HGRA

EnHancing manaGement and studies on migRation issues in LibyA

European Union and Libya cooperation mechanisms in managing migration along the Central Mediterranean Route

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ABOUT HGRA

Migration is an international phenomenon affecting several sectors of both the destination and the country of origin. EU is the most targeted destination for migrants and there are three main routes bringing refugees and migrants to it: the Western Mediterranean Route (usually via Morocco to Spain), the Central Mediterranean Route (usually via Libya to Italy) and the Eastern Mediterranean Route (usually via Turkey to Greece).

The Central Mediterranean Route via Libya is the most active one and accounts for the largest number of people crossing by sea to Europe. In addition, Libya is both a transit and destination country.

The HGRA project is dedicated to enhancing the role of Libyan universities in addressing migration challenges comprehensively. Central to this mission is the empowerment of universities to build capabilities and prepare proficient cadres equipped to tackle migration issues effectively. Through tailored curricula, specialized training programs, and interdisciplinary initiatives, universities play a fundamental role in nurturing professionals with the expertise to navigate migration governance, policy formulation, and societal integration.

Moreover, universities serve as vital hubs for driving scientific research that directly informs evidence-based policymaking and strategic interventions in migration management. By fostering a culture of inquiry and innovation, universities contribute invaluable insights into migration dynamics, socio-economic impacts, and best practices in migration governance. This research not only enriches our understanding of migration phenomena but also equips policymakers with the knowledge needed to devise holistic and sustainable solutions to migration challenges.

In essence, the HGRA project recognizes universities as linchpins for fostering capacity building and scientific research that address migration issues comprehensively, ultimately contributing to the creation of more inclusive and resilient societies.

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Abstract

Since the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, the European Union and Libya have significantly intensified their cooperation in the areas of migration management and border control. Despite existing initiatives of Member states such as Italy and Malta, the European Union has also developed in-depth cooperation with Libya to combat smugglers and human traffickers and address migratory movements through the Central Mediterranean Route. This report presents some of these cooperation mechanisms on migration and border control between the European Union and Libya, with particular emphasis on: 1. Training and capacity building of the Libyan Border and Coast Guard through European Union Common Security and Defence Policy operations; 2. Cooperation in the creation of a Libyan Search and Rescue Zone and the establishment of a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Tripoli; 3. The European Union Trust Fund for Africa funding programmes and EU-Libya information exchange in the context of maritime rescue operations; 4. Cooperation mechanisms on migration and refugee protection.

European Union and Libya cooperation mechanisms in managing migration along the Central Mediterranean Route

This contribution will discuss the cooperation between the EU and Libya to address irregular migration and combat smugglers and human traffickers along the central Mediterranean route, as well as those EU funded projects addressing the refugees' situation in Libya. It will particularly highlight the initiatives aimed at enhancing the capabilities of Libyan authorities, the creation of a Libyan Search and Rescue (SAR) zone, the financial support and information exchange between European and Libyan authorities on both sides of the Mediterranean, and the implications of the EU in cooperation with other International Organisations and organisms related to migrants and refugees' protection.

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1. Introduction: current migration trends along the Central Mediterranean Route

The Mediterranean Sea has been considered one of the most important migration routes in the world. A key turning point on this route was the unstable political situation post-2011, which increased migratory pressure along the various Mediterranean routes. Since then, numerous people have risked their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean, fleeing persecution, poverty, and internal conflicts, among other causes.

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The Central Mediterranean route involves departures from North African countries, such as Libya, Tunisia and Egypt to Italy or Malta. The journey's length, the type of boats used, and the presence of mafias and trafficking networks make it one of the most dangerous routes in the world.

Despite the intense migratory pressure experienced in 2015, the number of migrants and refugees arriving at Europe's external borders has significantly decreased. Although arrivals in 2021, 2022 and 2023 slightly increased, the number of migrants and refugees arriving at Europe's external borders remained low compared to 2015 figures.

