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Death and migration

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Document Version
Peer reviewed version

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Death and migration: migrant journeys and the governance of migration during Europe's 'migration crisis'

Abstract

In migration and refugee studies, migrant deaths have frequently been closely linked to contemporary forms of border and migration governance. Migrant deaths at sea have also played a central role in shaping policy and public responses to Europe's 'crisis.' Yet relatively little scholarly work has analyzed migrants' personal experiences related to death and the impact of these experiences on their mobility. Drawing on 500 semi-structured interviews with people who crossed the Mediterranean Sea by boat in 2015-2016 and over 100 interviews with key stakeholders in the region, this article documents geographies of violence and death stretching back throughout migration trajectories that start far from the Mediterranean shores. It shines light on the different ways that encountering the deaths of others and perceiving the inevitably of one's own death drive and shape migration decisions and journeys. The article also highlights differences between European policy responses to migrant deaths and the experiences of those migrants making the journey. In doing so, it calls for a more expansive understanding of the relationship between migrant deaths, policies, and migration that extends beyond the relatively small parcel of water that divides Europe from its southern and eastern neighbors.

Introduction

Between 2014 and 2018, an estimated 1.8 million refugees and migrants crossed the Mediterranean Sea by boat to Europe (UNHCR n.d.). Over the same period, the International Organization for Migration (IOM n.d.) recorded over 17,000 deaths of people trying to make the journey, and many more unrecorded deaths are thought to have occurred elsewhere along the way before migrants reached the Mediterranean Sea (Cuttitta and Last 2020). In 2015 alone, at the height of Europe's so-called 'crisis,' over one-million migrant arrivals were recorded in Italy and Greece, and an estimated 3,771 people died during the crossing (IOM n.d). Although the majority of sea arrivals were recorded in Greece, over three quarters of the deaths occurred along the Central Mediterranean route between North Africa and Italy (IOM n.d). In 2015, for every 53 people who crossed via the Central Mediterranean route, one died on the way across that same stretch of sea (Crawley and Sigona 2016). In the following years, despite a decline in arrivals, the sea journey became even deadlier, with the mortality rate rising from 0.3 percent in 2015 to 2.1 percent in August 2018 (IOM n.d; Steinhilper and Gruijters 2018).

The capacity to decide who may be allowed to live and who will be exposed to death has been intimately linked to the operation of state sovereignty (Mbembe 2003), particularly in contexts of migration and border control (Agamben 1998, 2005; Carling 2007; De Genova 2012; Vaughan-Williams 2012; Jones 2016). Public announcements by political leaders in Europe, Australia and the USA in response to migrant deaths have also been shown to shape debates and policymaking on migration (Fassin 2005; Stierl 2017; Weber and Pickering 2011; Squire 2017). Yet considerably less research has examined what death means for migrants themselves and how it influences their migration projects, particularly in Europe. But death itself can be a powerful shaper of human behavior. Philosopher Paul Fairfield (2015) has described the anticipation of death as lending meaning and structure to human existence, shaping our considerations of what it means to live. Because we cannot reflect on our own

death after it has happened, we often experience and reflect on our own mortality and life through the deaths of others (Brezina et al. 2009; Patton et al. 2017; Walter 2018).

In migration scholarship, death has been examined largely as an outcome of a journey, often caused by ruthless smugglers or a militarised border (e.g. Atuesta and Varedes 2016; IOM 2017; Last et al 2017; RMMS 2016; Squire 2015). In refugee studies, moreover, death has often been considered a 'push factor' from which people are compelled to flee (e.g. Altai Consulting 2015; UNHCR 2015). By focusing on death as an end point of a journey or a 'push factor' at the beginning of one, these perspectives repeat a tendency in existing research to focus on the reasons why people leave their place of origin or move to a certain destination and to say relatively little about what happens during the journey in between (e.g.; Fargues and Bonfanti 2014; Fassman and Sievers 2014; Neumayer 2004; contra McMahon and Sigona 2018). In this article, however, we foreground the ways that people actively reflect on experiences of death throughout their migration projects, and the implications this has for their journeys. Examining migrants' experiences of, and responses to, the deaths of other migrants trying to reach Europe provides insight into why people have continued to attempt journeys toward Europe despite the dangers of sea crossings and other hardships faced along the way. The article shows how experiences of exposure to deaths can arise during migration trajectories which stretch across many months and miles. Such experiences can have immediate impacts on decisions to migrate onwards, as well as a cumulative effect on how migrants interpret risks and make decisions along the way. In this way, we argue that exposure to death is not only relevant to how journeys begin and end, but is key to shaping their evolution over time. And in response to witnessing deaths of others or having their own lives put at risk, people are not simply compelled to flee but actively decide why, when, where and how to move in response to, or despite of, the potential dangers they may face.

