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From firearms to facemasks: The visual securitization of migration in Italy, Malta, Libya and Niger

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**From firearms to facemasks:
The visual securitization of migration in Italy, Malta, Libya and Niger**

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Introduction

Undocumented migration has long been known as a border spectacle (De Genova, 2002). According to International Organization for Migration (IOM) data, over a million people crossed the Strait of Sicily from 2013 to October 2024. At least 22,000 lost their lives at sea, a figure that is likely to be grossly underestimated (IOM, 2024), while deaths among migrants crossing the Sahara Desert may be even twice as high (UN, 2024). The Central Mediterranean Route connecting Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe is therefore a stage where the border spectacle of migration has been reenacted daily for over a decade, capturing media as well as public attention and evoking emotions ranging from fear to compassion. Due to their immediacy and emotional impact, images have played a central role in both the representation as well as the governance of migration across the Central Mediterranean and beyond (Massari, this special issue).

Scholars have extensively examined how images ‘speak’ security, stressing the securitizing power of newspaper covers and pictures (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020; Hansen, 2011) as well as artifacts like biohazard suits (Krause, 2021). Visual representations of migration have attracted significant scholarly attention. For instance, Stachowitsch and Sachseder (2019) include some images in their study of how migration is framed as a risk by the European Border and Coast Guard (still better known as Frontex), an agency whose visual communication is also studied at length by Dhillon (this special issue). Conversely, Massari (2021) examines the role that the images disseminated by transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play in the securitization of human mobility. Others have expanded the scope of their analysis beyond securitization in a narrow sense. Notably, Hansen et al. (2021) conduct a systematic analysis of European visual narratives of migration, while Adler-Nissen et al. (2020) leverage salient pictures like those showing the body of dead toddler Alan Kurdi, drowned en route to Europe, to investigate how emotions influence world politics.

While scholars agree that images securitize migration no less than written texts, existing studies largely focus on countries in the Global North. Visual representations of migration in countries of origin and transit, conversely, have remained largely invisible. Our study seeks to fill this gap by focusing on the Mediterranean, and specifically the Central Mediterranean Route connecting Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe through Libya and Tunisia. We interrogate irregular migration across this region through the following research questions: How do the pictures published by media at the two sides of the Mediterranean Sea securitize migration? Why does the visual securitization of migration vary between countries in Europe, North Africa, and the Sahel?

We seek to answer these questions by providing the first systematic, comparative analysis of the visual securitization of migration by media based in European states as well as countries of transit and departure in North Africa and the Sahel, thereby exploring how and why the framing of irregular migration varies across time and space. To that end, we investigate how newspapers' visual representation of border enforcement has changed over a long timeframe (2013-2023), across countries in Africa and Europe, and between media outlets with different political leanings. Specifically, we examine a large body of pictures portraying border enforcement personnel in four countries along the Central Mediterranean Route: Italy, Malta, Libya, and Niger.

Our analysis combines visual content analysis with insights from semiotics. We focus on the presence or absence of items that serve as indexical signs forming an associational link between irregular mobility and specific threats. Consistent with our theoretical expectations, our results show that the portrayal of these items varies significantly across countries. Due to the frequent foregrounding of personnel wearing biohazard protection rather than carrying weapons, European newspaper have increasingly securitized migration as a health risk, a tendency that is not solely limited to periods of pandemic outbreaks and conservative media outlets. Conversely, the trope of security forces confronting migrants is much less frequent on all African newspapers. When present, these pictures showcase a much smaller use of biohazard protection and a relatively more frequent display of weapons that resonates with securitization discourses linking migration to terrorism, crime, and physical violence at large.

Our study adds to the concept of visual governance of migration introduced by Massari (this special issue) by showing that, once portrayed by media, border enforcement routines play a performative role as international icons of irregular migration . These icons, we argue, can be studied systematically by focusing on items creating an associational link between migrants and specific threats, such as the use of weapons or biohazard gear by security forces. Second, we systematically map the relative presence or absence of these items in the pictures used by different media outlets, thereby assessing how visual securitization discourses change between countries in Europe and Africa. Third, and relatedly, we seek to redress existing scholarship

over-representation of the Global North, answering the call for decolonizing visual communication research (Bleiker, 2023: 17) and decentering migration studies (Triandafyllidou, 2020).

The article is divided as follows. The second section leverages critical security, migration, and global health studies as sources of theoretical expectations. The third section outlines our research design, case selection and methodology, while the fourth sketches an overview of migration across the Central Mediterranean Route. The fifth and sixth sections present and discuss the results of our visual analysis. Finally, the concluding section fleshes out the implication of our study and offers some tentative conclusions.

The visual securitization of migration across the Mediterranean: theoretical expectations

The construction of human mobility as a threat has been at the forefront of securitization studies since Waever et al.'s (1993) *Migration, Identity, and the New Security Agenda in Europe*. Accordingly, the literature on securitization as discourse identifies various speech act and frames, stressing the role of associational links (Squire, 2015) between migration and threats like terrorism and organized crime. Scholars have also stressed that irregular border crossing is often securitized as a threat to the safety of migrants themselves. Consequently, several studies highlight the salience of discourses victimizing asylum seekers and framing migration as a humanitarian crisis (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017; Aradau, 2004).

Alongside the literature examining securitization as the outcome of speech acts enabling exceptional responses, scholars like Didier Bigo (2014; 2002) have focused on the everyday routines of policing and border enforcement enacted by security professionals, heralding a different strands of securitization studies predicated on practices rather than discourses. Students of securitizing practices have often stressed that European border enforcement features an interplay of care and control (Pallister-Wilkins 2015, Walters 2006). In this ostensibly “humanitarian border” (Lynes, this special issue; Novak, 2022; Vaughan Williams 2015), activities mitigating human suffering like maritime rescue and medical assistance coexist with and partly disguise the growing attempt to govern and restrict irregular mobility.

