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The Biopolitical Warfare on Migrants: EU Naval Force and NATO Operations of migration government in the Mediterranean

Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli

Abstract: This paper deals with the recent transformations of the military-humanitarian technology for managing migration in the Mediterranean Sea, focusing on two naval operations, i.e., the European Union Operation Sophia deployed in the central Mediterranean and the NATO operation in the Aegean Sea, both deployed between 2015 and 2016 and still underway. Building on archival research on both missions and on interviews with officials of Operation Sophia, we propose the notion of “biopolitical warfare” to discuss these military-humanitarian interventions in the field of migration. These operations, we argue, stage a move to the offensive in the military-humanitarian government of migration by enlisting warfare against the logistics of migrant journeys. We then situate this argument within the activist and the IR discourse on migration in the Mediterranean context: we differentiate the framework of “warfare” from the “war on migrants” argument deployed since the 1990s as part as activist discourse ; we discuss the migration and warfare nexus in relation to the deployment of “migrants as a human bomb” which has been characterizing the international relations discourse in Mediterranean countries since the early 2000s, including the recent Turkish-Greece context that led to the NATO intervention. Subsequently, the paper focuses on the targets and operations of the EU and NATO interventions and mobilizes the concept of “hybrid war” to discuss how military and humanitarian techniques and rationales work when deployed as instruments of migration containment.

Keywords: migration crisis; refugee crisis; military-humanitarianism; EUNAVFOR MED; Operation Sophia; NATO; biopolitics; warfare; Mediterranean Sea.

Introduction: Warfare and Migration in the Mediterranean

The warfare and migration nexus has become increasingly complicated in the past few years in the Mediterranean region, and particularly at sea. The paradigmatic figure of migrants fleeing war through the Mediterranean to seek refuge has in fact become intertwined with massive and recursive military operations in the areas of border enforcement and the safeguarding of life at sea, positing military technologies as urgent terrains of analytic engagement for migration studies scholars.

In this evolution, the humanitarian regime under which refugees and migrants at sea are governed has progressively entered new terrains that overlap with and complicate the principle of international protection. This paper looks at two recent military interventions in the Mediterranean refugee crisis – one by the EU Naval Forces (EUNAVFOR) and the other by NATO – and maps the militarization of migration management at sea and the reconfiguration of both migration management and military interventions as they blend in a governmental response to the struggles of migrants and refugees in the Mediterranean (Albahari, 2015; Andersson, 2016; Cuttitta, 2015a, 2015b; Pallister-Wilkins, 2016; Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins 2016; Little et al 2016, Vaughan-Williams, 2015).

Let us briefly trace this evolution toward a military approach to migration management in the Mediterranean. Military deployments in the field of migration have grown in the past few years, moving from occasional rescue interventions operated by military seafarers in the Nineties and Zeros¹, to a series of military operations specifically enlisted to govern migration flows since 2013. In these last four years, in fact, the governance of migration in the Mediterranean region has witnessed at least three massive military operations,

¹ It is important to underline that “rescue” is mandated to any seafarer finding itself in the presence of a boat in distress by international and maritime regulations.

including the Italian “Mare Nostrum” mission in the central-southern Mediterranean (2013-4), the EU Naval Force “Operation Sophia” in the central Mediterranean (2015-ongoing), and the NATO intervention in the Aegean Sea, which just recently started in 2016.

What has progressively changed over this time span are both the targets who are pursued and the military actions that are enlisted by these operations. The focus has shifted from a military-humanitarian logic of rescue to offensive interventions against migration flows. The main target of these military missions has changed from shipwrecked migrants to be rescued by militaries, as in the case of Mare Nostrum, to the disruption of the business model of migrant smugglers through military intelligence and force, as in the case of the EU Operation Sophia, to, finally, the blockage of refugee flows by a securitarian and military block, supported by the NATO fleet.

In this paper we focus on Operation Sophia and the NATO intervention in the Aegean Sea to map the evolution of the military approach to the containment, management, and control of migration in the Mediterranean. Our hypothesis is that, at this warfare and migration nexus, both the governance of people on the move and the politics of military interventions change. Taking the notions of “migration crisis” and “warfare” as our objects of analysis, we study these two missions for their impact on migrants and refugees on the move across the Mediterranean and for the ways in which they articulate the military aim of the governance of migration.

In particular, we map the evolution of migration management in the Mediterranean as it deploys military units and a warfare approach to the logistics of migrant crossing, looking at the ways in which these operations impact on migrant journeys. We suggest the notion of *biopolitics of containment of transnational populations* to indicate our approach to the study of these military operations. While “biopolitics” is a lens most often applied to national populations (Foucault, 2007) we adopt a transnational approach, looking at how

these military-humanitarian interventions are aimed at containing the autonomous movements of populations of migrants arriving from different countries and the international organization of smuggling.

A second clarification about our use of “biopolitics” is required. Our use of the term does not focus on affirmative biopolitics, i.e., modes of government that foster the life and the wealth of populations (Hardt and Negri, 2001). Instead, we refer to political technologies that act both upon singular individuals and transnational populations on the move and that are aimed at containing their movements. We use “biopolitics” to underline two processes: first, the hold that states exert over migrants’ lives—both individually and as part of temporary groups; and, second, the specific politics of life that is at stake in the government of refugees at sea. As the paper will show, in fact, migrants are not only subjected to a politics of control but also to a specific politics of life targeting a continuum of tricky subjectivities of which refugees are part. Migrants at sea, in fact, are posited as either the subjects of humanitarianism *per excellence* (i.e., lives to be rescued) or as part of an insecurity continuum of tricky subjectivities, including smugglers, potential terrorists and “illegal” migrants. Thus, migrants at sea are profiled as “risky subjects” and “subjects at risk” at the same time (Aradau, 2004). In this context, our contribution introduces the notion of containment as a constitutive a constitutive element of the biopolitical mode of governing refugees at sea.