Furthermore, viewing official responses of European countries and European Union (EU) institutions to migrant deaths at sea alongside migrant responses to witnessing such deaths illuminates key divergences in death's meaning and function for the decision-making of, on the one hand, political representatives and policymakers and, on the other, migrants. As Andersson (2014) and Feldman (2012) have pointed out, decision-making on border controls and migration management often takes place in political arenas that are far removed from the physical encounters between the European Union's (EU) border apparatus and the people making their way toward Europe. As a result, we find indications of what Feldman calls '(non)connections' between the politics of and policymaking related to migration and the lives of people on the move (Feldman 2012: 5). A (non)connection can be defined as an absence of connections between people who are bound up in the same social processes (Ibid. :4). These (non)connections are particularly evident in the context of migrant deaths, the politicization of which, we argue, has been shaped by a geographically limited humanitarian gaze on the Mediterranean Sea. Policy narratives, as we show, have tended to focus on how the chance of dying on journeys *across* the Mediterranean Sea can deter migrants or on how policy measures should prevent deaths at sea. But experiences of death did not only happen at sea. Rather, for many people they occurred in locations and on routes far before the Mediterranean was reached. Situating decisions to attempt the sea crossing within *both* the specific contexts in which they were made *and* a broader understanding of people's journeys before that moment highlights how experiences of death throughout migration trajectories shape ongoing journeys.

To develop these ideas, this article has four sections. First, we describe the methodological approach that guided the research and outline a series of logistical and ethical considerations that we addressed. Second, we locate the discussion over migrant deaths at sea in ongoing debates on migrant journeys, border violence, and deaths. Third, we establish the link between the development of European policy responses to the so-called migration 'crisis'

and tragic migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea. Finally, we empirically examine experiences related to death during people's journeys to and across the Mediterranean Sea to show the different ways that witnessing and becoming aware of the risk of death shaped migrant decisions and journeys along the way. The concluding section reflects on the implications of migrant deaths for how we understand journeys and why border enforcement policies rarely prevent people from attempting dangerous journeys.

Methodological note

This article stems from a study which aimed to better understand the processes informing and shaping boat migration in the Mediterranean. The *Unravelling the Mediterranean Migration Crisis* (MEDMIG) project brought together academic and civil-society partners from the UK, Italy, Malta, Greece, and Turkey.[1] In Autumn 2015, at the height of boat arrivals in Europe, a team of field researchers carried out 205 interviews in Italy, 215 in Greece, 20 in Malta, and 60 in Turkey.

This qualitative study of migration drivers and routes took place at a time of dramatic flux and change in the dynamics of migration to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea and in the governance structures established in response (Crawley et al. 2017). To adapt to the shifting environments in each case-study country, we gathered samples by drawing on a combination of purposive and location sampling strategies (Reichel and Morales, 2017). Purposive sampling can be defined as the use of 'knowledge of the population to select in a non-random manner a sample of elements that represents a cross-section of the population' (Lavrakas 2008: 645). In our case, this approach meant reviewing macro-data on the migrant population crossing the Mediterranean Sea (released periodically by national governments and published online by

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[1] For more information, see http://www.medmig.info/

UNHCR) and targeting interviews to ensure a similar composition of nationality and gender in our own samples.

However, due to the rapidly changing situation, particularly in terms of shifting migration routes and contexts of reception in the research locations, there was insufficient up-to-date information available to produce an appropriate sample through purposive sampling alone. As a result, we also targeted interviewees through location sampling, which involved 'selecting a number of locations where immigrants are likely to be found' (Reichel and Morales 2017: 10). This approach was based on available knowledge of routes and governance structures gathered through background research, field observations of locations of arrival and transit, and interviews with key informants, including from our civil-society partners and local NGOs, human rights lawyers, and migrant and refugee associations. Information was securely shared among researchers via regular updates in an agile fieldwork approach which used new contextual knowledge to quickly adapt to diverse situations encountered on the ground (Crawley et al. 2017). In Greece we targeted locations along migration transit routes, such as the port of Mytilene and Athens. In Italy, by contrast, we targeted core locations of the country's complex refugee reception system, which intercepted people at sea and brought them to land in secure ports before distributing them throughout the country (McMahon and Sigona 2018). We also focused on transit points where people sought to move through Italy without being identified or entering the reception system, such as train stations, mosques, churches, and occupied buildings or squats[2] across the regions of Sicily and Apulia and in the cities of Milan and Rome. In addition, over a hundred stakeholders were interviewed, from politicians and policymakers to naval officers and coastguards, from representatives of international, non-

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[2] Vacant buildings which had been repurposed by local activists, volunteer networks, and migrants to provide makeshift accommodation.

governmental, and civil-society organizations to leaders of migrant and refugee associations and volunteers.

All migrants interviewed had arrived in the case-study country during 2015 or January 2016. Due to their often-precarious legal statuses, our approach had to ensure confidentiality. To that end, all interviewers gained informed consent before proceeding, and interviews were written up immediately in note form rather than being recorded.[3] As far as possible, interviews were carried out in the interviewees' mother tongues. For speakers of Arabic, Farsi, and Tigrinya, we employed translators who had experience working with refugees and were recommended by our research partner organizations. All translators were fully informed of the project aims and objectives and signed confidentiality agreements before beginning. If this arrangement was not possible, then interviews were only carried out in languages which interviewees spoke to a native or fluent standard.

The research team was also aware of the sensitivities of working with people whose backgrounds involved potentially traumatic experiences and adopted an ethical approach that sought to balance preventing distress with the need to give space to people to be listened to, to reconstruct and make sense of their experiences, and to bear witness to acts of violence and suffering which otherwise have rarely been recorded (Eastmond 2007). As a result, interviews were semi-structured, with a series of primary and secondary discussion points which could be addressed in a flexible order while giving interviewees space to express themselves in their own terms. Interviewees were not pressured to talk about distressing memories, but if such experiences surfaced and they wanted to discuss them further, they were given space to do so. Interviewees were not asked directly about witnessing death but rather about their experiences at different points along their journeys. Despite not being raised by interviewers, the topic of death was repeatedly brought up by interviewees themselves. Furthermore, the fieldwork was

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[3] As will be seen below, some notes were written up in third person.

