Navigating the Central Mediterranean in a time of 'crisis'

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Navigating the Central Mediterranean in a time of 'crisis': disentangling migration governance and migrant journeys

Abstract

From 2014 to the end of 2016, over 450,000 people crossed from North Africa towards Italy via the Central Mediterranean route. The number of people recorded as dead or missing in the same stretch of water has steadily increased too. Crisis-talk in the region has led to renewed efforts by the European Union and its Member States to govern and control migration to and across the Central Mediterranean. Against this backdrop, this article draws upon over two hundred interviews with newly arrived boat migrants and fifty-five stakeholders in Italy to reveal a disjuncture between the drivers and dynamics of migration and the assumptions underpinning policy development and how it operates at three crucial junctions: along migration routes, at sea, and upon arrival in Europe. In doing so, the article problematizes existent ways of understanding journeys in research and policy, with important consequences for the governance of migration.

Keywords

Borders, Refugee Crisis, Europe, Governance, Mediterranean, Migration

Introduction

From 2014 to the end of 2016, over 450,000 people crossed from North Africa towards Italy and, to a lesser degree, Malta via the Central Mediterranean route.[i] According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the number of people recorded as dead or missing in the same stretch of water exceeded 10,000 over this period.[ii] During 2015, amid declarations of a 'migrant crisis' in the region, the magnitude of the flow and rising death rate inspired an expansion of efforts by the European Union (EU) and its Member States to control and reduce migration to and across the Central Mediterranean Sea. This heralded significant transformations in the governance of mobility and borders before, during and after the sea crossing. And yet, flows have since persisted as people have continued to attempt the journey.

Against this backdrop, in this article we closely examine the relationship between migration and the changing governance of mobility and borders in the Central Mediterranean. In particular, we highlight a disjuncture between the drivers and dynamics of migration and two assumptions underpinning policy developments at three crucial stages: along migration routes, at sea, and upon arrival in Europe. The first assumption claims that those making the journey are mostly not refugees but so-called 'economic migrants', as they originate from countries that are not engaged in warfare and their main motivation is seeking employment and a better quality of life.[iii] This has been expressed in press reports and policy debates repeatedly asking whether those on the move had left their homes for economic reasons or in

search of international protection (Collier, 2014; Reuters, 2015) and reinforced by descriptions of the demographic composition of the migrant population which have referred to the low proportion of nationals from so-called 'refugee-producing countries'.[iv] The second assumption claims that Europe is the ultimate destination of all African migrants and constructs their presence in North Africa as 'in transit', with their mobility determined exclusively by the EU's capacity to deter or delay the journey across the sea. This has been supported by research, often carried out with migrants and refugees who had already reached Europe (a methodological bias) and which concentrates on the reasons why people set out from their home countries but says relatively little about what happens after the point of departure and before arrival in Europe (e.g. Altai Consulting, 2015; Fargues and Bonfanti, 2014; Fassman and Sievers, 2014; UNHCR, 2015; contra Mallet et al, 2017; Flahaux and de Haas, 2015; Squire et al, 2017).

These two assumptions have underpinned political narratives proclaiming a 'crisis' of uncontrolled migration to Europe. Representations of unceasing and linear migration flows have produced 'a politics of invasion and moral panic' (Mainwaring and Brigden, 2016). But declarations of crisis can also have a political function, enabling states to justify exceptional migration control measures and expand their geopolitical influence beyond their own borders (Mountz and Hiemstra, 2014). In this article, we highlight how the crisis narrative in Europe indeed informs and justifies an expansion of policy initiatives to seek to control migration in the Central Mediterranean. Moreover, we also present two key characteristics of migration patterns across the Central Mediterranean which underline a need to reassess the validity of its two main assumptions. First, the motivations that have led people to set out from their homes have varied widely and can rarely be reduced only to a single and exclusive economic or protection-based reason. Second, the majority of the journeys travelled prior to the sea crossing have not followed the pattern of being pulled directly to Europe. Although some people have undertaken unified journeys that were intended from the beginning to reach Europe, it has been more common for journeys to be disjunctive and protracted over lengthy periods of time. In these cases, the decision to come to Europe has been formed along the way and in response to the contexts that migrants have come across after having already left their home far behind.

Whereas existing research has usually relied on either relatively small samples of primary data (e.g. Altai Consulting, 2015) or secondary demographic data from governments and international organisations (e.g. Fargues and Bonfanti, 2014; Frontex, 2015; Toaldo, 2015), we draw our conclusions through analysis of a large primary dataset of 202 interviews in Italy and Malta with men and women who crossed the Central Mediterranean by boat during 2015. The fieldwork took place between September and December 2015 using a combination of location and purposive sampling approaches to gathering interviews (Reichel and Morales, 2017). This enabled us to adapt to the complex and somewhat chaotic social and political environment characterising Italy's refugee reception system. As a result, the profile of the sample broadly reflects the composition of the migration flows across the Central Mediterranean, with a wide range of nationalities represented from North, West and East Africa, as well as the Middle East and further afield (see Figure 1). Our sample also included a majority of male respondents (87%) over female ones (13%), which is a similar

pattern to that found in the arriving population. This is supported by 55 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders from political institutions, non-governmental organisations, research and social movements.