Through the notion of containment we intend to underline the workings of military-humanitarianism. Far from fully blocking movements, military-humanitarianism, in fact, works through a biopolitics which structures controlled channels of forced mobility across the Mediterranean. Such biopolitics allows for a flexible deployment of security concerns in relation to migrants. Containment should not be confused with detention, nor with blockages. Rather, it consists in measures that trouble, divert and decelerate migrants' autonomous movements. At the same time, containment could be considered part of a biopolitical mode of governing migration since it acts over migrants' bodies and

movements not through obstruction or prevention, but by channeling, decelerating, and diverting their movements. For, as Foucault has argued, biopolitics is about circulation, about “making a division between good and bad circulation, and maximizing the good circulation by eliminating the bad” (Foucault 2007: 18).

Building on this approach, this paper presents military-humanitarianism’s biopolitics of containment as operating alongside “hybrid war” (Hammond, 2015; Bachmann, 2015) which nation-states deploy in the Mediterranean to disrupt, decelerate and divert “troubling subjectivities” on the move. Our analysis builds on Michel Foucault’s work on biopolitics that illustrates the twofold level upon which biopolitical technologies act: individuals and populations. Yet, as we put Foucault’s biopolitics to work on military-humanitarianism, we also draw from scholars who analyze postcolonial biopolitical rationales, and particularly from Laleh Khalili’s analysis of confinement and counter-insurgency (2013; but see also Gregory, 2010). This work is useful for situating biopolitical modes of power within a geopolitical context, since the reference to the national frame—which is implicitly assumed in Foucault’s work on biopolitics—is deeply inadequate to account for techniques of control and government aimed at managing postcolonial subjects through the enforcement of asymmetries and inequalities across national borders. In particular, what we retain from Khalili’s analysis is the thesis that humanitarian discourses and practices, legal regimen and military strategies of control have historically coexisted in liberal forms of warfare in colonial and postcolonial spaces and that these military practices have been aimed at containing populations.

This analytical framework allows us to unpack the specific biopolitical modes that are at play in the military-humanitarian government of migration (Butler, 2015; Dillon, 2007; Fassin, 2014) and to move beyond the opposition between biopolitics and necropolitics. In fact, migrants in distress at sea are presented as the subjects of humanitarianism who need to be rescued from the sea and from smugglers, and at the same time their

autonomous movements are subjected to containment, disruption and channeling more than being simply left-to-die or being subjected to a politics of killing.

Studying military operations that are currently underway presents several methodological challenges to do with access. Operations tend to be deployed in inaccessible areas—in this case, the high seas—and hence prevent the possibility of direct observations. Moreover, the military actors involved in these actions, while open to talking with researchers and even following-up by email after interviews, tend to stick to defined discursive domains (e.g., the logistical deploy and the phases of operations). We confronted these challenges by adopting a research design built on three sources of data collection. First, we conducted archival research on Operation Sophia and the NATO intervention, by studying press releases, leaked military documents published on public media websites, think-tank and military experts' analyses about the two operations). Second, we conducted in-depth interviews with the militaries involved in different stages of the two operations between 2015 and 2016. Third, we interviewed other actors who had been involved with migrant journeys in different capacities (during as well as prior to the military operations) to understand the impact of the military engagement in the Mediterranean. In particular, we focused on the Italian and Greek Coast Guard² and activists working in landing ports³. Military actors have been involved in search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea for the past twenty years, and our research aim was to find the differences within the continuities of these two operations and the militarization of migration management. Finally, we engaged with scholarly debates about military humanitarianism with the aim of situating these operations within the current literature as well as contribute to the critical understanding of the deployment of warfare in the area of migration management.

² We interviewed the Italian Coast Guard in July 2015 at their headquarters in Rome and the Greek Coast Guard on the island of Lesbos in April 2016.

³ We interviewed activists working at Pozzallo, Augusta, and Catania (Sicily) in the winter of 2016 and in Lesbos and Athens (Greece) at different moments in the summer of 2016.

The remainder of the paper is divided in four sections. In the next section we present the military operations at the center of our study, situating them in relation to migration management, humanitarianism, and warfare, also touching on their evolution in terms of the military-humanitarian operation Mare Nostrum. We then move to situate the migration and warfare nexus that characterizes these two operations within public debates and within International Relations (IR) scholarship. The third and fourth sections situate this argument within the activist and the IR discourse on migration in the Mediterranean context. In the third section we differentiate the framework of “warfare” from the “war on migrants” argument deployed since the 1990s as part as activist discourse. Building on this conceptual and historical genealogy, the fifth section focuses on the target of the EUNAVFOR MED and NATO operations. Finally, we conclude with an overview of the military-humanitarian approach to the governance of migration, reflecting on the notion of “offensive containment.”

The main argument that we put forward in this paper is that refugees are governed according to what we call “biopolitical warfare” in the Mediterranean Sea. By biopolitical warfare we mean a form of hybrid warfare exercised upon a whole series of unruly subjectivities, ranging from migrants to smugglers, fake refugees and potential terrorists. We refer to biopolitics since such warfare does not correspond to a politics of killing; nor it works by letting migrants die at sea. Rather, it works through heterogeneous techniques, interventions and measures that act on migrants as singular individuals and, at the same time, as part of transnational populations on the move. Relatedly, mobilizing the term biopolitics enables us to point to the productive aspects of this hybrid warfare, in that it establishes partitions among migrants, channels unruly mobilities, and opens up new spaces of governmentality.

Offensive Migration Containment: Military-humanitarianism as per Operation Sophia and the NATO Intervention in the Aegean

The deployment of military operations to govern migrations in the Mediterranean has progressively *turned to the offensive* in the past three years, as military and humanitarian technologies have become increasingly intertwined in the government of migration, staging the militaries as one of the lead actors carrying out humanitarian tasks (Garelli and Tazzioli, 2015; Loyd et al, 2016; Williams, 2014). The EU Operation Sophia, for instance, aims at disrupting the business of and destroying the assets of ferrying migrants across the central Mediterranean. Likewise, the NATO intervention in the Mediterranean is deployed to dissuade and eventually block migratory flows toward Greece from Turkey. So these are two military-humanitarian operations deployed to attack migration flows, their logistics of travel, and their circulation in particular sections of the Mediterranean.

