

From Sophia to Irini: EU Mediterranean Policies and the Urgency of “Doing Something”

by Federico Alagna

Amidst the COVID-19 emergency and following months of negotiations and deadlocks, Operation Sophia, the EU's maritime mission in the Mediterranean, officially ended in late March 2020, being replaced by Operation Irini, with a substantially different mandate.

EUNAVFOR MED Sophia was first established in 2015 to combat migrant smuggling in the Mediterranean. Its mandate was then progressively extended, also including training activities for the so-called Libyan coast guard and enforcement of the UN arms embargo on Libya.¹ Sophia also performed search and rescue (SAR) activities, saving 44,916 migrants in the Mediterranean Sea between 2015 and March 2019, when the EU renewed the operation but simultaneously withdrew all naval assets from the Mediterranean.²

¹ EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia website: *About Us*, <https://www.operationsophia.eu/?p=581>.

² Council of the European Union, *Infographic - EU Mediterranean operations 2015-2020*, last reviewed on 11 March 2020, <http://europa.eu/!uk44kW>.

This decision stemmed from the vetoes of some member states – first and foremost Italy, though it had been one of Sophia's strongest sponsors back in 2015 – due to a lack of agreement on disembarkation points and the relocation of rescued migrants.³ These had been longstanding controversial issues, arising in particular from the responsibility of processing asylum applications borne by countries of first entry in the event of irregular border crossings into the EU.⁴

The new Operation EUNAVFOR MED Irini, on the other hand, is primarily tasked with the implementation of the UN arms embargo on Libya. Announced in the wake of the Berlin

³ Giulia Mantini, “A EU Naval Mission Without a Navy: The Paradox of Operation Sophia”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 19|33 (May 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10334>.

⁴ Anja Radjenovic, “Reform of the Dublin System”, in *EPRS Briefings*, 1 March 2019, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2016\)586639](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2016)586639).

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Conference on Libya and the escalating interventions on opposite sides by Turkey, Russia and the United Arab Emirates, Germany and the EU pushed through a renewed commitment to enforce the UN arms embargo as part of the Berlin Conference conclusions.⁵

A decision was therefore made to redeploy EU naval assets to the Mediterranean, this time to intercept arms deliveries, notwithstanding the fact that a large majority of weaponry is actually delivered by land and air, particularly that destined for Khalifa Haftar’s so-called Libyan National Army (LNA), which is presently battling the UN-recognised government in Tripoli.⁶

Operation Irini also has three secondary tasks, namely contributing “to the implementation of UN measures to prevent the illicit export of petroleum from Libya”, assisting “in the development of the capacities and in the training of the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy” and finally contributing “to the disruption of the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks” – this last task exclusively “through information gathering and patrolling carried out by aerial assets above the high seas”.⁷ No reference

is made to SAR activities, which are unlikely to take place in any event, considering that naval assets will not patrol areas traditionally associated with migration routes.⁸

Albeit different in their mandates, Operation Sophia and Operation Irini both fall into the category of EU foreign policy decisions taken under political and popular pressure to “do something”, but lacking in political courage to do what is really necessary. Their overall shortcomings in long-term planning and strategic thinking risk undermining both the tangible objectives of these missions and the broader, intangible goal of reinforcing EU credibility.

In 2015, such pressure was related to the thousands of people dying in the Mediterranean Sea and the demand by public opinion for the EU to finally act, after repeated calls (and failures) to do so.⁹ In 2020, the pressure stemmed from the deteriorating situation in Libya and the EU’s inability to promote a united and effective policy on the conflict, while violations of the arms embargo continued unabated in Europe’s neighbourhood.

The logic of this approach, persistent and consistent over time, is reflected in the fact that action is in both cases

⁵ David M. Herszenhorn, Matthew Karnitschnig and Judith Mischke, “Big Powers Pledge not to Fight Each Other over Libya”, in *Politico*, 20 January 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/big-powers-eu-russia-germany-france-uk-us-turkey-pledge-not-to-fight-each-other-over-libya>.

⁶ Luigi Scazzieri, “The EU’s New Libya Operation Is Flawed”, in *CER Insights*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.cer.eu/node/8505>.

⁷ Council of the European Union, *Council Decision (CFSP) 2020/472 of 31 March 2020 on a European Union Military Operation in the Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED IRINI)*, [https://](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2020/472/oj)

eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2020/472/oj.

⁸ Jacopo Barigazzi, “EU Launches Naval Mission”, in *Politico*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-launches-naval-mission-to-police-libya-arms-embargo>.

⁹ Niklas Nováky, “The Road to Sophia: Explaining the EU’s Naval Operation in the Mediterranean”, in *European View*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (October 2018), p. 197-209, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1781685818810359>.

limited to what is strictly necessary to overcome accusations of EU inaction, even though the implications entail concrete challenges for long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

The results were soon clear in the case of Sophia. Political tensions surfaced and SAR activities were suspended as soon as the general attention to the issue and the related public outcry diminished. In the case of Irini, the potential shortcomings of this limited maritime approach have been pointed out from the very beginning. They have to do, in particular, with the risk of not being able to enforce a comprehensive arms embargo, thus potentially reinforcing one party to the conflict (Haftar’s LNA) to the detriment of the other (the UN-backed government in Tripoli).¹⁰

The gradual disappearance of SAR activities in the transition from “old” to “new” Sophia and finally to Operation Irini provides one dimension of the fragility of EU external action in the Mediterranean.