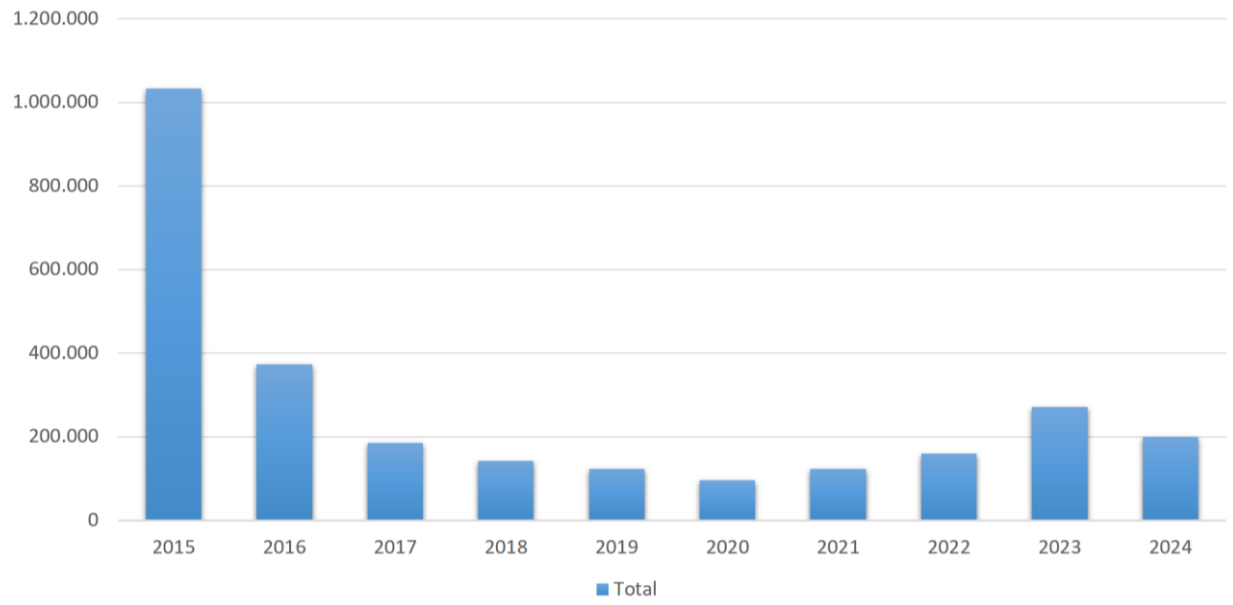

Table 1. Mixed migration flows to Europe 2015-2024. Data provided by the IOM: https://dtm.iom.int/europe/arrivals.

An important factor contributing to the decrease in arrivals at Europe's external borders is precisely the cooperation of the European Union (EU) and European States with neighbouring countries in North Africa. Thanks to the operational and technical support and training provided by the EU for the control of migratory flows, the authorities of countries such as Libya and Tunisia have increased their capacities to rescue migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. For example, in the first half of 2023, more than 14,000 people were rescued by Tunisian authorities, while approximately 7,200 people were rescued by the Libyan Border and Coast Guard[1].

This contribution will discuss the cooperation between the EU and Libya to address irregular migration and combat smugglers and human traffickers along the central Mediterranean route, as well as those EU funded projects addressing the refugees' situation in Libya. It will particularly highlight the initiatives aimed at enhancing the capabilities of Libyan authorities, the creation of a Libyan Search and Rescue (SAR) zone, the financial support and information exchange between European and Libyan authorities on both sides of the Mediterranean, and the implications of the EU in cooperation with other International Organisations and organisms related to migrants and refugees' protection.

[1] IOM Libya Maritime updates, available at: https://libya.iom.int/resource-group/maritime-updates.

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2. First EU-Libya cooperation initiatives from 2015 on migration and border controls

Libya has always played a key role in the evolution of migration flows into Europe. Libya's geographical location on the other side of the Mediterranean and its political situation, with porous borders and not a clear national migration strategy, have conditioned the cooperation on irregular migration between the EU, its Member States and Libya. Since the migratory crisis of 2015, the EU institutions have developed an entire strategy of migration cooperation with Libya. To ensure a cohesive and effective approach to managing migration in the Central Mediterranean -including preventing loss of life at sea, addressing migrant smuggling, and combating human trafficking- all stakeholders on both sides of the Mediterranean need to cooperate and share responsibilities.

During the 2015 refugee crisis, EU institutions have adopted regulations, directives, or decisions in specific areas of integrated border management, migration policy, or the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy, which we will address in the following section. However, atypical acts, the nature and legal effects of which are sometimes indeterminate, have become particularly important, especially when establishing the strategy for cooperation with Libya.