The article is divided in three main sections. First, we locate our analysis of Mediterranean boat migration and the EU's responses to it within debates on mixed migration, legal categorisations of mobility and migration journeys. Second, we discuss policy responses to unauthorised sea crossings focusing on three stages: at sea, at disembarkation in the EU, and before the sea journey. Third, drawing on our empirical material, we examine the experiences and journeys of migrants and focus in particular on their motivations for setting out and for moving on along the way. In the conclusion we consider the relevance of our findings to the development of more nuanced and effective policy responses to Mediterranean boat migration.

Complex process, blunt instruments

How we label, categorize and, in turn, differentiate between those who cross the Mediterranean by boat has enormous implications on the kind of legal and moral obligations receiving states and societies feel towards them (Author 2017). The distinction between refugees and migrants, or 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration has been a mainstay of much research, law and policy for decades (Long, 2013). International law defines a refugee as a person who has left their country of nationality as a result of a well-founded fear of persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (OHCHR, no date). The term 'migrant', in contrast, does not have such a universally-accepted definition but has been equated with people who are seeking a better standard of living or who move for reasons of 'personal convenience' (IOM, 2011: 61).This distinction has a functional purpose of ensuring that people in need of humanitarian protection have a special route for admission to safe countries without needing to meet economic criteria (Long, 2013).

However, the policy reliance on sharp boundaries between refugees and other migrants is often problematic and obscures the details of complex migration processes as well as fluid bureaucratic categorisation practices (Carling, 2017). All too often, research has also concentrated on the reasons why people left the country of their nationality and arrived in a particular host country, but not the bit in between (BenEzer and Zetter, 2014: 3; Mainwaring and Brigden, 2016). Consequently, as noted by van der Velde and van Naerssen, the existing research tends to 'assume that migrants are directly moving from one place (area of origin) to another (area of destination)' when the end destination is often unclear and journeys are disjunctive and protracted over time (2011: 220). Journeys are in practice varied, non-linear and formative processes (BenEzer and Zetter, 2014). Disjunctive migration patterns require continual decision making on whether to stop, how long for and where and why to move on. People adapt to the context they are in, the information they have and dangers they may face. As a result, routes can change, attempted settlement can be cut short and intended transit can become more permanent depending on the opportunities and constraints migrants face in particular times and places (Bredeloup, 2012; Hagan-Zanker and Mallett, 2016;

Schapendonk, 2015). Moreover, journeys are also part of broader life trajectories, sometimes stretching back before moments of departure from one place and last after arrival in another (Mainwaring and Brigden, 2016: 244). As a result, multiple events and considerations can contribute to people's decisions to move, making it difficult to pinpoint one single, precise motivation. These considerations destabilise existent ways of understanding the intentionality and directionality of migration experiences. As a result, we should be wary of the teleological connotation of the 'journey' as short cut to capture extended and fragmented migration projects, as the term essentialises the standpoint of the observer, suggesting that the place in which the interview was carried out was the destination and interpreting whatever happened before as a transit towards that specific point.

Although contemporary patterns of migration are complex and shifting social processes, this is often not reflected in political and policy responses (Authors, 2016). Indeed, as argued by Hagan-Zanker and Mallett (2016: 6), the responses from the EU and its Member States to migration across the Mediterranean Sea have often relied on 'blunt instruments' such as fences, walls, detention and deportation to respond to complex social processes. However, being able to categorise people as refugees who deserve protection or as migrants who can be deported is key to these approaches to migration management (Zetter, 1991, 2007; Inda, 2005). These legal categories and bureaucratic labels reveal more about the assumptions underpinning the politics of the time rather than the nature of migration patterns. In the public debate of much of contemporary Europe, for example, the term 'migrant' has increasingly been associated with illegality and criminality (Allen and Blinder, 2013). In this way, the categorisation of people as refugees or migrants establishes what Carling (2017) calls a 'two kinds of people' rhetoric distinguishing between refugees and migrants by dividing 'the special people—*our* people, refugees' from 'the other people, migrants'. The disjuncture between how receiving states see and categorise human mobility and complex sets of drivers and motivations underpinning international migration is for Castles (2004) the main reason why immigration policies often fail to achieve their stated goals.

In this article we advance understanding of the consequences of the disconnect between immigration policies and migration through critical examination of migrant journeys. This comes at a particular historical moment when, following a period in which crisis-talk triggered repeated calls for urgent policy responses, the global governance of migration is undergoing major changes,[v] in which greater control over unauthorised migration is a core consideration. Our first step is to examine the narratives and assumptions that underpin recent policy interventions at sea and on land.