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carried out with local research and civil-society partners with knowledge of legal and psychosocial services in each country, which was passed on to interviewees to ensure that those in need could potentially access support.

The research generated a large body of textual data, which were coded and analyzed with the assistance of NVivo software. Key demographic characteristics and information related to journey duration and itinerary were assigned to each interviewee ('attributes' in NVivo jargon), enabling us to identify broader trends across characteristics including routes, nationality, and gender and relate them to specific aspects of the migration journey, such as experiences of witnessing death and their impacts on migrants' decision-making. Thus, rather than a comprehensive *mapping* of deaths at Europe's border, our dataset is a corpus of reports on *experiences* of death along migration routes, which shines light on the significance of such experiences on migrant decision-making and trajectories in different locations.

Deadly journeys on land and at sea

Reports of people dying while seeking to migrate across the Mediterranean Sea have repeatedly punctuated European headlines in recent years, triggering calls for EU and national policy makers to act swiftly (Kovras and Robins 2016). However, deaths also occur elsewhere along migration routes and are not restricted to the routes to Europe (Weber and Pickering 2011). In the 1990s, for example, Eschbach et al. (1999) suggested that people were taking increasingly risky routes to cross the US-Mexico border in response to intensified border enforcement measures at urban crossing points (see also Hinkes 2008). In the 2000s, Nevins (2007) linked a decline in global coffee prices to rising migrant deaths on the Mexico-US border, highlighting how changes in international markets could force households and communities to undertake risky journeys in search of economic alternatives. Similarly, Weber and Pickering's overview of border policies and deaths in locations both close to and far from physical territorial borders

concluded that 'the deaths at the migratory fault lines between North and South are emblematic of the contradictions of globalization' (2011:4).

A growing body of research has examined various facets of the relationship between death and migration. Among other themes, this scholarship has addressed practical ways of identifying victims through forensic science and improving data collection on the prevalence of deaths (IOM 2017, RMMS 2016; Last et al. 2017), links between policy efforts to prevent irregular migration and a rise in border deaths (Jeandesboz 2014; Jones 2016; Last and Spijkerboer 2014), and the significance of death and public mourning for politics and policymaking (Délano Alonso and Nienass 2016). In particular, scholars have analyzed the close relationship between migrant deaths and migration governance. De León (2015: 3), for example, argues that deaths along the US-Mexico border are 'neither random nor senseless' but the predictable results of 'a strategic federal plan' which he likens to a killing machine 'that simultaneously uses and hides behind the viciousness of the Sonoran Desert'. Similarly, Jones (2016) argues that the Mediterranean 'refugee crisis,' especially the tragic deaths of tens of thousands of migrants, is a point of departure from which to examine the different forms of violence embodied in and by borders. As Jones explains, 'the structural violence of borders is at the foundation of the state,' and 'walls, borders, maps, properties, identity documents, and enclosure laws are technologies of governance that are fundamentally about controlling and excluding' the global poor (2016: 65). In the pre-Trump United States, the construction of a hybrid wall and fence system at the US-Mexico border as part of the 2006 Secure Fence Act was successful in reducing irregular entries locally but increased crossings and deaths a few miles away (Jones 2016; De León 2015). In all these ways, death has become a constitutive part of contemporary migration governance as states 'govern through death' – a practice Squire terms 'a form of biophysical violence whereby people are abandoned to the physical forces of

deserts and seas, which directly operate on bodily functions with often devastating consequences' (Squire 2017: 514).

Within this context, rather than examine the effects of their policies, political leaders in the United States (De León 2015) and Europe (Andersson 2018) have often blamed smugglers or migrants themselves for deciding to make dangerous journeys and promised to reduce migrant deaths by closing deadly routes. Although often wrapped in humanitarian language (Andersson 2018; Sigona 2018), such promises typically entail restrictive immigration policies and tighter border enforcement measures. In Europe, for example, the 'war on smugglers' has identified smugglers themselves, not EU policies or broader global inequalities, as the cause of boat tragedies (Peers 2015). European policymakers have frequently adopted the language of harm prevention and protection as a discursive device to *capture* migrants and 'save' them from migrating to Europe (Anderson 2012; Tazzioli 2016). However, the humanitarization of boat migrants as victims of exploitative and criminal smugglers also transforms them into subjects of control and regulation by states, placing blame for their deaths elsewhere (Sigona 2018). In this way, responses to migrant deaths drive an increasing inter-twining of humanitarian and security measures in the governance of migration and borders.

