

## **SOLIDARITY AND RESISTANCE AT THE BORDERS OF EUROPE**

SOLIDARITY AND RESISTANCE AT THE BORDERS OF EUROPE:  
CIVIL FLEET SEARCH AND RESCUE OPERATIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN  
BORDERSCAPE

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TITLE: Solidarity and Resistance (SAR) at the Borders of EUrope: Civil Fleet Search and Rescue Operations in the Mediterranean Borderscape

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## **LAY ABSTRACT**

My dissertation examines the externalization of migration control, the criminalization of humanitarianism, and acts of solidarity through the work of civil society Search and Rescue (SAR) operations. In looking at grassroots organizations and the spatial politics of the sea, I explore the unique and fluid dimensions of the Mediterranean Sea as a border security space. This project analyses the tension between the enactment of solidarity with people on the move alongside broader state efforts to externalize border security and criminalize humanitarianism. Examining the invocation and operation of humanitarianism at sea illuminates emergent trends around bordering, mobility, and citizenship as migrants and civil society confront the state security apparatus. This borderscape is enacted through contentious NGO acts of solidarity with migrants at sea as grassroots organizations challenge the appropriation of the natural environment as a border control mechanism. My research highlights how these political acts of rescue expose the violence of state borders, while simultaneously enacting solidarity with people on the move as an actively anti-racist, justice and rights seeking movement.

## **ABSTRACT**

The project examines the construction of state space and the contestation of the European borderscape through the work of non-state actors in the Mediterranean Sea. In response to the precarity of irregularized migrant journeys, there has been a rise in Search and Rescue (SAR) NGOs committed to assisting people on the move through upholding the basic human rights and dignity of migrants. Increasingly, NGOs are criminalized for providing basic necessities like food, water and shelter to migrants passing through the peripheral spaces of the state. Not only does irregular migration through the borderlands of the Global North directly confront state efforts to exclude through violent bordering practices, but NGO acts of solidarity also transform the harsh environment of the sea into contested spaces of political action. The lifesaving actions of NGOs operating in the Mediterranean directly challenge state authority and governance at sea while laying bare the violence inherent in state bordering practices. Conversely, the disruptive politics of these NGOs serve as a form of resistance to these same bordering practices and operate as a means of contesting state exclusion. Situating NGO SAR operations within the wider context of the securitization of borders, the repression and criminalization of solidarity in the Mediterranean highlights state efforts to reassert sovereign authority over the sea. This ongoing research contextualises the spatial politics of the Mediterranean borderscape at the intersections of migration governance and acts of solidarity by European NGOs. The research conducted for my doctoral project was driven by an ethnographic methodology that included six months working with SAR NGOs active in the Central Mediterranean while gathering over 50 interviews with activists working in the region. More directly, this also involved three months living and working alongside the German SAR organization, Sea-Watch, in France and Italy during periods of legal and administrative detention. My work bridges the opportunity to write about these movements and resistance efforts, with direct involvement in these struggles for rights, recognition, and freedom of movement, in solidarity with people on the move.

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While the acknowledgements (as with the dissertation) may be a bit longer than expected, upon reflection, I consider it a good problem to have. I have been fortunate to benefit from the mentorship, encouragement, and friendship of many people in this journey. Though this may not be the part of the dissertation you are most keen to read, personally, this is one of the most important parts of the project itself. It is a chance for me to thank the people and organizations that have helped me get to this point in my academic career. While this section is replete with all the expected cliched terms and phrases, I hope that you read this as a genuine and sincere expression of my gratitude.

Arriving in Hamilton as an undergrad in 2010, I did not anticipate being here 12 years later, having completed my PhD in the same department where my academic journey began. I would like to extend my thanks to the *Department of Political Science* at McMaster University for being my academic home for so many years. I have gained a fuller understanding of what it means to work in academia while also providing a space to fight for the needs of graduate students. I would like to extend a special thanks to the incredible administrative staff in the department. They work tirelessly to keep things running smoothly, even in times of uncertainty. Specifically, I would like to thank *Manuela, Rebekah* and *Wendy*. From the spontaneous chats about sports or the latest tv shows while I was trying my best to avoid working, to sorting through a mess of receipts from nine months of fieldwork, or navigating the never-ending hoops of being a graduate student trying to finish 'on time' (or close to it 😊), you have always been there to help out a helpless grad student. Your often unrecognized and un-thanked work is what has kept me, and the department, moving forward. Thank you.

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lot in Sicily thinking my fieldwork had just fallen apart, to your kind words of encouragement as I continually doubted myself and my research. You have provided honest feedback and thoughtful engagement with my project at key moments in the process. In doing so, you have been instrumental in helping me develop this embryonic idea into a completed dissertation. Though I don't have the space to convey the depths of my gratitude, I want to express my appreciation for all that you have done for me in my growth and development as a scholar. Thank you.

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One thing I tell any prospective graduate student; don't get into academia for the money. For many, undertaking a PhD is not an easy financial decision. I have been fortunate to have received financial support from various government and private sector funding opportunities. I would like to thank the *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)*, the *Government of Ontario (OGS)*, and *Mitacs Globalink* for providing me with the financial stability needed to complete this project, pay rent, and put food on the table. Simply put, completing this project would not have happened without these external funding opportunities. Receiving financial support from a state government for a project that exposes the violence and exclusion occurring in the peripheral spaces

of the Global North is not lost on me. Using those resources in the process of questioning the very existence of the state border system is one of the little ironies that have made me smile over the years. Thank you.

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***This project is dedicated to people on the move and those fighting against the violence and oppression of an unjust global border regime.  
May we one day see a world without borders.***

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFM – Armed Forces Malta  
AfD – Alternative for Deutschland  
AIS – Automatic Identification System  
EU – European Union  
EUNAVFORMED – European Navy Force Mediterranean  
EURODAC – European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database  
EUROSUR – European Border Surveillance System  
IMO – International Maritime Organization  
IOM – International Organization for Migration  
JRCC – Joint Rescue Coordination Centre  
scLYCG – so-called Libyan Coast Guard  
MENA – Middle East North Africa  
MOAS – Migrant Offshore Aid Station  
MRCC – Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre  
MSF – Médecins Sans Frontières [Doctors Without Borders]  
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization  
NGO – Non-Governmental Organization  
nm – Nautical Mile [Distance – approx. 1.85km]  
POB – Persons on Board  
POS – Port of Safety  
RHIB – Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat  
SAR – Search and Rescue  
SOLAS – Safety of Life at Sea [Convention]  
SOP – Standard Operating Procedures  
UK – United Kingdom  
UN – United Nations  
UNCLOS – United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea  
UNHCR – United Nations High Commission for Refugees

## Introduction

### Mediterranean Migration and the Civil Fleet

Irregular migration<sup>1</sup> has emerged as a prominent political issue, leading to profound shifts in the governance of mobility and the rapid evolution in state<sup>2</sup> border security efforts. Commonly defined as people on the move<sup>3</sup> entering states through non-official ports of entry<sup>4</sup>, irregular migration challenges state efforts to control migrant mobility while exacerbating the geographic divide between the Global North and South. Consistently, migrants are faced with transiting harsh environments such as seas and deserts as part of their journey, as these natural geographic features are both passively and actively employed as strategic physical barriers to migration (Doty 2011). The Mediterranean Sea is one of these sites of violent exclusion in a supposedly globalized international system, characterized by the graphic imagery of crowded boats *en route* to EUrope.<sup>5</sup> In response to the precarity of irregular migrant journeys, there has been a rise in civil society Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)<sup>6</sup> committed to providing humanitarian assistance for migrants in transit (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020b). Increasingly, NGOs are criminalized for providing basic necessities like food, water and shelter to migrants passing through the peripheral spaces of the state (Fekete 2018). Not only does irregular

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<sup>1</sup> To refer to people crossing borders at non-state sanctioned ports of entry. This is a conscious move away from the discourse of 'illegality' and while it still bears classed, racialized and gendered connotations associated with this particular form of mobility and migration, it is an effort to challenge the discourse around the mobility of the individual.

<sup>2</sup> The broad reference to 'the state' will be used throughout the dissertation to serve as a short-hand to encompass a conceptually diverse set of practices and process in relation to statehood.

<sup>3</sup> 'People on the move' (Squire et al. 2017) is used to encompass all precarious forms of irregular migration, regardless of status or their motivations for migration.

<sup>4</sup> While the focus of the dissertation is on irregularized migration through non-official means, irregular migration also encompasses people entering a state with false or improper documentation. Moreover, even when people have entered a state via an official port of entry and with proper documentation, their status can still be irregularized if they are to, for example, over stay a visa, work outside the parameters of a work permit, or through interactions with the criminal justice system.

