

MIGRATION MANAGEMENT IN LIBYA AND THE AMBIGUOUS ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

ARTICLE

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To address the issue of European responses to African immigration concerns, I propose to analyse how states and governments are increasingly making use of the services of international organisations to deal with legally or morally sensitive issues. I will attempt to demonstrate how international organisations are increasingly seen as mechanisms for governing the world indirectly, without assuming direct responsibility, and without being fully held accountable for their actions. I will do so briefly through the examination of the intervention of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Libya, where migration management has been considered crucial for the EU over the last twenty years, often justified by humanitarian concerns.

Historical studies have shown that trans-Saharan migrations have consistently been a normal part of life for Sahelian populations (Bernus, 1999; Brachet, 2009). Since the mid-twentieth century, the governments of Algeria and Libya have undertaken extensive development projects in their Saharan regions, leading to a significant demand for labour. Unable to meet this demand locally or nationally, these countries began importing workers from neighbouring states. In the early 1990s, various economic and political factors led to a surge in migration to North Africa, particularly to Libya, where Colonel Gaddafi publicly endorsed African immigration. Libya's oil wealth and robust economy made it an attractive destination for migrants from West and Central Africa, turning it into a primary hub within the continent (Pliez, 2004). This shift in migration patterns eventually extended to Europe, albeit on a smaller scale, with Sub-Saharan migrants venturing across the Mediterranean. Their presence garnered considerable attention in European media, framing migration as a pressing political issue on both continents.

The outbreak of war in Libya in 2011 triggered a significant displacement crisis, with the IOM dubbing it one of the largest migration crises in modern history. This crisis, exaggerated by fears of a southern invasion in Europe, prompted proactive international intervention led by organisations like the IOM, which facilitated the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of foreigners from Libya. While the IOM's humanitarian efforts received widespread acclaim, it is crucial to acknowledge its longstanding presence in Libya, primarily funded by wealthy governments for specific projects. Thus, the IOM's intervention during the war should be viewed not solely as humanitarian but also as an extension of Western state activities through international organisations (Brachet, 2016). Despite its financial reliance on member states,

the IOM wields significant influence in shaping migration policies, contributing to the framing of population movements and actively promoting certain policy narratives. Its involvement in border and migration control in Libya, since establishing an office in Tripoli in 2006, exemplifies its role in implementing migration policies abroad.

During the 2011 Libyan conflict, the IOM justified its interventions based on humanitarian grounds, citing the responsibility to protect vulnerable populations (Hehir and Murray, 2013). This rhetoric not only shaped public perceptions but also influenced the organisation's projects and priorities. For instance, the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of migrants, predominantly from Sub-Saharan Africa, was portrayed as a humanitarian imperative. Following Gaddafi's fall, Libya plunged into a prolonged state of war, exacerbating existing migration challenges, and fostering a lucrative market for migrant exploitation and detention. Despite the cessation of official programmes of 'assistance and repatriation of the refugees', migration remained a pressing issue, prompting the IOM to pursue their former 'assisted voluntary return programmes'. While the IOM's activities in Libya have evolved over time, the underlying rationale remains consistent, emphasising the management of population mobility and serving the interests of both state actors and international organisations. This paradigm shift in migration governance has profound implications, exacerbating existing challenges and perpetuating a cycle of instability and exploitation in the region.

Since the fall of the Gaddafi regime, following his assassination in October 2011, two political authorities have continued to compete for power: the UN-supported Government of National Accord based in Tripoli in the West, and politicians aligned with Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army, based in Tobruk in the East. Still, despite the ongoing tensions and clashes (Collombier and Lacher, 2023), the official end of the war was followed by the official end of the programmes of 'assistance and repatriation of the refugees', and by the return of those of 'assisted voluntary return', in order to face what was called, one more time, a 'surge in irregular migration'. But quickly, as the country settled into a lasting 'state of war' characterised by the constant possibility of new armed violence, the market of exploitation and violence against migrants, and the market of their detainment, have become even more important and influential than before (Brachet and Scheele, 2022). Dozens of migrant internment camps, retention centres and smuggling warehouses have sprung up throughout the country. They are run by militias, or conjointly by militias and the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (the DCIM, which is the official entity of the Libyan Ministry of the Interior responsible for migrant detention centres). Militias and the DCIM routinely fight over the control of the detention centres, as they clearly see them both as a way of garnering international funds and as an economic resource and labour pool. And, in many cases, 'no humanitarian agency, lawyers or civil society organisations [is] granted access' to these centres (UN Human Rights, 2023).

Given the rapidly deteriorating situation, the IOM changed again the name of its main programme in Libya and started in 2015 to implement a programme of Voluntary Humanitarian Return (VHR) (Rodriguez, 2019). This programme was and still is mostly financed by the EU and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, enabling thousands of people to be repatriated to their country of origin

each year (10,000 people in 2023). In March 2024, the IOM in Libya signed a new cooperation agreement with the British Government aimed at providing reintegration assistance for individuals who choose to return to their countries of origin through their VHR programme.

Finally, if emergency has turned into post-emergency and war-torn Libya into unstable Libya, the IOM's activities on the ground have changed little: the same people are always sent southwards by the same organisation, with the same methods and using the same equipment and funds. This is why this period of war, around 2011, should be seen not so much as a period of exception, but rather as a magnifying mirror of a rationale for action that continues to these days. For many private and public actors, migration has become once again a business almost like any other. Yesterday's refugees look again like unwanted immigrants in the eyes of most EU policy-makers. Meanwhile, the IOM renews its contracts, and carries on playing its part in the global show of migration management, alongside other IOs, but also as Paolo Cuttita (2023) has shown in a recent article, alongside NGOs and CSOs operating in this field, which all remain 'trapped in the care-control nexus'.

As we have seen, this global show of migration management undermines longstanding regional systems of transport and supply, which contribute to making travel in the Sahara increasingly difficult, expensive and dangerous (Brachet, 2012). Yet it slows down migration rather than stopping it (Brachet, 2018). In fact, after two decades of huge investments in migration and border control in the area, one can consider that these official objectives of curtailing irregular migration towards Libya remain mostly aspirational. Libya continues to need foreign labour – the vast majority of the estimated 700,000 international migrants in Libya today (in 2024) are still part of the Libyan labour market. The migratory adventure to North Africa or beyond continues to attract Sub-Saharan youth. Finally, at the level of the Saharan migration system, the Libyan conflict will have been only an additional tragic epiphenomenon, aggravating an already critical situation that preceded it and that is still ongoing. For years, the militarisation of border regions, the presence of foreign operational police agents in third countries, the deployment of considerable technical means, preventive information gathering, media propaganda, laws of exception, arrests, deportations, and the deaths by thousands constitute the reality of the implementation of European and Libyan migration policies in Libya and in the Sahara more generally. These policies pay little heed to international law, and their managers and agents deny responsibility for the effects they might have on the ground, hiding behind the need to respect orders and administrative obligations. In a sense, then, the war in Libya has only accelerated the implementation of migration policies that, for years, already bore all the trappings of war, without bearing its name.

This brief analysis highlights the intricate dynamics at play in the management of migration in Libya, underscoring the multifaceted roles of international organisations, state actors and regional conflicts. It emphasises the need for a more nuanced understanding of migration governance, one that considers not only humanitarian imperatives but also geopolitical interests and power dynamics. As the global landscape continues to evolve, the challenges of migration management will persist, necessitating ongoing dialogue and cooperation among stakeholders to address the complex realities on the ground.

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