Several studies have noted that containing infectious diseases is central to border enforcement discourses and practices alike (Bleiker et al., 2013; Hansen et al., 2021). As public health policies are tightly intertwined with the social construction of “self” and “other”, discourses on the “foreignness of germs” have a long history, targeting European migrants to the United States in past centuries (Markel and Stern, 2002: 757) as well as people from the Global South moving to Europe today. However, global health scholars agree that the propensity to offload health risks on unknowledgeable others has deeply racialized

underpinnings, linking infectiousness to the ignorance or allegedly unhygienic lifestyles of people from different ethnicities (Abeysinghe, 2016; Dionne and Turkmen, 2020).

Concerns associated with infectious diseases gained momentum in European migration governance since the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa (Abeysinghe, 2016) and have long been conspicuous in documents like Frontex risk analysis reports (Stachowitsch and Sachseder, 2019). In the wake of the first COVID-19 outbreak, EU member states leveraged health risks to tighten border and asylum policy, which exacerbated the plight of people on the move (Stierl and Dadusc, 2021). European countries of first entry like Italy and Malta initially “turned the logics of securitization upside down” (Tazzioli and Stierl, 2021: 4), presenting themselves as unable to safeguard migrants from contagion to shirk the obligation to act as places of safety for those rescued at sea, but eventually reverted to discourses securitizing migrants as carriers of diseases. Several studies also dissect post-pandemic border enforcement practices like the use of quarantine ships, examining their implications for migrants and frontline professionals (Pacciardi, 2023).

Drawing on these arguments, we investigate whether and to what extent the visual representation of irregular migration reproduces these discursive frames and practices. We expect the pictures published by European media to reflect the abovementioned tendencies. The portrayal of security personnel conducting border enforcement in European newspapers should reflect the growing prevalence of a hygienic-sanitary logic (Pacciardi, 2023; Tazzioli and Stierl, 2021), an interplay between care and control (Walters 2006; Pallister-Wilkins 2015) and a broader tendency to frame migrants travelling to Europe as both *at risk* and *a risk* (Aradau, 2004; Gray and Frank 2019). Accordingly, biohazard equipment should be especially prominent in the portrayal of border security forces among European newspaper pictures, especially amid pandemic outbreaks. Conversely, these items should be less frequently present in the visual representation of border enforcement by African news outlets.

Methodology, case selection and research design

As different legs of the Central Mediterranean Route, Niger, Libya, Malta and Italy serve as ideal cases to examine the visual securitization of migration. Niger is both the country of origin of people heading to North Africa as well as a transit hub for northbound flows from West Africa; Libya, conversely, is both a destination country for many migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa as well as a gateway to Europe. Malta and Italy too are simultaneously destination countries as well as entry points into other European states. Hence, the selection of these countries has a two-pronged rationale: on the one hand, it highlights continuities and discontinuities along the North-South divide, investigating the performative power of borders;

on the other, it sheds light on the commonalities between “transit countries” (Frowd, 2019) and how the alleged risks of human mobility are constructed therein.

To analyze the visual securitization of migration in these four cases, we have built a dataset including newspapers catering to different audiences and upholding different political orientations in each of the countries examined. In the case of Italy, we selected the conservative tabloid *Il Giornale* and the moderate progressive newspaper *La Repubblica*. As of Malta, we examined the two largest English-speaking newspapers, the moderate conservative *Times of Malta* and the more liberal *Malta Independent*. In the case of Libya, we selected the English-speaking *Libya Herald*, the multilingual Libyan News Agency *LANA*, and the Arab-speaking *Al Marsad*. While *Libya Herald* and *LANA* are respectively the oldest English-language outlet and the official news source in Western Libya, *Al Marsad* has been an outspoken critic of Tripoli’s government. In Niger, we examined the only three newspapers with online archives we were able to retrieve: *L’Évènement Niger*, *Le Sahel*, and *Aïr-info Agadez*. Although political cleavages in Niger hardly overlap with European categories, our choice reflects the different facets of a deeply divided country: *L’Évènement Niger* is an independent newspaper based in the capital Niamey and often critical of political authorities; *Le Sahel* is a Niamey-based outlet closer to the position of the government; *Aïr-info Agadez* is a local outlet catering to the elites of a region that had become both an irregular migration hub and a target of restrictive border enforcement measures. We have then relied on available search engines like Factiva and Google media to retrieve the relevant articles published by these papers between 2013 and 2023 by using the keyword “irregular migration”, typed in Arabic, English, French and Italian. We then zoomed on the images used by these outlets to cover migration, collecting 685 pictures from Italian media, 476 pictures from Maltese media, 850 pictures from Libyan newspapers and 294 pictures from Nigerien outlets.

Photographs and images do not simply act as conduits of information but are inextricably linked to the construction of the social and cultural meanings needed to interpret them (Roderick, 2016). By (not) taking and publishing pictures, photojournalists and newspaper editors shape what political communities see or do not see, playing a crucial role in narrating, securitizing, and desecuritizing phenomena like undocumented migration (Hansen et al., 2021). Consequently, as stressed by Massari (this special issue), media and photographers actively participate in the visual governance of migration.