Despite the risk faced by migrants in the face of deterrence policies, many continue to attempt dangerous journeys across international borders. To understand how and why requires refocusing our attention on the ways individuals experience and respond to exposure to death and the possibility of dying during their journeys. Analyses of migrant deaths, however, have tended to concentrate on state and civil-society discourses which define, appropriate, and quantify migrant deaths (Jones 2016; Squire 2015, 2017; Stierl 2016, IOM 2017; Last and Spijkerboer 2014) or on the impacts of border deaths for the families and loved ones of those who die (Kovras and Robbins 2016). Studies which do focus on the relationship between death and journeys have primarily examined data on general flows and routes, such as Eschbach et

al.'s examination of border crossings and border enforcement (1999), rather than on the decision-making processes which shape migration journeys in response to such deaths (see also Jones 2016). Exceptions include works by De León (2015) and Martinez (2014), who show how journeys shift and evolve and how individuals develop survival strategies in response to dangers along migration routes in Mexico. But as it stands, the available scholarship tells us little about the ways that exposure to death influences decisions to migrate across the Mediterranean Sea or shape the longer migration trajectories that bring people toward the sea crossing, despite the risks that this crossing may entail.

This article contributes to scholarship on migration and deaths by foregrounding migrants' experiences of encountering death during their journeys. It asks how witnessing someone die or becoming aware of one's own potential death shapes people's journeys and their decisions to migrate onwards. On one hand, people may experience death indirectly, by being informed about death(s) occurring in other times and/or places. These experiences are mediated through communication with others, such as people present at the time of the death, or through stories or rumors passed from one person to another and can increase awareness of danger, risk, and one's own mortality. On the other hand, people can also have direct exposure to death by seeing or hearing someone die. If such experiences of witnessing others die or having one's own life at risk are repeated over time, they can have a cumulative traumatic effect (Arsenijevic et al. 2018), as has been documented in cases of war veterans (Fontana et al. 1999). In all these ways, experiencing death can have an impact on someone's identities and actions far beyond the time and place of the traumatic event itself (Fairfield 2015).

Both indirect experiences of and direct exposure to death can have behavioral and cognitive implications for people's lives (Brezina et al. 2009; Garmany 2011; Patton et al. 2017; Walter 2018). For example, as recounted by Garmany in his description of violence in a Brazilian favela, directly witnessing another person die can be a traumatic experience which

produces sudden responses in search of safety, such as hiding or escaping (2011). Moreover, Garmany also found that indirectly hearing of murders from other people influenced individual's decisions of where to reside, how to move, and with whom to interact by contributing to increased awareness of the spatial distribution of violence in urban space (2011). Brezina et al.'s study (2009) of young people in gangs shows how awareness of people dying in gang-related violence influenced individuals' expectation of meeting an early death themselves and, in turn, made them more open to undertaking high-risk behaviors. When people have repeated experiences of death, the cumulative effect can produce a sense of 'derivative fear,' defined as 'a steady frame of mind, of being constantly susceptible and vulnerable to danger… [which] acquires a self-propelling capacity' (Bauman 2006: 2). Directly and indirectly witnessing death can, therefore, have a cognitive impact on how individuals view their own mortality and perceive risks and dangers around them, in turn shaping their behavior.

To unpack how experiences of death shape migratory behavior, we integrate an examination of these experiences with recent scholarship on migrant journeys and decision-making which emphasizes the importance of what happens 'in-between' the moments of departure from one place and arrival in another (Bredeloup 2012; Hagan-Zanker and Mallett 2016; Schapendonk 2015). Migration often involves moving between multiple locations in which stops are made for differing reasons, as has been the case with much of the movement of migrants and refugees to and across the Mediterranean Sea toward Europe (Belloni 2019; Crawley and Hagan-Zanker 2018; Kofman 2018; McMahon and Sigona 2018). Decisions regarding whether, how, and where to move can also develop and change along the way, according to the shifting contexts encountered (Crawley et al 2017). In these places, different configurations of information, networks, and material resources contribute to the production of migration infrastructures which can enable people to stay or to move onwards (Schapendonk 2015; Lin et al. 2017). Deaths, we suggest, also play a part in constituting these migratory

spaces and practices. As the empirical analysis that follows will show, rather than preventing people from moving, migrant deaths can drive and shape onward journeys, sometimes in life-threatening ways.

Political responses to migrant deaths at sea

> The Mediterranean Sea, cradle of our civilization, is becoming a deathbed for thousands of nameless, desperate men, women and children. These people had lives full of pain, despair and hope, which led them to become victims of human trafficking. The voices of mothers who lost their children at sea will haunt our consciences. We must stop this carnage. (Matteo Renzi, *New York Times*, 22 April 2015)

Former Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's call for actions from EU and world leaders to 'stop the carnage' followed one of the deadliest weeks in the Mediterranean in April 2015. Besides the moral imperative, Renzi's words contained two substantial and telling qualifications: first, the geographical delimitation of the territory where migrant deaths mattered – namely, the Mediterranean Sea, *our* sea, – and second, the attribution of responsibility for these tragedies to 'human traffickers.' This section builds on these observations and outlines the relationship between Europe's public and policy responses to migration and to migrant dead bodies (or their absence) by examining events in the Mediterranean Sea. In particular, it links widely publicized migrant deaths to shifts in the prioritization and concentration of EU resources for the management of mobility of migrants and refugees in the Mediterranean region.