<sup>5</sup> Drawing from Stierl (2021), I use of the term EUrope throughout the dissertation is intended to problematize the distinction between Europe and the EU, where the two are often used synonymously. Rather, in utilizing EUrope it seeks to signal that EUrope is not reducible to the institutions of the EU, but is constituted by a myriad of states, actors, and institutions.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout the dissertation I refer to both SAR NGOs and the civil fleet synonymously. In [Chapter 2](#), I discuss some of the nuance associated with the various groups involved in Mediterranean SAR operations. Moreover, while discussing these groups as a whole, the primary experience of my fieldwork took place with the NGO, Sea-Watch. As a result, much of the analysis is derived from this experience. While I use SAR NGOs or the civil fleet as a shorthand for these groups, it should not be misconstrued to mean they are a uniform or homogenous collective.

migration through the borderlands of the Global North directly confront state efforts to exclude through violent bordering practices, but NGO acts of solidarity also transform the harsh environment of the sea into a contested space of political action (Gordon 2019). Observing grassroots responses to the violence of the European border regime,<sup>7</sup> coupled with state reactions to irregular migration, is essential to understanding the broader trends in mobility, state security, and border control. Overall, this project develops a nuanced understanding of NGO acts of solidarity at sea while implicating state border policy as a form of state-sanctioned violence against marginalized communities.

My dissertation interrogates the politics of maritime migration control through the work of NGO Search and Rescue (SAR) operations in the Mediterranean Sea. It contextualizes the spatial politics of the Mediterranean as a border region by analyzing the intersections of migration governance and acts of solidarity by European NGOs. In looking at the spatial politics of the sea, I explore the construction of the Mediterranean as a contested borderscape, which views borders<sup>8</sup> not as discrete lines but as spaces of socio-political interaction (Brambilla 2015). Studying the invocation and operation of solidarity at sea illuminates emergent trends around bordering, mobility, and belonging as migrants confront the state security apparatus. My research centres the disruptive politics of SAR NGO operations and their acts of solidarity with migrants who defy the regulation of alternative forms of mobility that fall outside of the categories of “safe, orderly and regular migration” (UN 2018). Based on six months of fieldwork with European SAR NGOs, I argue that the contestation of state space is enabled through NGO acts of solidarity with migrants at sea, as grassroots organizations challenge the appropriation of the natural environment as a strategic border control tool. NGO interventions at sea challenge sovereign authority and migration governance while laying bare the violence

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<sup>7</sup> In speaking of the ‘European border regime’, I am not referencing one specific policy but rather the emergence of a broader governmental assemblage of the border, designed to exclude those deemed undesirable by the state. In part, this is characterized by the substantial expansion of border industries (Andersson 2014b), exclusionary visa regimes (Salter 2006), deportation infrastructure (Walters 2016) as well as the externalization (Bialasiewicz 2012) and militarization of the border (Huysmans 2006).

<sup>8</sup> The similar to the notion of ‘the state’, the broad reference to ‘the border’ will be used throughout the dissertation to serve as a short-hand to encompass a conceptually diverse set of practices and process in relation to statehood. Though a blurry concept, it will be used to describe not only the territorial demarcation of the state but as a broader mechanism of exclusion that become manifest and enforced at sea.



embedded in state bordering practices. These operations expose cracks in the European border regime while simultaneously amplifying migrant political claims to asylum and free movement. My research situates NGO SAR operations within a broader context of the proliferation of border security efforts in the Mediterranean and highlights state efforts to reassert control over the sea.

Given the breadth and depth of the project, the introduction attempts to address several interrelated concepts and legal frameworks that broadly shape the dissertation. In the first section, I provide background on the context of boat crossings in the Mediterranean while also discussing the emergence and evolution of European and civil fleet SAR operations at sea. Second, to situate the politics of the SAR within a more comprehensive rebordering effort in the region, I map out the international legal frameworks governing the sea to highlight the sea as a paradoxical space of supposed anarchy and hyper-regulation in the Mediterranean. Even with established legal conventions in place, Europe's commitment to their application and adherence in the context of SAR operations remains tenuous. After contextualizing the actors and legal frameworks governing the Mediterranean, I transition to discuss how my project contributes to a greater understanding of the spatial politics of the sea and the contentious politics of solidarity enacted by the civil fleet. In this third section, I discuss the research questions framing the project and situate the project within the broader academic literature. In doing so, I also identify the gaps for inquiry where the project can contribute to the critical border and migration studies field. After laying out the argument being furthered in the dissertation, I discuss some of the methodological considerations and limits of the project. This section of the introduction can be viewed as the first part of my methodological discussion in the dissertation. Here, I outline some of my fieldwork's logistical and pragmatic challenges. A broader reflection on the politics of research and methodological commitments in academic scholarship is explored further in the following chapter [[see Chapter 1](#)]. In part, the introduction not only frames the parameters of the dissertation but also serves as a part of my discussion on method. Finally, I provide a brief chapter overview of the dissertation.

## **Contextualizing Mediterranean Boat Crossings**

The Central Mediterranean has been a particularly deadly space for migrants seeking entry into Europe (Squire et al. 2017). By 2021, many will be aware of what is often referred to as the “European Migration/Refugee Crisis.” This process has been characterized by on-going boat migration originating from North Africa moving towards the European Union (EU) through the Central Mediterranean. Routinely depicted through graphic imagery of people adrift at sea; often being rescued; often in positions of extreme distress; often as lifeless bodies floating in the sea. In many cases, these journeys have been enabled through the services of smugglers that facilitate their onward journey from Libya (Zhang, Sanchez, and Achilli 2018). People leaving Libya often do so in wooden boats or rubber rafts that are often prone to leak and/or have tubes deflate. In most cases, they do not have enough food, fuel, water, navigational equipment to make the onward journey to Europe. Migrant boats at sea are in a situation of distress, and they must be helped and taken to the nearest port of safety as required by several international conventions (UNCLOS 1984; SOLAS 1974; IMO 1985).<sup>9</sup> Deaths at sea are not a bug of the European border regime but rather a feature of the necropolitical governance of irregularized migration in the Mediterranean.

### *European SAR Operations in the Mediterranean*

Irregular migration through the Mediterranean is not a new phenomenon. While the presence of irregularized migrants at sea has a more extended history in the region, there has been a marked rise in the attention paid to migration in the Mediterranean in recent years. In 2013, there was a significant turn in the narratives of migration at sea stemming from several high-profile shipwrecks occurring in the Central Mediterranean. One of these tragic events occurred on October 3<sup>rd</sup> where a ship sank within Italian territorial waters, less than a mile from the shore and within sight of the small Italian island of Lampedusa,

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<sup>9</sup> A point of contention that emerges between Europe and the civil fleet revolves around what constitutes a ‘distress case’ at sea. This is not clearly defined in any of the international legal frameworks and discretion is given to the captain of the ship to determine the status of the boat (Pugh 2004). In this ambiguity, the civil fleet maintains that any migrant boat departing from North Africa is in a state of distress given the aforementioned conditions of the boats and passengers encountered at sea, and therefore a rescue operation must occur.

leaving over 360 people dead (Nelson 2014). Within days of the event, Italy held an official day of mourning for the victims where Italian Prime Minister, Enrico Letta, cynically declared that those who died are posthumously “Italian citizens as of today” (Pop 2013). One week later, another boat sank in the same area killing over 200 people (Dines, Montagna, and Ruggiero 2015). Between 2014 and September 2021, an estimated 18,400 have died or went missing making this journey (IOM 2021) [see Figure 1]. With little indication of change, more will continue to meet the same fate due to European bordering practices in the region. These events catalyzed both EU member states and, soon, civil society groups to become directly involved in responding to migrants transiting the Central Mediterranean.

