Irregular Migration in the Mediterranean
Recommendations for U.S. Action

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Introduction

Irregular immigration in the Mediterranean has seen a significant increase in traffic over the past three years, with over 107,000 confirmed migrants in 2013 alone. Most migrants originate from the Middle East or sub-Saharan Africa and attempt to enter the EU. Their journey is composed of three stages. First, they travel along North African transit routes to reach the Mediterranean coast. Second, migrants seek passage across the Mediterranean Sea, usually enlisting the help of smugglers. Once in European waters, the migrant vessels issue a distress signal and are rescued by European naval forces. Third, after the migrants have arrived on shore, they are held in detention camps while their asylum and immigration requests are processed.

The majority of migrants set out for southern Italy, particularly the island of Lampedusa, which lies only 70 miles from the Tunisian coast. As the country in which the migrants first step foot, the Italian government must shelter these migrants while processing their asylum requests, in order to comply with the Schengen Agreement. This places a disproportionate burden on Italy to accommodate and oversee migrants.

In response to the 2013 Lampedusa migrant shipwreck, Italy initiated Operation Mare Nostrum, a search-and-rescue effort in the Mediterranean. However, the Italian government is unhappy about having to pay for this operation, especially since the majority of irregular migrants seek to reside elsewhere in the EU. Although Rome has asked for assistance from other EU countries, these requests have largely gone unanswered. In response, Italy has threatened to allow unprocessed migrants to enter other European nations; it is suspected that this violation of the Schengen Agreement is already occurring.

Implications of Irregular Immigration

Despite fears that terrorists will use the Mediterranean migrant route to infiltrate Europe, this possibility is unlikely. Given their increasingly sophisticated public relations and media expertise, it is more efficient for terrorist organizations to radicalize disenfranchised populations already within Europe than to attempt the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, irregular migration in the Mediterranean has significant humanitarian implications and imposes substantial financial and political costs on recipient countries.

- **Humanitarian Implications:** In the first stage of their journey, migrants must traverse dangerous terrain to reach the Mediterranean coast. These hazardous conditions were
demonstrated when, in October 2013, 92 migrants died of thirst after their transportation broke down in the Sahara.\(^7\)

The voyage across the Mediterranean is also perilous. Since 2000, over 23,000 migrants have died attempting the crossing.\(^8\) Crammed into overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels, migrants are vulnerable to storms and dehydration as well as suffocation below deck. Their smugglers sometimes lead the migrants astray or, in some cases, kill their clients.\(^9\)

After arriving in Europe, migrants are housed in overcrowded and heavily guarded detention centers, enduring poor conditions while their asylum and immigration requests are processed. With rows of fences, security cameras, and concrete barracks, human rights groups, such as Doctors for Human Rights, have criticized these facilities as de facto prisons.\(^10\)

- **Financial Implications:** Italy’s Operation Mare Nostrum costs the government €9.5 million per month, a burden that its neighbors are unwilling to share.\(^11\) Maintaining the detention facilities is also expensive; Rome spends €45 per day for each migrant detained in Identification and Expulsion Centers (CIEs). With an average detention period of 150 days, the cost per migrant is €6,750, totaling over €52 million in 2011 alone.\(^12\)

- **Political Implications:** The large volume of irregular migrants entering Europe has become a highly politicized issue. Migrants are often portrayed as a source of increased crime and other social problems. Consequently, anti-immigrant sentiment has risen across much of the continent.\(^13\) Far right and anti-EU parties have capitalized on this growing hostility, enabling them to make significant gains in the 2014 EU elections.\(^14\) In response, mainstream European parties have adopted a harsher stance against migrants. Of particular note, the United Kingdom has refused to contribute to the European Union’s Operation Triton, arguing that migrant rescue programs merely serve to attract more asylum seekers.\(^15\)

London’s stance is not unique; few EU countries are willing to share the financial burden of interdicting and processing migrants.\(^16\) Italy has asked for assistance from its neighbors, but their response has been slow and insufficient. As such, irregular migration has become a major source of contention within the European Union.\(^17\) Additionally, the European Union’s inaction and indifference towards migrant suffering has prompted outcry from human rights groups and the Vatican.\(^18\)

### Transition to Operation Triton: Risks and Concerns

In response to Italian calls for help, the European Union has implemented a new program, Frontex Joint Operation Triton, to assist in Mediterranean border surveillance. With a monthly budget of only €2.9 million – a third of Mare Nostrum’s – Triton is intended to supplement, not replace, the Italian operation.\(^19\) Operation Triton has a more limited mandate than Mare Nostrum.
Whereas Mare Nostrum operates off the Libyan coast, Triton only operates within 30 miles of Italy (see appendix). Mare Nostrum employs 900 personnel; Triton employs only 65. Nonetheless, the Italian government is discontinuing Mare Nostrum, winding down the program in the last two months of 2014.

Although the transition to Triton reduces Italy’s financial burden, it will considerably worsen the humanitarian situation. Of particular concern is the operation’s more restricted area of operations, as most migrant accidents occur near the Libyan coast. As a result, the number of migrant fatalities will substantially increase. While this additional danger may serve to deter some migrants, it is unlikely that the overall volume will significantly decrease. In fact, due to ongoing conflict in the Middle East and North Africa, the number of irregular migrants may rise.