The European Agenda on Migration of March 2015, which constituted the Union's primary political strategy for managing the migration crisis, devoted much of its efforts to establishing close cooperation with third countries on border management and the fight against human traffickers (European Commission, 2015).

On 7 June 2016, the Partnership Framework with third countries was established as part of the European Agenda on Migration. This initiative followed the 2015 Valletta Summit on migration and aimed to foster collaboration between EU institutions and key third countries. The goal was to manage migration flows effectively while addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement. The Commission's Communication for establishing this new framework (European Commission, 2016) mentioned the problematic situation in Libya and the need for continued political and financial investment in support of the Government of National Accord[2]. The intention to reinforce support to the Libyan authorities to enhance their rescue capacity was also reiterated in the European Council Conclusions of 15 December 2016 (European Council, 2016).

[2] The agreement referred to includes five main elements outlined on page 15: 1. Financial support of approximately €100 million to develop humanitarian aid projects; 2. Protection and stability for both host communities and displaced persons, both inside and outside of Libya's detention centres; 3. Assistance with border security and management to support the existing EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM), focusing on enhancing the capacity of Libyan immigration infrastructure, particularly through training the Libyan Coast Guard; 4. Support for the Government of National Accord in developing a legal framework for the protection of human rights and other international obligations; 5. Technical assistance provided through FRONTEX.

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The Joint Communication of the European Commission and the EU High Representative in January 2017 highlighted Libya as the top priority for cooperation on border control and the fight against irregular migration and human trafficking (European Commission, 2017). This communication expressly mentioned the need to reduce the pressure on the Member States mainly affected, such as Italy and Malta. To this end, the EU had a comprehensive strategy focused on Libya, which includes four key issues: training, equipment and education through the various EU initiatives to enable the Libyan Border and Coast Guard to rescue people at sea and even to coordinate rescue operations; improving the capacities of the Libyan authorities and information exchange systems to deal with people smuggling; enhancing the capacities of the Libyan authorities to assist refugees and asylum seekers disembarking on Libyan territory, with the support of International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); and finally, deploying EU missions and projects to support the Libyan authorities in border management and protection of migrants on Libya's southern border.

Following this package of measures aimed at reducing migration flows in the Central Mediterranean route, two key acts in the cooperation with Libya were adopted: the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Italy and Libya[3] and the Malta European Council Declaration of 3 February 2017 on the Central Mediterranean route (European Council, 2017). It is important to highlight that the European Council Declaration supported Italy's initiative for cooperation with Libya by endorsing the MOU and prioritising several key areas of action to "stem illegal flows to the EU". These areas include training and provision of equipment to the Libyan National Coast Guard to enhance its capacity for migrant reception and ensure adequate conditions for migrants in Libya, in collaboration with the UNHCR and IOM; support for IOM's assisted voluntary return activities, which include information campaigns; and finally, efforts to reduce pressure on Libya's land borders through collaboration with the Libyan authorities and neighbouring countries, as well as improving operational cooperation with EU Member States and the European Border and Coast Guard to prevent departures and manage returns.

In July 2017, following the Declaration, a new Commission Action Plan was introduced in support of Italy (European Commission, 2017). This Action Plan reiterated the need to accelerate the creation of a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Libya to establish a Libyan SAR area where Libya could coordinate further rescue operations. It also addressed the need to strengthen the management of Libya's maritime and land borders through EU Trust Fund (EUTF) for Africa-funded projects and through the training and capacity-building of Libyan coastguards. It also highlighted the objective of reducing migratory pressure on Libya's territory and southern borders through the Assisted Voluntary Return from Libya programmes and collaborating with Libya's neighbouring countries "to curb new flows to Libya".

Concerning European Union financial projects related to Libya, funding for the period from 2014 to 2021 was primarily provided through the European Neighbourhood Instrument. For the years 2021 to 2027, a financial framework for European projects in collaboration with Libya has been established through the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument

[3] Memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the fields of development, the fight against illegal immigration, human trafficking and fuel smuggling and on reinforcing the security of borders between the State of Libya and the Italian Republic. Text available in English at Odysseus Network website: https://eumigrationlawblog.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/MEMORANDUM_translation_finalversion.doc.pdf

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– Global Europe (European Commission, 2024), in parallel with projects financed through the EUTF for Africa, which will be discussed later.