Responding to the 'crisis'

Throughout history, the Mediterranean Sea has been shaped by intertwined social, political and economic relations among and between countries of the region (e.g. Braudel 1949). However, over recent years the dynamics of migration flows by boat across the Central Mediterranean route from North Africa have evolved significantly, resulting in a dramatic growth in their scale, diversity among the arriving population and increasing deaths recorded along the way (see Figure 2).

The evolution of migration flows can be seen particularly clearly in data from the last decade. Whereas between 2005 and 2010 an average of 23,000 migrants travelling by boat were detected reaching Italy per year, in 2014 and 2016 it was over 170,000 (with a slight decrease to 153,800 in 2015). In recent years, the arriving population has included mostly men from a wide range of countries of origin, with the top five nationalities of arrivals representing only 61% of the total in 2014 and 59% of the total in 2015. In Italy in 2014, the largest single nationality group was that of people from Syria, totalling 27.5% of arrivals. A year later, however, less than 5% of arrivals were from Syria and the largest single population was from Eritrea, making up 25.5% of the total, whilst there were another eighteen nationalities which each represented more than 1% of the total each. This diversity of proveniences stands in stark contrast to the composition of the migration flow on the Eastern Mediterranean sea crossing in 2015, when the top 5 nationalities arriving in Greece represented 96% of all arrivals, and hints at a complex range of routes and migration experiences that are evolving and shifting over time.

The response from EU and Italian governments has represented this migration across the Central Mediterranean as a crisis to be resolved through restrictions to unauthorised population movements across the sea before, during and after the sea crossing. Here we will look in more detail at the developments at each stage, with a particular focus on the assumptions that have informed them.

At sea

Since 2014, increasing migration across the Mediterranean has been met with intensified calls by the Italian and Maltese governments for closer cooperation at sea among EU institutions and Member States. Migration by boat has repeatedly come to the forefront of political agendas in Italy in particular, where emergencies have been declared in response to increasing numbers of arrivals and dramatic disasters in which hundreds of people have drowned attempting to make the journey (Author 2012; Tazzioli 2016). Early in 2011, for example, when thousands from North Africa arrived on the shores of the island of Lampedusa, the Minister for the Interior, Roberto Maroni, declared a humanitarian emergency whilst warning of an impending internal security threat to Europe (*La Stampa*, 11 February 2011). A few years later, in 2015, then-Prime Minister Matteo Renzi stated 'we must stop this carnage' (*The New York Times*, 22 April 2015) in response to the drowning of hundreds of people at sea and European leaders met repeatedly to 'prevent further loss of life at sea and to tackle the root causes of the human emergency that we face' (European Council 2015).

The declaration of a crisis has lent urgency to the unification of the maritime governance of the Central Mediterranean route, pooling together resources from governments and humanitarian organisations and expanding their operations significantly. Through the Mare Nostrum operation led by the Italian Navy throughout 2014 and Joint Operation Triton, under the command of the EU border agency Frontex since 2015, border security and humanitarian rescue operations have intersected at sea (Tazzioli 2016). Humanitarian organisations have contributed with their own rescue missions too. The EU's Joint Operation

Sophia was also established with the objective of seeking to destroy boats potentially used for smuggling, but which faced a range of legal and logistical difficulties in carrying this out in practice (Author 2015). Cooperation among EU institutions and Member States also progressed during 2015, bringing about the establishment of a series of four 'hotspots' at Italian ports where new arrivals could be contained, identified (even by physical coercion) and relocated (to the Italian reception system, to other EU Member States or to countries of origin) and the European Asylum Support Agency (EASO) was given greater resources and responsibility, involving the EU in the status recognition of asylum applications.

While the overarching aim of maritime missions has ostensibly been to save lives at sea, they have also functioned as a first stage of regulating the journeys towards Europe's southern shores. This is because they ensure that migrants are brought to land and disembark in an orderly way at ports that are securely closed off from public access and where each arrival should have a name, nationality, age, fingerprints and photograph recorded. This has been termed 'pre-identification' and it facilitates the containment of people for categorisation as a likely refugee or an economic, and therefore illegal, migrant to be expelled. The Interior Minister Alfano showed this clearly in his claim that 'it is essential that economic migrants are repatriated. We need to identify them and hold them in places so that we can make them leave' (*Reuters* 17 June 2015). The Vice-Secretary of the left wing Partito Democratico similarly declared that 'we will apply strong, determined pressure so that the only line that matters is held: redistribution and selection between war refugees and economic migrants' (*La Stampa* 14 June 2015). Pressure from EU and neighbouring governments adopted the same tone, with Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission stating that 'people must be registered. No registration, no rights' (European Commission 2016) and France's Interior Minister Cazeneuve declaring that 'there are many irregular economic migrants who are, therefore, not victims of persecution. We cannot host them' (*Giornale di Sicilia* 15 June 2015). Thus the evolution of interception at sea and measures for disembarkation has been strongly influenced by the view that refugees and migrants are clearly distinct and should be efficiently separated.

