

Recent Arrivals of Migrants and Asylum Seekers by Sea to Italy: Problems and Reactions (ARI)

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Theme: The Italian government's answer to the mass arrival of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers since the beginning of the present wave of political turmoil in North Africa must be seen in the context of both domestic political issues and international constraints.

Summary: From the beginning of the present wave of political turmoil in North African countries and up to 8 April, 390 boats have arrived in Italy with a total of 25,867 undocumented migrants and asylum seekers, most of them Tunisians. The Italian government's answer has been framed by both domestic political issues, such as the extreme anti-migrant attitude of the Lega Nord, and by international constraints, such as the refusal of other EU members to receive irregular economic migrants and the difficulty in establishing a workable repatriation accord with Tunisia. Given the situation, the Italian government has been trapped in its own web, made up of contradictory positions and exaggerated forecasts concerning migratory flows.

Analysis:

The Problem

In 2009 the Italian government promoted a steady hardening of the laws on irregular migration and new action to reduce it. A drop in the number of undocumented entries by sea was especially due to the enforcement of the agreements with Libya, and to the highly-criticised rejection of migrants and asylum seekers at sea.¹ According to official data, irregular entries by sea declined sharply between May 2009 and January 2011. The total number of migrants apprehended at sea in 2009 was 9,573: a 74% decline compared with the total of 36,951 apprehended in 2008. However, only very general data for 2010 have so been issued by the government (in a leaflet).²

In Italy the monitoring of irregular migration trends has become difficult for analysts: since 2008 the Italian Interior Ministry has released no relevant data on the geographical location of new arrivals, the nationalities of migrants and the countries of return for those repatriated.

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¹ The issue is currently under consideration at the European Court of Human Rights. See <http://www.unhcr.it/news/dir/26/view/558/stop-ai-respingimenti-in-libia-55800.html>, Unione Forense per la Tutela dei Diritti dell'Uomo, *I respingimenti in alto mare al vaglio della Corte europea dei diritti dell'uomo*, in <http://www.unionedirittiumani.it/>; <http://www.messinanotizie.it/aperta-uninchiesta-sui-respingimenti-di-migranti-nel-canale-di-sicilia.html> (accessed 21/1/2011).

² See <http://www.governoberlusconi.it/notizie/450-452/print.php?id=687> (accessed 3/IV/2011).

Always high on the political agenda in the previous years, in 2010 the problem of irregular migration by sea had almost disappeared from the public discourse. In the absence of data, and news, the strong media impact on public opinion of arrivals by sea declined substantially, while the view prevailed that the problem had almost been solved.³

The situation suddenly changed on 9-12 February 2011, when over the course of three days almost 3,000 migrants arrived in Lampedusa as a result of the political and social instability in the Mediterranean area, particularly Tunisia. The number of crossings from post-revolutionary Tunisia to Italy was already on the increase in January, but not publicised in the press. A new migration wave had commenced when patrolling and prevention activities to prevent departures from the shores of Tunisia were inactive for a few days due to the lack of police forces. Even after the crisis, the enforcement of controls has not returned to previous levels. Moreover, after the political change, repatriation procedures from Italy have been suspended.

Migration from Tunisia to Italy by sea continued throughout February and March. Meanwhile, migratory movements within the Mediterranean area became much wider. As the Libyan crisis flared up and civil war began, according to UN sources around 400,000 migrant workers left Libya, while Tunisia was heavily affected as it accepted 200,000 refugees at its borders.

In Italy the sudden growth in the number of arrivals by sea forced the government to address the problem once again, particularly from mid-February onwards. Up to 6 April 390 boats had arrived in Italy, with a total of 25,867 undocumented migrants and asylum seekers, mainly Tunisian. Up to 23,352 migrants landed in Lampedusa, almost all of them having been rescued by the Italian authorities at sea and disembarked on the island for routine checks.⁴ Only a few hundred landed in another small Pelagian island, Linosa, while others reached Sicily. In total, up to 6 April 10 boats had arrived from Libya.

As reported in the press, the arrivals from Libya were asylum seekers of all ages, almost all Somali and Eritrean nations, while the Tunisian migrants were almost all young men driven by the lack of opportunities in their country. Generally they had a good level of education and their objective was to settle –permanently or not– in Italy, France, Germany or Belgium. Around 20% of them intended to claim asylum.⁵ According to information collected by the Italian journalists, the Tunisian migrants leave from Zarzis, Djerba and Kerkenna Islands, and pay from €700 to €1,400 to cross the sea.