Photographs and images at large are inherently polysemic, sharing multiple and overlapping meanings (Barthes, 1977). The challenges arising from the ambiguity of visual communication are nevertheless eased by intertextuality (Hansen, 2011). Images may communicate separately from the texts surrounding them and must therefore be “assessed in their own terms” (Williams, 2003). Since they are all used to illustrate irregular migration, however, the pictures examined in our analysis are anchored in a broader discourse that

facilitates their interpretation and limits their ambiguity. To further address the challenge attached to pictures' polysemic nature, we followed previous scholars' reliance on those 'conventionalized' pictures that can be coded more objectively. Some motifs and visual signs are so consistently used that they come to "tell a more standardized and less polysemic story" to specific audiences (Gartner, 2011: 548). In media coverage of some phenomena, "certain elements are repeated over and over, from image to image, so that despite varying subjects, times and locations, the basic scene becomes a familiar staple, a visual cliché" (Perlmutter, 1998: 11). Specifically, we focus on one of these conventionalized type of pictures – those portraying security personnel engaging in border enforcement. As widely circulated illustrations of border enforcement, these pictures have served as international "icons" (Hansen, 2011; Hansen et al., 2021) of irregular migration and its governance. Pictures portraying border enforcement personnel interacting with migrants are 144 in the case of Italy, 80 in the case of Malta, 29 in the case of Libya, and only 5 in the case of Niger.

We then examined this archive through a visual content analysis. We focus on the equipment and clothing of these personnel, gauging whether they carry weapons and/or wear anti-epidemic suits, masks, and gloves. We argue that these items are pivotal securitizing devices because they serve as indexical signs. According to Peirce (1991 [1867]), signs can be *iconic* (imitative representations of a given object), *symbolic* (arbitrarily connected to an object via conventions like language), or *indexical*. Like a finger pointing in a specific direction, indexical signs draw a spatial or causal connection between a visual artifact and a certain phenomenon, even if that phenomenon is not directly portrayed in the image at hand. These connections enhance the resonance of indexical signs, evoking additional layers of meanings that lie beyond the image itself (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). We argue that, once showed in the pictures used by media, the items protecting security forces from migrants are indexical signs framing migration as a threat no less than written speech acts. Specifically, combat or anti-riot gear clearly securitize migrants by implying that they may engage in terrorism, crime, or other forms of violence. Conversely, biohazard gear signals the risk that migrants may be carriers of infectious diseases.

A coding strategy predicated on specific items like weapons or hazardous materials (hereinafter hazmat) gear has the distinct advantage that their presence or absence can be coded and counted in a largely objective, replicable way. To further mitigate the challenge attached to the ambiguity of images, the photos were coded independently by three student assistants and two of the authors. Keeping in mind the contextual and processual nature of images and the call for reflexivity and the inclusion of other sensory experiences (Pink 2021) when doing visual analysis, we have also relied on the authors' field research in Niger, Libya and Tunisia as well as on a civil society ship conducting maritime rescue operations in the Mediterranean.

This qualitative evidence has helped us make sense of border enforcement practices, their rationale, and their variations across countries and over time.

Irregular migration across the Central Mediterranean Route: an overview

The Central Mediterranean Route connects Sub-Saharan Africa to Southern Europe – Italy and to a lesser extent Malta – through countries in the Sahel – notably Niger – and the Maghreb – where Libya has served as the main gateway across the Mediterranean throughout the 2010s. While reliable figures remain missing, the Central Mediterranean Route has arguably been the deadliest worldwide throughout the last two decades.

In 2013, public outrage for casualties at sea and security concerns for undetected arrivals of irregular migrants prompted the Italian government to launch Navy operation *Mare Nostrum*, which proactively assisted boats off the coast of Libya and disembarked all asylum seekers on Italian territory. While *Mare Nostrum* was later suspended, rescue operations continued to be performed by Italian security forces, Frontex, the CSDP mission EUNAVFOR Med ‘Sophia’ and several NGOs (Cusumano, 2019; Baldwin-Edwards and Lutterbeck, 2019). Since 2017, however, these organizations have faced increasing restrictions or even outright criminalization, while a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Rome and Tripoli co-opted Libyan authorities into stopping irregular departures in exchange for financial and technical assistance (Mainwaring and DeBono, 2021). On 7 April 2020, Rome declared itself unable to serve as country of disembarkation for people rescued at sea ‘due to the emergency situation created by the pandemic’ (Tazzioli and Stierl, 2021: 8). Migrants, however, continued to reach Italian shores without assistance and rescue operations by NGOs and Italian security forces were later resumed. Since 2021, instability and economic hardship in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia prompted a new increase in arrivals, which peaked to over 150,000 in 2023 (IOM, 2024).

Irregular migratory flows across the Mediterranean have affected Malta only to a limited extent. By letting boats cross its maritime rescue region unassisted until they reached Italian waters or even allegedly conducting illegal pushbacks, Malta effectively minimized the disembarkation of asylum seekers on its territory (Mainwaring and DeBono, 2021). Even if relatively small in absolute terms, irregular arrivals onto its territory pose significant challenges to a small, densely populated island like Malta, reinforcing Valletta’s deep-seated framing of migration as an invasion or a siege (Baldwin-Edwards and Lutterbeck, 2019). In March 2020, Malta followed Italy in declaring itself unable to serve as a place of safety for asylum seekers. Although Valletta assisted some migrants later in the year, it also stepped up its deterrence policies, detaining those rescued in offshore ships for periods that far exceeded routine COVID-

19 quarantines, engaging in illegal pushbacks through private boats, and signing its own MoU with Libya (Tazzioli and Stierl, 2021).

