

Stop Wapenhandel

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NATO and EU border security in the Mediterranean

Mark Akkerman – May 2017

In the spring of 2016 US General Philip Breedlove, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, said: "Together Russia and the Assad regime are deliberately weaponising migration in an attempt to overwhelm European structures and break European resolve."¹ This is illustrative for the way NATO, just as the EU, sees refugees as a threat, or tools of enemies, to be dealt with by military means.

NATO supports EU border security policies, especially in the Mediterranean. Initially playing a low key role in assisting Frontex missions, NATO has stepped up to a more active role since the start of the so called 'refugee crisis' in 2015. This includes support to the EU military Operation Sophia for the coast of Libya.

Militarising EU border security

The response of the EU to the increasing number of refugees trying to reach Europe since the spring of 2015 has been a rapid expansion of its long standing policies of trying to keep or get refugees out of Europe. This has resulted in a further militarisation of the borders: the use of military means and/or personnel for border security. It includes the deployment of soldiers for border security, which has happened in several European countries, mostly in Southeastern ones such as Hungary and Bulgaria, and the erection of security fences at several borders. And on the other hand it is about the use of military equipment by police and paramilitary forces, including drones and helicopters.

Because the EU's border security policies are predicated on stopping people entering Europe through the most common migration routes, people seek to undertake ever more dangerous routes. Hence, the refugee toll in 2016, over 5000 known people have died crossing the Mediterranean sea, was higher than in 2015 even though the total number of refugees entering Europe fell with some 60%.²

As many experts had predicted, for example, one of the consequences of the deal with Turkey, and the related attempt to shut off the so-called 'Western Balkan migration route', has been a shifting of migration routes. More refugees have tried to cross the Mediterranean from Egypt and Libya, facing a more dangerous journey and resulting in higher numbers of migrant deaths.

The majority of people arriving in the EU come from the war-torn countries of Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, where European and broader western interventions and policies,

¹ Lizzie Dearden, Together Russia and the Assad regime are deliberately weaponising migration in an attempt to overwhelm European structures and break European resolve, *The Independent*, 3 March 2016

² Numbers as recorded by the International Organization for Migration (IOM)

including the arms trade, have added to violence and chaos. EU arms exports to the Middle East and North Africa, worth over 80 billion euros in the last decade, are fuelling war (Yemen, Syria), armed conflicts (Iraq, Turkey, Libya) and human rights violations (Egypt, Saudi Arabia).³

NATO support to Frontex missions in the Mediterranean

NATO patrol ships in the Mediterranean initially played a low key role in assisting Frontex border security missions. Two Standing Naval Forces did some border security work on the sideline of their main task, patrolling in the context of the counter-terrorism Operation Active Endeavour.⁴

In 2006, for example, NATO ships assisted the Hellenic Coast Guard in intercepting a ship with refugees heading for Greece.⁵ In 2011 two refugees surviving a shipwreck between Libya and the Italian island Lampedusa claimed a NATO ship was among the number of military assets ignoring their cries for help. Only nine out of the 72 passengers survived after their vessel was left to drift in open water for 16 days.⁶

Since the start of the so called 'refugee crisis' in April 2015, when hundreds of refugees drowned in the Mediterranean, NATO has stepped up its support for EU border security. In February 2016, responding to a joint request by Germany, Greece and Turkey, it decided that its Standing Maritime Group number 2, already active in the region, would start conducting reconnaissance, monitoring and surveillance in the Aegean Sea, directly coordinating with Frontex.⁷ One month later, five ships from various NATO member states expanded their patrolling mission into Turkish and Greek waters, sharing information with the Turkish and Greek Coast Guards and Frontex.⁸

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on one occasion claimed that "NATO ships are not in the Aegean Sea to stop or push back boats with migrants and refugees", but also made it clear that "in case of rescue at sea of persons coming via Turkey, they will be taken back to Turkey."⁹ Human rights organizations criticised this push back-policy, a clear violation of international law, which gives refugees the right to have their application for protection assessed in an EU member state.¹⁰

While the Turkish government expressed that the mission was successful and could come to an end in December, NATO decided to prolong it into 2017.¹¹ According to Stoltenberg, speaking at a press conference in October 2016: "[W]e have seen a very substantial reduction in the numbers of illegal crossings and we have been able to cut the lines of the criminal networks organizing the illegal crossings. And one of the reasons why we have

³ Mark Akkerman, Border wars: the arms dealers profiting from Europe's refugee tragedy, Stop Wapenhandel/TNI, July 2016

⁴ Mark Akkerman, Frontex: Nederlandse militaire bijdrage aan humanitaire tragedie, Vredesmagazine, september 2008

⁵ NATO, Active Endeavour ships assist Greece in illegal immigration operation, press release, 30 March 2006

⁶ Jack Shenker, Aircraft carrier left us to die, say migrants, The Guardian, 8 May 2011