How do these two operations relate to their predecessor, the Italian Mare Nostrum Operation, the first massive military deployment to govern migration in the Mediterranean Sea? The Mare Nostrum operation was launched by the Italian government in October 2013, in the aftermath of two major shipwrecks where more than 600 people died and when Italian authorities were accused of a fatal delay in their rescue operations.⁴ It was explicitly framed as a “military and humanitarian operation,” a label that was abundantly deployed in governmental documents and political discourse about the operation and the migration crisis in general. While the intended governmental goal was twofold – i.e., to both save lives at sea and to prevent irregular migration to Italy – the operation resulted mainly in a search-and-rescue mission. In this capacity, Mare Nostrum was the Italian military response to the international obligation to safeguard the safety of life at sea. Amid lack of support for its continuation under EU control and funding, the mission closed after one year.

⁴ On Mare Nostrum, see: Carrera and den Hertog, 2015; Heller, Garelli, Pezzani, and Tazzioli, forthcoming; Tazzioli, 2015; Cuttitta, 2014.

As we point to a turn to the offensive in these military operations, our goal is not to make a historiographical argument, positing a humanitarian “before” (the Mare Nostrum operation) versus a warfare-led “afterward” (Operation Sophia and the NATO intervention). Rather, our aim is to map different configurations of *the military-humanitarian technology* of migration management. In other words, the use of military technologies in the government of migration is not about a transition from humanitarianism to war, even as warfare tactics of migration management at sea have grown significantly (Chandler, 2001). It is important to underline that we speak about warfare, not war. What is at stake in the Mediterranean, in fact, is not a deliberate politics of killing but, rather, a politics of containment and a war at low intensity, as our analysis will show.

Security and humanitarian technologies have historically coalesced in the EU governance of migration. In fact, a clear-cut distinction speaks more to different institutional jurisdictions—military and humanitarian domains—rather than actual functions performed. For instance, humanitarian organizations like UNHCR support the removal and repatriation of irregular migrants. The same is true for the military and humanitarian regimen nexus in migration management (Fassin and Pandolfi, 2010): the deployment of military tools and the protection of lives are part of the military-humanitarian approach to migration management. This holds true both when the militaries perform search and rescue missions to save shipwrecking migrants and when military units perform a naval blockade against the cross-Mediterranean travels of migrants and refugees. Mare Nostrum rescue interventions and the EU and NATO operations map the changing configurations of military-humanitarianism—not necessarily a from-to-transition (from humanitarianism to militarism) but the flexibility associated with a governmental technology. Such flexibility consists in the capacity to reconfigure and modify control according to how the trajectories and crossing practices of migrants change.

Having clarified our approach, we now turn to discuss the two military-humanitarian operations that are the focus of this paper. The first was EUNAVFOR MED, or Operation Sophia that was launched in June 2015 by the EU. Already more than 100,000 people had crossed the Mediterranean seeking refuge in Europe that year, with over 1,830 reported to have perished at sea as they took the unseaworthy, extremely expensive, and only passage out of war and violence available to them. Issued in the aftermath of yet another tragic shipwreck in which about 900 migrants were lost at sea, Operation Sophia was the first large-scale military operation of migration management in the Mediterranean. It was presented by EU authorities as an intervention to “save” migrants from perilous waters and from pitiless traffickers and smugglers, and as a “response”—indeed, a humanitarian response of rescue—to the migration crisis in the Mediterranean. But more than the “search-and-rescue” mission of Mare Nostrum, the declared goal of Operation Sophia was to “disrupt the business model of smuggling and trafficking” people from Libya to the EU. As we explain elsewhere (Garelli and Tazzioli, forthcoming), this goal aims to *destroy the logistics of migrants’ crossings*, disrupting the ferrying of people to European shores, and potentially closing the central Mediterranean migration route. This offensive move against migrant travels was justified in humanitarian terms, i.e., in the name of “protecting” migrants from the abusive practices of smugglers.

Headquartered in Rome and deployed in the central Mediterranean route, the Operation consisted of three phases, starting with the surveillance and assessment of human smuggling networks in the central Mediterranean (this phase has concluded at the time of writing), then turning to the search and diversion of suspicious vessels, to finally engaging in the disposal of smugglers’ vessels and assets “preferably before use” – as EU authorities put it in official documents – and in the apprehension of smugglers. By the end of January 2016, during its first semester of operation, Operation Sophia had led to the arrest of 46 suspected smugglers, the disposal of 67 boats, and the rescue of 3,078 migrants, as the Operation Commander, Rear Admiral Enrico Credendino of the Italian

Navy, explained in his restricted report to the EU, which was brought to the public attention by Wikileaks (Credendino 2016, page 3).

In February 2016, the NATO security alliance responded to requests of assistance from Turkey, Germany, and Greece and staged its first intervention in the EU “refugee crisis”. The goal of the intervention was to extend the EU operational area to Turkish territorial waters, as noted by the executive director of the EU Border Agency Fabrice Leggeri.⁵ Since Turkey is part of the NATO Security Alliance, the NATO intervention can extend into Turkish territorial waters, whereas the EU couldn’t.

The NATO intervention in Turkish waters is to be read in conjunction with other initiatives that the EU has been undertaking to block the Aegean route of migration in the first months of 2016, such as the attempt to create an “enforcement archipelago” (Mountz 2011; Garelli and Tazzioli, 2016) in the Greek islands near Turkey through the EU “hotspot approach”⁶ and the EU-Turkey Agreement signed in March 2016 mandating that all migrants arriving in Greece who are not allowed to claim asylum will be returned to Turkey in exchange for aid and political concessions to Turkey. The NATO fleet, Maritime Group 2, is under German command and enlists Turkish, Canadian, French, Dutch, British, German, and Greek vessels and various airplanes to monitor the Aegean Sea. The challenge for the NATO fleet is the detection and forced return of smaller-sized vessels, which tend to be hard to see. In the initial stages NATO ships worked around the island of Lesbos where the majority of refugees used to arrive but the operation was scheduled to move south toward Chios, Samos, and Kos, all Greek islands close to the Turkish coast that are also landing sites for refugees.