The Regulations adopted as part of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum in May 2024 do not specifically address cooperation with third countries. However, it is important to note that the European Commission's Communication on the New Migration and Asylum Pact, released in 2020, highlighted the need to support third countries in building their capacity to manage irregular migration flows. This includes enhancing their abilities in border control and SAR operations, as well as establishing effective systems for asylum management and the reception of migrants and refugees (European Commission, 2020).

3. Cooperation mechanisms on migration and border control between the EU and Libya

A key aspect of the cooperation between the EU and Libya has been supporting Libyan institutions in the areas of border control and security. This collaboration has primarily involved establishing missions under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy and financing projects aimed at enhancing Libya's capabilities in border control, SAR operations at sea, and combating the smuggling of migrants and human trafficking.

In the following sections, we will focus on the military and civilian missions created by the EU to assist Libya in these matters, the establishment of a Search and Rescue (SAR) zone in Libya with support from Italian authorities, and the initiatives under the EUTF for Africa aimed at developing an integrated system for border control and migration management in Libya.

3.1. Training and capacity building of the Libyan Border and Coast Guard through EU Common Security and Defence Policy operations

Cooperation through EU Common Security and Defence Policy operations dates back to 2015 with the establishment of the EUNAVFOR MED Sophia mission, which was mandated to detect, capture and eliminate vessels used by migrant traffickers (European Council, 2015). However,

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despite successive mandate extensions, it faced significant operational limitations, particularly regarding its ability to operate in Libyan territorial waters.

According to the mission's Strategic Review from July 2017, the lack of a Security Council resolution or authorisation from Libya to operate within its territorial sea significantly limited the mission's ability to gather comprehensive intelligence and mainly hampered efforts to disrupt the smuggling operations. Smugglers took advantage of Operation Sophia's limitations by modifying their tactics: they would accompany boatloads of people only to the edge of Libyan territorial waters and not beyond (Council of the EU, 2017).

These limitations did not hinder efforts to continue strengthening support for the Libyan authorities, although this support was not part of the mission's original objectives. In June 2016, the EUNAVFOR MED Sophia mission's mandate was expanded in scope and duration. The mission included the additional responsibility of monitoring compliance with the United Nations arms embargo on Libya in international waters and the mandate to train and equip the Libyan Coast Guard to combat trafficking networks in Libya and to conduct life-saving SAR activities (Council of the EU, 2016).

Just after the mandate's extension, the Libyan National Government authorities notified Brussels of the appointment of a committee within the Ministry of Defence that would address the details of training and equipping its border guards (Loschi, et. al., 2018). To this end, an MOU was signed in August 2016 between Operation Sophia and the Libyan Ministry of Defence in order to design the training programme based on three complementary training modules: 1. At-sea training focused on navigational practice in EUNAVFOR MED units; 2. Training at EU Member States' naval bases; 3. Advanced at-sea training on Libyan coast guard vessels (Council of the EU, 2018).

Operation Sophia concluded its mandate on 30 March 2020 and was soon succeeded by the EUNAVFOR MED Irini mission, which started its operations in April 2020 (Council of the EU, 2020). This military crisis management operation was initiated based on commitments adopted at the Berlin Conference on 19 January 2020. Its primary mission is to enforce the United Nations arms embargo on Libya using air assets, satellites, and maritime resources. To achieve this goal, the mission may conduct inspections of ships travelling to or from Libya if there are reasonable grounds to suspect they are carrying weapons. In addition to this primary task, Irini has secondary responsibilities, including building capacity and training the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy (as outlined in Article 4) and disrupting the business model of smuggling and trafficking networks (as mentioned in Article 5). The training envisaged in Operation Irini's strategy would be conducted on the high seas, but it can also be conducted on Libyan territory and in Libya's territorial waters, subject to an invitation from Libya and a decision by the operation's Political and Security Committee.

Regarding human trafficking, the mission will collect information and conduct air patrols in international waters; however, it does not have the authority to inspect or apprehend vessels involved in trafficking. Moreover, Irini vessels do not possess a specific SAR mandate, and there are no provisions for disembarkation of rescued people in compliance with international law. The location of any potential disembarkation remains confidential and is not disclosed to the public (Moran, 2020). The operational area of the Irini mission has been oriented mainly towards the eastern Mediterranean, with an increased emphasis on air assets, resulting in a reduced presence of maritime assets (OHCHR, 2021). Following Council Decision 2023/653, the operation's temporary mandate has been extended until 31 March 2025.