Compared to Europe, the visual governance of migration in African countries of transit and departure has remained much less investigated. Migration governance in Libya is a complex phenomenon shaped by dynamics of co-optation and political connivance blurring the lines between formality and informality, crime and law enforcement, as well as mobility and immobility (Achilli, 2024). The need for foreign labor prompted autocrat Muammar Gaddafi to encourage thousands of foreigners to settle in Libya permanently or seasonally. Irregular migration to Italy started to gain momentum at the beginning of the 2000s. To curb undocumented flows, Italy co-opted Gaddafi's regime into the externalization of border enforcement (Bialasiewicz, 2012). Notably, the 2008 Treaty of Friendship, Partnership, and Cooperation (TFPC) enabled the two parties to jointly patrol Libyan territorial waters with boats and surveillance equipment provided by Italy. While problematic from a legal and ethical standpoint, this agreement succeeded in bringing down irregular flows. The uprisings that overthrew Gaddafi in 2011 and the ensuing political unrest that continues to the present day turned Libya into an irregular migration hub. Between 2013 and 2017, when more than half a million people crossed the Mediterranean Sea, Libya was the main country of departure for Europe. These dynamics prompted media and policy discourses to speak of a European "migration" and/or "asylum" "crisis". This framing, albeit contested and ambivalent (Raineri and Strazzari, 2021), shaped European perceptions and policy responses.

While Libya is simultaneously a country of transit and arrival, Niger is a country of both transit and departure. As global economic statistics consistently rank Niger among the poorest states worldwide, Nigeriens have often sought better life prospects in comparatively wealthier neighbors, including Nigeria and Ghana to the south, as well as oil-rich Algeria and Libya to the north. It is noteworthy, however, that existing data show a limited presence of Nigeriens in trans-Mediterranean migratory flows (Benattia et al., 2015). At the same time, the consolidation of a well-oiled human smuggling infrastructure has contributed to making of Niger a regional migration hub since the fall of the Gaddafi regime – when Libya's border enforcement collapsed – and the parallel outbreak of an insurgency in Mali, which blocked alternative routes to Europe. Leveraging regional agreements granting freedom of movement, people from all over West Africa started to converge towards the northern Nigerien town of Agadez on their way to North Africa and Europe. According to the IOM, over half of those who reached Lampedusa at the peak of the European migration "crisis" transited through Agadez. Nigerien authorities largely turned a blind eye on these developments, since cross-border migration was seen as potential sources of revenues, remittances and livelihoods, contributing to peace and stability in an otherwise turbulent region (Raineri, 2018).

Since 2015, Niger became one of the main recipients of European border externalization efforts. Notably, the EU pressured Niamey's government into criminalizing migrant smuggling and its security assistance mission EUCAP Sahel was repurposed to help Nigerien security forces better tackle irregular migration. Niger also served as a laboratory to implement digital and biometric border control tools sponsored by the EU (Dauchy, 2023). In exchange for its cooperation, Niamey became a large beneficiary of the EU Trust Fund for Africa. The impact of such measures remains contested. Adopted notwithstanding Nigerien authorities' initial reluctance and social protests in Agadez (Molenaar, 2017), these policies arguably contributed to reducing irregular migration from 2016 onward. However, critics contend that they redirected irregular migration underground, fueling criminal organizations and migrants' vulnerability (Border Forensics, 2023). In summer 2023, a *coup* toppled the government of Mohamed Bazoum. Appointed President in 2021 with the support of European leaders, Bazoum had previously been in charge of border enforcement as Niger's Minister of Interior. Facing harsh European criticism for the unconstitutional regime change, the military junta that ousted Bazoum discontinued cooperation with the EU and repealed the law criminalizing human smuggling, thereby loosening border crossing into Libya.

Border enforcement in newspapers' visual discourse

In this section, we compare how border enforcement icons vary over time, between newspapers, and across countries. By examining the pictures used by eight different media outlets, we analyze how the visual securitization of migration may be informed by their ideological position, audiences, and relationship with local authorities. By conducting a longitudinal, diachronic analysis, we seek to assess how events like pandemic outbreaks and terrorist attacks reshape both border enforcement practices and the different ways in which media frame and securitize irregular mobility. Finally, and most importantly, we assess how the visual representation of migration changes between Africa and Europe by selecting newspapers from different countries at the two sides of the Mediterranean,

Specifically, we identify five categories of icons performing visual securitization according to the presence or absence of weapons and/or biohazard protection. The first category, "no protection", refers to security forces carrying no visible protective gear of any kind. The second, "partial biohazard protection", encompasses personnel using some health protection devices, such as masks or gloves, but no full-body coverage. The third category, "full biohazard protection", refers to individuals wearing comprehensive hazmat including suits, gloves, and masks. The fourth category, "weapons", encompasses personnel carrying firearms or crowd control equipment such as shields and batons. The last category, "weapons

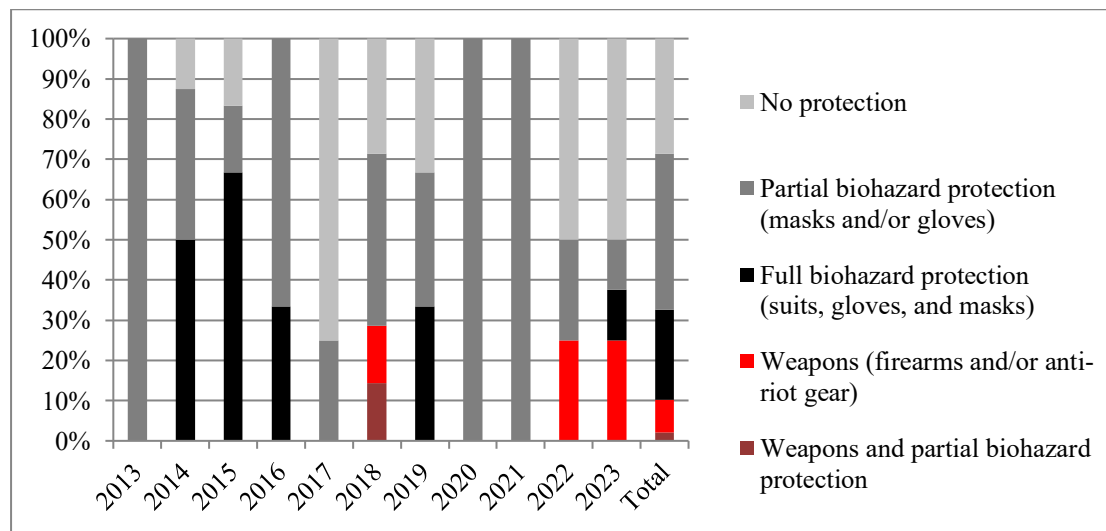
and partial biohazard protection”, refers to personnel equipped with weapons as well as some hazmat protection items such as gloves and/or masks.¹ No pictures of personnel carrying both weapons and full biohazard protection were found. Examples of our visual coding are provided in Annex 1.

Italy

Italy features the largest sample in our visual archive, covering 144 pictures.

The 44 pictures selected for publication by *Il Giornale* consistently reflect its vitriolic stance on migration. Already in 2013, security forces engaging in migration governance consistently portrayed wearing some partial biohazard protection. The presence of full hazmat suits gained momentum in 2014-2015, well before the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting the changes in border enforcement brought about by the Ebola pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa (see Figure 1). Overall, around 60% of the pictures published by *Il Giornale* show security forces wearing some biohazard protection. Some photos, however, feature a more traditional portrayal of security forces carrying weapons or anti-riot gear. Surprisingly, weapons feature less frequently during the “migration crisis” peak of the mid-2010s than in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, while biohazard protection was more prominent during the years of the “crisis” than in the 2020s despite the coronavirus outbreak.

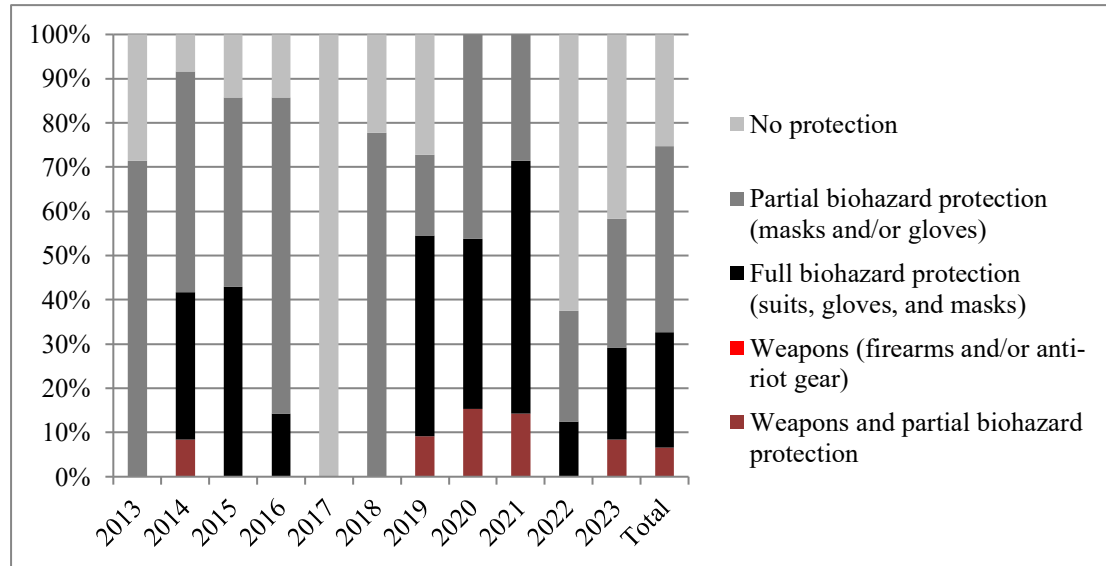
Figure 1. Border enforcement forces’ equipment – *Il Giornale*



¹ A small number of pictures (24) were coded as belonging to two different categories because they included security personnel carrying different types of gear (i.e. both partial protection and no protection).

As shown in Figure 2, The 100 pictures published by *Repubblica* show a similar trend, portraying security forces in full biohazard clothing even more frequently than *il Giornale*. Conversely, photos showing personnel carrying arms were published slightly less often.