On land

Once disembarked and passed through pre-identification, new arrivals in Italy would enter into a complex, multi-layered refugee reception system. This system was basically two-pronged, with an 'ordinary' system (the *SPRAR*) providing accommodation, legal support and measures for integration for asylum claimants for six months extendable to a year, and an 'emergency' one which provided only short-term accommodation and basic services. Alongside these two, a relocation programme was established among EU Member States with the aim of releasing the pressure on the country's reception system. People arriving who were considered to be 'in clear need of international protection' would be separated at hotspots and invited to relocate to another EU Member State. This need for international protection was assumed according to nationality: if the individual was from a country with an acceptance rate in asylum cases of 75% or more they could be put forward for relocation. In this way, the relocation programme was based on separating people according to whether they had originated in a 'refugee producing country' or not, using nationality as a proxy for someone's

need for international protection. Regardless, the programme has failed to reach its objectives and by the end of 2016, a year after being established, only 2,654 people had been relocated from Italy, far behind the target of 39,600.[vi] In contrast, throughout 2015 alone there were 25,000 requests for Italy to take asylum seekers back from other EU Member States.[vii]

In response to the increase in arrivals in 2014 and 2015 and growing pressure from European partners, the Italian emergency regime underwent a major and rapid expansion: whereas in February 2015 there were 37,028 people recorded in temporary reception centres within the emergency system (the *CAS*), by the end of the year this had increased to 76,683. One year later, by the end of 2016 it had risen to a total of 137,218 people housed in temporary reception centres.[viii] The focus on the emergency system over the ordinary one points towards a view that the majority of the people arriving in Italy via the Central Mediterranean crossing would not need to be housed for an extended period of time or encouraged to integrate in Italy. This is supported by data on asylum claims during 2015 which show how the Italian authorities' adopted a less benign approach to asylum applications from 'non refugee-producing countries'. Over the course of the year, the rate of rejection of initial applications to Territorial Asylum Commissions rose considerably from 48% in January to 68% in December. By the end of the year, less than one third (29%) of applicants would be given a temporary form of protection, and only 3% would be granted asylum. During late 2015, 'deferred expulsion orders' became common, given mainly to people from West African countries and demanding that they leave Italy within seven days. These processes have limited the chances that newcomers would previously have had to regularise their position in Italy as workers after a period of subsidiary or humanitarian protection or to transit through towards another desired destination. Measures designed to deter secondary migration towards the north of Europe, in practice created a large undocumented and yet non-deportable population in Italy with fewer rights and no access to formal reception facilities and support networks.

Before the sea

The array of documents, policy statements and position papers issued over the last few years by EU institutions highlights an anxiety about the movement of people from Africa towards the northern shores of the Mediterranean. They also highlight an unresolved tension in the EU between internal and external dimensions of migration governance (Author 2012). The EU's Global Approach to Migration and Mobility paper (GAMM) of November 2011 tried to reframe the EU's approach around four "equally important" pillars: facilitating regular migration and mobility; preventing and reducing irregular migration and trafficking; maximising development impact and promoting international protection; and "enhancing the external dimension of asylum policy" (European Commission 2005). However, as a number of our stakeholder informants pointed out, subsequent developments have changed the balance between the pillars, with the goal of stemming migration becoming the overriding principle informing EU interventions. This in turn has reshaped other policy areas, as for example with the redirecting of development aid and its conditionality to assist with immigration enforcement and asylum externalisation.

As part of stemming African migration, the EU and its Member States have accelerated the externalisation of border controls to North African and sub-Saharan states. The EU-Turkey deal which came into force in March 2016 and has been accompanied by a dramatic reduction in irregular crossings across the Aegean Sea has been referred to by European politicians as a blueprint for new partnership agreements (Author 2017; Gabrielli 2016). This externalisation of migration control through package deals and diplomacy has been taking place for years (e.g. Gabrielli 2016), but the current process has broadened its geographical focus with a number of high profile diplomatic initiatives including the Khartoum and Valletta summits, and state visits by Member States to key countries. A securitarisation of African borders has been pushed by EU politicians who conceptualise African migration as intrinsically directed towards Europe. The result, Gabrielli (2016: 30) argues, is 'a repeated displacement of the border between EU and Africa vis-à-vis migratory flows every time more to the South, as well as the creation of a series of buffer zones in the African continent.'