⁵ Source: http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2016/03/11/fabrice-leggeri-directeur-de-frontex-la-turquie-ne-doit-plus-etre-l-autoroute-pour-l-europe_4881160_3214.html

⁶ Source: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/2_hotspots_en.pdf

Unlike the EU's Operation Sophia, the NATO operation returns migrants to Turkey even if they are picked up in Greek waters, as NATO officials have explained in interviews.⁷ In both cases, humanitarianism is the justification for the extralegal action (Fassin and Pandolfi, 2010, p 13) that is intended to block migrant and refugee flows.

“War on Migrants:” Situating a Catch-all Signifier and a Practice of Governance at Large

Within activist discourse and critical migration studies scholarship, the notion of “a war on migrants” has been abundantly deployed in the past twenty years (see, in particular, Migreurop 2006; but also, Carr, 2012; Fekete, 2003; Rosiere 2012, Mazzeo 2015), peaking in the aftermath of the 2005 killings at the Ceuta and Melilla gates of the EU. The notion has become the critical slogan under which EU migration politics has been summarized but also challenged by activists and critical scholars. Different policies have come to count as part of the EU “war on migrants,” from regulations against migrant and refugees’ access to the EU space,⁸ to border enforcement initiatives at the outer frontier of the EU--within its space, and on off-shore locations--to state violence and abuses experienced by migrants and refugees in processing and detention centers.⁹

The invocation of warfare has certainly played an important political task, especially in the Nineties, when the securitization of migration discourse in the EU context started to emerge, transforming the conversation about labor migration and refugees’ mobility into a national security problem and essentializing migrant and refugees’ flows as threats for receiving countries (Bigo and Guild, 2005; Huysmans, 2006). In this context, the notion

⁷ Sources: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-nato-idUSKCN0VY0M7>

⁸ E.g., from the policy of the Schengen visa, to the policies of border externalization, to the EU border patrol missions.

⁹ E.g., from eviction from migrant transient spaces to abuses in governmental run facilities for processing and detaining migrants.

of “war on migrants” had a precise analytic purchase, pointing to the institutional violence embedded in the EU migration policies through a powerful signifier and providing a convincing critique to border and labor policies.

However, this notion has progressively lost specificity, standing for any governmental approach to migration management, from visas regulating access, to naval blockades against migrant flows, to the use of drones for border patrol, to human rights abuses in refugee camps, just to name a few examples. Yet the ongoing transformations in the deployment of military approaches and warfare practices in the Mediterranean of migrants has been problematically under-researched. Analytical constructs for thinking through this fast-changing approach to migration management are missing, as is empirical research on its military technologies and migration control practices.

But these operations enlisted in the field of migrants’ and refugees’ travels in the Mediterranean require a critical engagement with the content, strategies, and outcomes of military practices. As a matter of fact, the military comes into play in the Mediterranean landscape of migration, not only as the agent of externalization and border enforcement or as the arm of search and rescue missions, but also as an instrument for containing migration flows and hampering the attempts of migrants to land in Europe.

Didier Bigo has importantly underlined how the notion of “war on migrants” may be misleading, subsuming the complexity of border control under violent practices and simplistic geopolitical narratives (Bigo 2014, 2015). Mapping the evolutions of migration management in the Mediterranean as it is carried out through military operations, we build on Bigo’s assertion, while at the same time attempting to move the conversation forward in relation to unpacking the “warfare and migration” nexus. Our contribution centers particularly on the practice of *migration containment*, which is described by Bigo as not pertaining to warfare, especially in a context where, as his fieldwork suggests, the “disposition” of border guards is not rooted in the intentionality to kill but in that of

“tutelage.” Thus, Bigo concludes that we cannot speak of a war on migrants. We agree and offer the notion of warfare to describe military-humanitarian interventions of rescue and control targeting migrants in the Mediterranean. Our approach is not that of an institutional ethnography of the military actors engaged in these operations. By studying Operation Sophia and the NATO intervention in the Aegean Sea, our goal is to understand how migration management is carried out as it engages militaries and warfare technologies and how, in turn, this military approach to the government of migration impacts migrants’ and refugees’ struggles.

What is at stake for us is neither war nor border control per se but “migration management through a military technology” (Garelli and Tazzioli, 2016). Methodologically, this means that our interest is directed toward what this military approach produces and how it re-configures the government of migration. To put it more directly, our work is an attempt to specify what *migration warfare* is when it becomes a *persistent biopolitical technology for governing transnational populations on the move*. Methodologically this means to move beyond the level of discursive analysis in order to engage with how military technologies are deployed on the terrain of Mediterranean mobility (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Walters, 2011). While certainly our work draws from interviews with governmental actors, from public or leaked institutional and policy documents, our goal is to confront these governmental visions with their deployed logistics and tactics and to understand how these impact the journeys of migrants and refugees.

“Migrants as a Human Bomb:” Political Coercion, Migration, and International Relations

The warfare and migration nexus extends well beyond the field of migration governance illustrated above, playing a crucial role in the domain of IR. The phenomenon of

migration, in fact, has been used as a levy for coercive diplomacy and as a blackmailing threat launched by potential sending states to potentially receiving ones. In these contexts migrants are used as the “human bombs” or “human bullets” through which states threaten to unsettle or actually do unsettle the border security of other states. The migratory “human bomb” tactic is used in order to obtain targeted states’ alignment with the threatening state’s political agenda.

Building on Judith Butler’s reflections on the political function of a “human shield,” it could be argued that migrant bodies are equally politicized with a somehow specular but opposite function, namely, as “human bombs.” Reflecting on the use of children as “human shields” in the Palestinian occupied territories Butler writes:

human shields are people who are positioned strategically to prevent attack, or stave off a bombardment in the same way that shields may be said to block a blow (Butler, 2015, p.1).