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Finally, the European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) Libya is a civilian mission established in May 2013. Its mandate is to assist the Libyan authorities in developing an integrated border management concept for the territory (Council of the EU, 2013). EUBAM Libya is the only European mission operating extraterritorially on the ground in Libyan territory (Council of the EU, 2021).

Council Decision 2023/1305 has extended the mandate of the Mission until 30 June 2025. Currently, the Mission aims to contribute to the capacity building of Libyan authorities and agencies to manage their borders and fight cross-border crime, including trafficking in human beings and smuggling of migrants. To this end, the Decision states that EUBAM Libya will facilitate

(a) support the Libyan authorities and agencies responsible for border management, including in facilitating intra-agency, inter-agency and international cooperation as guiding principles of integrated border management;

(b) support the Libyan authorities and agencies involved in the fight against cross-border crime, including human trafficking and migrant smuggling, and against terrorism, in line with international standards in these areas;

(c) facilitate and support cooperation and interoperability of the Libyan authorities and agencies in these thematic areas in order to help them mitigate possible gaps or overlaps in border management; address cross-border crime, including human trafficking and migrant smuggling, and counter-terrorism;

(d) provide specific needs assessments and develop related projects supporting the Mission's operational activities (Council of the EU, 2023).

3.2. Cooperation in the creation of a Libyan SAR Zone and the establishment of a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Tripoli

The Joint Communication of the High Representative and the European Commission of January 2017 already urged the Italian Coast Guard to assist the Libyan Coast Guard, with the financial support of the EU, in establishing a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Libya. The goal was to help Libya meet the necessary requirements to designate its own SAR Area, in accordance with international law—specifically the SAR and Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) conventions, to which Libya is part. The communication also mentioned the potential use of the Seahorse network's satellite infrastructure and the support from Frontex to facilitate immediate information exchange regarding incidents at sea with Libyan authorities. This would enable better coordination of operations in collaboration with neighbouring states (European Commission, 2017).

However, before establishing a Libyan SAR area, maritime rescue cooperation was carried out thanks to the Italian Operation Mare Sicuro. This operation aimed to conduct aero-maritime surveillance all along the central Mediterranean area by deploying naval units, helicopters and drones. In July 2017, the mandate was expanded to include dispatching units to operate in Libya's territorial waters. This expansion also led to the setting up a maritime operations centre on Libyan territory to enhance surveillance, maritime cooperation, and coordination of joint activities.

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On 4 August 2017, the first Italian ship arrived at the port of Tripoli to repair the equipment and infrastructure used in combating illegal immigration, conduct SAR operations, and establish a Naval Liaison and Communication Centre on board (Alarabiya News, 2017). In this regard, the Italian ship docked in Tripoli served as a communication and coordination centre, providing a decisive contribution to the Libyan Coast Guard's command and control capabilities. The action sheet of the EUTF Africa *Support to Integrated Border and Migration Management in Libya* project mentions that Italian personnel would be deployed on Libyan territory for continuous on-site monitoring to supervise the proper use of the maritime and land equipment provided (European Commission, 2020).

Thanks to this initial cooperation, Libya unilaterally declared its SAR zone in August 2017, where the Libyan coastguards would conduct interception operations (The Local, 2017). However, Libya still needed a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre and did not establish a specific zone extension. Thus, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) notified that it was impossible to recognise the international registration of the Libyan SAR zone. As a result, all rescue operations at sea continued to be operated from the Italian Coordination Centre (Monroy, 2018).

The Libyan Government of National Accord submitted a new application to the IMO a few days after the withdrawal. Italy also sent a communication to the IMO on the "Libyan Maritime Coordination Centre Project" under the initiative of the Italian Coast Guard and funded by the European Commission. In this communication, Italy assumed that "[T]he Italian Coast Guard is playing a key role in strengthening the capacity of the relevant authorities" (IMO, 2017). The new request focused on the Libyan Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre, for which Italy would take responsibility until Libya has the necessary conditions.

The IMO recognised Libya's SAR area in June 2018. As listed in the IMO database, Libya currently has a Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (joint aeronautical and maritime), and the lines delimiting the Libyan SAR Zone are registered (Santer, 2019).

Despite efforts to establish a Maritime Coordination Centre in Libya and the recognition of its own SAR zone, concerns persist regarding the Libyan authorities' capability to respond effectively to emergencies at sea. In this sense, some SAR practices have been identified as potentially infringing international human rights obligations (European Court of Auditors, 2024).