On 3 October 2013, a boat carrying migrants from Libya to Italy sank off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa, killing over 300 people. A memorial for the victims was held in a warehouse space on the island to accommodate the coffins. Over the coming days, Italian

authorities would descend on Lampedusa. The European Commission was represented by then-President José Manuel Barroso and Commissioner Cecilia Malmström, who, in an official statement showing respect for the victims, framed their bodies as a specifically *European* tragedy to which the EU would have to respond:

> I will never forget the sight of 280 coffins today. I will bear this with me for the rest of my life and I think they express something that we need to think about in the European Union, this isn't the European Union we want. (Cecilia Malmström, the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs, 2013)

Malmström's words highlight the significance of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea for the EU's governance of migration ('something we need to think about') and signal a call to action to prevent future deaths. At the same time, by publicly mourning the deaths of migrants in Lampedusa, EU leaders acknowledged they had a stake in, if not responsibility toward, such tragedies. A similar tone was adopted in calls for action from politicians, NGOs, volunteers, and the public escalated to the European and international levels (Dines et al. 2014; Puggioni 2015). The humanitarian commitment to saving humans in peril at sea became paramount, 'commonplace' (Stierl 2017), and set the tone for subsequent political and media discourse. The transnational mobilization of activists and volunteers in response to deaths at Europe's borders contributed to shifting EU policymakers' focus toward a more humanitarian discourse (Rygiel 2015; Pallister-Wilkins 2015).

Two weeks later, on 18 October 2013, the Italian Navy launched its *Mare Nostrum* operation to intercept and rescue boats at sea by patrolling the waters between the Libyan coast and Italy. *Mare Nostrum* rescued more than 150,000 people during its twelve-month duration (Marina Militare, n.d). At the same time, it brought about a unification of the maritime governance of migration across the Mediterranean, pooling national and European resources and taking all rescued migrants and refugees, except those in need of urgent medical care, to

the reception system in Italy. Yet it was not only a humanitarian initiative: rather, *Mare Nostrum* used military resources to detect and intercept migrant boats and, thus, manage and contain migrants' arrival in Italian territory. This military-humanitarian operation (Tazzioli 2016; Heller and Pezzani 2018) epitomized the intimate connection between humanitarianism and security in the management of human mobility in the Mediterranean Sea (Cuttitta 2014, 2018; Vaughan Williams 2014).

In late 2014, this balance between the mission's humanitarian and security imperatives shifted, as *Mare Nostrum* was replaced by Joint Operation *Triton*, an EU-wide mission coordinated by Frontex which was much smaller in scale and resources and had a more narrow mandate to police and monitor sea borders rather than carry out rescue operations (McMahon and Sigona 2018). For both its size and emphasis, Joint Operation *Triton* signaled a return to border control as a priority and a movement of resources away from SAR (Search and Rescue) operations. But when there was a peak in deaths in April 2015, more rescue-oriented missions at sea returned, as the Frontex mission was expanded and its operational mandate in the Central Mediterranean reviewed (Frontex 2015). Rescues were subsequently coordinated among governmental and non-governmental search and rescue operations, and, instead of waiting for boats to arrive in Italian or Maltese waters, rescues took place closer to Libyan shores (Interview with representative from an NGO in Italy). In this way, the humanitarian drive to prevent migrant deaths reshaped Europe's governance of migration on the Central Mediterranean through a redefinition of operational mandates and a reorganization of the distribution of resources.

A similar pattern would be observed on the Aegean Sea in the Eastern Mediterranean. In Summer 2015, there was little coordination of responses to boat migration, and although the Greek government tried to enforce border controls by authorizing the Hellenic Coastguard to

'push-back' migrant boats entering its territory,[4] there was no formal agreement or shared approach between the two countries over who would carry out rescues or how (Interviews with Officials from the Greek Coastguard and Navy). However, a dramatic shift came in September 2015, when a photograph of a Turkish policeman retrieving the lifeless body of a three-old Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, from the lapping waves on a beach near Bodrum made headlines (Vas 2015). Expressions of solidarity for the plight of Syrian refugees reached unprecedented levels, as world leaders responded to the change of mood and launched a number of initiatives in support of refugees (Sirriyeh 2018). Canada's Prime Minister welcomed Syrian families at the airport, and Germany's Angela Merkel suspended the Dublin regulation and initiated what became known as an *open-door* policy for Syrians (BBC News 2015). Alan Kurdi's photograph encapsulated and was the culmination of a trend initiated in Spring 2015, turning political and media focus firmly onto the Aegean route and the plight of Syrian refugees escaping the intensifying civil war. The predominantly male, black, African migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean, by contrast, made headlines only in the case of mass tragedies and were increasingly labelled by European politicians as economic and/or illegal migrants (McMahon and Sigona 2018). This distinction between 'refugees' and 'economic migrants' reflected a 'two kinds of people' rhetoric dividing 'the special people—*our* people, refugees' from 'the other people, migrants' who were less deserving of protection (Carling 2017).

This section has described the evolution of migration governance measures in response to migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea, but the assumption that preventative measures can stop people from making dangerous journeys holds only by taking a politically and geographically narrow view of responsibilities for migrant deaths and the impacts of border policies (Weber and Pickering 2011; Andersson 2014; Jones 2016; Squire 2017). Since 2013, this narrow view of Europe's 'migrant crisis' has meant prioritizing, claiming, and taking

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[4] NGO representatives that we interviewed alleged that pushbacks still happen from time to time.

responsibility for certain deaths in particular places, but not for others. But as the following section shows, experiences of death had a broader role in shaping migration trajectories leading to and across the Mediterranean.

