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Contesting the lethal Mediterranean frontier

Charles Heller, Lorenzo Pezzani, Maurice Stierl

Introduction

In the night of 6 to 7 November 2018, a group of 93 migrants left the coast of Zlitan, seeking to escape Libya and travel to Europe by boat (Heller 2019). In the afternoon of 7 November, a Spanish aircraft part of the EU anti-smuggling operation EUNAVFOR Med Sophia sighted them and relayed their sighting to the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome which, in turn, informed the Libyan Coastguard. As the Libyan forces were already engaged in the interception of another migrant boat, the 93 migrants continued to navigate north. The precarious passengers alerted activists of the emergency hotline Alarm Phone who remained in contact with them, gathering information and GPS positions and passing them on to the Italian authorities. In the meantime, the Libyan authorities identified a vessel transiting the area of distress, the 88-meter-long vehicle carrier *Nivin*, flying the Panama flag. Lacking the communication equipment to contact the *Nivin* captain, the Libyan authorities requested MRCC Rome to alert the *Nivin* on their behalf and instruct the vehicle carrier to conduct a rescue operation. In the early hours of 8 November, the *Nivin* reached the boat in distress and rescued the 93 distressed migrants. According to the rescued, the *Nivin* crew informed them that they would be brought to Italy. In reality, however, the vehicle carrier proceeded toward Misrata, as instructed by the Libyan authorities.

When the Libyan authorities approached the *Nivin* in the open sea to transfer the passengers, the rescued realised they had been lied to. Fearing for their lives if returned, they refused to be transferred to the Libyan Coastguard. In an act of resistance, they locked themselves up in the hold of the ship to protect themselves from Libyan officials threatening them. The migrants later refused to disembark in the port of Misrata, where the boat arrived in the morning of 10 November, and remained confined inside the vessel. Thanks to a mobile phone, they were able to communicate their plight and refusal to disembark to the outside world. The stand-off lasted for ten days. On 20 November, Libyan security forces violently removed the passengers from the ship. The migrants describe suffering serious wounds during the attack, including as a result of being shot at with both rubber and standard bullets. After the forced disembarkation, they faced detention and ill-treatment, including torture, and forced labour.

As the *Nivin* incident exemplifies, precarious migration across the Mediterranean is a highly conflictual process. Though routinely folded into narratives within which the fate of migrant travellers seems to depend on their own struggle with biophysical forces at work – the winds, the currents, the waves, and the cold – the phenomenon of maritime migration needs to be viewed in light of shifting policies and practices of securitisation and control as well as the unabated desire and needs that underpin ‘acts of escape’ across the sea (Mezzadra, 2004). Given the diverse background and places of origin of the people on the move, the drivers and conditions of flight via the Mediterranean differ considerably, as several scholars have noted (Crawley et al., 2017; Squire et al., 2017). What people on the move in the Mediterranean share, however, is the experience of increasingly securitised migratory routes, to a large part the consequence of restrictive and preventative approaches to certain forms of human mobility, by the member states and institutions of the EU.

The maritime frontier is, however, not only shaped by the security imperatives of states. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013: 167) note, the border is “a space where sovereign and governmental powers interact and are contested by the autonomous action of migrants themselves”. Following these authors, we understand borders, including maritime ones, as complex institutions and spaces shaped by multiple actors and the conflicts they embody “between the practices of border reinforcement and border crossing” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 3). As the *Nivin* incident illustrates, beyond migrants and states, multiple other actors may align with sides of this conflicting spectrum – the merchant ship contributed to the border reinforcing logic imposed by states, while the Alarm Phone sought to enable the border crossing of migrants. It is from these conflicting relations between multiple actors that *border regimes* emerge and transform (Hess and Kasparek 2017).

In this chapter, we highlight scholarly and activist insights into the interplay between migratory movements and forms of border governance in the Mediterranean. We point to the migratory dynamics which have resulted in the crossing of about two million individuals between 2014 and the end of 2020 alone, as well as the political processes that have turned the sea into a space of severe human rights violations and a ‘graveyard’. We emphasise the multiple forms of contestation which have crystallised across the sea over the last years to oppose border violence and enable migrants to enact their freedom of movement (Heller, Pezzani and Stierl 2019). Our chapter is organised in three main parts. We begin by offering a brief historic overview of policies and practices of border governance in the Mediterranean region vis-à-vis

ongoing struggles for movement. In the second part, we discuss the particular political geography of the sea and the role that its overlapping jurisdictions play in migrant deaths. The final part explores different modalities of contestation of the maritime frontier: migrant struggles and nongovernmental action at sea, but also more ambivalent actors such as merchant ships whose role in relation to the border regime has shifted over time.