3.3. The EU Trust Fund for Africa funding programmes, and the EU-Libya information exchange in the context of maritime rescue operations

The EU has deployed a comprehensive funding strategy for cooperation activities in Libya. Since 2015, this funding has been channelled through the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa, created to overcome the fragmentation of EU budgets in the external migration policy (European Commission, 2015).

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Libya has received the most funds in the framework of the EUTF for Africa in North Africa's Programme, whether through regional projects in North Africa or projects aimed specifically at Libya. About the latter, EU funding has holistically addressed all aspects of migration and international protection, such as improving disembarkation facilities and detention centres in Libya; the refugees' and migrants' access to basic health and protection services; the voluntary return programmes; and the maritime and land border control capacities.

Concerning migration management and border controls, the programme established specifically for this objective is the *Support to Integrated Border and Migration Management in Libya*, the second phase of which was in force until November 2024 (European Commission, 2023). This programme aimed to improve the Libyan authorities' capacity to control its borders, manage migration and save lives both at sea and in the desert. The project includes providing support to the Libyan Coast Guard, both the General Administration of Coastal Security and the Libyan Coast and Port Security Guard, by offering training and equipment to enhance their sea surveillance capabilities. It also involves setting up an essential National Interagency Coordination Centre and a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre for operations at sea and along the coastal zone and rescue activities. Furthermore, it includes assisting the relevant Libyan authorities in declaring a Libyan SAR region, as previously noted, and enhancing the capacity of authorities in the south to effectively manage border surveillance and land border operations in the desert.

Finally, the exchange of information with Libyan authorities by European States is achieved through Libya's participation in Project Seahorse. This programme, entirely financed by the EU, aims to increase and strengthen the capacities of the authorities of North African countries in the area of surveillance and border control. In order to achieve this goal, two main activities are set: first, the training of authorities from the third countries involved in handling maritime rescue operations, and second, the exchange of information on irregular migration by sea through the Seahorse Mediterranean Communication Network. This network is based on the national contact points of the African countries, which would be equipped with communication tools that would allow them to be connected via satellite to Eurosur. In the framework of Eurosur, Frontex monitors the Libyan coast using satellite and aerial mechanisms. This information is analysed and provided as part of the Eurosur Fusion services. Both the EUTF project and the Seahorse project aim to set up a Eurosur-like system in Libya with a National Coordination Centre where all coordination centres cooperate and communicate with all Libyan agencies involved in border control (European Commission, 2017).

The EU Court of Auditors' Special Report on the EUTF for Africa, published in 2024, highlights several areas for improvement concerning the projects implemented in Libya. One significant risk related to human rights protection involves the potential misuse of equipment provided for the projects, as it could fall into the hands of actors not linked to the project.

Training in maritime SAR does not ensure that the personnel who receive it will adhere to the “do-no-harm” principle. This concern also extends to the financial support for disembarkation points; there is no assurance that these points are solely under the control of official Libyan authorities, and European authorities have faced restrictions in accessing and monitoring the implementation of these processes (European Court of Auditors, 2024).

Regarding the training programs on international maritime law and human rights scheduled for the period from 2022 to 2024, there are still gaps in both the content and scope of these courses. Additionally, training on international standards, including human rights related to land border management, only commenced in 2023 (European Court of Auditors, 2024).

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Despite the European Commission contracting an external consultancy in Libya in December 2019 to monitor the impact of EUTF projects on human rights, the EU Court of Auditors has determined that the reports produced by this consultancy do not fully cover the entirety of the projects until 2023 (European Court of Auditors, 2024).

4. Cooperation mechanisms with The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organisation for Migration

During the so-called refugee crisis, financial cooperation between UNHCR, IOM and the EU was further strengthened with increased funding and more flexible mechanisms for establishing projects and programmes. The migratory situation has fostered a greater synergy of their competencies and more collaboration between the EU, UNHCR and IOM in third countries. Although these organisations are separate legal entities, they work together within a defined organisational structure. The EU makes decisions while UNHCR and IOM handle implementation. Therefore, this collaboration aims to achieve the objectives outlined in the constitutions of both organisations, as well as the originally European interests that have now evolved into shared goals (Georgi, 2010).

The funding landscape underwent a significant transformation due to the refugee crisis and the necessity to make existing mechanisms more flexible, with the European Commission considering it as one of the main options. It is essential to note that IOM and UNHCR have seen their funding increase through specific and general European financial programs, such as the EUTF for Africa.

EUTF-funded projects for Africa, as explained above, are not exclusively implemented by UNHCR and IOM. However, UNHCR and IOM stand out as the primary international organisations with founding objectives centred on assistance and protection in the areas of mobility and migration, as well as refugee and international protection. Consequently, the EUTF also serves as a financial framework for IOM and UNHCR to collaboratively and independently implement actions and projects impacting migration and refugee management. Below are two examples of programs funded by the EUTF and carried out by UNHCR and IOM, including initiatives in Libya.

One of the most funded project in Libya is the programme entitled *Managing mixed migration flows in Libya through expanding protection space and supporting local socio-economic*

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development (T05-EUTF-NOA-LY-03), adopted in April 2017 by the Operational Committee of the Trust Fund until 31 March 2023. The implementing partners for this program include the United Nations Development Programme, UNHCR, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), IOM, and the German Society for International Cooperation.

The program was guided by one overarching objective and two strategic pillars. The main objective was to enhance the protection and resilience of migrants, refugees, and host communities in Libya while improving migration management capacities along the country's routes. The first strategic pillar focused on protecting migrants, refugees, and vulnerable individuals stranded in Libya. This was primarily achieved through IOM's Assisted Voluntary Returns program, along with providing humanitarian assistance and support to improve conditions in detention centres. The second strategic pillar promoted socio-economic development in local municipalities and communities to integrate migrants into Libyan society effectively.

On the other hand, the *Integrated Approach to Protection and Emergency Assistance for Vulnerable and Stranded Migrants in Libya* project was adopted on 6 July 2018, with a total budget of €29,000,000 fully implemented by UNHCR and IOM in Libya.

The project's main objective was to strengthen the protection and resilience of migrants in Libya. It also aimed to enhance the capabilities of Libyan authorities in managing migration through targeted training, mainly focused on international practices related to detention policies, rights-based migration management, and the registration of migrants. This included providing assistance and protection at disembarkation points and detention centres.

To achieve these goals, both UNHCR and IOM would undertake activities related to migration management and international protection. Key initiatives will involve training Libyan staff in human rights and international protection, enhancing their ability to operate open reception centres, establishing and training search and rescue teams, and improving registration systems for migrants rescued in the desert, following the procedures used at disembarkation points. Additionally, training on international practices regarding detention policies, identification of vulnerable migrants, and collaboration on voluntary repatriations to countries of origin would also be prioritised.

However, some international organisations with humanitarian goals have limited access to specific detention centres. This restriction hinders a comprehensive monitoring of the projects aimed at ensuring the human rights of migrants and refugees. While living conditions have improved in the detention centres still controlled by Libyan authorities, the treatment of individuals held there has not changed. Furthermore, the centres that Libya's Department for Combating Illegal Immigration has closed may fall under the control of unofficial entities associated with human trafficking activities (European Court of Auditors, 2024).

5. Concluding remarks

Cooperation between the EU and Libya on migration and the fight against human trafficking along the central Mediterranean has significantly impacted the number of arrivals at Europe's external borders from 2015 onwards. Notably, it has led to a substantial reduction in the number of arrivals at Europe's external borders since 2015. The cooperation mechanisms have been based mainly on building the capacity of the Libyan authorities to manage migration at the maritime and

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land borders in the south of the country and to achieve sufficient disembarkation and reception conditions on Libyan territory.

Following the migratory pressure of 2015, the first EU-Libyan cooperation mechanisms have been characterised by a more intense presence of the European authorities on the high seas and Libyan territory itself. However, as the Libyan authorities have taken on more responsibility for intercepting migrants on the central Mediterranean route, this extraterritorial action by the European authorities has decreased. This shift has been supported by financial aid and the establishment of mechanisms for sharing information on migratory situations in the Mediterranean Sea.

In sum, although cooperation with third countries and, in particular, with Libya, is necessary to respond to the loss of life at sea and to the fight against mafias and traffickers of human beings in the Mediterranean Sea, these mechanisms must continue to connect the EU and its European authorities extraterritorially. They should also include measures to observe and monitor international obligations related to maritime rescue and respect for human rights of migrants and refugees.

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