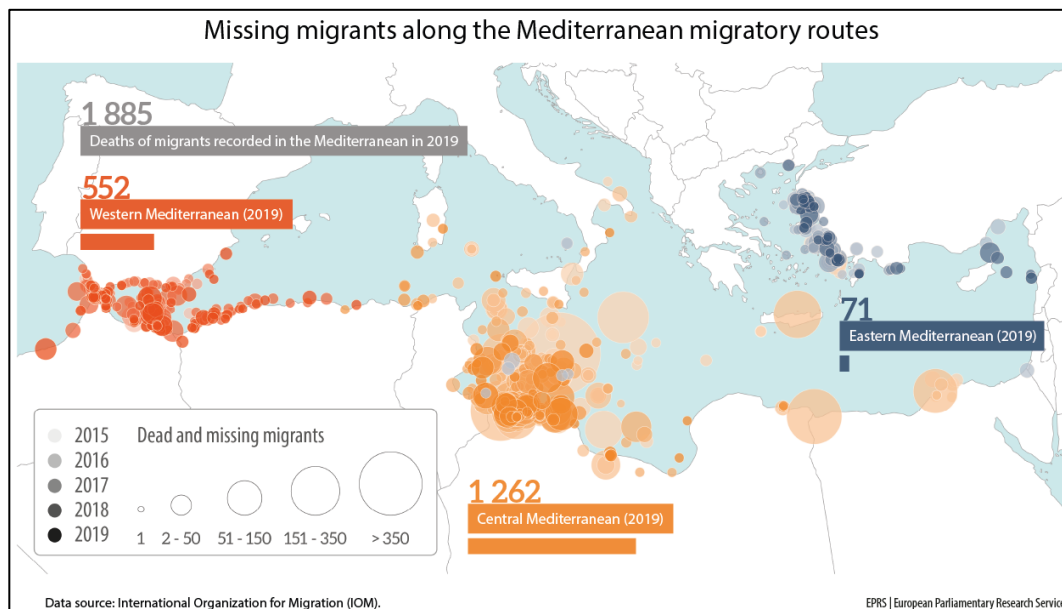


Figure 1: Missing migrants along the Mediterranean migratory routes in 2019 (EPRS 2020)

On October 14<sup>th</sup> 2014, Italy responded to the shipwrecks by launching a military-humanitarian mission, *Mare Nostrum* (Latin: Our Sea), equipped with multiple Italian Navy and Air Force assets and over 900 personnel. The operation, which ran until November 2014, was involved in rescuing over 100,000 people on the move in the Central Mediterranean over roughly 420 missions (L. Davies and Neslen 2014). Despite the apparent success in mitigating migrant deaths at sea, the EU refused to provide additional funding to continue the operation, even though an estimated 3,100 died during that same

period. Instead, the EU, in collaboration with Frontex,<sup>10</sup> subsequently launched several operations in the region that became increasingly focused on reinforcing border security. While the *Mare Nostrum* operation was tasked with preventing further tragedies at sea, it was clear that the mission was targeted at addressing ‘illegal migration’, apprehending smugglers, and increasing Europe’s border control capacity at sea (Tazzioli 2015; 2016; Pinelli 2018).

Operation *Triton* ran from November 2014 to February 2018 and was tasked with filling the gap left by the culmination of *Mare Nostrum* yet with a significantly smaller budget and allocation of assets. While the Italian mission had an expressed humanitarian element to their operation, *Triton* was primarily focused on border control and surveillance in the Italian and Maltese SAR zones (Frontex 2016). With the ending of *Triton*, Operation *Themis* was launched in February 2018. Again, while supposedly committing to assist in SAR operations, the overarching focus of the mission was to enhance European security capabilities at sea. As Frontex describes, *Themis* has “an enhanced law enforcement focus while continuing to include search and rescue as a crucial component [...] Operation Themis also has a significant security component, including the collection of intelligence and other steps aimed at detecting foreign fighters and other terrorist threats at the external borders” (Frontex 2021).

In parallel with Operation’s *Triton* and *Themis*, Europe also developed a new organization: the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED). Stemming from a series of high-profile shipwrecks off the coast of Libya, *EUNAVFOR MED* was launched in June 2015 and ran until March 2020. The initial EU NAVFOR MED mission was later renamed Operation *Sophia*, following the birth of a child on board a military ship shortly after the mother had been pulled from the sea. As the EU Foreign

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<sup>10</sup> Frontex, the European Union’s border control and coast guard agency, was established in 2004 to oversee “European integrated border management at the external borders with a view to managing the crossing of the external borders efficiently. This includes addressing migratory challenges and potential future threats at those borders” (EU 2016a). Frontex operations are coordinated out of Warsaw, Poland and require asset commitments from EU member states. While Frontex has tried to incorporate a humanitarian framing into aspects of their work, the exclusionary security narrative seeking to control irregularized migrant mobility remains central to their mission (Aas and Gundhus 2015; Pallister-Wilkins 2015; Perkowski 2016; Moreno-Lax 2018).

Minister, Federica Mogherini, convey in a statement, “[...] I will suggest to Member States that we change the name of our Operation: instead of calling it EUNAVFOR MED, I suggest we use the name: Sophia. To honour the lives of the people we are saving, the lives of people we want to protect, and to pass the message to the world that fighting the smugglers and the criminal networks is a way of protecting human life” (EU 2016b).

Headquartered in Rome, the mission had the expressed intent of disrupting ‘smuggling routes’ from Libya as a means of saving lives in the Mediterranean. As they state, “The mission core mandate is to undertake systematic efforts to identify, capture and dispose of vessels and enabling assets used or suspected of being used by migrant smugglers or traffickers, in order to contribute to wider EU efforts to disrupt the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean and prevent the further loss of life at sea” (EU 2016b). Beyond addressing smuggling in the Mediterranean, in June 2016, *Sophia* was also tasked with enforcing the UN arms embargo in Libya and training the so-called Libyan coast guard (scLYCG).<sup>11</sup> In January 2019, *Sophia* was scaled back to only involve aerial monitoring missions.

The current EUNAVFOR MED mission, Operation *Irini*, launched in March 2020. While *Sophia* had a SAR element within the mission mandate, *Irini* is primarily focused on enforcing the UN arms embargo in Libya with no mention of SAR operations in the mandate (EU 2020). As a secondary task, *Irini* is also committed to ‘capacity building’ and training the scLYCG. European states no longer conduct rescues within the Libyan SAR zone, relegating rescues to commercial actors, the civil fleet and the scLYCG. Europe is now only conducting aerial monitoring missions and coordinating illegal pullbacks with the scLYCG (AlarmPhone 2020).

While the number of arrivals in Europe has been declining since the peak in 2015-16, there are still a significantly high number of departures occurring from North Africa

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<sup>11</sup> The reference to the so-called Libyan coast guard is done in acknowledgement of the reality that they do not function as a true coast guard, but instead are an outsourced form of European border control that is used as a mechanism to forcibly return people on the move to Libya.

(IOM 2021). The lack of arrivals is largely a result of outsourcing border control to the scLYCG under the guise of SAR. The EU-funded, equipped and trained scLYCG is responsible for many interceptions, and forcible returns to Libya, also called pullbacks. NGOs routinely witness and document this violent practice (Amnesty International 2017; Sea-Watch 2021). As codified in international law, non-refoulement explicitly prohibits the return of individuals to a place where there is a well-founded fear of persecution or violence upon return.<sup>12</sup> In conjunction with the fall of the Ghaddafi regime, Libya has been in a perpetual state of conflict with warring parties fighting to seize control of the state in the political power vacuum created by the NATO intervention in 2011.

Coupled with the ongoing conflict, multiple international NGOs and monitoring agencies such as Human Rights Watch (2019), Amnesty International (2020a; 2017), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2021), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2021; 2017), and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (2020b; 2018; 2016) have consistently documented the state of migrant detention camps in Libya. In October 2021, the UN's OHCHR suggested that the violence occurring in Libyan migrant detention camps was being committed on a scale and with such coordination, it was potentially tantamount to crimes against humanity (OHCHR 2021b). Marked by egregious human rights violations and violence towards migrant populations, including rape, trafficking, and other forms of physical abuse, the conditions in Libya are often a significant factor in the escape or flight from the state. Despite the well-documented rights violations of the scLYCG, in July 2021, Italy reaffirmed their funding commitment to the Libyans (D'Emilio 2021), while the European Commission agreed to provide additional ships for their coast guard fleet (Nielsen 2021). Funding the scLYCG represents a form of border control by proxy as Europe outsources and externalizes the same violent bordering practices often criticized by supposedly liberal, rights fearing states of the EU. In effect, this process allows for Europe to wash its hands of the ongoing rights violations taking place.

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<sup>12</sup> For examples, see: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) (UN 1984); International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED) (UN 2006); Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (European Commission 2012); Inter-American Convention to Prevent and Punish Torture (OAS 1985).