⁷ NATO, NATO Defence Ministers Agree on NATO support to assist with the refugee and migrant crisis, 11 February 2016

⁸ Naval Today, NATO starts patrols of Turkish and Greek waters, 9 March 2016

⁹ Joint press point by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu - Secretary General's opening remarks, NATO, 7 March 2016; Jens Stoltenberg, NATO and Europe's refugee and migrant crisis, NATO, 26 February 2016

¹⁰ Nicole Sagener, NATO mission criticised for sending refugees back to Turkey, EurActiv.de, 24 February 2016

¹¹ Kathimerini, NATO to boost efforts in Aegean to stop migrants, 27 October 2016

been able to do so is that many of the first sightings has been done by NATO vessels partly because they're able to operate both in Turkish and Greek territorial waters and also I think it is important to understand that NATO presence in the Aegean Sea adds value, because it is a platform for enhanced cooperation between non-EU NATO ally Turkey with Greece and improved cooperation between Turkey and the European Union.”¹²

In February 2017 defence ministers at the NATO Summit in Brussels decided to continue the border security NATO patrols in the Aegean Sea, again in spite of Turkish objections. Greek Defense Minister Panos Kammenos said: “The prevention of refugee flows with NATO ships will continue as long as there are prospective illegal migrants or refugees on the other side of the Aegean.”¹³

NATO and Operation Sophia

In 2015 the EU started Operation Sophia (also known as EUNAVFOR Med) with the aim of undertaking “systematic efforts to identify, capture and dispose of vessels as well as enabling assets used or suspected of being used by migrant smugglers or traffickers”. By July 2015 the first phase of EUNAVFOR MED, surveillance and assessment, was fully operational. The operation moved on to the second phase in October 2015, “the search and, if necessary, diversion of suspicious vessels.”¹⁴

In June 2016, the Council of the EU extended the mandate for the mission by a year and added two supporting tasks: training of the Libyan coastguards and navy and contributing to the implementation of the UN arms embargo against Libya.¹⁵ The actual training, with some 100 participants (out of a expected total of 1000) started in October, supported by financial, personnel and equipment contributions from EU member states.¹⁶

Human rights and refugee support organisations have opposed Operation Sophia from the start, pointing out that a military operation isn't the right answer to the refugee tragedy. The training of the Libyan coast guard was cause for further criticism. Judith Sunderland, Associate Director of the Europe and Central Asia Division at Human Rights Watch denounced the hidden EU agenda of getting the Libyan Coast Guard to halt refugees before leaving Libyan waters, saying it was a deliberate attempt to avoid EU's obligations under international law of non-refoulement (ie not returning refugees to places where their lives or freedoms are threatened).¹⁷ The refugees detained by Libyan Coast Guard were ending up “in overcrowded, filthy detention centers in Libya where beatings, forced labor, and sexual violence are rife”, Human Rights Watch noted. Also, there have been several instances of violence against refugees on sea by the Libyan coast guard.

At a press conference in October 2016, Stoltenberg announced that NATO ships would start to assist the EU Operation Sophia: “Within two weeks, NATO ships and planes will

¹² NATO, Press conference, 27 October 2016

¹³ Kathimerini, NATO's Aegean patrols to continue, 16 February 2017

¹⁴ European External Action Service, European Union Naval Force – Mediterranean Operation Sophia, Factsheet, 15 December 2015

¹⁵ Council of the European Union, EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia: mandate extended by one year, two new tasks added, press release, 20 June 2016

¹⁶ European External Action Service, EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia starts training of Libyan Navy Coast Guard and Libyan Navy, press release, 27 October 2016; Steve Scherer, EU to continue Libyan coast guard training after attack on migrants, Reuters, 24 October 2016

¹⁷ Judith Sunderland, Why cooperating with Libya on migration could damage the EU's standing, Newsweek, 5 November 2016

be in the Central Mediterranean, ready to help the EU's Operation Sophia with situational awareness and provide logistical support. This is yet another example of NATO and the EU working hand-in-hand to increase European security.”¹⁸

In November NATO launched its new maritime operation Sea Guardian in the Mediterranean, which replaced Active Endeavour. Situation awareness and logistical support to Operation Sophia were named as tasks of the new mission, which has a broadened scope compared to Active Endeavour.¹⁹ “NATO ships have been very often the first spotters of boats and activities, we have shared that information with local coast guards and they have then taken action”, according to Stoltenberg.²⁰ In April 2017 he said four NATO ships, three NATO maritime patrol aircraft and some other assets were providing direct support to Operation Sophia at the moment.²¹

