



Emptying the sea with a spoon? Non-governmental providers of migrants search and rescue in the Mediterranean

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ABSTRACT

In 2015 and 2016, 1,200,000 migrants crossed the Mediterranean into Europe. At least 6000 went missing at sea. In response to states' failure to provide adequate search and rescue (SAR), several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have launched their own rescue operations in both the Central Mediterranean and Aegean. This article provides the first empirical analysis of SAR NGOs, outlining their structure and operating models, investigating the reasons underlying their proliferation and assessing their contribution to mitigating the loss of life at sea.

1. Introduction

In 2015 only, over one million migrants crossed the Mediterranean into Europe, roughly five times more than the year before. The death toll was dramatic, amounting to 3771 officially recorded casualties. Migrant crossings in the first half of 2016 were only slightly inferior. By the end of June 2016, there had been 222,291 arrivals by sea, with at least 2888 migrants declared dead or missing [27].

The humanitarian crisis in the Central Mediterranean peaked after October 2014, when the Italian government suspended its Search and Rescue (SAR) operation *Mare Nostrum*, replaced by Frontex operation *Triton*. Narrowly focused on border control, *Triton* proved ill-equipped to counter the humanitarian emergency [2,7,25]. Different aid organisations have attempted to fill the gap created by the lack of proactive SAR operations. In the summer of 2014, Christopher and Regina Catrambone set up the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), reconverting a fishing boat into a SAR vessel. MOAS' operations offered an example that has increasingly been replicated by other organisations. The operational branches of MSF headquartered in Barcelona and Brussels developed their independent SAR capabilities by using own ships, the *Dignity I* and *Bourbon Argos*. In February 2016, SOS Méditerranée started SAR operations from the 77 m *Aquarius*. Two German and one Spanish NGOs, Sea-Watch, Sea-Eye, and Pro-Activa Open Arms, deployed smaller vessels offshore Libya to actively search for boats in distress, providing support to migrants whilst awaiting the arrival of a larger ship. Between August and September 2016, three other organisations, namely the Berlin youth association Jugend Rettet, the Dutch NGO Boat Refugee Foundation, and Save the Children, also started SAR missions in the Central Mediterranean.

NGOs have provided a crucial contribution to mitigating the loss of life at sea. The existing literature, however, has only briefly touched upon the existence and proliferation of SAR NGOs [41]. This research is based on document analysis and semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2015 and June 2016 with personnel from SAR NGOs, Italian Coast Guard and Navy personnel and one Greek Coast Guard officer. It also relies on the direct observation of one consultation workshop involving both military personnel and NGOs organised by the Italian Navy and one meeting involving representatives from all SAR NGOs in April 2016. By relying on this body of information, this article provides the first empirical study of the non-governmental provision of SAR, conducting a structured, focused comparison ([23]: 67–73) of all the NGOs that have engaged in these type of operations up to the end of July 2016. By doing so, the article outlines the structure and operating models of these organisations, investigates the reasons underlying their rapid proliferation, and examines both the effectiveness of non-governmental SAR and its limitations. Unless otherwise specified by a reference, the information contained in the paper is based on the interviews conducted by the author.

The article is divided as follows. The first section provides a short overview of the unfolding of the migrations crisis from operation *Mare Nostrum* until the end of July 2016. The second conducts a comparative analysis of each of the NGOs conducting SAR operations in the Mediterranean. The third section identifies the key factors underlying the proliferation of SAR NGOs over the last three years. The conclusions offer a preliminary assessment of the impact of non-governmental SAR and outline some avenues for future research.

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2. The Mediterranean migrations crisis: an overview

Migrations across the Mediterranean are far from novel. The Italian government started conducting SAR operations to counter the loss of life at sea as early as 2004 through operation *Constant Vigilance*. Between 2011 and 2013, the Italian Navy conducted 139 rescue missions, reportedly saving more than 16,000 people [40]. In October 2013, the sinking of two large boats caused the death of over 600 migrants. Calls for action by the Pope and public opinion urged Italian decision-makers to undertake more proactive SAR activities by launching operation *Mare Nostrum*, which lasted from 18 October 2013–31 October 2014, rescuing over 156,000 migrants [34,40]. In late 2014, however, Italian frustration with the lack of EU-wide burden sharing and other states' criticism that the operation was a pull factor of migrations led to the replacement of *Mare Nostrum* with the Frontex operation *Triton* [52]. Unlike its predecessor, *Triton* was not a SAR operation, but a mission primarily focused on border control which only operated within 30 miles from the Italian coast, comprised a much smaller number of assets, and was run on a third of *Mare Nostrum*'s budget ([7]: 7–10; [30]: 10–12; [40]: 17). Consequently, the humanitarian emergency intensified. In the summer of 2015, the European Council decided to complement the patrolling of its external borders with the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operation *EUNAVFOR Med 'Sophia'*, aimed at countering illegal migrations by disrupting smuggling networks and destroying smugglers' boats [30,50]. The Italian Navy also maintained a smaller presence in the Central Mediterranean through operation *Mare Sicuro* (Safe Sea), aimed at protecting humanitarian and commercial activities in the area [35]. Other European states, such as the UK and Ireland, contributed to SAR on a voluntary basis with some of their Navy and Coast Guard assets [42].