Since 2014, there has been a rapid expansion of the European border industry, specifically in the growth of Frontex. The growth has manifest internally, through the expansion of surveillance, detention and deportation regimes, while also occurring “at the border” through the proliferation of walls, fences, surveillance systems, and militarized border guards (Andersson 2014b; 2016a; 2016b). Increasingly, the expansion of the European border industry also extends beyond the territorial demarcation of the state, through the development of anti-migration funding agreements, building, training and arming various aspects of the border apparatus as a means to outsource European migration control (Frowd 2017; Zaiotti 2016; Akkerman 2021; Goldner Lang and Nagy 2021). The increasing partnerships and the active coordination on SAR operations established between Europe and Libya (see ‘Friendship Pacts’; MOU on cooperation with the scLYCG; development of Libyan MRCC) has worked to position the NGOs operating in that space as the effective enemies of the state (Andersson 2014b). These efforts have also led to spurious claims of NGOs operating as a “pull factor,” or even cooperating with smugglers in Libya (Cusumano and Villa 2019).

Europe’s response to the increased number of irregular arrivals in the Mediterranean has been characterized by seemingly conflicting notions of humanitarianism and security rationale for the interventions at sea. This notable development in global bordering practices points to the emergence of a humanitarian-security framing of state bordering practices. The humanitarian-security nexus creates a duality in the conceptualization of irregular migrants. They are constructed as victims in need of protection while also being projected as law-breaking criminals or threats to the state that needs to be secured against. Within this framework, migrants are at once perceived and discursively produced as both victims and villains in the migration process with relation to the state (Anderson 2008; Mainwaring 2016). Through the production of victimhood, migrants are cast as devoid of agency while infantilizing the individuals and promoting the state as the provider of humanitarian assistance, able to save them from their dire situation. The result then necessitates both the securitization of the individual and, in turn, the enhancement of both active and benign bordering practices.

EUrope has made concerted efforts to recast its actions in response to migrant boat crossings in the Mediterranean, as humanitarian. In particular, EUrope’s attempt to reframe acts of containment that work to keep people on the move in place in Libya, barring their departure, is positioned as a humanitarian act. As Mainwaring and Debono (2021, 1039) have noted, “Despite the ebb and flow of migrant arrivals, EUropean leaders continue to prioritize the externalization of Europe’s borders to Libya and elsewhere, using the same rhetoric of ‘saving lives’ to justify attempts to close routes across the Mediterranean as well as out of some of the world’s poorest countries.” Still, EUrope still maintains that efforts to control the border through pullbacks to Libya or efforts to contain migrants in North Africa is driven by a distorted sense of humanitarianism that becomes justified as efforts to prevent people on the move from leaving in the first place (Andersson 2014a). The paternalistic approach of containing migrants in a volatile state and ensuring they remain in precarious positions, effectively, denies their right to escape (Mezzadra 2004a). Viewing this narrative of both care and control (Agier 2011; Aradau 2004; Pallister-Wilkins 2015) within the broader trends of migration governance, anti-migration policies have coincided with increasingly restrictive and violent border regimes, limiting the ability for individuals to cross borders while reaffirming and ontologizing borders in modern statecraft. This has become manifest in practical ways by expanding border industries that enable and support the acts of exclusion produced by the state. Despite the humanitarian characterisation, the state response to instances of irregular migration actually enables the further militarization of the border.

### *The Rise of the Civil Fleet*

In 2014, we saw the emergence of civil society SAR NGOs in the Central Mediterranean due to the high rate of death at sea, replete with tragic imagery of bodies drifting onto beaches; shipwrecks occurring on Europe's doorstep. In response to these events, Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), a privately funded Maltese NGO, became the first civil society vessel in the Mediterranean with the sole intent of assisting in migrant SAR operations (Cutitta 2018a). From there, several other independent groups from across Europe joined what became the civil fleet [[see Appendix 3](#)]. Following the ‘closure’



of the so-called 'Balkan route' through the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea in 2017, there was an increasing number of crossings taking place in the Central Mediterranean, as people on the move were forced to reroute their journeys due to the growing barriers to mobility. Here, we also see the proliferation of NGOs involved in rescue efforts as the number of people crossing through the Mediterranean increased in response to route closures in other parts of the region. Legally, the duty to engage in this work is codified in the international conventions, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) International Convention on the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and the Search and Rescue (SAR) Convention [[see below for further explanation](#)], which indicate that it is the responsibility of all seafarers to rescue and assist anyone in distress at sea.

Since 2014, NGOs from Germany, Italy, Spain and France have come onto the scene with varying capacities and motivations for involvement [[see Chapter 2](#)]. The organizations that followed MOAS, including Sea-Watch, Sea-Eye, ProActiva, SOS Méditerranée, MSF and Mediterranea, largely worked in cooperation with European assets in coordinated SAR operations. In part, NGOs are responsible for facilitating mobility, providing support and assistance to people on the move, while making concerted efforts to maintain the humanity and dignity of the individuals (Squire 2014). In the absence of a radical change to European border policy that facilitates freedom of movement, organizations like Sea-Watch also stress that SAR is a concerted European response while the failure to do so is tied to a lack of political will (Cusumano 2017a).

The civil fleet is a heterogeneous collection of organizations with differing political orientations towards the work [[see Chapter 2](#)]. This was also the case within the NGOs themselves. With Sea-Watch, many of the crew came from activist backgrounds and had been involved in various forms of organizing prior to their involvement. Despite the activist orientation of the NGO, there were often crew members that did not have the same politically engaged background. For many organizations, their work represents a pragmatic humanitarian project rescuing people in distress to ensure no one dies at sea. However, for others, the work also represents a political project that believes in freedom

of movement. While often invoking calls for open borders, NGOs stress there is not only a need but a right to escape Libya that should be met with safe passage.

Geographically speaking, the civil fleet primarily operates outside of territorial and contiguous waters off the coast of Libya, respecting the legal parameters outlined by these international conventions [[see description below](#)]. As previously mentioned, the civil fleet had been working in cooperation with European MRCCs primarily based in Rome and Malta in coordinating SAR operations (Amnesty International 2020b; AlarmPhone 2020). NGOs have played, and continue to play, a significant role in mitigating death and suffering at sea, which has been shown to reduce the mortality rates associated with migrant boat crossings in the Central Mediterranean (Amnesty International 2020b; AlarmPhone 2020). The civil fleet has also improved the quality of rescues at sea by undertaking rescue operations that would have been carried out by commercial vessels, less well-suited to conducting such operations, as SAR NGO boats utilize “rescue boats specially designed and equipped for refugees and migrants’ rescues, with well-trained staff, including medics on board.” (Amnesty International 2020b, 54)

The civil fleet plays a vital role in amplifying the politics of visibility in the Mediterranean, especially during distress cases at sea and in the standoff process following the conclusion of SAR operations [[see Chapter 5](#)]. In a distress case, NGOs such as AlarmPhone and the Sea-Watch’s aerial asset, *Moonbird*, are integral to identifying active distress cases, coordinating rescue operations as a form of civil MRCC, documenting illegal pullbacks to Libya by the scLYCG and also the lack of state and commercial vessel response to these cases. NGOs work to ensure migrant bodies are visible despite concerted efforts to make sure they remain unseen. Conversely, NGO operations at sea, however, also work counter this in/visibility. Beyond the surveillance and monitoring function they provide [[see Chapter 4](#)], they play a central role in making migrant claims visible and audible in spaces where they are not supposed to be. In the Mediterranean, spectacles of illegality apply to people on the move and the NGOs operating in that space. This occurs in different ways at different stages of the rescue process. Prior to state or NGO interaction with migrant boats at sea, state actors work to

keep migrant bodies invisible or out of sight. Once migrant boats at sea have been identified by the different actors in the civil fleet, there is a shift towards a competing operationalization of visibility at sea. For states, once the presence of migrants at sea has been made public, the narratives of illegality emerge. In many cases, it is only once these cases have been made visible by NGOs that state actors will then make the existence of these cases visible to the broader public in an effort to signal control.

In part, all NGOs at sea rely on the visibility of their missions in challenging European in/action at sea. In doing so, the visibility created by these operations makes the violence of the European border system perceptible while serving as a direct call to action for European civil society (Cuttitta 2018b; Pezzani and Heller 2013; Stierl 2016). In tandem with exposing border violence at the periphery of Europe, “the activists are able to contest the ways in which the sea is rendered a space of ‘nature’ or one of ‘sovereign prerogative’, highly undemocratic and difficult to access for non-state, non-commercial and non-security actors” (Stierl 2016, 563). They employ an actively confrontational position decrying the deadly logic embedded in the European border management strategy, which seeks to externalize and displace the violence of the border to spaces beyond view.