If, according to Butler, bodies can be transformed into war instruments to prevent attack, as with “human shields,”¹⁰ likewise human bodies can also be used as “*human bombs*” launched (or threatened to be launched) on some of international relations’ contested terrains. As Kelly M. Greenhill’s study shows (2010), “weapons of mass migration” are indeed very powerful political tools.

The notion of “migration driven coercion” has historically played an important role in the Mediterranean context, and particularly with respect to Libya-EU relations. In 2004, for instance, Muammar al-Gaddafi used the threat of the “human bomb” to stop sanctions against his country (including the embargo) which had been in force since 1980. As Greenhill reconstructs:

sanctions were lifted in exchange for a Libyan promise to help staunch a growing flow of North African migrants and refugees across the

¹⁰ It is important to underline that the use of human shields is a war crime.

Mediterranean onto the European soil. *The prime instrument of influence? Not bullets, nor bombs but human beings* (Greenhill, 2011, p.1, emphasis added).

In 2011, when Italy had not yet joined the NATO intervention in Libya, Gaddafi again used the threat of “weapons of mass migration” (Greenhill 2010) when he threatened Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi – a long standing business partner, ally, and friend for Gaddafi¹¹ – to throw a “human bomb” against Italy by invading it with migrants and suspending his role as the EU preventative frontier’s agent, a role rooted in Italy-Libya agreements. Many of the migrants who arrived in Lampedusa at that time, in fact, reported that they had been forced to migrate to Italy, kidnapped by Libyan militias and forced to embark on overcrowded vessels directed to Italy as part of Gaddafi’s retaliation (Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013).¹²

Four years later, after the end of Gaddafi’s regime, the threat of using migration as a “human bomb” comes again from Libya, this time from a revolutionized and unstable country with two governments. It is precisely the non-recognition by the international community of the government of Tripoli, opposed to the government of Tobruk, which led the former to threaten Europe, and Italy in particular, to provoke a “migration tsunami”¹³ in the Mediterranean by loosening border controls in Libya that were designed to prevent out-migration, i.e., allowing and even forcing migrants to leave from the Libyan coasts directed to Europe.

¹¹ See, for instance, the Italy-Libya Friendship Agreement signed in 2008.

¹² <http://www.faustobiloslavo.eu/scrivono/182.pdf>

¹³ <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/e-ora-tripoli-minaccia-litalia-tsunami-migranti-1190603.html>

Starting from 2015, the Islamic State has also started using migrants as a threat, declaring it would smuggle half a million of migrants into Europe.¹⁴ Furthermore and more recently, in January 2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan threatened he would use the “weapon of mass migration” (Greenhill 2010) in the context of the EU delay in providing 3 billion Euros that were committed to helping Turkey for containing migrant flows within its territory (and away from the EU) and providing for refugees’ needs.¹⁵ The fact that migrants are used by states as potential weapons corroborates our argument according to which migrants play the twofold role, in state narratives: of risky subjects and of subjects at risk.

Biopolitical Warfare on Transnational Populations

The term “migration crisis,” often used in scholarly and public debates, refers to phenomena that extend beyond migration itself, including a wide variety of subjects, geopolitical issues and social dynamics. The insecurity continuum between terrorism, (“illegal”) migration, crime and trafficking represents the script through which anti-immigration policies have been legitimized for at least two decades (Bigo, 2002). In recent years, this continuum is at the center of governmental efforts toward the restructuring of the politics of mobility in the Mediterranean region and intersects with its growing militarization. Efforts toward strengthening security and containment measures (against potential terrorists, migrants, or migrant smugglers) are increasingly crafted along the lines of a *hybrid warfare* that has emerged to respond to mixed but intertwined sources of threat (Hammond, 2015).

¹⁴ Source: <http://pamelageller.com/2015/09/the-islamic-state-had-warned-europe-they-would-send-500000-migrants-as-weapon.html/>

¹⁵ Source: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/12151701/Turkey-threatens-to-open-the-gates-and-send-refugees-to-Europe.html>; <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/02/11/Erdogan-threatens-to-send-refugees-outside-Turkey.html>

We argue that the EUNAVFOR Med operation close to the Libyan waters and the NATO operation in the Aegean should be situated within a broader *biopolitics of containment of transnational populations* that stems from applying a model of hybrid warfare to the government of migration. The specificities of this biopolitical mode of governing transnational populations consists in strategies of confinement and capture exercised on migrant lives that aim at deterring migrant crossings, intercepting migrant boats, rescuing vessels in distress and singling out migrants from smugglers.

In the field of migration, such a hybrid warfare¹⁶ consists in the deployment of manifold tactics for containing mobility and posits the figure of the migrant as part of a dodgy continuum of risky subjects, including smugglers, traffickers, migrants themselves and potential terrorists. Thus, hybrid warfare surreptitiously entails a certain biopolitics of populations on the move, as it posits migrants as the unruly conducts to contain by preventing their crossing of the Mediterranean Sea into Europe.

In order not to abstract the expressions “hybrid threats” and “hybrid war” from the political and military context in which they were forged, it is worth reconstructing a brief genealogy. During the Second War in Lebanon, when Hezbollah started to gain recognition for its military success in 2006, the notion of “hybrid threats” was used to indicate “multimodal, low-intensity, kinetic as well as non-kinetic threats to international peace and security” and included “cyber war, asymmetric conflict scenarios, global terrorism, piracy, retrenchment from globalization and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.” (Bachmann, 2015, p.178). From the outset, “hybrid threats” designated asymmetrical relationships between non-state and state actors in which attacks to state orders are conducted outside the framework of international law. In parallel, the notion of “hybrid war” has been used for describing state response to such multi-modal threats and particularly to underline the necessary flexibility and heterogeneity of war

¹⁶ Interview with EUNAVFOR MED officer at EUNAVFOR Headquarters in Centocelle (Rome), December 2015.

tactics needed vis-à-vis non-conventional threats. In 2014 the notion of “hybrid war” was mobilized again to describe the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in the aftermath of Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. A year later, the European Parliament released a paper entitled “Understanding hybrid threats” mobilizing political attention to

... the interconnected nature of challenges (i.e. ethnic conflict, terrorism, migration, and weak institutions), multiplicity of actors involved (i.e. regular and irregular forces, criminal groups) and diversity of conventional and unconventional means used (i.e. military, diplomatic, technological)¹⁷.