By late 2015, the worsening weather conditions reduced the number of migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean. Arrivals to Greece, by contrast, increased dramatically. Although narrower, the Aegean Sea was also treacherous. New widely publicized tragedies shifted attention towards the Eastern Mediterranean, where the financial crisis and the distrust between the Turkish and the Greek governments in the contested waters of the Aegean complicated the provision of effective SAR operations. The increase in migratory flows through the Aegean led to the deployment of Frontex operation *Poseidon*, primarily focused on border control like its Central Mediterranean counterpart *Triton* [30]. In February 2016, NATO also deployed its Maritime Group in the region [14]. To ensure a more proactive effort to halt migrations from Turkish authorities, in March 2016 the EU agreed on delivering a six billion EUR aid package to Turkey [13]. The closing of Eastern European land borders and the EU–Turkey agreement drastically reduced the flow of migrants crossing the Aegean [27]. Transits through the Central Mediterranean, however, did not decrease. Between January and June 2016, Italy witnessed 62,750 arrivals by sea compared to the 70,350 of the previous year. Smugglers' use of increasingly overloaded unseaworthy vessels and the increasing departure of migrant boats from Egypt has further magnified the scope of the emergency, creating new challenges to the provision of effective SAR [59].

Due to the present prominence and greater complexity of the humanitarian emergency in the Central Mediterranean, this article primarily focuses on non-governmental SAR operations offshore Libya. NGO SAR operations in the Aegean, however, will also be briefly examined.

3. The rise of private providers of SAR

Both international and local NGOs have played a key role in mitigating the humanitarian emergencies arising from mass migrations, conducting research, advocacy, and several support services for migrants on land [18].

The direct involvement of NGOs in the provision of maritime SAR, however, is a much more recent phenomenon. The German NGO Cap Anamur helped saving Vietnamese boat people in 1979 already [10]. It also operated in the Mediterranean, but suspended its activities in 2004, when some of its personnel faced prosecution for abetting illegal immigration ([4]: 211; [15]: 22–3). It was only in 2014 that non-governmental SAR operations restarted with the creation of MOAS. The ensuing subsections briefly examine each of the NGOs involved in the provision of SAR as of the end of July 2016.

3.1. The Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS)

MOAS was created thanks to the initiative of the millionaires Christopher and Regina Catrambone, who already had experience in the field of crisis management as the owners of Tangiers Group, a firm providing insurance investigations, evacuation, and intelligence for firms operating in dangerous environments. Part of Tangiers' revenues were used to purchase a 40 mt Canadian fishing boat, the *Phoenix*, and convert it into a SAR vessel for a total cost of around 4 million EUR [53]. The ship was subsequently chartered for free to MOAS, established in 2014 as a Malta-based non-for-profit organisation.

The *Phoenix*, which conducted its first SAR operations between August and September 2014, was equipped with two RHIBs and two remotely piloted Camcopter S-100s, leased to MOAS at a subsidized rate. The drone producer, Schiebel, found in MOAS's activities an important form of advertisement, stressing that its Camcopters 'assisted in the rescue of over 8800 refugees' [45]. The *Phoenix* usually operates with around 11 own personnel on board. The crew, consisting of personnel with a background in the Maltese Coast Guard and Navy, was led by captain Martin Xuereb, former Commander of the Armed Forces of Malta. In 2015, MOAS operated in partnership with MSF Amsterdam, which provided six doctors and paramedics to be deployed on board. In the autumn 2015, MOAS extended its operations into the Aegean Sea by leasing a second vessel, the *Responder*, equipped with two high-speed rescue boats named after the two drowned Syrian children Aylan and Galip. The personnel on board include the chartered captain and crew, MOAS SAR personnel, and doctors and paramedics initially provided by the Medical NGO Emergency. In the autumn of 2015, the *Phoenix* suspended its mission in the Central Mediterranean, and was relocated to the Andaman Sea to monitor migrations across the Bengal Gulf in partnership with two other NGOs, MigrantsReport.org and Fortify Rights [36]. At the beginning of June 2016, the large number of casualties among migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean prompted MOAS to deploy both the *Phoenix* and the *Responder* offshore Libya. Medical personnel on both vessels are now provided free of charge by the Italian Red Cross.

In total, MOAS presently employs 35 personnel both on board and ashore, and its running costs currently amount to around EUR 400,000 per month. Funding consists entirely of private donations largely collected through crowd funding. In less than two years of activities, the NGO has conducted humanitarian support missions in three different theatres, reportedly contributing to saving over 12,000 migrants. MOAS's activities have obtained extensive coverage by international media, and received praise and awards by Italian authorities. The most important indicator of MOAS's success, however, lies in the emulation process that has taken place after its creation. MOAS's model, which has proven to be effective, financially viable, and supported by national governments and civil society alike, has inspired several other NGOs to start their own SAR operations.

3.2. Médecins sans Frontières (MSF)

Unlike MOAS, a small organisation established specifically for conducting maritime SAR, MSF is a large international medical NGO with offices in 28 countries and more than 30,000 personnel worldwide. Its activities are coordinated by six semi-independent operational

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