In February 2017, at a press conference with Libyan prime minister al-Sarraj, Stoltenberg added: “If requested, we could also support the efforts of the European Union to strengthen the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy.”²² Al-Sarraj was very receptive to this idea: “If there is something to be carried out jointly between the Libyan navy and any other party interested in extending a hand to the Libyan navy, that would be possible. [...] Of course, we have to modernise our navy flotilla and enhance its capacities. NATO or any other friendly nation on a bilateral basis could extend a hand in this.”²³ In other words: Libya would be willing to grant Operation Sophia the much wanted access to its waters in exchange for support to rebuild Libya's armed forces.²⁴ Two weeks later Libya submitted a more detailed request to NATO for training and developing its military forces. NATO officials said it would take some time to study the request and respond to it.²⁵

Further steps

In July 2016 NATO announced support to Tunisia, including giving advice to the Tunisian authorities on the development of a Tunisian Intelligence Fusion Centre and providing training to Tunisian Special Operations Forces.²⁶ This was a result of an "Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme" Tunisia and NATO agreed in 2014, promising cooperation across a range of areas, including border security.²⁷

In March 2017 NATO also announced it would strengthen its ties with Egypt. Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs Shoukry discussed several topics with Stoltenberg, including the possibility of NATO providing Egypt's Naval Forces with weapons and equipment to counter migration.²⁸

¹⁸ NATO, Press conference, 27 October 2016

¹⁹ NATO, NATO launches new Operation Sea Guardian, 9 November 2016

²⁰ NATO, Press conference by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the launch of his Annual Report for 2016, 13 March 2017

²¹ NATO, Doorstep statement by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the start of the Informal meeting of EU Ministers of Defence in Malta, 27 April 2017

²² NATO, Joint press point with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the Prime Minister of Libya, Fayez al-Sarraj, 1 February 2017

²³ Patrick Wintour, Libya may allow EU ships to pursue people-smugglers in its waters, The Guardian, 1 February 2017

²⁴ Associated Press, Libya leader offers NATO sea access if it upgrades navy, 1 February 2017

²⁵ Robin Emmott and Phil Stewart, Libya sends new request for military training to NATO, Reuters, 16 February 2017

²⁶ NATO, NATO steps up efforts to project stability and strengthen partners, 9 July 2016

²⁷ The New Arab, NATO to launch 'intelligence hub' in Tunisia, 11 April 2017

²⁸ Noura Ali, Egypt establishes mission to NATO, Belgian Embassy in Cairo to act as NATO's point of liaison, Middle East Observer, 15 March 2017

Military industry profits

The increasing militarisation of EU border policies has benefited the arms and security industry. Since the start of the twenty first century, the EU has provided billions of euros for border security and control measures in both member states and neighbouring countries, creating huge profits for large European arms companies, including Airbus, Leonardo-Finmeccanica and Thales. Among the main beneficiaries of border security contracts are some of the biggest arms sellers to the Middle East and North Africa, who fuel the conflicts that force many people from their home countries in the first place.

The military and security industry is not only a beneficiary, it increasingly shapes European border policy with persistent lobbying on border security and control policies, and calls for more funding for research and purchases in this field. What has emerged is a European border security industrial complex where the interests of European securocrats and the profits of military companies are increasingly aligned.²⁹

NATO itself is not a big spender in the field of border security purchases. However, at the NATO summit in Warsaw in July 2016, the Alliance Ground Surveillance (AGS) was showcased for the first time. It is a system that can be used for border control assistance, among other uses. US arms producer Northrop Grumman is the main contractor for AGS, Italian company Leonardo-Finmeccanica contributed “the operational control centre ground station, two transportable ground stations and communications technology for the transmission of data and imagery between the remotely piloted aircraft and the ground segment and mission support facilities.” AGS will be in use from this year or next, at the Italian air force base Sigonella on Sicily.³⁰

Conclusion

Human rights organisations and experts have repeatedly warned that the EU's current response to the refugee crisis will only lead to more suffering and violence against refugees, who will be forced to use even more dangerous routes to safety. Yet the EU remains deaf to such criticism, just as it denies its responsibility for the drivers of migration: the role played by the West, including NATO, in causing chaos, violence and poverty in the Middle East and Africa.

In EU border security rhetoric human traffickers are now the primary enemies, who must be combated, with increasing use of military means. Success is measured on the number of intercepted ships and refugees, and the extent to which the number of refugees reaching Europe is reduced. There is no attention for the well-being of refugees who are looking for safety and a viable future. They are met by pushbacks to unsafe countries, including Libya, violence by border and coast guards, detention and the prospect of deportation or living a hard life as an 'illegal' in Europe.

The increasing role of NATO, a military alliance with no humanitarian mandate, in EU border security is exemplary for the militarization of these policies. It also raises questions about accountability, since NATO falls outside EU parliamentary control and complaint mechanisms.

²⁹ Mark Akkerman, Border wars: the arms dealers profiting from Europe's refugee tragedy, Stop Wapenhandel/TNI, July 2016

³⁰ Leonardo-Finmeccanica, Leonardo-Finmeccanica at Warsaw NATO Summit with NATO AGS System, press release, 8 July 2016