The boats themselves, both migrant and NGO, are important sites of political action. For people on the move, the boat can be read as a political space that facilitates not only the right to escape but an active claim to asylum rights while also a direct contestation of the state’s sovereign authority and ability to exclude. For NGO rescue vessels, the boat itself and the crews that operate them serve as another form of resistance by enacting a contentious politics of solidarity with people on the move. The boat becomes operationalized as a space of ‘viapolitics’ (Walters 2015) through the contentious politics of solidarity as NGOs help facilitate escape, rights claims, and a direct challenge to exclusionary state bordering practices. In part, this occurs through making the violence inherent in European bordering practices visible in the otherwise unseen

spaces of the sea. The boat becomes a mechanism to see the unseen.<sup>13</sup> This is not a static process but is defined by the kinetic relationship between states, NGOs and migrant populations.

Conversely, the reproduction of the border is also in process of constant evolution that requires active reaffirmation of that process. In effect, the continued operation of NGO boats represents mobile acts of resistance to state bordering practices. The space of the boat becomes a place in which migrant subjectivities can be enacted. This is achieved, in part, through the visualization of migrants trapped onboard ships during standoff periods. This has manifest through direct appeals to European actors to open the ports and allow for the disembarkation of those on board. Now more than ever, NGOs fill this gap left by the state due to a retraction from SAR operations in the region. Their work has been a crucial contribution to helping people on the move in precarious positions as they confront the violence of a European border system meant to exclude them. Nevertheless, now, we are witnessing a sustained effort to criminalize all non-state actors involved in Mediterranean SAR operations [[see Chapter 5](#)].

### **Mapping the Sea – Lines and Legal Frameworks Governing the Mediterranean**

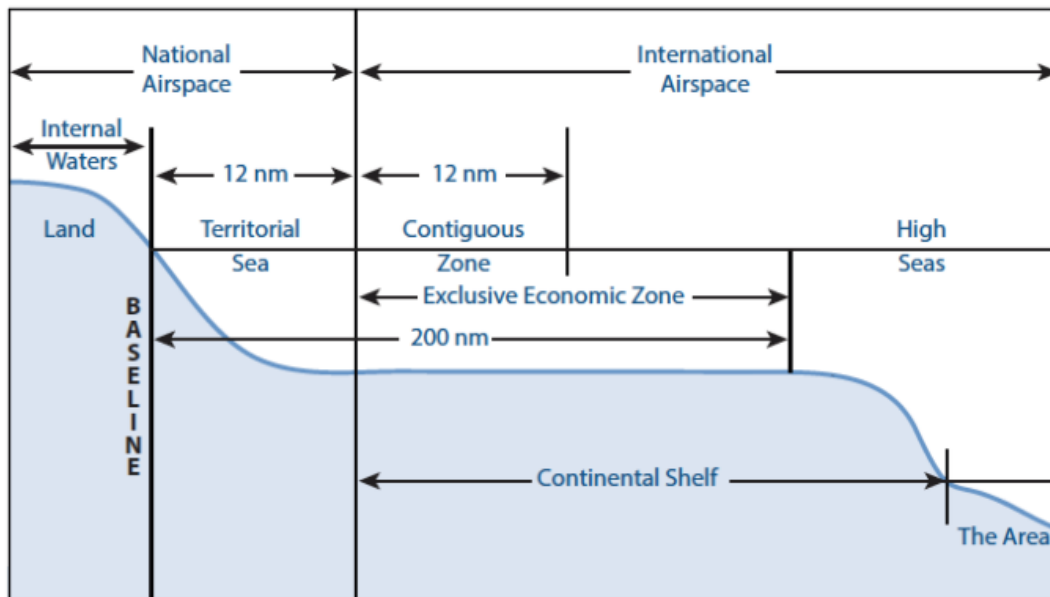
On conventional political maps, the sea often appears as a borderless space. There are, however, multiple overlapping and intersecting borders that have been mapped onto the space of the sea. I will briefly outline the various ways this occurs while highlighting the uniqueness of these same borders in the context of the Mediterranean. I will speak further to how this lays a framework for the contentious politics emerging at sea with regard to state authority. Despite the vastness of the sea, there are different ‘waters’ or ‘zones’ that demarcate varying degrees of sovereign control, such as territorial and international waters, or contiguous and economic exclusion zones, among others. The

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<sup>13</sup> In the case of *Sea-Watch Airborne*, this also occurs through the aerial monitoring operations that take place at sea. As the targeted criminalization of NGO SAR operations has increasingly meant significant period of time without any ‘on-the-sea’ monitoring and assistance through rescue operations, airborne operations become another tool in making visible the unseen spaces of the sea. As previously mentioned, these efforts have identified on-going cases involving violations of international law and the continued cooperation and collusion with the EU-funded scLYCG. Exploring the viapolitics of the NGO aerial reconnaissance planes would be an interesting area for further study, but at the moment, an in-depth analysis of these operations falls beyond the scope of the dissertation.

waters around coastal states become divided into several different spaces. These spaces produce multiple, overlapping borders with overlapping authority and jurisdiction.

Legally, several overlapping international legal frameworks govern the sea. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is a broad overarching international legal framework that governs maritime activities. Among other things, UNCLOS applies a set of legal regulations to the seas and oceans and lays out various normative practices that articulate sovereign authority over coastal areas, freedom of navigation, along with the regulation of environmental liability and economic activities occurring at sea (UNCLOS 1984). More importantly, it establishes and demarcates a series of ‘waters’ or boundaries mapped onto the sea [see Figure 2].



nm – nautical mile

Figure 2: Maritime Zone Schematic (Tufts 2017)

The space defined as territorial waters extends from the shoreline to 12 nautical miles (nm). This space, in many ways, represents the legal extension of the land-based territorial authority of the state. Here, states have exclusive jurisdiction over economic access to resources and sovereign authority to determine who and what passes through that space (Tufts 2017). In effect, this is essentially an extension of territorial control and authority at sea. Beyond the territorial water boundary, from 12nm to 24nm, the sea is defined as the contiguous zone in which states retain legal jurisdiction over customs,

sanitary and immigration laws, among other areas, though jurisdiction is limited to the surface and floor of the sea (Tufts 2017). Extending from 24nm to a maximum distance of 200nm, the area is defined as an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The essential distinctions within this space give states sovereign authority over economic activity and resource extraction, including fishing, mining, oil exploration etc. (Tufts 2017). Here, states still retain jurisdiction over the sea related to economic resources and extraction, but states cannot impede the passage and presence of other vessels in that space. For purposes of navigation and passage, beyond the 24nm contiguous zone, that space is, in effect, international waters. Beyond 200nm is considered to be high seas or international waters and considered to be “the common heritage of all mankind” (UNCLOS 1984 Article 151(b)). Here, there is a distinct absence of the state as there are no direct claims to sovereign authority and jurisdiction over the sea.<sup>14</sup>

Conversely, there is also the Safety of Life at Sea Convention (SOLAS). Primarily, the SOLAS Convention establishes minimum safety standards pertaining to the construction, equipment, and operation of all ships at sea (SOLAS 1974). Contained within SOLAS (Chapter V) is the expressed legal obligation to render assistance to all ships at sea. In 2004, amendments to Chapter V of the SOLAS came into force. These amendments contain the expressed provisions that people rescued at sea are not to be returned to a state where there is a well-founded fear of persecution or harm (Aalberts and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2014). These amendments effectively codify the principle of non-refoulement within SOLAS. While there is no explicit guarantee that the coordinating state accepts the shipwrecked passengers, there is the expectation that states cooperate and coordinate “to ensure that a place of disembarkation is found with a minimum further

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<sup>14</sup> The relatively small geographical size of the Mediterranean produces important challenges to the governance of the sea. In particular, the UNCLOS demarcation of high seas does not apply in the same way. The 200nm demarcation at which international waters become operationalized, does not exist because at no point is the Mediterranean Sea reach 400nm. In most cases, Mediterranean states have also forgone the UNCLOS EEZ framework due to the small size of the sea. Instead there are a patchwork of agreements pertaining to environmental protection and resource extraction (EU 2010). This fluid approach to the application and understanding of international space was also done in part to enable the free flow of capital and goods at sea, again as a mechanism to mitigate potential conflict and dispute at sea. In effect, beyond the 24nm contiguous zone international waters start in the context of the Mediterranean. It is understood as beyond state legal jurisdiction in the context of the Mediterranean Sea. For legal and juridical reasons, this becomes important for the application of the rules of sovereign authority at sea.

deviation from the ships' intended voyage" (Aalberts and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2014, 449). However, it has been identified that "Where this does not happen on its own, a fallback mechanism is inserted by noting that the state 'responsible for the SAR region in which such assistance is rendered shall exercise primary responsibility for ensuring such co-ordination and co-operation occurs'<sup>15</sup>[...]This residual obligation would seem to put additional emphasis on organising disembarkation according to the existing division of the high seas into national SAR regions" (Aalberts and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2014, 449).