Migrants and asylum seekers sail in dinghies or boats to Lampedusa at great risk. Accidents and tragedies have occurred, some of them unrecorded: boats sink and dozens drown. It has been documented that since January at least 156 people have died in their attempt to cross the Sicily Channel. The latest accident was on 5 April and involved a boat carrying 450 Somali and Eritrean asylum seekers sailing from Libya, with up to 250 deaths having been reported.⁶

³ Even if FRONTEX data show an increase in the course of 2010: from a total of 150 intercepted migrants in the first quarter of the year, to nearly 600 in the second quarter, and 2,157 in the third quarter. See http://www.frontex.europa.eu/situation_at_the_external_border/art22.html (accessed 3/IV/2011)

⁴ http://www.interno.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/sezioni/sala_stampa/notizie/immigrazione/000069_2011_04_07_informativa_Maroni_alla_Camera.html (accessed 7/IV/2011).

⁵ Cfr. Massimo Livi Bacci, *Migranti irregolari in Italia: oggi dalla Tunisia domani dalla Libia?*, www.neodemos.it, 12/III/2011.

⁶ *La Repubblica*, 7/IV/2011.

Responses at the national level

Since mid-February 2011 *ad hoc* responses have been put in place by the Italian government to respond to the new situation regarding the arrival of irregular migrants by sea.

The first public response of the Italian authorities essentially spread panic and fear through the media. The words and images used by Berlusconi and the Italian ministers from the beginning of the crisis, and up to 6 April, were highly charged, such as 'exodus of biblical proportions', 'human tsunami', 'invasion' and 'black danger'. The Minister of the Interior also said that 'we have never seen an emergency of this scale'. At the international level, the lack of assistance from the EU was also remarked upon several times by the country's political leaders.

On the practical side, on 13 February the Italian government declared a humanitarian emergency and, after some hesitation, decided to re-open the facility for 850 migrants in Lampedusa, which had been closed since October 2009.

At the same time a special commissioner, the prefect of Palermo, was appointed, and a disbursement of €1 million was made, including funds needed to open a new centre for asylum seekers in Sicily (in Mineo), to gather asylum seekers from all over the country, although it has subsequently been heavily criticised.⁷ Also, in mid-February, the government decided to deploy 200 soldiers to assist in the management of migration flows.

From 15 to 30 March no further initiatives were undertaken, while hundreds of boats were being tugged towards Lampedusa. Migrant arrivals continued to outnumber departures to the mainland. In a couple of weeks the island had filled up with newcomers, whose position was described as 'desperate' by the authorities on the island and by observers.

At the end of March, the 5,000 Lampedusa residents protested against the deteriorating living conditions resulting from the massive inflows, and the unbearable sanitary and psychological problems they had to endure. When even the President of the Republic complained about the situation, and public order was almost impossible to maintain on the island, Berlusconi decided to intervene directly. His visit to Lampedusa on 30 March had extensive media coverage. He promised to relieve the pressure on the island and to solve the growing humanitarian crisis by a quick transfer of the migrants. More precisely, he promised to 'liberate' Lampedusa within 60 hours, shipping the migrants to other centres on mainland Italy. Also, he promised to promote the island's image, as its economy is based on tourism and fishing, and to support the funding of new infrastructures. Berlusconi, in order to gain the residents' trust, also announced that he would buy a villa on the island (which he has not done yet) and suggested that a golf club should be opened.

After a delay because of bad weather, an Italian naval vessel along with three private ferries arrived in Lampedusa to transfer 4,000 migrants to Sicily and the mainland in a couple of days.

⁷ See <http://thehubsicilia.wordpress.com/2011/02/22/sicilia-chiama-maghreb-e-mashreq/> and www.meltingpot.org/articolo16438.html (accessed 4/IV/2011).

At present the total capacity of holding centres throughout Italy is only 7,000.⁸ The press has reported on a plan to open new reception and first-aid centres in 15 of Italy's 20 regions. For the time being, no details about the geographical distribution of the migrants have been released, but it appears that most will be held in southern Italy.

However, several meetings have been held with regional and local authorities and the location of new sites is still under discussion: an agreement was signed on 30 March but few solutions have so far been implemented.⁹ The Interior Ministry's intention is to create a total capacity of 20,000 new places, mainly in new (temporary) facilities.

