Making money from EU's migration policies in Libya

In recent weeks, the unfolding tragedy of refugees stuck in the Libyan migration system has caught the eye of the European public. The conditions they face are terrible: beatings, torture, systematic rape, slave trade and killings.

European leaders have tried to dodge responsibility and have blamed this humanitarian disaster on smugglers, the competing Tripoli and Tobruk governments, and the many militias vying for a place in the country's power vacuum.

Yet it is European policies, and more specifically the EU outsourcing "migration control" to Libya, that have helped bring about the current crisis. In fact, it is impossible to understand why the Libyan "migration control" system developed the way it did without considering the intensive EU involvement in the country's border control policies and the massive profit that various private companies are making out of it.

The EU's involvement in Libya started way before some EU countries turned on their former darling, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, and backed a NATO operation which helped topple his regime.

Building Libya's 'migration control'

The EU's gradual externalisation of "migration control" started in the early 2000s, as Libya finally emerged from a decade and a half of international isolation. In 2003, Gaddafi decided to pay compensation to the families of the victims of the Lockerbie bombing. In April 2004, he paid a visit to Brussels, and six months later, the EU lifted its arms embargo on Libya.

A month later, the European Commission sent a "technical mission" to Tripoli to "identify concrete measures for possible balanced EU-Libyan cooperation particularly on illegal immigration."

In 2007, the newly formed EU border agency Frontex dispatched another technical mission to Libya to examine possibilities for "developing an operational and technical partnership" with Libyan authorities.

As EU-made arms, vessels and surveillance technology started flowing into Libya, the union pushed Italy to expand its bilateral cooperation with Libya on border control through the 2008 Friendship Treaty. By then, Brussels had quietly sanctioned the controversial push-back practice against boats carrying refugees.

In 2011, a popular uprising against Gaddafi's regime erupted, and NATO launched an operation against the Libyan regime, backed by Gaddafi's former "friends", Italy and France. As a result, the "border control" mechanisms in place under Gaddafi were dissolved, and migration across the Mediterranean increased again.

Since then, the EU has been putting a lot of effort and money into reinstating these mechanisms.
In 2013, there were repeated attempts to send a "border assistance mission" to train Libyan border guards and naval coast guards. The situation in Libya was so unstable that the contingent had to be moved to Tunisia in 2014, where training continued.

The EU has spent hundreds of millions of euros financing "migration control" through a remarkably high number of instruments, including Aeneas (EU's programme for financial and technical assistance on migration), the Thematic Programme for Migration and Asylum (TPMA), Solidarity and Management of Migration Flows (SOLID), the Home Affairs Funds and the European Neighbourhood Instrument.

The fact that conditions in Libya have deteriorated the way they have should make us all question not just the morality, but also the efficiency of such a militarised approach to displacement.

Already in Gaddafi's era, the police, military and smuggling sectors were thoroughly interconnected, to the point that many people caught in that system were unable to distinguish between them. They were, and still are, all kidnapping, brutalising and robbing people trying to reach Europe.

This is one reason why the European political narrative on combating smugglers is problematic: The union has in effect, been collaborating with the very people they claim to be combating.

What is more, for the last 15 years, the need for smugglers' services has been inversely proportional to the availability of legal migration paths.

The smuggling industry has boomed in North Africa in parallel with the massive expansion of European border control in the 2000s. In the process, the EU gradually closed legal work, education and humanitarian migration paths and launched militarised border control operations like Triton, Sophia, and Poseidon.

As a result, migration has been relegated to ever-more dangerous routes and more profit-oriented and cynical operators. In that sense, the European politicians have been creating the most favourable conditions possible for the smuggling industry.

Making money from 'migration control'

Ultranationalism and racism are not the only driving forces behind the European militarisation of border control. The EU's perceived need to invest in upgraded control measures has boosted the border control industry which has made billions out of selling equipment and services to curb migration.

The externalisation of European border control to North Africa has precipitated the creation of a highly profitable subsidised export market for Europe's arms, security and IT industries.

Since the early 2000s, an increasing number of actors have viewed border control as a lucrative market and have lobbied for its expansion. Companies such as British BAE Systems, Italian Leonardo (formerly Finmeccanica), French Thales and Airbus, US Boeing and HP have been actively competing for border security contracts.
The export of control equipment like IT databases, drones, fighters, jeeps, biometric tools, ships and radar equipment may not appease racist and nationalist circles in Europe, but it does make a lot of money. The international market for such technology is estimated to be worth $56bln by 2022.

Also involved are the stockholders and credit regimes associated with international banks, investment firms, and hedge funds which provide and circulate the capital underpinning the European border control industry.

In the 2000s, for instance, Italian Finmeccanica played a crucial role supporting the externalisation of "migration control" to Libya through contracts for border systems, vessels, aeroplanes, drones and helicopters.

These contracts, along with the international legitimacy derived from having closer relations with the EU, helped Gaddafi consolidate power and pushed refugees into a deeply exploitative system. The brutality they suffered was just as bad as the one we hear of today but was far less covered by the media, as it had limited access to the country under the Gaddafi regime.

It was credit institutions that facilitated such contracts. In 2010, for instance, more than two dozen such companies guaranteed Finmeccanica a five-year revolving credit line worth $2.8bln.

This was coordinated by BNP Paribas and UniCredit, but also included Royal Bank of Scotland, Barclays, Bank of America, Citibank, HSBC, JP Morgan and others.

With its growing profitability, this market has naturally attracted the likes of Erik Prince, the founder of military contractor Blackwater. Prince has pitched a plan for the creation of a private police force to deal with the Libyan "problem". The force would block people from crossing the sea into Europe "in a humane and professional way" through interception, incarceration and deportation, he claims.

Using the language typical for this industry, Prince promises that his force would be fast, cost-efficient, and able to steer clear of political quagmires. Ironically, that is not what most people associate Blackwater with.

The way arms and security companies are profiting from Europe's border militarisation is truly worrying. It indicates how Europe today seems to be stepping away from upholding universal human rights and drawing closer to its past of racialised colonial practices.

And just like the colonial slave trade was driven by both racism and economic profit, so is the current outsourcing of "migration control".

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