While migration features as only one of multiple possible threats in the EU document, the heated debate about the current refugee crisis has contributed to the staging of the migrant as the catalyzer for all the other “troubling subjectivities” on the move, from the terrorist, to the smuggler, to the foreign fighter. In the current political climate, the migrant has become the central figure in the dodgy continuum of hybrid threats. In EU declarations and documents, in fact, the migrant is featured at the same time as the victim to be rescued (from the waters or from smugglers and traffickers) and as the subject who could actually be a concealed terrorist or to have a role in the business of human smuggling. In this sense, the migrant is posited as a bodily threat, independently from his or her actual engagement in actions against state security and order.

The fight against smugglers had already gained center stage in military-humanitarian interventions during the Italian operation “Mare Nostrum,” when the mission of rescuing migrants close to Libyan waters had come under criticism for the security threats it seemed to pose, functioning as a sort of pull factor for migrants, who, as they became aware of the presence of the military vessels, strategically used Mare Nostrum in order to be ferried to Europe. Military-humanitarianism started to shift from being a “politics of

¹⁷ [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2015/564355/EPRS_ATA\(2015\)564355_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2015/564355/EPRS_ATA(2015)564355_EN.pdf)

rescue” (Tazzioli, 2015) whereby the effort of saving migrants from shipwrecks was militarized to an intelligence practice increasingly marked by “singling out procedures,” in which criminals and refugees had to be differentiated.

Such singling out logic—emphasizing the need to distinguish refugees from criminals—of the military-humanitarian approach to migration management came to a halt after the 2015 Paris attacks, when a Syrian refugee passport was found near the body of one of the perpetrators of the Stade de France attack. Starting from that moment refugees – and particularly Syrian refugees – became targets of preventive measures of nationalist protection. The Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, crudely summarized this shift by saying that “all the terrorists are basically migrants, the question is *when* they migrated to the European Union.”¹⁸ Such a statement eloquently illustrates the continuum of unruly subjectivities that is crafted through the military-humanitarian government of refugees in the Mediterranean.

In this context the EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia was presented not (only) as a humanitarian war against smugglers, but (also) as a *strategy of deterrence against migrant departures* from Libya and, simultaneously, as an attack on the logistics of migrant crossing (Garelli and Tazzioli, 2016). In the context of the humanitarian warfare against smugglers mobilized by the EU through Operation Sophia, the hybrid threat involves the whole economy of migrant crossing and its logistics, and refers to risky subjects subsumed under that economy, and the “mixed” threats that economy is said to produce. The measures mobilized to face such hybrid human threats are based on a multi-strategy approach that includes the physical containment and blockade of migrant vessels, rescue operations followed by police investigation on board and upon disembarkation, intelligence activity, and deterrence. Even as rescue operations may be performed as part of this warfare on smugglers, those rescued are immediately transformed into

¹⁸ <http://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-interview-terrorists-migrants-eu-russia-putin-borders-schengen/>

“informants” for gathering intelligence information. By “deterrence effect” we refer to the decrease in the number of migrant boats in the central Mediterranean which, as Operation Commander, Rear Admiral Enrico Credendino, explains in the wikileaks report on “Sophia,” characterised the first six months of the operation¹⁹.

With respect to smugglers, Credendino underlines their prompt reaction to Operation Sophia through the reorganization of various facets of their business. In particular, as Credendino details for EU institutions and as EUNAVFOR officials explained to us (December 2015 interviews), smugglers adapted to the presence of the militaries by changing their logistics and area of operation. Since the beginning of Operation Sophia, in fact, smugglers used a significantly higher number of inflatable boats to protect their business from the loss in revenues deriving from the destruction of wooden boats by the militaries²⁰. Moreover, in order to avoid being arrested, smugglers started abandoning migrants within Libyan waters, before the vessels had reached international waters. In light of the use of increasingly unseaworthy vessels and the practice of dingy abandonment, the EU naval operation actually produced an *increased securitization of migrant journeys*, of the logistics and routes involved in ferrying migrants across the Central Mediterranean.

Under EUNAVFOR MED, military seafarers have operated mainly as *vessels of dissuasion*, sort of *border-navies* at sea, dissuading smugglers from pursuing particular routes.

¹⁹ According to Credendino, the operation has been successful in “providing a deterrence effect in international waters, preventing smugglers from operating in international waters (Credendino, 2016).

²⁰ This is what emerges from the interviews we conducted with EUNAVFOR officers at EUNAVFOR Headquarters at the airport of Centocelle in Rome (January 2016 and July 2016) who stressed smugglers’ change in strategy due to the presence of EUNAVFOR vessels in front of Libyan coasts. The argument has been highlighted also by Rear Admiral Enrico Credendino as stated in the leaked report on Operation Sophia states: “Wooden boats are more valuable than rubber dinghies because they can carry more people ... However, following operation Sophia entering into Phase 2A (high seas) smugglers can no longer recover smuggling vessels on the high seas, effectively rendering them a less economic option for the smuggling business and thereby hampering it” (2016, p 9).

Since 2015, in correspondence with the start of EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia, the number of migrants arriving in Europe from Libya decreased by 9% in comparison with the previous three years and only 16% of people fleeing across the Mediterranean now use the central Mediterranean route, which remains the deadliest one (Credendino, 2016). While EUNAVFOR MED may have had a deterrent effect on migrant departures, it has not decreased the number of deaths at sea and certainly has not prevented abuses against migrants in Libya who are blocked in by Operation Sophia.