In the meantime, while local and national authorities are seeking a collective agreement, camps made of tents and basic sanitary services have already been rapidly established to allow the transfer of migrants from Lampedusa. The biggest one is in Manduria (Puglia, southern Italy) and can hold up to 4,000 undocumented migrants. According to press releases, the camp does not comply with the basic rules for first-aid centres while migrants are unable to obtain legal aid or social assistance and translation services.¹⁰ In Manduria they must eat their food sitting on the ground, as there are no tables, and water is scarce.¹¹ NGOs are denied entry and, according to local witnesses, once migrants arrive they are deprived of their belongings: substantially, their human rights are not respected.¹²

Living conditions in the new centres have been described as awful and escapes and revolts are habitual. In Manduria at least 700 migrants fled on Saturday 2 April after breaking down a fence; and on the same day 500 migrants escaped from the Mineo centre¹³ in Sicily in an attempt to reach a railway station. Some of them were later apprehended by the police.

Responses at the International Level

In mid-February the Italian Minister of the Interior complained about the lack of support from the EU and expressed the need for the burden to be shared at the European level. Moreover, on 15 February he asked the EU for FRONTEX to intervene directly and enforce European border controls. Following the request, Operation Hermes was implemented on 20 February.¹⁴

A total of 14 Member States (including Italy) have committed resources, in the form of either personnel or technical equipment, and seven Member States are currently assisting the Italian authorities with the processing of irregular migrants. After 19 days in operation, Joint Operation (JO) Hermes is cooperating in Lampedusa and in immigrant detention centres based in Crotona (Calabria), Caltanissetta and Trapani (Sicily), and Bari (Puglia).¹⁵ FRONTEX also bears the cost of the flights transferring migrants to these centres. Last but not least, problems have arisen with France, as the French police started to patrol the border with Italy and refuse entry to irregular Tunisian migrants. A

⁸ *La Repubblica*, 7/IV/2011.

⁹ <http://www.anci.it/index.cfm?layout=dettaglio&IdSez=10325&IdDett=29178> (accessed 7/IV/2011).

¹⁰ *Il Manifesto*, 5/IV/2011.

¹¹ *La Repubblica*, 3/IV/2011.

¹² *La Repubblica*, 1/IV/2011.

¹³ *La Repubblica*, 3/IV/2011.

¹⁴ Frontex had offered its support to the Italian government weeks earlier, but had been refused.

¹⁵ See http://www.frontex.europa.eu/newsroom/news_releases/art102.html (accessed 4/IV/2011).

reception centre has been opened on the Italian side of the frontier and discussions are underway between the French and Italian authorities.¹⁶

Relations with Tunisia are, of course, of the outmost importance to resolve the situation. The 15-year-old policy based on the strengthening of police and military controls on Tunisian shores suddenly collapsed and border patrols and the other measures of prevention were suspended. Repatriation policies could no longer be implemented because of the political instability in Tunisia. The Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Tunisia on 14 February in order to find some common ground to implement bilateral agreements. However, this first visit to Tunisia failed to produce results and a second visit by Prime Minister Berlusconi on 3 April was followed by a meeting between officials of the two countries and led to a new agreement.¹⁷

After signing the agreement with Tunisia on 6 April, the Italian government proposed providing the 22,000 Tunisian nationals who arrived between 1 January and 6 April with temporary humanitarian permits. It is still not clear whether they will have validity only in Italy or also in the rest of the EU. The issue is controversial and still under debate since the European position on the implementation of Directive 55/2001,¹⁸ regulating the granting of humanitarian permits in the case of massive arrivals of displaced people, has not yet been fully defined.

After 6 April, repatriation procedures with Tunisia were again implemented for new arrivals and on the basis of the new agreements signed with the government.¹⁹ Moreover, €100 million will be provided to the Tunisian authorities to reinforce their coastal patrols with new technical equipment.²⁰

A Change of Attitude

Italy's lack of capacity to respond to the migration emergency, especially in Lampedusa, is quite unexpected. The country has been involved in controlling irregular migration by sea since the beginning of the 90s and it has developed an ample experience on the ground. As far as Lampedusa is concerned, the situation of emergency is not something new. Large numbers of migrants have already been recorded in the past: the official number of migrants landed in Lampedusa ranges from 10,497 in 2004 to 31,252 in 2008.

A small island with 5,000 inhabitants in the middle of the Sicily Channel, Lampedusa is 'traditionally' the landfall for crossings from Libya and Tunisia. The reason is twofold: (1) it is the closest point to the North African shore; and (2) it has had a first-assistance facility for a long time. Since 2006 it was a reception and first-aid centre, where migrants stay for a maximum of 48 hours, before being transferred –by plane or ferry– to holding centres on mainland Italy. Special teams of experts (police, international organisations and NGOs) worked on the island providing assistance to those rescued at sea. In 2009 it was transformed into a centre for the identification and direct expulsion of migrants but was finally closed after a revolt in October 2009. All boats intercepted in the Sicily Channel after that date have been towed directly to Sicily.