Specifically pertaining to search and rescue, the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, or SAR Convention, was developed by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) (1985). Adopted in 1979, the Convention sought to establish an international framework for conducting SAR operations at sea, to ensure that "no matter where an accident occurs, the rescue of persons in distress at sea will be coordinated by a SAR organization and, when necessary, by cooperation between neighbouring SAR organizations" (IMO 1985). Within the convention, it outlines the legal parameters governing SAR operations. While the obligation to render assistance to vessels in distress was initially outlined in SOLAS, the SAR Convention sought to develop an international framework for conducting SAR operations.

As part of this effort, the SAR Convention also established 13 SAR areas, in which those areas were further subdivided into numerous SAR regions that coastal states are responsible for coordinating operations within [see Figure 3].<sup>16</sup> These represent another set of borders mapped onto the space of the sea. The various SAR regions are administered by the respective Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres (MRCC). The three most contentious MRCCs in the context of Mediterranean SAR operations are Rome

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<sup>15</sup> Citing SAR Convention, Article 3(1)9 and SOLAS Convention, Article 4(1)1.

<sup>16</sup> Within these spaces, each state is required to coordinate rescue within that space. If there is a boat in distress, the state in which that emergency event takes place, must, by SAR convention protocol, coordinate the rescue. This does not mean that they are the state responsible for conducting the rescue directly, but they are required to coordinate with all available assets in the area in order to conduct the rescue within that particular area. This has become a particular flashpoint for controversy and contention between NGOs and states as NGOs often assert that the SRR in which that distress call takes place, must assume the responsibility for the rescue and disembarkation.

(Italy), Malta, and Tripoli (Libya). During the height of the so-called crisis, MRCC Rome and Malta were primarily tasked with coordinating rescue operations in the Mediterranean. Often working in close coordination with Frontex assets, national Navy's, commercial assets and NGO rescue vessels, the MRCC's have historically played an integral role in SAR operations in the region. Their responsibility in the context of SAR operations is to identify active distress cases and coordinate the rescue operations with all available actors in the area. Moreover, they have also been tasked with coordinating a port of safety for disembarking the shipwrecked on board. This process has been designed to operate smoothly and efficiently as SAR operations are, in many cases, highly time-sensitive. As numerous individuals identified, if a ship is in distress and the MRCC is contacted, in many cases, a rescue is to be conducted within hours of the call as all available assets become mobilised in response to the event.

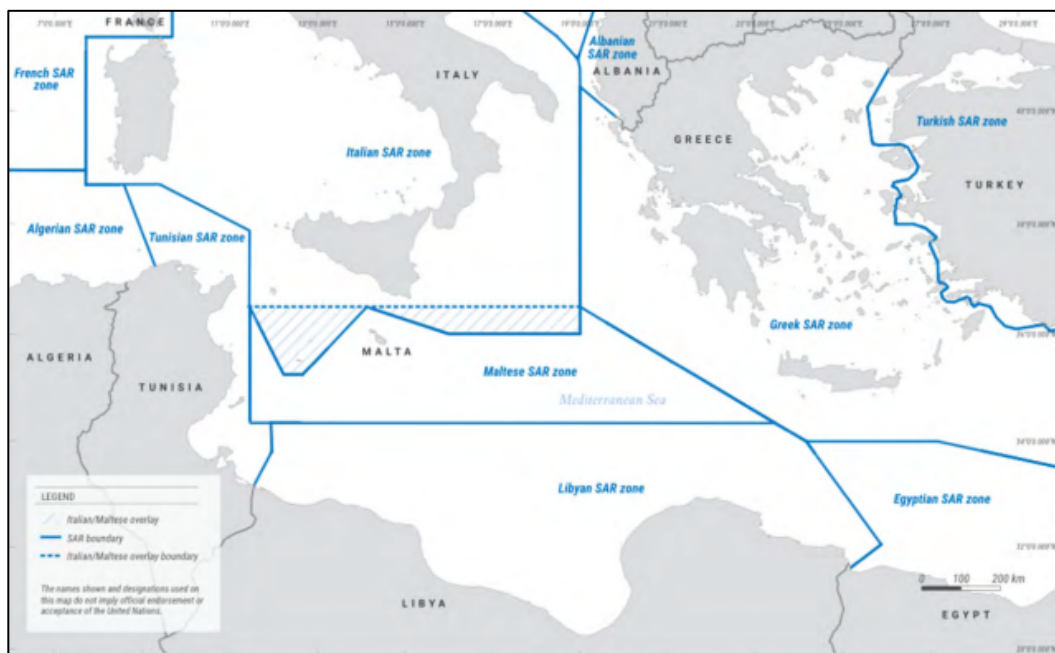


Figure 3: Mediterranean Sea – Search and Rescue Zones (OHCHR 2021a)

This close coordination between the MRCCs and the civil fleet has largely stopped. As the activist monitoring network, AlarmPhone has identified, “European authorities tie the assignment of a POS [Place of Safety] to the SAR zone where the rescue took place. For example, for boats in distress rescued in the disputed Libyan SAR zone, EU member states commonly refer to the so-called Libyan coastguards as the ‘competent’ authority



that should organise the return of those escaping to Libya – in full knowledge of the inhuman situation there” (AlarmPhone 2020).

### *Sea as a Unique Environment and Point of Analysis*

As one of the most visible sites of exclusion between the Global North and South, the Central Mediterranean holds a rich opportunity for nuanced insights into the process of bordering. Capitalizing on the international space of the sea and the concept of *Mare Liberum* presents an opening for individuals to engage in political action and SAR activities at sea. EUropean efforts to control the sea highlights the practices of governmentality that exist in that space. In looking at these seemingly peripheral spaces of EUrope, I suggest the sea should not be pushed to a marginal role in this analysis. Conducting an ethnographic study to interrogate the Mediterranean borderscape enables me to uncover the various manifestations of sovereign power in the borderlands of the region.

There are clear indications of this vast environment being utilized as a tool for state border control while simultaneously being transformed into a space of resistance by NGOs and migrants alike (Squire 2012b). Conversely, this expansive and unforgiving environment continues to exact a deadly toll on migrant populations while also producing a complicated politics of in/visibility for irregular migrants transiting that space (Pugliese 2013). Centring the work of grassroots organizations and the environment in this analysis offers valuable and much-needed insight into how non-state actors contest the violence of the state border apparatus in the Global North. In turn, this project contextualizes the dynamic spatial politics of the borderlands by highlighting the fragmented governance of borders affecting marginalized migrant populations at the literal and figurative margins of the state.

In centring the Mediterranean in this analysis, it is an effort to see the sea as a political space defined by complex interactions between people on the move, the civil fleet and the EUropean border apparatus. In doing so, I am not focusing on what is taking place once migrants arrive in the territorial spaces of EUrope get to land. While serving as another important space of analysis, I aim to reorient the focus from the grounded territory

and the overt state efforts to control migrant mobility on land by examining what is happening at sea. The Mediterranean has its own temporality, dangers, and movement specific to that space, which are unlike being in the desert or the refugee camp. While it is now well-documented that people can and do live for years, if not, decades in refugee camps or detention centres (Loescher and Milner 2005; Hyndman 2013), the ability to survive at sea is limited by hours, if not minutes. The temporality tied to the space of the sea creates a unique condition that reassigns meaning to the harsh transit environment, which renders it an exceptional space of analysis.

There is another interesting geographical division that is created in the temporal production of space of the sea. In particular, the imagined, orientalist division between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean produces notable claims to that space. The southern Mediterranean, inclusive of the shores of North Africa, are often considered “backwards,” and assumed to have weak civil society, unstable governments, and poor economic conditions (Danewid 2017; Landau 2019). Conversely, we see the northern Mediterranean, inclusive of the southern Europe, as modern, robust, stable and rational, yet share the common geography of the sea. There is a spatio-temporal difference produced through the separation of Europe from the global south that operates as a power mechanism working to legitimize the exclusion from the region (Sajed 2013). Despite the sea being shared amongst all Mediterranean states, the Mediterranean is routinely claimed as European space, for example, by naming the Italian military-humanitarian mission, *Mare Nostrum*, or Our Sea. There are shifting notions of territoriality in the state conceptualization of space, where the physical demarcation of the state is not the only point where the border becomes enacted, but rather, the mobile practice of the border shifts as it is brought to the migrant, possibly before they have even left their home state (Balibar 1998; Bigo 2002). It alters the understanding of territoriality and borders where the traditional limits of the state are not only the point of sovereign control, but also reaffirms the primacy of the state in protecting and maintaining the borders of the state. This is an intentional effort to push the presence of the European border apparatus further from the region itself (Frowd 2014; 2017), while making claims to the interstitial space of the sea.