Death and migration

During 2015, the number of deaths recorded in the Mediterranean Sea reached 4,500 - until that point, the highest annual total deaths since records of migrant deaths had been counted (IOM n.d). However, deaths were not only occurring at sea. One in five of the people we interviewed had been exposed to death in some way between their place of origin and their arrival in the location of our interviews. Of these, the majority (64 percent) had direct experiences of seeing or hearing someone die or be killed. Some interviewees spoke of more than one experience of death in different places. This section provides an overview of where these experiences occurred, for whom, and how.

In our data, the people most likely to have witnessed death along their journeys were male, young, and travelling without family members. Whereas 21 percent of the men we interviewed spoke of such an experience, only 9 percent of the women did so. 32 percent of interviewees who crossed the Central Mediterranean had a direct (witnessing someone die) or indirect (hearing from others of deaths in that particular place) experience of death along their way, in contrast to 9 percent of people who crossed the Eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, the Central Mediterranean route itself was more deadly, with 10 percent of interviewees who took that route reporting someone dying on the way, in contrast to 2 percent of those who took the Eastern Mediterranean route. Experiences of death were most commonly reported by people from West and Central Africa (37 percent of those who reported them), followed by 19 percent by people from Asia (specifically Bangladesh and Pakistan), 11 percent by people from the Horn of Africa, and 8 percent by people from the Middle East (Syria, Iraq, and

Afghanistan). It is noticeable that while almost all interviewees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan had originally set out for 'forced migration' reasons, most commonly to escape violent conflict and persecution (Crawley et al. 2017), relatively few witnessed death on their journeys once they had left their place of origin.

However, there were many more deaths further back on the routes taken by people *before* they reached the Mediterranean crossing. 72 percent of references to directly or indirectly experiencing death were linked to locations on land, especially three locations: the Iran-Turkey border, the Sahara Desert, and Libya. Of interviewees who travelled through Iran, 17 percent reported being exposed to death in some form there. These people were Afghans who either travelled from Afghanistan or had grown up in Iran and sought to leave the country or Pakistanis who were taking long land-based journeys toward Europe. Their routes involved stops in Tehran and Urmia, before attempting the mountainous border crossing to Turkey on foot, as described by the quote below:

> The night we started walking, 15 more people joined us in the house, and we found 50-60 more people on the mountain before beginning our journey on foot... We were hearing the Iranian army shooting, but we didn't see them. We were hearing the gunshots. We managed to hide, but some others from our group were shot. Others were killed. The army had a very big spotlight and were shooting whoever they were seeing. We were very scared. Only 12 people made it to Turkey. (50-year-old Afghan man interviewed in Greece)

As the interviewee above notes, the Iranian-Turkish border was not only a harsh terrain to cross by foot but also patrolled by the Iranian military, who would capture or shoot at people seeking to pass. As a result, border crossings were attempted on isolated routes, often at night, to avoid

being seen. Another interviewee described being driven toward the Turkish border by car but having to then embark on a long walk hidden from security forces, during which five people died:

> We went by car to Urmia. We walked for 26 hours: Afghans, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis. 5 people died there: 1 Pakistani and 4 Afghans. They died of thirst. Some people survive thirst; some others don't. We buried them there. And we prayed for them. And then we went on. (28-year-old Pakistani man interviewed in Greece)

The Sahara Desert between Agadez in Niger and Sabha or Al Qatrun in Libya was traversed by a majority of interviewees from West and Central Africa (75 percent). The desert has historically been a vital route for the transfer of people, contraband goods, and weapons between northern and southern Africa (Husken 2017). 20 percent of interviewees reported having witnessed death in some form along the way. Deaths in the desert could be caused by heat, difficult terrain, and lack of water, as well as by the actions of people organizing the journey, as described below:

> You pack the luggage in the back, including water, and after, the passengers sit on top of the luggage. You are packed like sardines. You can go for hours before you can reach a bottle of water. You can only get your water when you stop. It was not easy. My water got finished, so I had to ask for water. We lost three people on the way. We stopped and buried them. When we lost the first person, everyone was shocked. They are wicked devils – the drivers. They treat human beings like animals. I cannot even describe how they are being treated… If anything happens, they just drop you. (Ghanaian man interviewed in Italy)

As shown by the above quote, migrants seeking to enter Libya from Agadez were dependent on the drivers taking them across the desert. Once in the desert, only the drivers knew the routes to take and when and where to stop for rest or to drink water. If people died, the dangerous terrain and heat would mean that the journey had to continue despite the ongoing risk to life. The bodies would be left, with no chance to record or mark the place or reasons for their passing. Despite being a dangerous journey, it was traversed by thousands.