¹⁶ *La Stampa*, 5/4/2011.

¹⁷ See <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/articolo.asp?ID=1722> (accessed 7/IV/2011).

¹⁸ http://www.interno.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/sezioni/sala_stamp/notizie/immigrazione/000069_2011_04_07_informativa_Maroni_alla_Camera.html (accessed 7/4/2011).

¹⁹ <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/articolo.asp?ID=1722> (accessed 7/4/2011).

²⁰ *La Repubblica*, 6/IV/2011.

In 2011, rescue operations from Lampedusa have been carried out in accordance with the law of the sea, with great professionalism and in very difficult situations. Conversely, organisation after disembarkation has been a complete failure. The explanation is simple: the management of migrants is impossible on the island. In the absence of the necessary transfer facilities to the mainland, the authorities have been unable to feed or house such large numbers of migrants. Sanitary conditions are desperate and the mayor has announced that 2,000 people have been without food, while the local population has done all it has been able to help.

At the time of Berlusconi's visit on 30 March, 2,800 migrants were housed in the reception centre, which had a capacity for 850, while more than 3,000 were without proper shelter in camps with makeshift tents and terrible sanitation. The scarcity of food and water was evident. More than 250 minors, sheltered in a provisional facility, were also on the island. Most of them preferred to camp out of doors, sleeping on what has been called 'the hill of shame'. Amnesty International has denounced a situation of sanitary emergency.²¹

The critical situation was not the result of the landings, but of the complete lack of logistic support. The strategy to make it difficult to move migrants to the mainland created a panic in Lampedusa. Probably the intention was to increase the state of alarm and then organise collective expulsions directly from Lampedusa to Tunisia, as had already been done in 2009.

Conclusion: The Italian government's reaction to the migrant crisis can be better understood in the context of domestic politics. The influence of Lega Nord, the xenophobic political party supporting Berlusconi's coalition, had a decisive impact on the initial political choices. In a northern Italian dialect, Umberto Bossi, the party leader, announced in the middle of the Lampedusa crisis: 'Immigrati? Foeura de ball' (which can be translated as: 'Immigrants? Go away, piss off!'). The only feasible solution, in the Lega's view, is to reject and repatriate immigrants. According to Bossi, eventually –and only if really necessary– migrants can be moved to holding centres in southern Italy. In any case they have to stay close to their homeland, in the south: if not in the southern Mediterranean, at least in the south of Italy. Of course, there were negative reactions to this view, especially from the authorities of the southern Italian provinces, such as the Governor of Sicily.

However, the initiatives adopted to reject and expel migrants have failed as no agreement on repatriations has been reached with Tunisia, which refuses to contemplate collective deportations. Hence, Berlusconi has had to change strategy.

The final decision to grant temporary permits and allow Tunisian migrants to move freely around Italy shows a complete change of perspective and a new-found strength in Tunisia's negotiating capacity. All the efforts of the Italian government, which initially intended to repatriate the migrants, have been for nought. However, the management of undocumented migrants in Italy will be easier in the near future, as those already in Italy will be regularised. Consequently, the temporary holding centres will be emptied and will probably be used for the expected mass arrival of asylum seekers from Libya in the following weeks.

²¹ See Fulvio Vassallo Paleologo, *Lampedusa, Mineo, Manduria: Detenzione arbitraria e violazione dei diritti dei migranti*, www.meltingpot.org/articol16566.html (accessed 4/IV/2011).

It is important to remark that after Berlusconi's visit to Tunisia and the new agreements with the North African country, reached on 5 April, his discourse in the media and his attitude towards migrants has completely changed. A much more positive vision prevails. Apparently the fear of an 'invasion' from Africa has disappeared and the aim has been to present a more positive image of Italy²² as a good receiving country. Humanitarian permits are ready to be released, and the Prime Minister has recently announced that everything is well in Lampedusa and that migrants have no problems with food or water. There are still problems to be solved with Italy's EU partners –which are not supporting this initiative– but Berlusconi now recalls the country's Catholic tradition and the centrality of the value of generosity to assist migrants. He makes no mention of the very severe criticism the government has received in the past few weeks from human rights activists in Italy and abroad and from part of the Roman Catholic Church.

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²² *La Repubblica*, 3/IV/2011.