Figure 2. Border enforcement forces' equipment – *La Repubblica*

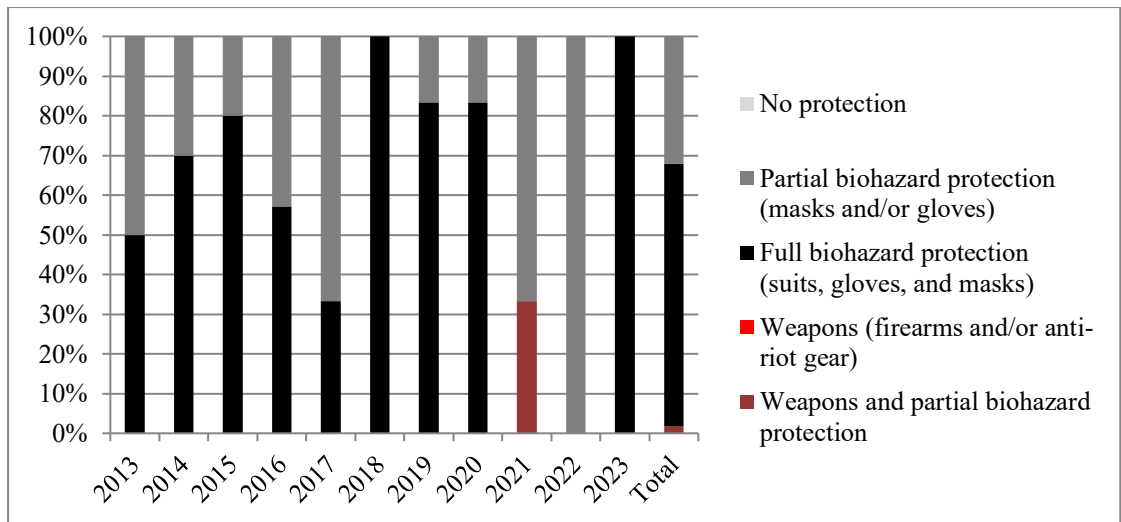


In *La Repubblica* and *Il Giornale* alike, the presence of both partial and full biohazard protection predates the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of *La Repubblica*, however, the influence of pandemic outbreaks in reshaping the portrayal of border enforcement is more glaring. Biohazard gear features prominently in 2014-2016 – during the Ebola crisis, and even more so in 2020-2021 – in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic – but sharply declines in 2017 and 2022, where both emergencies subsided. Broadly speaking, however, both the conservative and the progressive Italian newspapers feature strong visual securitization dynamics framing migrants as a health risk.

Malta

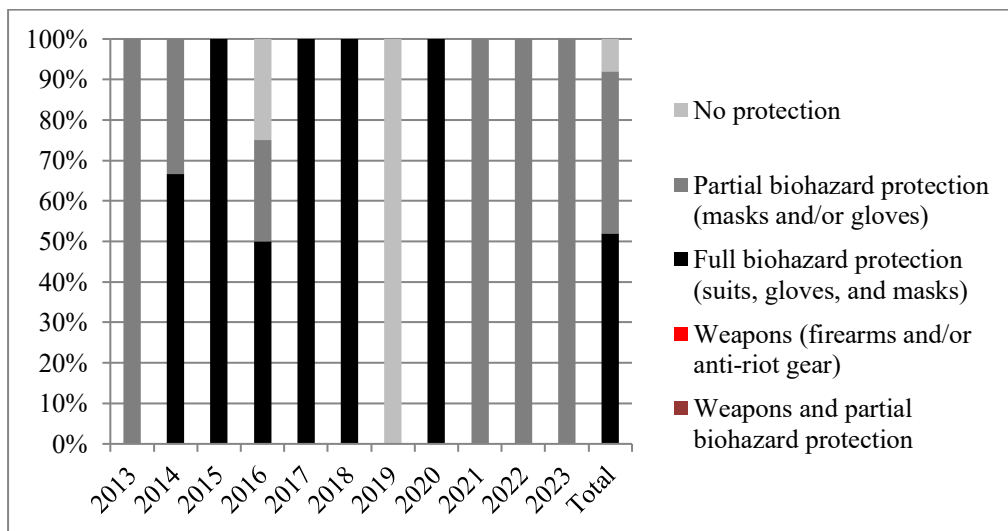
The visual archive of the Malta case includes 80 photos, most of which (55) found in the more conservative *Times of Malta*. In the *Times of Malta*'s photos, health protection devices feature very prominently, fully or partially covering the entirety of the border enforcement personnel represented. Full suits were a frequent trope already in 2013, well before the COVID-19 as well as the Ebola pandemics. Weapons are displayed only in 2021, in combination with some health protective device.

Figure 3. Border enforcement forces' equipment - *Times of Malta*



The more progressive-leaning Maltese newspaper *The Malta Independent* features 25 photos. In this case, we note a complete absence of photos displaying weapons but an equally pronounced tendency to portray border security forces in biohazard clothing. Indeed, all pictures of border security forces interacting with migrants available for the year 2015, 2017, 2018 and 2020 portray personnel in full biohazard suits (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Border enforcement forces' equipment – *The Malta Independent*



Paradoxically, 2021 and 2022 show a less intensive use of biohazard clothing than the years prior the COVID-19 pandemic on both *Malta Independent* and *Times of Malta*. This is likely because almost no migrants reached Maltese territory during those years. Maltese papers' pervasive tendency to securitize migration as a health risk by portraying security personnel in biohazard suits is therefore only loosely linked to the magnitude and timing of pandemic outbreaks.

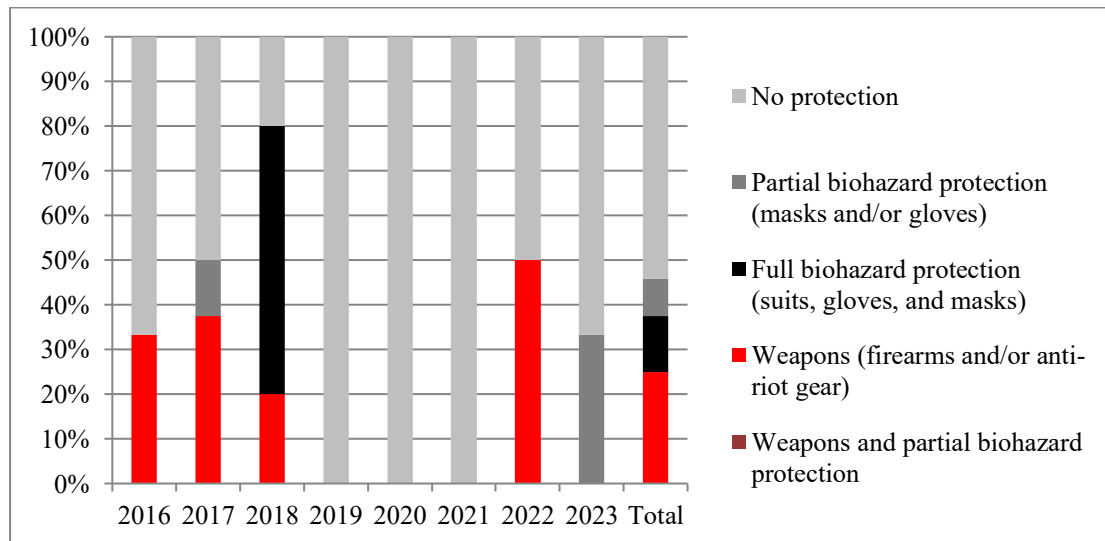
Libya

In the case of Libya, our archive is more limited, as it only consists of 29 pictures featuring border security forces engaging in the governance of migration: 7 of those were found on the Libya Herald, 18 on Al-Marsad, and only 4 on LANA.

Libyan newspapers tend to portray border enforcement personnel displaying weapons more frequently than biohazard clothing. The English-speaking newspaper *Libya Herald*, for instance, features no images of security personnel wearing biohazard gear, whether full or partial, in any of the 7 photos we managed to retrieve. In 2 of those, however, border enforcement personnel do carry weapons.

Al Marsad, which provides a bigger sample of pictures (18), reflects the same pattern. Pictures of personnel carrying weapons amount to around 25% of the total, clustering around the years when departures from Libya to Europe were higher. Libyan security personnel were portrayed wearing no biohazard protection whatsoever. This tendency remained unaffected by both the Ebola outbreak of 2014-16 and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 5. Border enforcement forces' equipment - Al-Marsad



The same is true for the only 4 pictures available on *LANA*'s online archives. While the small sample obviously belies any strong conclusions, the pattern showcased is identical to other Libyan outlets', with two photos portraying armed personnel and two showing security personnel carrying neither arms nor any hazmat gear.

Overall, the limited number of pictures showcasing security forces conducting migration enforcement, as well as the shortage of biohazard protection, indicates that Libyan papers have engaged in the visual securitization of irregular mobility to a lower degree than

their European counterparts. The more frequent display of weapons, however, suggests that migrants are primarily seen as a conventional threat rather than a biosecurity risk.

Niger

Nigerien outlets' coverage of irregular mobility features an even more severe shortage of photos and a scant use of the iconic trope of border enforcement personnel. The small sample available – 3 photos in *L'Évènement*, 2 in *Air-Info Agadez*, and none in *Le Sahel* – does not allow for systematic conclusions but confirms some of the patterns already apparent in the case of Libya. Only one of all the pictures available features personnel in full biohazard suits, while all the others portray soldiers that carry weapons but are unprotected against infectious diseases.

In 2020, *L'Évènement* published a picture portraying armed soldiers wearing facemasks in an article on the inauguration of a new military outpost in the desert as well as another group of armed soldiers wearing no protection approaching a truck full of migrants. In 2017, *Air-Info Agadez* had published a similar picture, also featuring armed soldiers with no health protection next to a pickup vehicle loaded with people. 2021 features the only picture of border enforcement personnel wearing full protection, published on *L'Évènement*. Tellingly, however, the photographs illustrate migration outside of Niger – portraying foreign security forces approaching a dinghy at sea. The year 2024 features another set of foreign players – Libyan police officers – approaching migrants while wearing no biohazard protection.

Even more than in Libya, the shortage of pictures portraying border enforcement security in Niger suggests a reduced tendency to visually securitize migrants as a threat and a higher frequency of items that are indexical to conventional security threats like weapons rather than biohazard risk.

The Visual Securitization of Migration across the Mediterranean: an analysis

Border enforcement doctrines and standard operating procedures often prescribe the use of specific clothing, items, and procedures in security forces' border enforcement. Once documented by media in their coverage of irregular migration along the Central Mediterranean Route, these migration governance practices turn into icons and become themselves discourse. Consequently, weapons or biohazard suits work as indexical signs securitizing human mobility as a threat no less than written texts. However, stark differences emerge in the visual securitization of migration between the European and African countries covered in our sample. First, while iconic and salient in Italy and Malta, where border security enforcement are often foregrounded over migrants, pictures portraying security personnel engaging in border

enforcement are less prominent in Libya and almost absent in the case of Niger. This divide reflects the existence of very different migration governance discourses and practices.

On Libyan and Nigerien papers, news on migration is frequently illustrated not by photos of security forces but by other types of pictures featuring institutional meetings or migrants alone. Such icons, which remain out of the scope of the present investigation, are arguably less conducive to visual securitization. The stark difference in the type of icons chosen to illustrate migration by newspapers at the two side of the Mediterranean further confirms that visual securitizing dynamics are more prevalent in European than African newspapers. The much more pronounced use of pictures portraying the enforcement of borders and the policing of migrants by European media clearly reflects the higher political salience of irregular migration and its framing as an emergency to be tackled. Conversely, irregular human mobility on the African continent, where borders are more porous, is a much less sensational everyday experience, which hardly captures photojournalists and newspaper editors' attention. While they are an integral part of the border spectacle of migration to Europe, encounters between migrants and security forces are hardly newsworthy in Africa.

Second, our analysis highlights the existence of different visual securitization patterns. As we expected, the portrayal of border enforcement routines framing migration as a health risk is pervasive on European media but virtually absent on their African counterparts. This visual discourse is consistent with the prevalence of a hygienic-sanitary logic in European border enforcement (Pacciardi, 2023; Tazzioli and Stierl, 2021) and the broader tendency to frame migrants travelling to Europe as both *at risk* and *a risk* (Aradau, 2004; Gray and Frank, 2019). Indexical signs like biohazard equipment frame migrants as threats not *despite* but precisely *because of* their vulnerability, which resonates with the risk that their bodies may carry irregular pathogens. While scholars have highlighted this tendency after the COVID-19 outbreak, our analysis shows that visual securitization patterns establishing an indexical semiotic link between irregular mobility and infectious diseases long pre-existed the new coronavirus outbreak. Biohazard clothing was already used by European border enforcement personnel and portrayed by media in 2013. While this clothing gained salience after the Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks, our dataset shows no systematic alignment between the intensity of pandemics and use of biohazard gear by border enforcement personnel. This suggests that border enforcement practices and their visual representations are not merely affected by the timing and magnitude of global health crises. The icon of security forces covered in hazmat gear is ultimately a visual shorthand for crises requiring urgent action, while the use of no such protection evokes a more routine approach to border enforcement.