The country where most instances of death were reported, however, was Libya. 95 percent of the people we interviewed in Italy departed on boats from there. Libya has historically played a central role as both a transit and a destination country for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and has cooperated with EU member states on migration governance for many years (Paoletti 2011). Among the people we met, Libya not only was a country of transit but had also been an intended destination for one third of interviewees who had crossed the Central Mediterranean (McMahon and Sigona 2018). Many told how they had imagined that Libya would be a place of economic opportunity, but their descriptions of the situation in Libya were instead characterized by heightened awareness of generalized violence and death. More than a quarter (27 percent) of interviewees who had traversed Libya prior to moving to Europe spoke of either directly witnessing death or becoming aware of deaths by hearing of them from others, with West and Central Africans the most likely to experience violence and witness death in Libya. Many migrants who experienced violence and death in Libya did so while seeking to stay in the country to reside and work, and interviewees stated that they had been targeted due to their race, religion, and language:

they shoot black people for fun. There is no law, it is a crazy place. (18-year-old Gambian man interviewed in Italy)

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He heard on the way that Libyans were killing Christians, and he was grateful that he was Muslim. There were four Muslims in the truck and some Christians. The Libyan driver spoke a little English and beat the Christians more. (Ghanaian man interviewed in Italy)

Such fears appear to be supported by the prevalence of experiences of death reported by migrant interviewees from three mixed-faith, English-speaking countries: Gambia (51 percent of Gambian interviewees reported direct or indirect experiences of death), Ghana (67 percent of Ghanaian interviewees) and Nigeria (29 percent of Nigerian interviewees). Other dangers included conflict between armed groups, threats from armed street gangs (such as the 'Asma Boys[5]'), and exploitative employers who threatened workers rather than pay them or kept people in slave-like conditions, as described below:

The Arab peoples would take you to work but sometimes don't pay, one day a man said there's a big project, big work, so I put my things in the car and he drove me off and put me in prison. It was a kidnapping… We were 2, 3, 4 days without food or water, many people lost their life there. [In the prison] you work for them, when somebody dies, you have to move the body for them. They take you and tell you to throw the body in the ditch. It is inhuman. (31-year-old Gambian man interviewed in Italy)

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[5] Asma Boys were described by interviewees as street gangs of young men who would be responsible for violently assaults, robbery, and extortion of migrants. However, there is little known about the composition and operations of these gangs. OHCHR simply refers to Asma Boys as the term migrants use for criminals (OHCHR 2018: 52). The United Nations Panel of Experts on Libya describes them as 'criminal gangs' and notes that the name Asma comes from the Arabic word for listen, which they would shout to migrants to get their attention in the street (UN Security Council 2018 :14-15).

I was working in Tripoli one day with my brother. We were fixing cars, and they shot him. My brother was shot in front of me. We was working, and they did not pay… When my brother said where is my money, he complained and asked for his money and they got a gun and came back and shot him dead like that. (18-year-old Nigerian man interviewed in Italy)

As is shown below, the context in Libya led to people having an expectation of witnessing others die or being killed themselves, which influenced where people lived, to whom they talked, and how they viewed their future. Onward movement from Libya to Europe had not always been an intention of people when they entered the country, but for many it became a decision made in response to the context and experiences encountered there.

Decisions to migrate

Whereas the previous section described encounters with death documented in interviews, here we examine the significance of these encounters for migrants' journeys throughout their varied routes and trajectories. Experiencing death could shape people's decisions to move on, their interpretations of the risks they would face, or their intended routes and ways of travelling. These decisions could respond to specific experiences of witnessing a death or be the result of repeated exposure to death and violence, a cumulative effect that acted as a reminder of one's own mortality.

Experiences of death were reported as drivers of onward migration, particularly for migrants in Libya or Iran. For migrants in these countries, directly witnessing death or having one's own life threatened could drive them to move away in search of safety and became a reminder of the risks associated with staying put. As noted by one interviewee, 'it's hard, you watch your brothers bleed and die, but you can only think of yourself' (18-year-old Gambian

man interviewed in Italy). In both Libya and Iran, newly arrived migrants often realized that they would be unable to safely remain. In the cities of northern Libya, becoming aware of the threat of being killed by witnessing or hearing about the deaths of others acted, in conjunction with Europe's proximity, as catalysts spurring them to seek someone to organize their onward travel by boat:

> Everyday there are guns, bombs, soldiers… Being Christian is very difficult in Libya. Because of the situation in Libya, killing people and all that, I wanted to go to Europe. (Ghanaian man interviewed in Italy)

In this way, the lack of security in places such as Libya and Iran played a vital role in driving onward mobility from them (Crawley et al 2017). For these people, the need to move on in search of protection and safety arose long after their departure from their place of origin and was often motivated by quite distinct factors from their original decision to migrate (McMahon and Sigona 2018).

Deaths also reconfigured the resources and information available for staying in or moving on from particular places, impacting on the logistics of people's journey, in terms of intended routes or decisions regarding where to go, when, and how. The death of a friend, family member, or travelling partner, for example, could have significant practical implications, cutting someone off from the social and financial resources enabling his/her movement or facilitating his/her stay in certain places, as was noted in the following interview:

> His friend fell down from the pick-up and died in the desert. The accident left him completely shocked - "I was screaming at him: 'don't let me alone! Don't let me alone!'"

He lost his only guide and with him all the contacts and the money to use once they would have been in Libya. (18-year-old Nigerian man interviewed in Italy)

In such situations, death could increase vulnerability and limit opportunities for staying in or moving on from a particular place. Those with material resources, networks, and information were better positioned to respond to such tragic events and adjust their migration projects to dangerous and volatile circumstances. The following examples illustrate how social networks and financial resources, in some circumstances, enabled safer journeys. For this interviewee from Pakistan,

life on the way is not safe, there are many risks… I paid more to be respected on the journey, to be safer… If you pay more money, you have a safer boat, other people with less money have a not good boat and not safe life. (28-year-old Pakistani man interviewed in Italy having crossed the Eastern Mediterranean and Greece)

Similarly, in Iran, one interviewee could afford to pay for two horses to carry his family and belongings through the mountain border with Turkey, whereas others reported people dying or simply 'falling off' the mountain side. In these cases, people with sufficient resources and knowledge were able to act on awareness of the deaths of others along a particular migration route and plan their journey accordingly.