A news story widely reported in European media exemplifies this attitude. Early in 2015 Frontex's executive director said he expected the number of asylum seekers crossing the Central Mediterranean to skyrocket in 2015 and urged EU governments to ready themselves to face 'between 500,000 and one million migrants ready to leave from Libya' (*Ansa*, 6 March 2015). This statement supposed that all foreigners in Northern Africa were in 'transit' on their way to Europe (Author 2017). Needless to say, the mass exodus did not eventually materialise and in 2015 arrivals across the Central Mediterranean route recorded a 7% decrease (153,000) compared with 2014. The story encapsulates the power of numbers in firing up public and political debate, raising fears of unceasing African migration to Europe and sustaining the 'crisis mood' that pervades policy responses (Del Biaggio 2015). Furthermore, externalisation leads to unintended outcomes: by restricting cross-border mobility within Africa, the EU may impact on one of the reasons why African migrants choose *not* to move to Europe, namely the capacity to engage in circular migration and move unrestricted between places for family or business reasons alike (Authors 2016).

Unpacking journeys to and across the Central Mediterranean

In this section we juxtapose the assumptions underpinning policy developments with our findings from interviews with people who had crossed the Central Mediterranean. Our interviews show how the distinction between refugees and migrants that has been influential in policy does not accurately reflect the diversity of motivations and experiences that lead people to depart from their places of origin. They also show the assumption that migrants are all intending to migrate straight from their place of origin to Europe to be misplaced. This illustrates how policymaking responds to a crisis narrative that is not reflective of the dynamics of migration to and across the Mediterranean.

Motivations to move

In our interviews we used open questioning to ask people for the reasons why they moved away from their place of origin. The responses highlighted multiple and often intersecting

motivations that did not easily fit into a dichotomy of forced or voluntary migration. Security, political, economic or personal concerns were not mutually exclusive influences.

Two thirds of our respondents (66%) explicitly mentioned motivations that could be described as 'forced migration', such as moments of violence (29%), death threats (25%), political tensions and discrimination (21%), or civil unrest caused by militias or confraternities (12%). Over one third (39%) of our respondents also discussed economic factors, such as seeking employment (18%), moving out from extreme poverty (often so as to send money home to support a family) (13%), or to get away from corruption (5%). Others also mentioned personal reasons, such as tensions and fighting within a family (10%) or being in a relationship that was disapproved of (2%).

The most common motivations for leaving places of origin were related to insecurity and a lack of safety, principally experiences of violence and death (of someone close to the interviewee or threats to the interviewee's life). These were widespread among people from all backgrounds. People from countries in West and Central Africa, for example, did not come from countries at war but often mentioned the threat posed by violent groups, as well as speaking of localised cases of violence arising from political protests, land disputes or fights among neighbours and extended families:

> "I tried to fight back the Muslims [Boko Haram] but I had to run away. I had nothing in Nigeria. They burned everything. There was nothing left there. They tried to kill me". (Nigerian man aged 26)

People from the Horn of Africa also mentioned tribal and militia-based violence, such as that of Al Shabaab in Somalia:

> "Originally, I was just aiming to get out of Somalia, away from Al Shabaab and to a safe place. My father and brother were killed by Al Shabaab and soon after, when my uncle was killed, I eventually decided I needed to leave". (Somalian man aged 18)

One fifth of the interviewees spoke of political tensions or discrimination contributing to their decision to leave. Interviewees from places as diverse as Gambia, Nigeria and Pakistan experienced violence due to their membership of a political party or faced imprisonment through corrupt or unfair legal processes. The threat of permanent conscription into the military and a general lack of freedom were key reasons for those who left Eritrea.

Finally, economic reasons were also mentioned, with 18% of our respondents mentioning unemployment and the need to find a job, usually in order to improve their own wellbeing, move beyond living a hand-to-mouth existence, or to be able to send remittances from abroad to a family back home. In West Africa in particular, there have been widespread labour migration patterns of this type for decades, the vast majority of which remain within Africa (Altai Consulting 2015).

Interviewees often rarely spoke of only one reason for leaving their place of origin. Instead, multiple motivations for migration could be inter-related. Violence, political persecution or corruption could not only put someone's life in danger, but also harm their capacity to provide for themselves and their families. People from countries such as Gambia or Ivory Coast, for example, revealed how contexts of crime, political corruption and

violence restricted their ability to complete their education, find employment or gain access to economic opportunities. The capacity of a family to provide for itself could be harmed by insecurity or persecution, removing a breadwinner and creating a need for new sources of income, as illustrated by the following description from an interview with a Bangladeshi man:

> The interviewee comes from a poor family … His eldest brother was the only one with a regular job and he provided for the family: he was a "big politician", but he has been killed by members of the rival party ... the interviewee decided to emigrate in order to find a job and maintain his family. At that time the only possibility was to go to Libya, as there he could obtain a visa (Bangladeshi man aged 18)

Similar cases were presented by people from other nationalities, such as an Eritrean man who moved to a refugee camp and then on to Sudan after his father was unjustly imprisoned and he had to seek safety and economic opportunities in order to take on the role of supporting his family. These and other examples highlight the ways that security, political, economic and personal reasons for leaving places of origin often fed into each other to inform the decision to migrate.