In contrast to European papers, African media portray security practices featuring a scant use of hazmat gear but a more frequent display of weapons in relative terms. This tendency is partly due to the widespread presence of firearms in contexts fraught with unrest

like Libya and Niger as well as the shortage of biohazard equipment and training among the security forces of less affluent countries. However, as confirmed by qualitative evidence from two of the authors' field research in Libya and Niger in 2024, this visual portrayal arguably reflects the different and more ambivalent perception of migration in many African countries. On the one hand, the use and display of weapons reflects the more traditional border enforcement practices and discourses of countries fraught with instability, where cross-border mobility is often framed as a potential source of physical violence. On the other, since migration is seen as a risk as well as an opportunity for both fellow nationals looking for a better life abroad and local informal economies, the emotional proximity to migrants may lead to a lower propensity to other them as carriers of foreign germs. Accordingly, qualitative evidence from the ethnographic fieldwork suggests that migration is often viewed through humanitarian lenses. On the one hand, this framing contributes to the shortage of pictures showing security forces policing migrants; on the other, it shapes a tendency to treat migrants as the referent object of textual and visual discourses on migration. In Libya and especially Niger, media outlets frame irregular border crossing primarily a threat to the safety of migrants themselves. Accordingly, local newspapers publish pictures of dead bodies more often than photographs of security forces approaching migrants.

While representations of irregular migration reflect a stark North-South divide, other factors like the political leaning of media outlets and their expected audience affect the visual governance of migration to a much less significant extent. This contrast in the visual securitization of migration between Europe and Africa indirectly confirms the racialized underpinnings of European border enforcement and the tendency to displace health risk on unknowledgeable others from different ethnicities noted by previous research (Abeysinghe, 2016; Dionne and Turkmen, 2020).

Conclusions

Our visual analysis shows that border enforcement routines along the Central Mediterranean Route have become icons which may frame irregular migration as a threat to different extents and in different ways. As noted by Massari in her introductory article (this special issue), the relationship between visual communication and governance is inherently iterative, with visual representations and governance informing each other in a dynamic interplay. The relationship between border enforcement and the pictures illustrated to portray them is a case in point. Once illustrated in the pictures published by media outlets, border enforcement routines become themselves discourse, securitizing migration no less than written

texts. Specifically, the clothing and gear of security forces serve as indexical signs linking migration to health risks or more traditional threats to transit and destination countries, such as terrorism or crime. Accordingly, the pictures used to illustrate irregular migration across the Central Mediterranean Route amount to a form of visual governance. As such, our article has both theoretical and policy implications.

From a theoretical standpoint, we show that visual analysis serves as a bridge between different approaches to securitization. By showing how border enforcement and migration governance practices become visual discourse, our study combines the Copenhagen School's focus on discourse with "second generation" securitization scholars' attention to daily practices rather than exceptional measures (Bigo, 2014), answering the call for 'harnessing the strength of both logics' (Bourbeau, 2017: 4). By following the strategy of focusing on indexical items, we charted a path for visual securitization studies to code large databases of imagery portraying migration governance across regions and long timeframes, leveraging the potential of quantitative visual content analysis in a critical perspective.

More broadly, our article has attempted to answer the call for decolonizing visual communication research (Bleiker, 2023: 17) and decenter migration studies (Triandafyllidou, 2020) by systematically comparing European and African newspaper pictures. While limited by the fact that the media of countries like Niger produce much less visual content than their more affluent counterparts in Europe, our study suggests that iconic visual tropes like security forces conducting border enforcement differ starkly between the Global North and the Global South. Notably, the focus on traditional security threats indexed by weapons pictures in countries in the Global South contrasts with European concerns for "new" security issues like health risks, as the salience of biohazard gear suggests.

Such findings call for more nuanced, context-specific analyses that leverage interpretative approaches to challenge the alleged universality of securitization discourses. Future research should also compare visual narratives of migration to a more systematic degree and investigate the cultural and sociopolitical factors shaping the production and publication of photographs and video footage. Since media participate in the visual governance of migration (Massari, this special issue) and how, why, and by whom images are produced and disseminated matters no less than what they depict (Pink 2021), follow-up studies should complement the coding of newspaper pictures with additional ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with photojournalists and editors to appraise why certain photos are taken, purchased, and published by various outlets. By doing so, future research would shed more light on the role played by media in (visual) migration governance. While enabling a large-scale comparison covering six different countries over a long timeframe, the quantitative analysis inevitably entails some limitation, overlooking meaningful aspects of visual analysis like the sense of proximity evoked by photos through close, medium or long shot and the relative foregrounding or backgrounding

of specific subjects and items (Ledin and Machin 2018). Future research should also pay attention to these elements.

From a policy standpoint, the fact that border enforcement practices become discourse warrants a reappraisal of both media coverage of migration and European border enforcement routines, as the systematic use and portrayal of certain items has unintended effects on public perceptions of migration that media and security agencies should carefully consider. European border security forces have arguably shown awareness of these dynamics by largely refraining from carrying weapons when photographed while interacting with migrants. The pervasive display of biohazard clothing, although necessary at times, may nevertheless be conducive to a no less problematic form of securitization, framing migrants as health risks.

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