitary actor. Migration is not a passing phenomenon. It will be here to stay. The sooner European states agree on a political agenda to tackle this issue collectively the sooner will EU-Africa relations be placed on a more sustainable plane, providing concrete benefits to both.

Ultimately, the way forward can only be found through unity among EU member states and a shared political vision for the future of Europe's role and responsibilities on the international stage. On the politically divisive migration issue, efforts should be made to develop sustainable and legal migration routes, overcoming the harmful dichotomy between open and closed ports and moving ahead with a long-overdue reform of the Dublin system.

At a time when the EU's credibility is being undermined by its internal contradictions, the European Union – and Italy within it – should focus on ending opportunistic power politics and establishing, especially in view of

the upcoming EU elections, a common political vision for the Mediterranean and beyond.<sup>8</sup>

13 May 2019

<sup>8</sup> A useful recommendation to this end is the setting up of a EU Research Foundation for the Mediterranean. See MEDRESET, "Reflections on MEDRESET", in *European Policy Briefs*, April 2019, <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13853>.

### Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

## Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì ([a.dessi@iai.it](mailto:a.dessi@iai.it))

- 19 | 33 Giulia Mantini, *A EU Naval Mission Without a Navy: The Paradox of Operation Sophia*
- 19 | 32 Chiara Giuliani, *The Intra-GCC Crisis: Qatari Soft Power and International Law*
- 19 | 31 Nils Meyer-Ohlendorf and Sebastian Oberthür, *EU Reform and Climate Policies: Two Birds with One Stone*
- 19 | 30 Daniela Huber, *A New Venice Declaration from a "Coalition of the Lead Donors" on Israel/Palestine*
- 19 | 29 Stefan Lehne, *The Emergence of a European Political Space*
- 19 | 28 Nona Mikhelidze, *Italy and Russia: New Alignment or More of the Same?*
- 19 | 27 Maria Saide Liperi, *The EU's Externalisation of Migration Management Undermines Stabilisation in the Western Balkans*
- 19 | 26 Davide Ceccanti, *An EU Unemployment Benefit Scheme to Relaunch the European Project*
- 19 | 25 Davide Cancarini, *China, India and the Crossroads of 21st Century Infrastructure Competition*
- 19 | 24 Lorenzo Kamel, *"Stabilising" the Middle East: A Historical Perspective*