Routes and journeys: pulled to Europe?

As already mentioned, policy developments in response to the arrival of migrants across the Mediterranean Sea during 2015 were often informed by the assumption that migrants underwent more or less direct journeys seeking to reach Europe. However, our interviews indicate a broad variation of migration routes leading to and across the Central Mediterranean route. We identified 36 different countries that our interviewees had traversed before reaching Italy or Malta, with 68 different combinations of routes passing through them. These journeys often took a long time. Only two interviewees (1% of the sample) arrived in Europe within one month of setting out from their place of origin. 32% had left their country of origin between one and six months before arriving. Over one third (34%) had been travelling for between seven and eighteen months, and another third (34%) had left their place of origin more than eighteen months before arriving. This paints a picture of journeys that were protracted over time and involved a variety of routes and experiences.

Moreover, despite the diversity of migration patterns recorded two general types can be distinguished.

First, there were cases that can be considered as unified journeys. These are cases of people who set out from their place of origin already with a clear intention of moving to Europe. One third (35%) of the interviewees who spoke about the intentions that they had when they left their place of origin spoke of moving to Europe. Of the people who described why Europe instead of other destinations, 61% spoke of improving their standard of living, usually through employment or education whereas 46% stated that they thought it was the only place to find safety, security and freedom (respondents could present more than one reason). Often, these impressions were built on little specific knowledge about particular countries but rather mentioned general hopes of what life in Europe would be like.

Moreover, unified journeys did not always bring migrants directly to Europe. Rather, people could spend many months travelling before arriving at their intended destination. Of those who set out seeking to reach Europe only 5.5% of them arrived less than one month after departing. For 61% of the respondents who had originally intended to come to Europe, up to six months were required before they arrived in Italy. For 25% it was up to a year and for 14% it was longer still. This indicates that unified journeys were not always short or direct, but could be interrupted such as by kidnappings and being held for ransom in Libya, which would result in being kept in a prison for weeks or months until money could be sent to enable their release. Yet despite this, decisions to continue moving were motivated by the original intention of arriving in Europe.

Second, there were disjunctive journeys that could be considered to be made up of multiple separate decisions made in different times and places regarding where to move and why. A majority of our interviewees' migration experiences followed this pattern. Over a quarter (28%) stated that when they left their place of origin they sought either a nearby place or had no specific destination in mind. People moving in this way had originally intended to get away from a particular situation of harm, with little time to prepare, or were seeking labour opportunities that were not too far from home so that they could eventually return. Over one third of the respondents (37%) also stated that when they left their country of origin they were seeking to move to Libya. Many expected that there would be readily available employment and support from social networks of past emigrants, but they also lacked an awareness of the severity of the ongoing conflict and security situation, as this Ghanaian man told us:

> "I wanted to go to Libya. In Libya there are some problems, I knew there was a conflict there but I had one friend who said they would help me to find a job" (Ghanaian man, aged 29)

The persistence of this view of Libya as a destination country is a reflection of the strength and durability of pre-existing migration networks from Africa and further afield, as Libya has been both a destination and a transit country since the 2000s. In 2006 it was estimated that between 65,000 and 120,000 sub-Saharan Africans were entering the Maghreb yearly and that several tens of thousands of them would try to cross the Mediterranean (de Haas 2006). By 2011 figures suggested that there could be 2.5 million foreign nationals residing in Libya (MPC 2013).

Disjunctive journeys could extend over many months or years, with stops in multiple locations along the way. For people originating from countries in West Africa, for example, initial migration patterns from countries of origin were usually directed at nearby locations where it would be possible to rest, find employment, connect with friends or kin or find someone to facilitate onward movement. This local and regional mobility could be organised at short notice by travel agencies, friends or family members within the free movement area of the ECOWAS region. The opportunities and information available in each particular location would inform the evolution of onward movements that could shift and develop over time, as shown by the following interview:

> "I was never targeting Europe, but you keep moving from country to country and you never know how hard the journey is going to be or how the conditions and opportunity for work will be in the next country. ... So initially I targeted any other country in Africa that wasn't Gambia. Then I realized that the situation in the next country was not any better, so I kept moving" (Gambian man, aged 20)

Onward movement after lengthy periods of settlement and attempts to start a new life were similarly reported among East Africans who had stayed in the Sudanese capital Khartoum, for example, or among Syrians who had been in Egypt. Onward movement would come when economic opportunities appeared to have run out, corruption was seen as too much of an obstacle or changing political contexts brought new dangers, as expressed by one Syrian interviewee:

> "Syrians could enter by plane. They were welcome in Egypt. I lived there about a year and a half … When the Morsi government fell and Al Sisi arrived things for Syrians changed. Strong discrimination. We were even insulted in the street. Even renewing a residence permit was difficult. So I went to Libya." (Syrian man, aged 23)

In other cases, where stops were short, people would use them to rest, gather information about a connection, seek a smuggler or to find temporary work to pay for moving on. This was particularly the case in Burkina Faso and especially Niger where extreme poverty and a harsh climate meant few people considered staying for long.