The thesis developed by Laleh Khalili in her seminal book *Time in the Shadows* about “the rise of confinement and incarceration as central tactics of counterinsurgency warfare” (Khalili, 2013, p.5) is particularly useful for unpacking the present biopolitics of containment deployed against fleeing populations in the Mediterranean. In invoking Khalili’s contribution we are not suggesting a comparison between the current humanitarian politics of containment targeting migrants and liberal strategies of counter-insurgency focused on the government of populations. Unlike the carceral spaces described by Khalili - such as island prisons and enclaves - the ongoing humanitarian warfare in the Mediterranean (legitimized as a war on smugglers or in the name of saving migrants) is neither waged on national populations nor conducted through detention in confined spaces. Rather, the biopolitics of containment put into place by military forces in the Mediterranean is exercised over transnational populations - people fleeing wars from different parts of the world - in zones of departure and transit towards Europe.

Khalili’s study of liberal warfare contributes to situating military tactics in conjunction with their security and humanitarian components. The EU preventative frontier enacted through naval blockades in international waters and the borders on the move constituted by the military vessels of EUNAVFOR MED and NATO are in fact not in opposition to a humanitarian rationale. The entanglement between humanitarian and military tactics is not simply their juxtaposition: it produces *strategies of containment* deployed through the mutual support of military and humanitarian techniques, and enlisted as military

operations rooted in humanitarian practices—i.e., blocking migrants away from Europe through military-humanitarian interventions enlisted to rescue them from smugglers or possible shipwrecks.

For the first time since the EU started talking about a refugee “crisis” in its public statements, in fact, the reference to the humanitarian approach is marginalized and the whole document is centered on the EU need to protect itself from the refugee “crisis:”

“in response to the migration crisis facing the EU, the objective must be to rapidly stem the flows, protect our external borders, reduce illegal migration and safeguard the integrity of the Schengen area”

Yet, while at a discursive level humanitarianism is less central than it was in 2014 and 2015, it remains part of the current discourse in an ambivalent way. The protectionist approach (military operations to save migrants from smugglers and shipwrecks) is in fact the vehicle of forms capture against migrants. Practices of surveillance, identification, and deportation are performed as part of military-humanitarian operations, hence reinforcing the bind between safety and capture that Didier Fassin describes as the hallmark of the politics of humanitarianism (2014). Building on this, we see analytical approaches that critique the entanglement between the military and humanitarianism in the name of an effective and genuine humanitarian politics as analytically misleading: the “captures” (De Genova, 2013; Jeandesbodz, 2015) enacted by humanitarianism are well illustrated in the scenes of rescue in the Mediterranean, where migrants are saved by military actors and identified (when already on the boat) and then suspected smugglers and terrorists are arrested, or returned to their countries of origin.

The deployment of a NATO fleet in the Aegean sea to support Greece and Turkey in managing the migration crisis was presented by NATO officers as an intervention for “stemming illegal trafficking and illegal migration”²¹ through activities of

²¹ http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_128746.htm?selectedLocale=en

“reconnaissance, monitoring and surveillance,” thus appearing as a sort of intelligence operation at sea. Before engaging with the geopolitical struggles around and behind the warfare on migrants in the Aegean Sea, it is worth highlighting two points.

Firstly, NATO boats are in charge of what Turkish and Greek authorities are prevented from doing by international regulations, i.e., returning migrants to Turkey when they are intercepted at sea even if their interception occurs outside of Turkish territorial waters. NATO in fact has jurisdiction in the whole Aegean Sea thanks to the participation of both Greece and Turkey in the Alliance. The captures and the trap of humanitarianism are encapsulated in this *rescue-and-deport* operation performed by military actors.

Secondly, in continuity with the EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia, the NATO operation in the Aegean is also presented as having the goal of dismantling the logistics of migrant crossing, combining the fight against illegal trafficking and smuggling with the fight against illegal migration. More than saving migrants from smugglers, the double goal of blocking migrants and combating smugglers results in the attempt to undermine the economy of migrant crossing as a whole.

Simultaneously, migrants are used as the “human bullets” through which states threaten or effectively unsettle the border security of other states. The Turkish threat to flood Europe with migrants coincides with the approval of the NATO operation in the Aegean, multiplying the border controversies at stake in that sea-zone. The deployment of NATO vessels in support of Greek and Turkish authorities for detecting and intercepting migrants at sea has ultimately heightened those border controversies and paved the ground for a potential escalation of the abovementioned inter-state conflicts. However, at the same time, the presence of NATO in the Aegean has in a way contributed to legitimizing the ongoing warfare on migrants and the attempt to move the frontiers of Europe further back, in Turkey, with containment and return operations of migrants via Turkey.

Let us reflect on both operations now going back to the question about war that we posed in the opening sections of the paper: can we properly speak of a “war on migrants” through these two military operations? To what extent should we eventually stretch the very notion of “war” in order to describe the current military-humanitarian operations deployed in the Mediterranean? It goes beyond the scope of this paper to provide a renewed definition of war. After all, the difficulties in reconceptualizing what war is today and retracing the boundaries between wars and other forms of conflicts are at the core of the present challenges to IR:

“if we are to identify whether war is changing and - if it is - how those changes affect international relations, we need to know first what war is. One of the central challenges confronting international relations today is that we do not really know what is a war and what is not” (Strachan, 2011, p.2).

Instead of attempting to re-define the notion of war, we are interested in mapping and taking stock of the military-humanitarian approach to managing and blocking migration, interrogating the peculiar biopolitics it enacts and the kind of warfare it enlists. Actually, the notion of a “war on migrants” may be misplaced when migrants are not presented as the human target to combat. This point is important insofar as the strategies of containment and capture enforced by European actors are characterized by the entanglement between military and humanitarian measures, as we described above. Migrants are at the same time the subjects to put into safety (to rescue) and the subjects to thwart in their movement to Europe. In other words, the dimensions of human security and border security overlap and can’t be completely detached from one another.