Moreover, as experiences of hearing about or witnessing deaths arose repeatedly throughout a journey, they could have a cumulative influence on an individual's self-perception and, subsequently, the decision to migrate. In particular, a perceived imminent death led some people to undertake potentially life-threatening onward journeys. For people experiencing a consistent fear of dying, the risks faced by leaving that place did not act as deterrents because

they considered death to be a certainty, regardless of whether they stayed or moved on. Such a perspective was most evident in descriptions of preparations for the Mediterranean Sea crossing from Libya. As the previous section showed, by the time that interviewees reached the Mediterranean's southern shores, many had suffered direct violence and already witnessed death at some point since leaving their place of origin, particularly in the Sahara Desert and in Libya itself. These past experiences shaped their future decisions and willingness to undertake onward migration, even when there was a risk of dying along the way. At this point, interviewees often spoke of the certainty of dying, of accepting the certainty and insuperability of their own deaths before attempting to cross the sea. The decision to move was, thus, interpreted by them not as a search for a better life but as a way of seeking to determine when and where death would come: it was a decision to face death at sea rather than on land. The possibility of surviving was often expressed in terms of faith and spirituality: prayers would be made to God, and survival was considered to come not because of their own actions but because a superior power had decided it was not their time to die:

> We were very afraid on the boat. We could die. But at that point if you have lived the terrible things I saw in Libya and other countries, you do not care any more about dying. It is almost better to die. If we arrive, ok; it's ok if I die. Whatever God wants. (22-year-old Ethiopian woman interviewed in Italy)

> Either I will die, or I will live. I leave and survive, or stay and die. I gave everything to God. (29-year-old Ghanaian man interviewed in Italy)

In this way, the decision to face the sea journey's dangers was an acceptance of facing death. God, not the person undertaking the journey, made the choice over whether death would come

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at sea. However, even within the belief that the ultimate decision on life or death is out of their hands, people take the chance of crossing the sea over the certainty of dying in Libya. From the perspective of those who made it to Europe successfully, this enabled at least some hope for the future, something that staying did not.

Conclusions

This article has drawn attention to the role that migrants' experiences of the deaths of other migrants and their own potential deaths have in shaping journeys toward Europe, despite the dangers of sea crossings and other hardships faced along the way. In particular, we have highlighted how experiences of death play an important role shaping migration decisions and the migration trajectories over time, not only at departure but also *en route*. This addresses a gap in migration and refugee studies, which have tended to examine death as an end point of a dangerous journey or a push factor from which people are compelled to flee, and rarely considered the ways that migrants reflect on and act in response to experiences of deaths throughout their journeys.

We have shown how death influences people's decisions on when, where, why and how to move. Firstly, the decision to migrate could be shaped by an immediate experience, such as seeing someone killed, which became a catalyst to decide to move away in search of safety. In this way, experiences of death could shape the temporality and directionality of onward migration, as was the case with migrants moving on from Libya despite not having previously intended to do so. Secondly, many people with whom we spoke had experienced danger, violence, and death repeatedly prior to attempting the journey across the sea to Europe. The cumulative memory of these experiences informed their decision to take the risks of crossing. Some accepted the risks of the sea crossing because they considered themselves already as good as dead either on land or at sea, others because saw the sea crossing as a last resort to

avoid an imminent danger to their lives. In this way, the decision to board a boat across the Mediterranean Sea was shaped by people's direct and indirect exposure to death throughout their journeys, in times and places often far from Europe's shores.

We have also described EU and Member States' responses to migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea in order to highlight distinctions in the meaning and implications of migrant deaths for the governance of migration in the Mediterranean and for people's decisions to undertake risky journeys to cross the sea. Public and policy responses to the migration 'crisis' in Europe were focused predominantly on stopping people smugglers in the Mediterranean Sea. Calls to save lives and prevent further deaths accompanied policy measures which sought to prevent boat migration. But death neither occurred only at sea, nor was ubiquitous in all places. Migration in some places was highly dangerous, such as the mountainous Iran-Turkey border, the Sahara Desert, or Libyan cities. On other routes, such as the one from Syria, once people had left their origin country, they tended to witness less violence and death on the way to Europe than people from West and Central Africa, for many of whom the need to find protection arose *after* leaving their place of origin. Although death could come at the hands of violent smugglers, particularly while migrants were in Libya or on unseaworthy boats in the Mediterranean Sea, they were not the only cause. Many migrants died of thirst or starvation in the desert or at the hands of militias and gangs in Libya or were shot at by security forces trying to leave Iran. Many more experienced violence before even deciding to find a smuggler and attempt the sea journey toward Europe.

In conclusion, by bringing deaths which occurred throughout people's broader migration trajectories analytically to the fore, this article challenges the limited geographical focus of European and EU policymakers' concern with migrant deaths. Moreover, emphasizing experiences of death and violence occurring prior to the sea crossing enables us to grasp how, for many, the risk of death is a reason for moving onwards rather than a cause for staying put.

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