Thus, our data shows that many of the people who arrived in Europe had set out from their places of origin without particularly clear plans about where their final destination would be. Their journeys were not linked to a pre-determined outcome, but evolved in response to their experiences and the information they could gather along the way. In the context of these disjunctive migration patterns the Mediterranean Sea crossing can be viewed not as the culmination of a single journey or completion of an ideal that the migrant hoped for when they left home, but rather as a response to the varied living conditions that they experienced after having left their place of origin. The situation for migrants in Libya therefore takes on a special significance as a driver of boat migration across the sea towards Europe. Over three quarters of the people that we spoke to referred directly to experiences of violence there, rising to 95% in the case of people from Gambia and Nigeria. They spoke not only of the dangers of military operations but also of armed street gangs (such as the 'Asma Boys') and unscrupulous employers willing to threaten or lock people up rather than pay them. Women spoke of being unable to leave their places of residence and suffering sexual as well as physical violence:

> "They took us to a very isolated place and we lived in a stable for a month, where there were also animals. We couldn't leave. On the farm there were other women who had also arrived from Nigeria. The men who were supposed to watch us raped us many times" (Nigerian woman aged 25)

Such experiences appear to be more or less indiscriminate, affecting all age groups to a similar degree, except perhaps for a slight decline in experiences of violence and death among older people.

The security environment often drove people who had intended to settle, work and live in Libya to realise that they would have to move on again to find somewhere safe. Some of those fleeing had resided there for years, such as Bangladeshi workers who had moved there in the years preceding the war, arriving by plane directly from Bangladesh or following previous stops in the Middle East. The sea journey was considered to be the only way out, as described by this young man:

> "Libya is like a hole. You can enter and then you can't go back … they seize you when you are going, it is very difficult to get out" (Gambian man aged 19)

Crossing the sea was, in this sense, for many a new movement that was motivated by distinct drivers to their previous patterns of mobility, making Italy the first safe country that they came across.

Conclusions

Building on scholarly literature critiquing assumptions concerning migration drivers and dynamics, and constructions of African migration as always in transit towards Europe, this article has highlighted a disjuncture between the empirical reality and the assumptions that inform Europe's crisis-response to Mediterranean boat migration. Our analysis identifies critical junctions at which this mismatch become more salient, namely at sea when boat migrants were intercepted, rescued and identified; disembarkation when boat migrants were channelled through bureaucratic pathways often relying on approximate assessments of their deservingness of international protection; and before the sea journey, when assumptions of the 'economic' nature of African mobility and its directionality informed policies aimed at strengthening border controls *en route* to Europe. In this way, we show how the construction of a crisis narrative describing migration as uncontrolled, unceasing and directed straight to Europe has driven a transformation of the governance of mobility in the Central Mediterranean.

Furthermore, our empirical data has also highlighted how the assumptions underpinning the narrative of a Central Mediterranean crisis are often removed from the way that migration in the region plays out. Our evidence shows that although some journeys were indeed aimed at arriving in Europe, many more were sequences of relatively loosely related events rather than fully thought through plans. Multiple considerations can lead to people making a decision to move in the first place. Subsequent decisions are taken at different times and in responses to conditions at origin as well as *en route*, highlighting the infrapolitics of migration as people respond to the challenges and opportunities opened up by specific conjunctions they encounter. Libya in particular was not simply a country of transit that people were intending to move through, but a context in which people made new decisions about the need to move and where to. In this way, the context of insecurity and uncertainty in Libya is a clearer driver of onward migration to Europe than conditions in many countries of origin.

This closer inspection of the hiatus between mechanics of migration during the so-called 'crisis' in the Mediterranean and policy responses unsettles and problematizes existent

ways of understanding journeys in research and policy. Rather than an immediate and localised 'crisis' in the Mediterranean, these migration patterns had multiple footings and were produced by the interplay of contexts, opportunities and decisions occurred over a prolonged period of time and in different locations. People's decisions to move do not easily fit into clear categories and human rights violations, persecutions, violence and loss of livelihood can arise in multiple locations along the way. As a result, we warn of the risks associated with the frequent use of 'country of birth' as a shortcut to channel boat migrants through bureaucratic pathways and decide on the validity of their protection claims. Finally, the proclamation of a crisis caused by the mobility of economic, and therefore illegal, migrants on dangerous journeys has also been shown to narrow the range of potential policy responses, as the urgency of resolving an apparent crisis favours short-term, immediate measures to prevent people moving rather than longer-term initiatives enabling mobility and providing asylum to those on the move.