As I develop throughout the dissertation, zoning the Mediterranean borderscape operates as a fluid process that enables the (re)territorializing of Europe. Facilitated through the emergence of graduated sovereignty (Ong 2006), zoning reinforces exclusion and marginalization to prop up the institutional structures that ensure their continuation. There is a gradual shift occurring in the act of zoning the Mediterranean that has been taking place over time. While Europe has always had a strong security focus on policing the external borders of the region, there have been flashes of humanitarian idealism, often occurring in response to particularly large, single event tragedies and deaths at sea (i.e. 2013 Lampedusa Shipwrecks) or through the individualized stories of suffering (i.e. Alun Kurdi). As one activist suggests, “you see a huge amount of public interest raised when some babies are photographed, washed up on the beach. But that suffering was happening anyway. You know, it's only when...and it was being documented, but it's only when it's brought...or when the public reaction gets strong enough, it then becomes something that politically, it's worth politically commenting on to the majority of politicians” (24 Sea-Watch 2019).

Zoning the sea treats it as both an extension of state territory while also an exceptional space of exclusion. State renderings of the sea as a space of intervention become separated from the ‘normal’ acts of state politics and reassigned meaning that enables exception to be situated as a means of reasonable response to the death and suffering occurring at sea. In doing so, this hybridity highlights the contradictions of liberal humanitarianism and points to the uniqueness of the sea as a contested space. The Mediterranean exists as a spatially distinct zone. While highly regulated and governed through domestic, regional and international legal norms also can operate outside of that authority through the invocations of humanitarianism.

### **Framing the Project**

Here, I outline some of the research questions that guide the project. I also provide an overview of some of the literature in critical migration and border studies that shape my inquiry. In doing so, I also identify some of the gaps where this project looks to

contribute to the field. Finally, I broadly outline the argument being furthered in this dissertation.

### *Research Questions*

The overarching goal of this interdisciplinary study is to examine the dynamic, relational process of bordering and interrogate the transformation and production of the natural environment as a contested borderscape through NGO acts of solidarity in the Mediterranean Sea. In exploring the complex interactions of bordering and solidarity, first, I evaluate civil fleet responses to irregularized migrant journeys, animating the Mediterranean borderscape. Second, I analyze how NGOs enact solidarity with people on the move and contest state bordering practices. Third, I explore how Europe has responded to this process.

The primary research questions shaping this work are:

- (1) How is the Mediterranean Sea weaponized as a violent borderscape?
- (2) How does the civil fleet disrupt state claims to sovereign authority over the Mediterranean borderscape?
- (3) How has Europe responded to the contentious politics of solidarity enacted by the civil fleet?

As one of the most visible sites of both exclusion and solidarity, the Central Mediterranean Sea holds rich opportunities for nuanced insights into state bordering practices. This dissertation attempts to survey the intersections of space, solidarity and state security efforts and allows for a deeper understanding of the politics embedded in these acts of solidarity with people on the move at the margins of the Global North.

### *Literature Review – State of the Field*

The border studies literature is increasingly moving away from the idea of a borderless, globalized world and towards recognizing the importance and implication of borders and space in the modern context. This shift is also coupled with an increased awareness of the spatial politics of mobility and how border spaces manifest in the

everyday lives of individuals. I briefly outline some of the leading scholarship on borders, security, and humanitarianism to situate the project within a wider literature. This project draws from, and will directly contribute to, the theoretical landscape of the critical border and migration studies literature.

In many ways, borders operate as an expression of state sovereignty in a globalized world. Borders are representative of a 'modern geopolitical imaginary' that supposedly mark the acutely defined territorial boundary of the state, which enables sovereign power, authority and jurisdiction (Agnew 1994). Aradau (2016, 569) suggests that the border is articulated as the sovereign power of enclosure which serves as "a spectacle of sovereign protection and impotence at the same time." In looking at the practice of enclosure, Brown (2010) argues that the proliferation of borders and bordering practices points to a concerted effort by states to assert authority as state sovereignty wanes. The waning sovereignty, for Brown, is emblematic of a supposed last gasp of the state. Contrary to Brown's assertion, Jones and Johnson (2016) argue that the increasing militarization of the border is, in fact, a re-articulation of the state rather than the demise. They do not deny that the notion of state sovereignty is in decline, but instead, they suggest that the re-articulation of the state points to an effort to expand state presence in an era of globalization. Borders are a temporally bounded 'compartmentalization' of a particular time and space in which they are reproduced through both affirmation and contestation, rather than being natural, static, assumed or neutral (Vaughan-Williams 2012).

There is a deep and well-established literature exploring both the politics of space (Lefebvre 2009; Elden 2007b; Massey 2005; Brenner et al. 2003), the fluidity of borders (Balibar 2009; 1998; Nyers 2012a; Mountz 2010; Bigo 2002) and their centrality to the violent preservation of wider colonial and imperial structures (Miller 2019; Mainwaring 2019; Jones 2016; Walia 2013). Spatially, Balibar (1998) conceived of borders as a process of vacillation in the layout, function and operation. As Vaughan-Williams (2012) notes, the vacillation of borders alluded to by Balibar is not to be conflated with the disappearance of borders, but instead, reiterates their flexibility and fluidity. Rather than

disappearing, borders are being “multiplied and reduced in their localization...thinned out and doubled...no longer the shores of politics but...the space of politics itself” (Balibar 1998, 220). Simply stated, borders are no longer exclusively located at the territorial demarcation of the state (Vaughan-Williams 2012).

In examining the biopolitics of control, Vaughan-Williams (2012, 11) establishes what he terms as the ‘generalised biopolitical border’, which decentres the idea of a distinct ‘domestic’ and international’ space. The generalized biopolitical border moves beyond the analysis of sovereign power limited to the state’s territorial boundary to one encompassed by the notion of the global. Both Vaughan-Williams (2015b) and Andreas (2003) outline the development of this biopolitical security narrative and the role of bordering processes in relation to irregular migration in both the European and American contexts, respectively. There is evolving literature surrounding the governance of migration and the establishment of territorial control. State borders produce overlapping governance structures that control mobility (Salter 2004). Despite borders operating on the traditional inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion, identity/difference binaries, the multiplication of borders means that they “inevitably fold into one another,” making the binary distinction difficult, if not impossible (Vaughan-Williams 2012, 1). Conversely, Walters (2006) argues that borders serve a regulatory, policing function that draws on Deleuze’s notion of ‘control society’. The understanding of the border shifts from a specific site of governance to an all-encompassing network of power.

There have been several interventions that have looked at the externalization process of border control. Walters (2006) suggests that, if anything, more borders are being added to the international system through the delocalization of the border, manifest through off-shoring border control as a critical feature in establishing territorial control. In this effort, states seek to control the flow of migration through performing and enacting the border through (re)defining the territoriality of the state, while migrants try to circumvent these efforts of exclusion (Andersson 2014b; Spener 2011; De León 2015). The literature addressing the outsourcing of border control has focused mainly on how this practice is downloaded to states in the neighbourhood, at the margins of Europe, and the frontiers

of the Global South (Andersson 2014a; 2016b; Frowd 2014; 2017; Geiger 2014; Mountz and Kempin 2014; Radeljić 2014). Importantly, Andersson (2014b) argues that state-led externalization efforts and the development of the border industry are producing what it is intended to curtail, which is then used to justify further investment in counter migration initiatives that produce handsome profits for the individuals involved.

Transit migration is a burgeoning field of literature that has seen growth over the past two decades and engages with the experience and contestation of bordering practices through examining migrant journeys (Ben Ezer and Zetter 2015; Collyer, Düvell, and de Haas 2012; Collyer 2010; Coutin 2005; Gerard and Pickering 2014; Khosravi 2010; Squire 2014; Walters 2016). Conversely, an emergent body of scholarship has formed through exploring the violence of the border and the use of harsh environments as a tool of state border control (Tazzioli and Garelli 2020; G. A. Boyce 2016; De León 2015; Doty 2011). There have been several engagements with the broader notion of violent borders and the corporeal implications of these exclusions (Jones 2016; Mountz 2010; Mountz and Loyd 2014).