The EU’s overall hostility to SAR – and, ultimately, to migration – is a longstanding issue, effectively summarised in the concept of “Fortress Europe”.¹¹ However, when Sophia was launched in 2015, and throughout

its first phase, EU rhetoric and public discourse depicted SAR activities as paramount.¹² Since then, they have progressively lost centrality eventually disappearing altogether in the present Operation Irini. Three sets of reasons explain this transition.

Firstly, the EU’s pursuit of externalisation policies has meant that most migrants are held before they can even reach the Mediterranean, thus making migration less visible to public opinion.¹³ Secondly, the policing of humanitarian actors at sea and the criminalisation of NGO search and rescue activities in the Mediterranean has further diminished publicity, working, alongside externalisation, as a smokescreen to relieve public pressure on politicians and the EU or, for another segment of the population, to strengthen the image of EU governments “tacking back control” on the issue of migration and SAR in the Mediterranean.¹⁴

The third element has to do with domestic politics in Europe and the successive elections held in member

¹⁰ Luigi Scazzieri, “The EU’s New Libya Operation Is Flawed”, cit. and Tarek Megerisi, “EU’s ‘Irini’ Libya Mission: Europe’s Operation Cassandra”, in *EUobserver*, 3 April 2020, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/147968>.

¹¹ See Jiska Engelbert, Isabel Awad and Jacco van Sterkenburg, “Everyday Practices and the (Un)Making of ‘Fortress Europe’: Introduction to the Special Issue”, in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (April 2019), p. 133-143, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549418823055>.

¹² Eugenio Cusumano, “Migrant Rescue as Organized Hypocrisy: EU Maritime Missions Offshore Libya between Humanitarianism and Border Control”, in *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (March 2019), p. 3-24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836718780175>.

¹³ This approach began in earnest with the 2016 EU-Turkey Deal on migration and is also present, for example, in EU agreements with Niger, in the Italy-Libya 2017 Memorandum of Understanding or in European support for the so-called Libyan coast guard.

¹⁴ Shoshana Fine, “All at Sea: Europe’s Crisis of Solidarity on Migration”, in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, October 2019, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/all_at_sea_europes_crisis_of_solidarity_on_migration.

states over the past years, including the 2019 European Parliament elections. Overall, the fear that a narrative of “out-of-control” migration might further strengthen far-right populist and Eurosceptic parties has contributed to further reinvigorate the already existing support for harsher migration policies across the political board in Europe. It is also in this context, that the questionable thesis that SAR activities constitute a “pull factor” for migration towards Europe has gained currency among many EU institutions and member states.¹⁵

The result is that once the pressure to act lessened, so did the EU’s interest towards SAR. Remarkably, similar trends are detectable also within those EU supranational institutions – the Commission and the Parliament¹⁶ – that in the past had shown more concern for SAR activities and the humanitarian aspects of migration policies, often criticising Council decisions that went in the opposite direction.

¹⁵ Jacopo Barigazzi, “EU Launches Naval Mission”, cit.; and Matteo Villa, “Migration and the Myth of the Pull-Factor in the Mediterranean”, in *ISPI website*, 26 February 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/node/25207>.

¹⁶ Consider, among other things, the lack of any mention of SAR activities in High Representative Josep Borrell speech for the launch of Irini, the rejection of a non-binding resolution on SAR in the European Parliament in October 2019, or the very harsh internal debate within the EPP on migration and how this reflects on the battle for leadership. See European External Action Service (EEAS), *Operation IRINI: Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell Following the Launch of the Operation*, 31 March 2020, <https://europa.eu/!Xf99YY>; and Jacopo Barigazzi, “In Libya, EU faces a Civil War of Its Own”, in *Politico*, 17 February 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/libya-eu-civil-war>.

Looking at the transition from Sophia to Irini, and how easily SAR disappeared from EU policy while being heavily curtailed in public discourse demonstrates the consequences of policies approved out of short-term urgency, especially when such urgency changes, blurs or disappears.

Significantly, these measures did not effectively improve the situation in Libya or on migration policies, let alone the EU’s image as a responsible and effective foreign policy actor. The price paid by the EU in terms of its credibility is well illustrated by the criticism coming from international organisations, NGOs and human right advocates¹⁷ – not to mention impact this is having on people whose lives are harshly affected by these policies.

The question which is left open, for the months and years to come, is to what extent the emergency approach shown by the EU on migration will continue to inform other foreign policy decisions related to the Mediterranean, hampering the EU’s external action.

This urgency of “doing something” should rather be re-directed to finally resolve those internal contradictions and debates related both to the decision-making process (from veto powers in Council to the relationship of foreign affairs with other policy areas) and the diverging interests of member states in substantive policy aspects. Without

¹⁷ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, *Lives Saved. Rights Protected. Bridging the Protection Gap for Refugees and Migrants in the Mediterranean*, June 2019, <https://rm.coe.int/lives-saved-rights-protected-bridging-the-protection-gap-for-refugees-/168094eb87>.

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this, it is hard to imagine the EU as a credible and humanitarian actor in the Mediterranean, shaping long-term, comprehensive and consistent policies that are best able to serve EU interests while not sacrificing its fundamental values.

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