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Figures

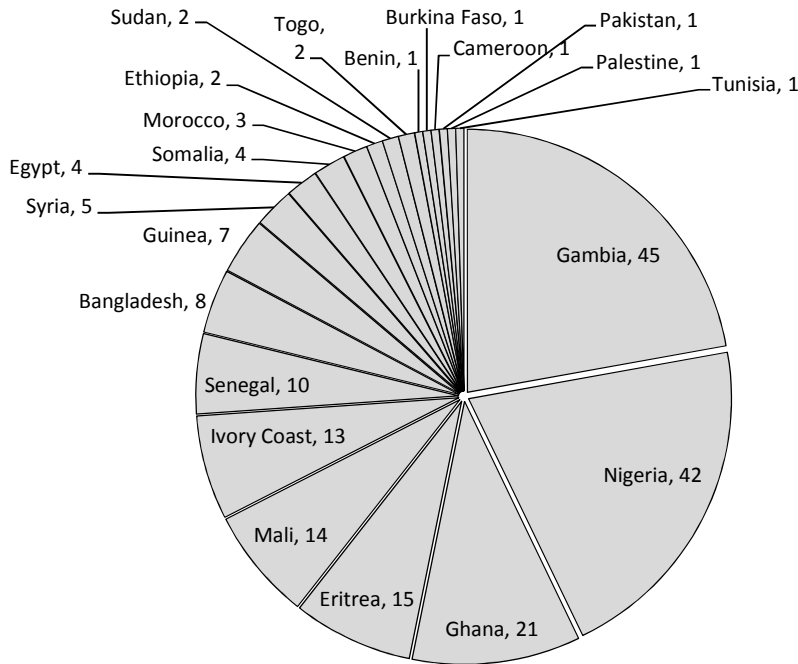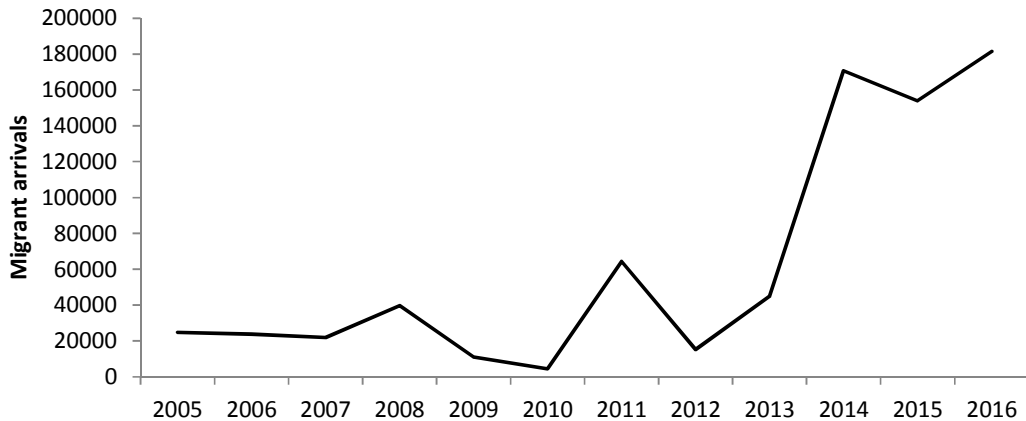Figure 1. Nationalities of interviewees

Figure 2. Migrant arrivals in Italy and Malta, by boat across the Central Mediterranean route (2005-2016). Data from UNHCR, Ministero dell'Interno, Malta Migration Police

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[i] Data on migrants intercepted at sea and arriving in Italy and Malta can be accessed from the Italian Ministry of the Interior, available at http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero (accessed 25th November 2016) and from UNHCR Malta, available at http://www.unhcr.org.mt/charts/category/12 (accessed 25th November 2016)

[ii] Data on deaths at sea can be accessed at https://missingmigrants.iom.int/

[iii] See IOM's campaign 'Aware migrants' (2016) for example

[iv] This terminology can be found, for example, in material produced by UNHCR. See http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php

[v] This is particularly the case following the UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants. The resultant New York Declaration envisaged a roadmap for the reform of the global governance of migration and introduced changes with immediate effect as the incorporation of IOM in the UN family. http://refugeesmigrants.un.org/declaration

[vi] A regularly updated 'State of play' of the relocation programme is available at https://t.co/wlzda4suJL

[vii] Data on Dublin returns is available from Eurostat at http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_dubri&lang=en, accessed 30 March 2017

[viii] Latest data on the reception system is available from the Italian Ministry of the Interior at http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero