

# Italy's Migration Conundrum Continues in 2018

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**Abstract:** Following the important changes in migrant routes observed in the Mediterranean Sea in 2016, Italy became both one of the most important destination country and the first stop to reach other European countries. Whereas death tolls have been increasing on the journeys throughout the Central Mediterranean Sea, arrivals to Italy are increasing as well. Thus, Italy and other EU Member States have been taking measures in liaison with African countries, specifically Libya, to intercept migrants' arrival and to decrease numbers of dead and missing. Meanwhile, with this increase of the amount of newcomers to the EU countries, xenophobia became more visible and began to spread rapidly among European countries. This led a rise in far right wing groups and affect policy of authorities. This paper makes a brief of Italy's recent migrant policy, along with EU's policy, with its crecscive xenophobia trend to the newcomers.

## Introduction

In a shipwreck at the start of the year which was dubbed as "the first large-scale migrant tragedy of 2018 in the Mediterranean", 86 people were rescued by an Italian coastguard while 64 migrants lost their lives.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the last seven years, since the eruption of the Arab Spring and the Libyan civil war, thousands of refugees and migrants have reached the coasts of Italy and her neighbors, putting immense pressures on Italy and other southern European countries. Even though the number of arrivals coming through the central Mediterranean Sea fell off in the second half of 2017 due to Italy's liaison with Libya, refugees have tended to change their routes to Tunisia<sup>2</sup> and Morocco<sup>3</sup> in order to reach the countries of the European Union (EU). Furthermore, dozens have been suffering from worsening conditions in detention centers<sup>4</sup> in Libya and the African Union (AU). The EU and United Nations (UN) have launched a joint taskforce<sup>5</sup> and agreed to provide assistance to the Voluntary Humanitarian return operation (known by its acronym VHR) that aims to return 15,000 migrants to their countries of origin by February 2018. Subsequent to these developments, Italy has vowed to bring up to 10,000 refugees via "humanitarian corridors" from Libya to be relocated among the EU countries, in 2018.<sup>6</sup> On Dec. 22, 2017, Italia's Interior Minister Marco Minniti said "today is a historic day": it saw the first evacuation of the most vulnerable refugees from Libya to Italy.<sup>7</sup>

As of Nov. 30, 2017, 117,000 refugees and migrants have landed on Italian coasts from the Mediterranean Sea, according to the UN Refugee Agency's Europe Monthly Report, which represent a 32 percent decrease compared to during the same period last year.<sup>8</sup> In 2017, an estimated 2,832

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migrants attempting to migrate from Libya to Italy were found dead or reported missing,<sup>9</sup> while the total number of those left dead or missing trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea was 3,081.<sup>10</sup> In 2016, 181,400 refugees and migrants reached Italy, while 153,800 did in 2015, reflecting a significant increase.<sup>11</sup> Naming a few of the EU's challenges that directly impact Italy, the famous Dublin Regulations, the poverty that refugees face in South Eastern European, Central European, and Baltic States<sup>12</sup> that refuse refugees makes Italy the EU's cannon folder. Due to this increase in number of people entering the EU and the absence of a consensus in the bloc, many refugees are stuck in Italy. For this reason, Italy's government announced in June 2017 that the country had reached a "saturation point" and asked other member countries to share its burden.<sup>13</sup>

*Figure 1: The Numbers of Arrivals in Italy per month*



Source: UNHCR<sup>14</sup>

### **Migration Routes, Sea Operations, and Hotspots**

Statistics show that migration through the central Mediterranean route saw an increase

in recent years, particularly after the Arab Spring.<sup>15</sup> Since migrant death rates surged, Italy launched the Mare Nostrum operation in 2013 to identify the boats at risk, rescue migrants, and capture human traffickers.<sup>16</sup> However, Mare Nostrum was a very costly operation not supported by other EU member states and therefore it ended in 2014. Also, it was regarded as a pull factor for refugees and migrants because it increased safety and therefore encouraged them to take the journey.<sup>17</sup> In an attempt to assist Italy, Frontex Joint Operation, known as 'Triton', whose aim was the protection of Italy's borders, was set up in 2014.<sup>18</sup> The head of Triton did not welcome the idea of search and rescue, because the process encourages refugees and migrants to cross the Mediterranean. Thus, after the commencement of the Triton operation, the death toll in the sea increased by more than 30 times in April 2015 compared with the year before.

Important changes in this migrant route were observed in 2016, particularly after the EU–Turkey agreement to return new migrants to Turkey and the closure of the Greek–Macedonian border.<sup>19</sup> As a consequence, crossings through the central Mediterranean route began to increase.<sup>20</sup> According to Frontex's Risk Analysis 2017, the largest death toll was recorded in the Mediterranean Sea in 2016 (5,083 compared with 3,777 in 2015 and 3,279 in 2014) while 2016 was described "the deadliest year".<sup>21</sup> Triton expired on July 27 and Italy has called for a pan-European Triton mission.<sup>22</sup>

Other than these sea operations, to assist frontline member states, closed camps called hot-spots were set up by EU states and Italy was designated the starting point for implementing the hot-spot approach. Functioning as reception and removal centers,<sup>23</sup> hot-spots were set up to better manage the migrant influx as a larger-scale Frontex presence to process extensive tasks



from identification to registration and border control. Hot-spots' missions basically provide an emergency and relocation mechanism for Italy and Greece, fighting against smugglers and traffickers, improving control of external borders, developing an adequate reception system, and returning irregular migrants e.g. from Greek Islands to Turkey.<sup>24</sup> Although no statistical data is available, according to Risk Analysis 2017, various weaknesses were identified in hot-spots and reception centers' conditions regarding safety and security. Therefore, it was reported that hot-spots and other hosting facilities in frontline need to be improved due to their effects on the safety of migrants and refugees as well as the internal security of member states.

### **Measures Taken against Migration through the Central Mediterranean Sea**

Due to the increase of arrivals in Italy and of death tolls in the central Mediterranean Sea, the EU and Italy have been making decisions and taking measures to prevent new arrivals and reduce the number of deaths and missing people at sea.

On July 4, 2017, the European Commission published an action plan to support Italy, after the Italian Interior Minister had discussed the emergency situation in Italy on June 30. According to the action plan, potential measures for helping Italy were discussed. There were three main subjects: firstly, measures to reduce migratory pressure in the central Mediterranean Sea area by increasing the solidarity of member states. These measures included a code of conduct for the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), accelerating relocation within member states, and working with Libya by training the Libyan Coast Guard and applying return procedures in Italy with the EU's help. Secondly, amplifying the implementation of EU migration policy with Italy, as the latter would have to apply free movement

restrictions to prevent secondary movements and double the capacity of hotspots. Finally, supporting Italy and other EU countries by amending the Dublin legislation.<sup>25</sup>

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At the EU council of foreign affairs meeting on Libya in Brussels on July 17, 2017, Italy's situation and its responsibilities were discussed alongside Libya's situation. As a result of this meeting, the council reached a conclusion and the EU made some suggestions. First of all, the EU member states should be willing to work with Libya against illegal activities such as smuggling and trafficking. Second, they should provide support to Libya to increase its control over its borders with neighboring countries, especially its maritime borders, in accordance to International Law, to reduce migratory pressure. Thirdly, they should establish a monitoring mechanism to help the operations and the personnel become more effective in refugee tracking. Finally, the EU imposed restrictions on exporting certain products that might be used by smugglers and traffickers, such as inflatable boats and outboard motors.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to these suggestions, last year in July, Italy urged other EU countries to assist it as it could not handle the massive migrant influx alone with several countries within the bloc continuing to refuse the relocation plan.<sup>27</sup> Beyond threatening to close ports and blocking rescue boats, Italian Foreign Minister Angelino Alfano said, "In order to lower the number of people arriving here, we must reduce the number arriving in Libya," on July 7, 2017, expressing this as Italy's



mission.<sup>28</sup> For this reason, Italian authorities planned to send Italian military vessels to Libya's coasts to help stopping smugglers and traffickers.<sup>29</sup> Plus, Italy pledged €10 million to Libya's neighbors to help them control the porous borders that migrants pass through to get to Libya.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the government considered giving temporary humanitarian visas that would provide migrants who have arrived Italy from Libya a permit to travel around the EU.<sup>31</sup>

Alongside these things, Italy decided to impose a new code of conduct for NGOs operating in the relief sector in July 2017.<sup>32</sup> This code of conduct laid out 12 commitments, such as a ban on communicating with smugglers via light signals, allowing Italian judicial police to access the information and evidence they possess, and not crossing Libya's territorial waters.<sup>33</sup> Seven out of ten NGOs have rejected this code of conduct due to confusion as to whether it targets smugglers or aims to stop the flow of migrants.<sup>34</sup> The move has also been criticized by Human Rights Watch, asserting that Italy has an obligation to rescue people in distress and therefore it should not help Libyan forces to stop people.<sup>35</sup>

After these measures were taken to decrease the number of arrivals and deaths, on Oct. 19–20 and Dec. 14–15, 2017, the European Council reviewed the state of migration across the central Mediterranean and made decisions. In October, EU leaders agreed on a more comprehensive migration strategy which aimed to restore control of external borders, to reduce arrivals and the number of deaths at sea and considered support for directly affected EU countries, cooperation with countries of origin and transit, efforts to increase returns, and policies to prevent illegal migration.<sup>36</sup> In December, EU leaders debated on the external and internal dimensions of the past two years of the EU migrant policy and mainly focused on preventing mass arrivals, tackling the root

causes of migration and resolving internal deadlocks. Another important thing was the discussion on the reform of the Dublin system including the mandatory quotas issue. Following the meeting, Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, pointed out that a compromise seemed very hard while a scheme based on mandatory quotas was worth discussing and trying though it remained a contentious issue.<sup>37</sup>

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In the meantime, at the AU-EU Summit, in Abidjan, on Nov. 29, 2017, delegates of the UN, the AU, and the EU came together to address the dramatic situation of migrants and refugees, particularly in Libya.<sup>38</sup> In particular, due to conditions in detention centers<sup>39</sup> in Libya, which were overcrowded, known for abuse, lacked facilities and had a shortage of food, they agreed to carry out a joint EU–AU–UN Task Force that would be coordinated with the Libyan authorities. This Task Force “to save and protect lives of migrants and refugees along the routes and in particular inside Libya, accelerating the assisted voluntary returns to countries of origin, and the resettlement of those in need of international protection.” Moreover, it attempts to tackle traffickers and to assist the development and stability of countries of origin at the root of migration problems.

### **Italy and Other Member States' Recent Positions**

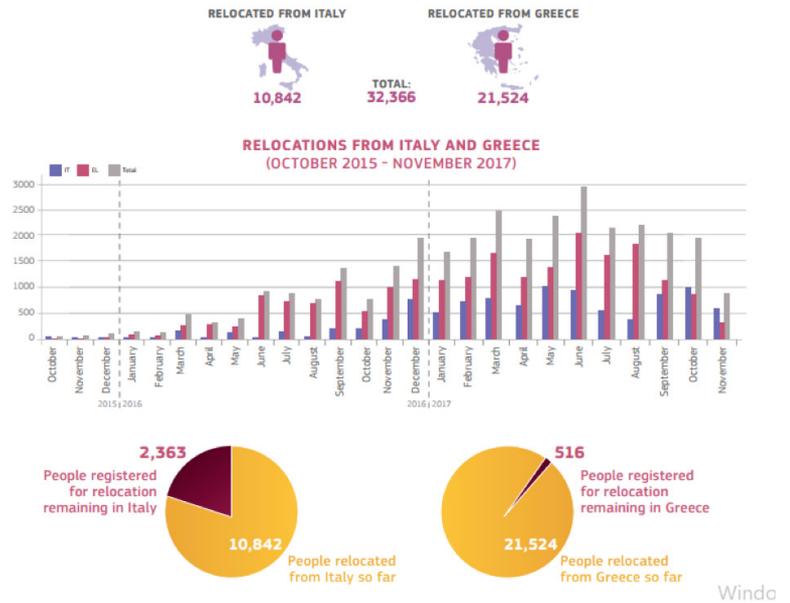
The European Commission called on member states to support Italy as well as other affected countries like Greece but was



more interested in preventing migrants from leaving the Libyan coasts. In April 2017, the EU gave €90 million to Libya, to improve conditions for migrants, contributed €46 million in July 2017 for the securing of its northern<sup>40</sup> and southern borders, and more recently central European countries (the Visegard Four) provided €35 million<sup>41</sup> to help Libya's anti-emigration efforts. Plus, the EU claims that it provided essential economic and logistic support for Rome.<sup>42</sup> Italy is considered to have the necessary infrastructure to tackle the migration influx but is not prepared politically with general elections planned to be held in the spring of 2018. To experts, because of variety of reasons such as poverty, climate change and political strife, tens of millions more migrants will continue to make their way to Europe. Under these circumstances, Italian authorities have to be ready for an emergency situation that will cause a rise in immigration and will affect their policy and likely the general elections. For this reason, Italy is garnering European support for its efforts. The Czech Interior Minister has expressed his support for the EU's activities in Libya.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Austrian authorities have been even more preoccupied with protecting their country's borders from the expanding migrant influx.<sup>44</sup> France's President Emmanuel Macron has planned to establish hot-spots in Libya to stop people "taking crazy risks", claiming that most of them are not eligible for asylum.<sup>45</sup> Yet, countries working with Libyan authorities have been criticized because they are trying to prevent migrants, who are fleeing conflict-ridden countries, from landing on EU shores.<sup>46</sup>

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Figure 2: Relocation – Sharing Responsibility Within the EU



Source: European Commission<sup>47</sup>

On top of some Eastern European countries' rejection of the EU's migrant-sharing plan, in June 2017, Italy announced that EU countries should either help and accept more refugees from the country or it would take measures aiming at closing its ports to refugee rescue ships.<sup>48</sup> Subsequent to Italy's announcement, the EU's Interior Ministers gathered in Tallinn, in Estonia, to discuss the current situation. In the meeting, the EU ministers urged "the Libyan authorities to set up a joint rescue coordination center with Italy."<sup>49</sup> However, V4 countries, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, remain against a mandatory quota scheme while neither Hungary nor Poland have accepted any of the allocated asylum seekers<sup>50</sup> as they never acknowledged an EU-wide solution.<sup>51</sup> Following this meeting, the measures taken in liaison with Libya to reduce the numbers of refugees reaching Italian shores are creating new problems in themselves. Since the summer of 2017, Italy, with EU support, has been training Libyan coastguards and this has ended up with decrease in arrivals of almost 70 percent compared to the same period last year, while there was a 20 percent jump between January and June, 2017.<sup>52</sup> By June 29,



5,641 arrivals had reached Italy by sea that month, compared to 3,914 in August, 11,459 in July and 23,524 in June according to data released by the International Organization for Migration.<sup>53</sup>

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Although those numbers indicate a sharp fall, it has been observed that people have tended to change their route from Libya to Tunisia and Morocco in order to reach Europe. Meanwhile, the EU policies have been called “inhuman” due to critical situation and the risk of human rights violations and abuses in camps, in Libya, particularly after the CNN television report about African migrants there being sold as slaves,<sup>54</sup> and it has also been criticized by Amnesty International.<sup>55</sup> Owing to these factors, for the first time the UN decided to bring refugees from Libya directly to Europe in December. Whereas French President Emmanuel Macron said the situation in the refugee centers were scandalous and unacceptable,<sup>56</sup> Germany agreed to allocate \$140 million to improve their conditions.<sup>57</sup> European leaders were also criticized for acting shocked about abuses and enslavement because these things have been known about for years, rather than suddenly appearing. Moreover, it was claimed that European governments via aid and other policies, contributed to the incentives for militias to worsen conditions in Libyan detention centers as much as African governments did. In addition to this, Macron, who appreciated the Italian–Libyan agreements to halt migration, have implicitly embraced xenophobic policies to

win votes, while German Chancellor Angela Merkel stands out as a rare pro-migrant European leader.<sup>58</sup> Due to the dramatic drop in the number of arrivals to Italy, Minniti has recently been praised by officials in Brussels and far-right groups in the country. He has been considered as the mastermind by his admirers with his “desert diplomacy” while the UN and NGOs have criticized his approach.<sup>59</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In the light of the developments mentioned above, all member states of the EU deem reducing numbers of arrivals through the central Mediterranean a top priority target. The UN has announced that it would transport several thousand migrants from Libya either to third countries or to their countries of origin.<sup>60</sup> Following this, for the first time Italy opened a humanitarian corridor directly from Libya to Italy and the first evacuation of 162 vulnerable migrants occurred in December 2017. In 2018, up to 10,000 refugees are planned to be sent from Libya,<sup>61</sup> and 30,000 migrants are slated to be repatriate in their home countries through a voluntary returns program.<sup>62</sup> However, there are ongoing discussions about the ways to intercept migration flows and one way appears to be by opening a legal path to migration, thus intercepting illegal arrivals. Moreover, plans for minimizing danger are focused on minimizing arrivals rather than through making routes safer.

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Negotiations for solidarity among Member States remain unresolved following an EU summit in mid-December 2017.<sup>63</sup> Although



Italy has been striving to gain the support of EU countries, it has been left alone in dealing with migrants within its territory. Besides, Italy's general elections in March 2018 put the migration influx at the center stage of Italy's domestic policies. The rise in popular right-wing parties is leading to the growth of xenophobia within the country, just as it has been spreading throughout Europe. For several reasons, and particularly these newcomers, it seems that Italy will become more rigid about its migration policies to gain votes by maintaining control on migration.



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#### ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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