**U.S. Policy Options**

The United States cannot address the root causes of irregular migration in the Mediterranean; the conflicts and poverty that drive migration are unlikely to diminish in the near future. Similarly, Washington has limited ability to influence both European countries and the third-party states through which the migrants travel. Libya, the main transit hub for irregular migrants, is particularly difficult to work with, as its government has effectively lost control over much of the country.

However, the United States can implement policies to limit the humanitarian, financial, and political costs of irregular migration. We recommend that the United States: (1) organize a public relations campaign to deter migrants, (2) contribute aerostats to the search and research operation, and (3) coordinate the work of recipient countries and NGOs to reform detention centers. These relatively low-cost policies could be easily implemented and make a tangible impact.

**PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN**

The United States should collaborate with both European and third-country partners to implement a public relations campaign to deter migrants. An effective deterrence campaign would reduce the overall volume of migrants, diminishing the number of fatalities. Reducing the number of migrants would decrease the strain on European interdiction, detention, and asylum processes. Finally, with fewer migrants arriving in Europe as well as fewer dying en route, political tensions over this issue should subside.

*Implementation*

This campaign could be modeled after the U.S.-led Danger Awareness program currently being implemented in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Intended to prevent
children from illegally traveling to the United States, Danger Awareness focuses on the perils of migration, including the unreliability of smugglers and the physical risks of the journey. A similar program for the Mediterranean should highlight the dangers of migration, emphasizing the untrustworthiness of smugglers. The campaign should showcase incidents of migrant fatalities and the resulting trauma. It should attempt to disprove the migrant perception of Europe as a “promised land” by highlighting the squalor of detention centers and migrants’ lack of economic opportunity. The public relations campaign could be broadcast by radio, television, or billboards, as suitable within target countries.

Disadvantages

The main disadvantage of any deterrence campaign is that most potential migrants are likely to ignore it. Given significant levels of violence, deprivation, and poverty in their countries of origin, many migrants cannot be deterred. Consequently, while deterring migrants is the most direct and efficient solution, even the best-executed campaign will only be effective for a small proportion of potential migrants.

Contribution of Aerostats to Maritime Operation

The United States should provide aerostats to assist with current maritime monitoring operations. Aerostats are lighter-than-air craft, similar to blimps, that can remain airborne for long periods of time. The use of aerostat-mounted radar would increase the effectiveness of the migrant search-and-rescue operation by tracking Mediterranean vessels more efficiently. Consequently, maritime patrols would save more lives while employing fewer resources. These positive effects should make the maritime operation less politically contentious within Europe.

Implementation

During the Bosnian War in 1992, Italy used a TCOM sea surveillance system to monitor migration, a device that can be mounted on an aerostat and used in the Mediterranean. The United States used a large number of aerostats during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and may still have a significant stockpile. These aerostats could be offered to Italy, and to the larger European community to assist with border surveillance. A medium-class aerostat, such as the Navy’s recently tested TIF-25K, is best for naval monitoring because of its high altitude, long flight duration, and ease of operation.

Disadvantages

Given Operation Triton’s limited area of operation, it cannot employ aerostats to its full potential. Most of the vessels they intercept will already have been identified through coastal radar or other means. Aerostats would be more effective if employed for a long-range search-and-rescue mission, similar to Mare Nostrum.
The Italian government is discontinuing Mare Nostrum because of its high costs. However, aerostats could be used either as a way to revive Mare Nostrum at a significantly lower cost or as a way to bolster and expand the scope of Operation Triton. Thus, although aerostats are of limited value for current operations, the United States should still offer this technology to lower the costs of potential future operations.

**Detention Center Reform**

The United States should promote a public-private partnership between the Italian government and NGOs to help reform migrant detention centers. Collaboration with NGOs would reduce the financial and bureaucratic strain on European detention facilities while also improving conditions for migrants. In particular, faster processing would prevent overcrowding. Additionally, although irregular migration would still remain a controversial subject, these developments would help diffuse political tension by decreasing the burden on recipient countries.

*Implementation*

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is currently working with several European governments to help build and maintain fair and efficient asylum and protection systems, as well as helping to prevent and resolve instances of migrant statelessness. UNHCR allocates approximately one-third of its total budget for Europe to Italy’s regional office. Given the success of Italy’s partnership with UNHCR, the United States should encourage the Italian government to collaborate with more NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch and the Italian Society for International Organization on how to best reform their migrant detention centers.

A major source of political tension among European countries is the cost of maintaining the camps and processing the migrants. One way to help mitigate this tension would be to encourage other European governments help fund the NGO work, especially those states that do not receive a large quantity of migrants. This measure would internationalize the issue of hosting migrants and asylum seekers while also lowering costs for Italy.

**Conclusion**

Irregular migration in the Mediterranean causes substantial suffering for migrants, significant financial burdens for recipient countries, and political contention within the European Union. Although the United States cannot address the fundamental causes of Mediterranean migration, it can help reduce some of the movement’s negative ramifications. Coordinating a public relations campaign to deter migrants, offering the use of aerostats for long-range patrols, and helping to facilitate cooperation between recipient countries, the EU, and NGOs would be particularly beneficial. These policies would save migrant lives and diffuse tension within Europe.
Appendix

Comparison of Operation Mare Nostrum and Operation Triton, relative areas of operation (approximate):
5 Ibid.
12 Global Detention Project
17 BBC News, “Illegal migration to EU”
21 Davies and Neslen.
22 Davies and Neslen.
25 Arezo Malakooti.
30 UNHCR.