A possible counter-argument could be that if humanitarianism is constitutive of the practices and the discourse of the European actors involved in governing migration, we could speak of a “humanitarian war,” building on Christopher Coker’s definition of “humanitarian warfare” (2001). By “human warfare” Coker refers to the humanitarian aim that has been underpinning many contemporary wars, since the war in Kosovo.

However, the strategies of containment enacted against migrants in the Mediterranean are not mobilized in the name of saving a national population from a dictatorship or from a rogue state. Nor does the warfare against the logistics of migrant crossing rely on democratization as the political goal.

Moreover, there is a fundamental ambivalence in the humanitarian approach to migration that consists in framing migrants both as shipwrecked lives to be rescued and as subjects to be blocked in their attempt to rescue themselves from violence and conflicts at home (Cuttitta, 2015). Current military-humanitarian ways of managing migration in the Mediterranean are not at all instances of “military humanitarianism” (Lindskov-Jacobsen, 2015) since the actors involved in saving and blocking migrants are military and governmental forces, more than humanitarian organizations supporting military interventionism.

The “Mediterranean frontier” is currently enforced and governed through a widespread warfare on logistics of migrant crossing. Such a biopolitical warfare targeting transnational populations is enacted through heterogeneous tactics (Evans, 2011) - including military and humanitarian measures - for containing mobility. As part of this warfare, it is not only migrants’ mobility that is targeted, but a wide range of troubling subjectivities— i.e., the migrant, the smuggler, the would-be terrorist. It is a warfare tactic that oscillates between moments and spaces at high intensity and visibility and others that remain overshadowed. Mark Duffield has provided a compelling argument about the security-development nexus when he wrote that it “remains incomplete without a third category that is here called containment. That is, those various interventions and technologies that seek to restrict or manage the circulation of incomplete and hence potentially threatening life” (Duffield, 2008, p.146). The twofold logic of control-and-rescue enacted by military operations can hence be reframed in terms of EU member states’ frantic attempts to restrict access to the European space to refugees, in a time of war proliferations across the globe.

The focus on a biopolitical divide that “has deepened following decolonization” (Duffield, 2008, p.147) and that results in a series of measures of containment on national populations and on refugees helps unpack the military-humanitarian interventions to block and rescue migrants at sea. On this point, Foucault’s argument about the implications of positing the military as the kernel of politics is particularly persuasive for grasping the biopolitics of containment over transnational populations that is at stake in the Mediterranean. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault explains that the XVIII century was characterized by the combination of warfare “as a way of conducting politics between states” and military as a tactic for controlling individual bodies (Foucault, 1995).

By speaking of biopolitical warfare for designating the strategies of containment against migrants’ mobility we do not only refer to the overt and muscular block of migrant boats made by Navy vessels positioned close to Libyan and Turkish waters. Rather, warfare also includes the rescue and capture of migrants, their identification, and the techniques for singling out suspected smugglers from migrants. It follows that the biopolitical dimension at stake in the warfare against migrants concerns both strategies to contain transnational populations and techniques of capture exercised on individual subjects.

An analysis that engages with the biopolitics of transnational populations enables us to challenge the disciplinarization of migration studies (Garelli, Tazzioli, 2013; Mezzadra, 2013). This consists in a political and a methodological move at the same time: politically, this means reading the ongoing refugee “crisis” as crisis in the management of transnational populations on the move; from a methodological and theoretical standpoint, such a refocusing involves challenging the reification of migration as an object of study and the bordering of migration issues into a sort of autonomous and self-standing research field. Nicholas De Genova has convincingly argued that

“migrations are always irreducibly particular in their historical specificities and substantive characteristics. Yet, they remain nonetheless also instances of a larger dynamic of human mobility on a global scale” (De Genova, 2013, p.250).

But, De Genova continues “migration scholarship (however critical) is implicated in a continuous (re-) reification of ‘migrants’ as a distinct category of human mobility” (253). In this paper we attempted to move beyond such reifications in the discussion about military-humanitarianism in the field of migration: we offered the notion of “biopolitical warfare on transnational populations” as a critical framework for the EU and NATO interventions in the Mediterranean migration “crisis”.

Concluding Remarks

Military-humanitarian approaches to migration management in the Mediterranean have gained center stage in recent years, with the mobilization of warfare on migrant routes and on the logistics of journeys. In this paper, we worked with the notion of hybrid war to describe how this military-humanitarian approach is a biopolitical intervention of containment which targets migrants as part of a dodgy continuum of tricky subjectivities that include smugglers, traffickers and potential terrorists. What is at stake here is not the predicament of fostering the wealth of populations but the government of migrant lives through measures that contain their mobility and that profile them as risky subjects and subjects at risk at the same time. This amounts to a “biopolitical warfare” at play in the Mediterranean insofar as it consists in governing migrants at sea not through thanatopolitics and not even by simply letting them die, but rather through military-humanitarian tactics deployed at channeling and containing their unruly mobility.

It would be misleading to think of the series of military Mediterranean blockades against migrants as a European game only, in which neighboring countries only play by EU rules. On the contrary, in order not to replicate a Eurocentric gaze on the government of the

border regime, we suggest framing the EU politics of externalization by situating it within an ongoing process of militarization of the Mediterranean frontier – a process implemented by European and non-European actors, although from asymmetrical positions and with different long-term goals.

This paper has dealt with the recent transformations in the military-humanitarian government of migration at sea, focusing on the biopolitical warfare on migrants conducted by European and non-European states in the Mediterranean region. The two military operations that are currently deployed in the Mediterranean - EUNAVFOR Med “Operation Sophia” and the NATO operation in the Aegean - show how military and humanitarian techniques and rationales of intervention are used for targeting the logistic of migration crossing. The war on migrant smugglers turns, in fact, into a series of blockade and containment strategies against migrant movements across the Mediterranean where migrants become the triggers, if not the weapons, of much broader geopolitical stakes.

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