Part I: The Mediterranean conflict over mobility

The Mediterranean has long been a space of friction, across which illegalised migratory trajectories have evolved in light of increasingly militarised means of control and governance, deployed by states of the ‘Global North’ and their allies in the attempt to turn turbulent and unruly human movements from the ‘Global South’ into orderly and governable mobilities. Though we focus on the contemporary period, one needs to situate such uneven forms of mobility control in a longer history. The work of historians reveals that a selective and unequal mobility regime was an intrinsic part of European imperial expansions toward the Mediterranean’s southern shores in the nineteenth century (Clancy-Smith, 2010; Borutta and Gekas, 2012). While mostly European settlers migrated toward colonised territories during that century, as of the beginning of the twentieth century, the northbound movement of colonised populations toward metropolitan territories took prominence. This phase was marked by successive moments of partial opening and closing of borders, with restrictions consistently leading to acts of evasion by migrants and early cases of deaths at sea.

It is, however, more recently that illegalised migration and deaths across the Mediterranean have become structural and highly politicised phenomenon. At the end of the 1980s, in conjunction with the consolidation of freedom of movement within the EU through the Schengen Agreement, visas were increasingly denied to citizens of the ‘Global South’ (Bakewell and De Haas, 2007; Squire and Stierl 2020). As scholarly research on the history of migration toward Europe has repeatedly shown, restrictions on legal migration did not prompt an end of Europe-bound migration but were, to the contrary, rather productive of unauthorised attempts to cross into Europe, including attempts via the sea (Samers, 2010; Boswell and Geddes, 2010). These ‘EUropean’¹ forms of migration governance have thus been constitutive

¹ The term ‘EUrope’ seeks to problematise frequently employed usages that equate the EU with Europe and Europe with the EU and suggests, at the same time, that EUrope is not reducible to the institutions of the EU (see Stierl 2019).

factors in the production of Mediterranean migration, which, in particular during the 1990s, became an increasingly spectacularised and fatal phenomenon (Weber and Pickering 2011; Mountz and Loyd 2014; Baldwin-Edwards et al. 2018).

During the 2000s, EU member states and institutions established a range of measures to prevent irregularised forms of migration, most notably by establishing the EU border agency Frontex (Neal, 2009) and by fostering new agreements with North African and other countries through which these countries would gradually turn into what Ataç et al., (2015: 3) have referred as the “(post-colonial) wardens of the European border regime”. These alliances between Europe and North Africa, however, were considerably ruptured from 2011 onward, when the Arab Uprisings prompted a ‘re-opening’ of the North African migration corridor. The fall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and the Qaddafi regime in Libya in early 2011 allowed migrants to seek out maritime routes to escape to the European continent while the war in Syria led to an exodus which would contribute decisively to the mass crossings via the Aegean Sea in 2015 and early 2016. During this period, migratory movements across the central Mediterranean have increased considerably, particularly from Libya: from an estimated annual average of 23,000 between 1997 and 2010 (McMahon and Sigona, 2016), to approximately 64,000 in 2011, and further to an annual average around 156,000 between 2014 and 2017. This was followed by a drastic decline between 2018 and 2020, when the annual average of migrant arrivals dropped to approximately 25,000 people, not least due to increased containment operations carried out by Libyan authorities (UNHCR, 2021). The human cost of border closure has been exorbitant: more than 40,000 migrant deaths at sea have been documented since the early 1990s. Over 21,000 deaths have been counted between 2014 and 2020 alone (UNITED, 2020), with the real figure of migrant fatalities estimated to be much higher as many people disappear without ever being accounted for.

What has emerged in the Mediterranean Sea over time, is thus an intense and lethal *mobility conflict*. On one side of this conflict, we find the illegalised travellers on often overloaded boats seeking to cross the Mediterranean frontier: migrants from the Global South who seek to reach European soil despite the denial of the right to do so by European states and their southern allies. Seeking to support migrants in exercising their unauthorised mobility and shielding them from the violence of the border regime, a range of activists and nongovernmental actors have intervened. These actors, situated within a broad political spectrum, have multiplied over the last years and have developed new forms of intervention at the maritime frontier, including by

deploying rescue vessels and civilian aircrafts or running an activist hotline that receives distress calls from the sea. On the other side of this mobility conflict, we find state actors who seek to prevent migrants from arriving on European shores, no matter the cost to life and well-being. In response to migrant crossings, and despite the legal obligations of coastal states to organise and perform rescue, European state actors have systematically refrained from rescuing, and repeatedly denied disembarkation. In effect, European states have shifted the burden of rescue to non-state actors, outsourced border control to third countries, and criminalised the solidarity enacted by activists, NGO rescuers, and fishermen.

Between these different actors who directly clash within the Mediterranean battlefield (Mezzadra and Stierl 2019; Garelli and Tazzioli 2018), a range of actors with more ambivalent positions exist, who may form temporary alliances with either side of the Mediterranean mobility conflict. Merchant ships fall into this in-between category, who may engage in rescue operations and disembark rescued migrants in European ports, or who may engage and push-backs, in compliance with the orders of European or Libyan state agencies to return migrants to Libya. International organisations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are other highly ambivalent actors, oscillating between defending the interests of states and advocating for migrants' rights. The position of the different actors in the Mediterranean mobility conflict is thus not always a clear-cut one, and also evolves over time. To understand the practices and logics of these actors, it is essential to understand the political geography of the Mediterranean and the different jurisdictional spaces that criss-cross it.

Part II: The political geography of the humanitarian border

Understanding the political geography of the sea is essential to conceive of the ways in which the mobility conflict plays out across it and the specific forms of violence that are exercised against migrants. The Mediterranean frontier has a distinct postcolonial history (Danewid 2017; Mainwaring and DeBono 2021). Today, it constitutes a fault line of the world system, and a highly contested border zone, across which the desires and movements of migrants from the Global South clash with the bordering practices deployed by European actors. The sea's liquid element has long imposed constraints on states in terms of their modes of appropriation and control, but also offered crucial potentialities to connect empires and trade on a global scale (Steinberg 2001). Over time, states have created international conventions in a space over

which no state can exercise exclusive sovereignty, and all states exercise partial rights and obligations, which often overlap and conflict with each other.

At work at sea is a form of “unbundled” sovereignty described by Saskia Sassen (2006), in which the rights and obligations that compose modern state sovereignty on the land are decoupled from each other and applied to varying degrees depending on the spatial extent and the specific issue in question. As a result, illegalised migrants’ boats crossing the Mediterranean frontier cut across various jurisdictional zones that crisscross the sea – from exclusive economic zones to search and rescue regions – and are caught between a multiplicity of legal regimes that depend on the contested juridical status applied to those onboard (refugees, migrants, illegals, pirates, etc.). These overlaps, conflicts of delimitation, and differing interpretations are not malfunctions but rather a structural characteristic of the maritime frontier, one that both constrains and offers potentialities to migrants and states alike. Migrants departing from Libya may seek to navigate undetected until they reach the limits of the Maltese and Italian search and rescue areas, in the hope of being rescued by European actors and disembarked on European soil.

Conversely, in order to avoid engaging in rescue missions and bearing the ‘burden’ of processing migrants’ asylum requests following disembarkation (as entailed by the so-called Dublin Regulation), coastal states have strategically exploited the partial and overlapping sovereignty at sea and the elastic nature of international law to evade their responsibility for rescue at sea (see Gammeltoft-Hansen and Alberts 2010; Suárez de Vivero 2010; Moreno-Lax, 2018). These states have criminalised fishermen for rescuing migrants, and engaged in lengthy stand-offs in which they have sought to refuse disembarkation. All these practices have acted as a disincentive for seafarers to comply with their obligation to rescue *any* person in distress, leading to repeated cases on non-assistance to migrants crossing the sea. The vastness of the sea, as well as its ambivalent legal construction, has made it challenging to seek accountability for border violence, and the space of the sea has in effect become to a large extent a “legal black hole” (Mann 2018).

Within these overlapping and conflicting jurisdictional zones and legal norms, illegalised migrants are constituted as highly ambivalent subjects, simultaneously “a life to be protected *and* a security threat to protect against” (Vaughan-Williams 2015, 3). This ambivalence lies at

the heart of what William Walters (2011, 138) has referred to as the “humanitarian border”, which emerges

once it becomes established that border crossing has become, for thousands of migrants seeking, for a variety of reasons, to access the territories of the global North, a matter of life and death. It crystallizes as a way of governing this novel and disturbing situation, and compensating for the social violence embodied in the regime of migration control.

The instability and ambivalence of migrants’ subject-positions in the course of their precarious journeys is further heightened by the shifting imperatives of states, who may seek to emphasise the humanitarian dimension of their responses to a shipwreck and public outcry (as was the case with the launching of Italy’s Mare Nostrum operation, following a large shipwreck off Lampedusa’s coast in October 2013) or the security dimension of their responses to public expressions of racism. The tensions between the often-entangled logics of *security* and *humanitarianism*, both of which have become fundamental rationales, discourses and practices that cut across governmental and nongovernmental actors far beyond the Mediterranean (Fassin 2012), are thus starkly revealed at Europe’s maritime frontiers. These logics shape to varying degrees the practices of states, but also those of other actors engaged in the mobility conflict. The coexistence of these logics within each actor, which are also shaped by other rationales such as solidarity and human rights for NGO rescuers or economic profits for merchant ships (Senu 2019), and within the border regime as a whole, highlight friction and tension. While, as Paolo Cuttitta (2018, 649) reminds us, the fluctuations of security and humanitarian logics have left the EU’s “restrictive migration and border regime” fundamentally unchanged, the contradictions between these logics have opened a space of negotiation that migrants frequently mobilise in the process of their unauthorised border crossings. Furthermore, these complex and shifting logics at work along the Mediterranean frontier have had a major impact in shaping the positionality of rescue NGOs. As Walters (2011, 149) argues, humanitarian practices exist “in a permanent state of co-option, infiltration but also provocation with the state (but also with other supranational and international entities as well)”.

Part III: Shifting modalities of contestation at sea

In this part, we turn more specifically to some of the actors involved in contesting the border violence in the Mediterranean Sea and outline how their practices have evolved over the past ten years. We focus on migrant travellers as central participants in the mobility conflict as well as non-governmental actors whose presence and practices at sea ensure that the Mediterranean remains a conflictual political space.

Migrants' oppositional practices

People precariously on the move are the primary actors who contest border violence. Recognising this, however, is far from straightforward. In dominant public and policy debates, but also in much of mainstream migration studies, the mass dying in the Mediterranean is portrayed as the result of a 'migration crisis' (cf. New Keywords Collective, 2016). In these accounts, migrants are regularly reduced to passive subjects, victims of smugglers or traffickers who lack agency in the migratory process, who are simply being 'pushed' or 'pulled' around (Stierl 2020). Such portrayal denies agency and erases the many and creative ways in which migrants enact their freedom of movement. Even in precarious situations at sea, they frequently generate dilemmas for Europe's border enforcers (Stierl 2019). The Autonomy of Migration literature, associated with autonomous Marxism, has become one of the main scholarly interventions able to emphasise the subjective practices of migrants and the political dimension of their transgressive movements (Scheel 2013). Migrant escape through an autonomist perspective is considered "a form of creative subversion capable of challenging and transforming the conditions of power" (Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 56).

Carrying subjects who enact their right to leave, move, survive and arrive, migrant boats turn into "a site of political action" (Walters 2015: 472). These boats are mostly steered by 'migrant captains' who make use of the satellite phone often only after having moved a significant distance to northern African shores, regularly informing not (only) European coastguards, but (also) activists of their distress. Some boats do not want to be rescued at all but seek to reach European coasts independently, at times in order for their passengers to 'disappear' after arrival. In several cases, dinghies were intentionally deflated or people went overboard in order to force others to respond. Hundreds of precarious travellers have jumped into the sea in the presence of European forces to avoid being returned to Libya by Libyan militias. Through these risky, desperate, and at times fatal acts of becoming shipwrecked, migrants try to force themselves into a regime of care that was never intended for them, thereby re-articulating European humanitarian narratives in a "reversed discourse" that is "parasitic on the 'dominant

discourse” (Baaz et al., 2017: 31–32). As Tazzioli and Walters (2016: 462) write, through such actions migrants make themselves audible and visible “in terms of a politics of the governed in which migrants demand to be objects of humanitarian concern” and turn themselves into “a humanitarian problem”.

Nongovernmental allies

Another force that has contested the Mediterranean border are nongovernmental actors. Since 2011, they have transformed the Mediterranean into a laboratory for the innovation of new political practices. A multitude of nongovernmental actors have created initiatives to support migrants in the exercise of their freedom to move and to counteract the violence of borders. Together, they have turned the in-between space of the ‘Medi-terranean’ into a transnational space of political experimentation, and a space of politics in its own right.

Without any claim to being exhaustive, we start by mentioning the mobilisation of the families of the disappeared in Tunisia, who came together in 2011 to demand truth and accountability for the disappearance of their loved ones. These families have been supported by organisations such as the Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux (FTDES) in Tunisia and by activists in Italy. Their voices have resonated across the Mediterranean within large activist networks, such as the Boats4People, which launched a campaign in 2012 to counter-act the mass drowning at sea and proved pivotal for later initiatives, including WatchTheMed and Alarm Phone.

The Forensic Oceanography project, which was initiated in 2011 by two among us (Heller and Pezzani 2012), developed new methods to document and contest the violence of borders. In our reconstruction of the 2011 ‘left-to-die boat’ case - an incident in which 72 people were abandoned to drift for 14 days within NATO’s maritime surveillance area off the coast of Libya despite repeated distress calls and encounters with state actors - we assembled a composite image of the events by corroborating the survivors’ testimonies with information provided by the vast apparatus of remote sensing technologies that have transformed the contemporary sea into a digital archive. While these technologies are often used for the purpose of policing illegalised migration as well as the detection of other ‘threats’, they were repurposed to find evidence for the failure to render assistance in support of litigation efforts led by several different NGOs.

Since 2013, the WatchTheMed platform has sought to make these tools of documentation available to migrant solidarity movements. It has mainly been used by the Alarm Phone project since 2014 (in which Stierl is actively engaged), a 24/7 emergency phone line supporting migrants in distress at sea. Through the Alarm Phone, underground networks of solidarity have been extended across the sea, offering precarious travellers alternative ways to make their voices heard (Stierl, 2016 and 2019). Thanks to a management software, the Alarm Phone can re-route distress calls to a vast number of volunteers operating shifts, situated in about 12 countries, thus ensuring that every call is attended to. In its first eight years in existence, the activist phone project has gathered extraordinary momentum, and supported over 4,000 boats in distress in all Mediterranean regions (Schwarz and Stierl, 2019). Listening to and giving echo to the voices of those in the process of crossing maritime spaces allows the hotline activists to disobediently *observe* the Mediterranean Sea. Besides supporting precarious human mobilities at sea, the wide solidarity network of the Alarm Phone, composed of over 200 activists and several connected groups, can exercise pressure in real-time when there is a risk that a human rights violation may be perpetrated, such as cases of failing to render assistance or forcibly returning people to places of unsafety, as was the case in the *Nivin* incident we outlined in the beginning.

These different initiatives have challenged the boundaries of what and who can be seen and heard across the Mediterranean frontier and have allowed nongovernmental actors to exercise forms of pressure on states. Nonetheless, for several years, they had to rely nearly exclusively on states to conduct rescue operations, given the absence of other actors in the Mediterranean. This monopoly was actively contested through the intervention of Search and Rescue (SAR) NGOs who started to deploy their own vessels during, and especially in the wake of, the termination of the Italian Mare Nostrum operation. Cuttitta (2017 and 2018) has referred to this moment as the ‘non-governmental turn’ in the Mediterranean, with first MOAS and later Sea-Watch, MSF, and several other NGOs sending SAR assets to the area off the coast of Libya in order to fill the lethal rescue gap left by the end of the Italian operation (Heller and Pezzani 2016). Also Stierl (2018: 705) has considered the emergence of the nongovernmental “humanitarian fleet [...] a new dimension in the humanitarian transformation of (maritime) borderzones” which would provoke conflict in the dominant humanitarian narratives constructed by EU institutions and member states.

Rescue NGOs, who have rescued about 120,000 people between 2014 and 2019 alone (Cusumano and Villa 2021), simultaneously contest the partial de-humanitarianisation of the border at the operational level in light of the withdrawal of state assets from the deadliest stretches of the sea, and take the rescue practices that had come to be embedded in the humanitarian border into their own hands. While, at first, “Italian authorities welcomed NGOs as an important multiplier of their SAR capabilities” (Cusumano 2019: 107), Italy and other EU member states turned ever-more hostile from 2017 on in their desperate attempt to prevent migrants’ crossings. Despite a lack of evidence, NGO rescuers were increasingly portrayed as a ‘pull-factor’, accused of prompting migrants to embark on risky journeys - an argument that had significantly contributed to the termination of Mare Nostrum (Heller and Pezzani 2017; Tazzioli 2016). As a result, NGO rescuers faced increasingly harsh state measures, ranging from accusations of collaboration with smuggling networks, to confiscations of rescue vessels and criminal investigations of crew members. In view of the increasingly draconian policies of criminalisation and closure adopted by Italy’s far-right Interior Minister Salvini in 2018, one could observe how SAR NGOs adopted diverse strategies, with some alternatively seeking to depoliticise their activities further by foregrounding their humanitarian neutrality or by affirming instead their oppositional and disobedient stance, defending both the irrepressible desire to live, rights and autonomy of migrants, and nongovernmental organisations’ ability to exercise their right to solidarity (Heller 2021).

While we see already with rescue NGOs that opposition and complicity are not clear cut and may evolve over time, this has become even more evident in relation to the evolving positionality of merchant ships. Merchant ships have long been enlisted in the EU’s politics of abandonment as the criminalisation of rescue and the frequent denial of disembarkation have acted disincentives for seafarers to comply with their obligation to rescue any person in distress. And yet, during the Mare Nostrum operation, merchant ships were actively called upon to rescue migrants. Despite the significant costs incurred in the process, which, as Senu (2020) notes, are only partially covered through insurance, merchant ships demonstrated a remarkable commitment to abide by their obligations and engaged in challenging rescue operations. However, with the end of Mare Nostrum, an even greater burden was placed on their shoulders.

Indeed, the shipping industry became the largest SAR operator in the central Mediterranean in early 2015, rescuing 11,954 people within the first five months of the year. In this way, the shipping industry turned into a central actor at Europe’s maritime frontier, not only at the

operational level but also as an outspoken critic of the withdrawal of EU state assets. The International Chamber of Shipping vocally denounced the termination of Mare Nostrum (World Maritime News 2014) and warned EU member states unequivocally in an open letter that is worth quoting at length:

“The humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean Sea is spiralling out of control. [. . .] There is a terrible risk of further catastrophic loss of life as ever-more desperate people attempt this deadly sea crossing. [. . .] We believe it is unacceptable that the international community is increasingly relying on merchant ships and seafarers to undertake more and more large-scale rescues. [. . .]. Commercial ships are not equipped to undertake such large-scale rescues. [. . .]. In the short term, we therefore feel that the immediate priority must be for EU and EEA Member States to increase resources and support for Search and Rescue operations in the Mediterranean, in view of the very large number of potentially dangerous rescues now being conducted by merchant ships. [. . .] In addition to increasing SAR resources, there is also an urgent need for EU and EEA Member States to develop a political solution. [. . .] The shipping industry believes that the EU and the international community need to provide refugees and migrants with alternative means of finding safety without risking their lives by crossing the Mediterranean in unseaworthy boats.” (ECSA and ICS, 31 March 2015)

This letter strikingly illustrates the role the shipping community came to play along the Mediterranean frontier, a role that has evolved further over the past years. From the rather antagonistic position taken in the mid-2010s, the merchant shipping community has become increasingly complicit in forms of migrant deterrence. This has particularly been the case since 2018, when under Italy’s far-right government, merchant vessels have increasingly turned into active participants in mass push-back operations to Libya, as the case of the *Nivin* demonstrates.

Conclusion

The Mediterranean frontier constitutes a key site to explore and to contest Europe’s violent border experimentations that systematically violate migrants’ rights and dignity. In this space, tens of thousands of migrants are captured against their will, often to orchestrate their return to

places they had sought to escape from. Others are abandoned and left to die. In this chapter, we have highlighted the production of this violent and deadly frontier, pointing to the ways in which restrictions on legal migration have been productive of sea migration in the first place, and discussing the particular political geography of the sea, a space shaped by conflictual logics of security and humanitarianism. At the same time, we have emphasised the many modalities of contestation that have emerged along this the maritime frontier: migrant struggles and nongovernmental action at sea as well as the practices of more ambivalent actors such as merchant ships.

Migrant death and deterrence at sea is not predetermined but subject to contestation, not least as the Mediterranean Sea is a complex space, criss-crossed and monitored by a variety of actors who often operate with conflicting rationales. This suggests that the maritime frontier is not a sealed or static frontier but one that evolves over time and in light of various state and non-state interventions. No pre-written script exists when migrants enter the sea on precarious boats in order to reach European shores. Whether they drown, are rescued, arrive independently, or whether they are disembarked in Europe or back in North Africa, is not predetermined but the outcome of a struggle that plays out at sea, a struggle that implicates migrant groups, commercial actors, North African and European fishermen, NGO rescuers and activists, militia groups and smuggling networks, as well as national and supranational actors operating at sea and up in the sky. The Mediterranean is more than merely the ‘sea between the land’, a liminal space lying outside the realm of politics. Instead, unabated migrant movements and ongoing practices of solidarity, contest the bordering of the sea and turn it into a fundamental space of international and transnational politics in its own right.

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