When looking at civil society humanitarian efforts, a well-established field of inquiry critically engages with humanitarianism and solidarity movements in more traditional humanitarian contexts such as refugee camps and aid projects (H. L. Johnson 2013; Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2011; Calhoun 2010). There is also a burgeoning academic literature interrogating the intersection of grassroots solidarity movements and state security in both the European Union (Esperti 2020; Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020b; Tazzioli and Walters 2019; Cusumano 2019; Stierl 2018; 2016; Pallister-Wilkins 2017c). Moreover, some of this literature also engages with this work as a form of solidarity that produces the Mediterranean as a contested borderscape (Ioannidis, Dimou, and Dadusc 2021; Dadusc and Mudu 2020; Dadusc 2019; Stierl 2016; 2012; Heller and Pezzani 2019; Heller, Pezzani, and Stierl 2017). Few interventions look at rescue NGOs and other non-state actors as a form of outsourced border control in the rescue process (Pallister-Wilkins 2017b; 2017c; Cuttitta 2018b). Furthermore, there is also a well-established critique of humanitarianism and NGOs' role in this process (Duffield 2006; 2012; Hyndman 2009;

Fassin 2007b; Belloni 2007; J. K. Boyce 2002). Less work, however, has been done to combine and examine humanitarianism and humanitarian borders in the Mediterranean Sea, though there are notable exceptions (Aas and Gundhus 2015; Andersson 2017; Cusumano 2018; Cuttitta 2014b; 2018b; Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins 2016; Stierl 2018; Tazzioli and Walters 2016; Pallister-Wilkins 2022). Moreover, much of the work focuses on state security efforts (Ghezelbash et al. 2018; Zaiotti 2016; Little and Vaughan-Williams 2016; Watson 2009; Brunet-Jailly 2007), rather than how NGOs contest state space through the provision of care at the border.

### *Gaps for Inquiry and Research Contributions*

Despite the emergent body of literature on migration, humanitarianism and borders in the Mediterranean, there remain several gaps for inquiry. There is limited engagement within the literature that analyzes how grassroots actors contest state bordering practices by challenging sovereign authority at the margins of the state. Here, I find my opportunity to advance the literature and make a modest contribution to the critical border, security and migration literature. Specifically, this project is well-positioned to provide a much-needed theoretical framework to address the role of non-state actors in the borderlands as situated within the broader narratives of migration (Haas, Castles, and Miller 2019), borders (De Genova 2017; Agier 2016; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), security (Vaughan-Williams 2015b; Walters 2012; Neocleous 2008; Muller 2010) and citizenship (Nyers 2018; Isin 2012; Rygiel 2010; Muller 2004). My ethnographic framework draws upon the existing literature to address notable gaps in the literature while further animating the spatial politics of solidarity, exclusion, and the contestation of the borderlands. As I highlighted, there is work being done on humanitarianism in the Mediterranean, but there is little engagement with the politics of solidarity and how these acts challenge the practice and performance of the state. Examining boat rescues highlights how the practice and performance of the Mediterranean borderscape challenges state efforts to control the peripheral spaces of Europe. Moreover, this project explores how civil fleet acts of solidarity contest the extra-territorialisation of state borders and the re-articulation of state sovereignty at sea.



In examining solidarity movements across the peripheral spaces of Europe, this project centres NGO acts of solidarity and care within evolving trends in global migration governance. In turn, my dissertation provides a deeper, expanded understanding of borders as sites of struggle, resistance, and agency while uncovering the emergent forms of political belonging and solidarity across disparate geographies. Moreover, the project contributes to understanding how borders within the liberal international order are legitimized, reproduced and upheld (Jones 2019; Pallister-Wilkins 2022). This project enables an interrogation into how organizations operate as both a contrast to, and an extension of state bordering practices. Examining the production of the sea as a contested borderscape and the complex role NGOs play in this process has yet to be engaged thoroughly. Critically engaging with the stop-gap measure of boat rescues in the Mediterranean is essential to understanding how the practice and performance of solidarity actively challenge the politics, territoriality, and violence of borders.

This research project examines the politics of the sea through exploring NGO responses to irregularized migration is both important and timely. In the European context, thousands of migrants have died attempting to circumvent violent and exclusionary border practices searching for safety, opportunity and refuge (IOM 2016). Irregular migration has become an increasingly visible and defining aspect of migration and mobility in a supposed era of globalization that has brought about “the most intensive and extensive period of bordering in the history of the world” (Jones and Johnson 2016, 187). The persistent violence inflicted upon migrants in these spaces creates an urgency to understand how non-state actors work to mitigate harm and challenge sovereign exclusion along the borders as we also witness new actors such as the sLYCG routinely colluding with European actors to pullback people on the move to the violent conditions within Libya (Amnesty International 2017). Irregular migration and talk of a global migration ‘crisis’ dominate popular discourse in state, non-state and academic spheres. From Brexit to Trump, the ability for states to secure and control their territorial borders against the supposed ‘waves’ of irregular migrants has brought the issue of irregular migration to the forefront of both popular and political discourse. Moreover, the rise in far-right populism within Europe presents an added challenge to the work of the civil fleet that

seeks to mitigate the harms inflicted upon migrant populations (Perrone 2018). Much of the hysteria surrounding state borders, coupled with the willingness to increase barriers to mobility, runs contrary to narratives of a supposedly globalized and interconnected world. My dissertation seeks to illuminate the politics involved in that apparent contradiction that emerges as privileged bodies experience the benefits of an increasingly connected global system while other, often racialized bodies are met with the proliferation of violent border control mechanisms.

Broadly, my project speaks to several important interventions in the discussion surrounding the border. It highlights the complex politics of solidarity while exposing the multifaceted violence associated with the practice and performance of the border, territoriality and sovereignty when associated within the wider discussions of control and exclusion in a globalized international system. Exploring solidarity at sea provides an opportunity to further understand borders as sites of struggle, contestation and agency through efforts to circumvent exclusionary state structures, which only contribute to further marginalization in a supposedly globalized international system. My work intends to serve as a challenge to state power structures and make the violence associated with the current border governance framework visible.

### *Situating the Argument of the Dissertation*

Based on the ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted, first, I argue that through examining the relationship between state and non-state actors at sea, we can develop an understanding of the Mediterranean as a contested space, enacted through NGO acts of solidarity with migrants at sea. The interactions between state and non-state actors animate the sea as a contested humanitarian border space while highlighting the conflicts and challenges associated with international legal norms. The actions of the civil fleet directly challenge state authority and governance over the space of sea whilst making visible the operationalization of violent and exclusionary state bordering practices. Through illuminating the politics of borders and examining the production of the sea as a contested space, we see the nexus of humanitarianism and security firmly embedded in the reconstruction of that space.

In order to develop an understanding of the spatiality in the politics at play in the acts of sea rescue and the production of the humanitarian border, I look to Ong's (2006) work on zones. Exploring the production of graduated sovereignty shifts notions of state sovereignty and territoriality through the intersections of humanitarianism and responsibility as a means of re-bordering in the Mediterranean. The act of zoning is the intentional and active effort by state border actors to reassign meaning and authority to a particular space as the concepts of citizenship and sovereignty shift in relation to neoliberalism. The conceptual use of zones is particularly informative in the project's scope as I look to employ the concept to examine how this is performed and understood in relation to rescue. While not necessarily focusing on the role of zoning as a mechanism for neoliberal expansion, I employ the concept more broadly in terms of how it redefines a particular space. Though Ong looks to zoning in the case of the domestic, I want to apply that to the international. Rather than seeing the zoning as an act of relinquishing sovereignty in the case of the domestic, it is through the process of zoning which enables and legitimizes the incursion of the state into international spaces. The process of zoning employs a particular identification and conceptualization of exceptional space, which allows for intervention. The Mediterranean is zoned to establish state authority, jurisdiction and control over the sea as the act of zoning makes the state visible in those unseen spaces. Conceiving the space of the Mediterranean in terms of zones enables a move away from traditional notions of sovereignty and territoriality in our conceptualization of the international.

NGO SAR operations challenge the spatial understanding of the sea and production European Mediterranean space. The act of rescue exposes the fallacy of the European myth that the border is a finite thing that can be clearly defined, controlled, and therefore, produce clear exclusions. Despite state efforts to zone the sea as an exceptional space of sovereign control, NGOs actively contest this process. The solidary efforts of NGOs work to challenge the zoning of the sea as *mare nullius* (Mainwaring 2019). The act of erasure enabled through zoning the borderscape also positions SAR NGOs and other solidarity actors as contravening state authority, thereby situating them

as oppositional to state security efforts whilst enabling the emergence of a criminal narrative to take hold. Non-state actors contest state authority in the space of the sea and are thereby deemed to be illegitimate. This becomes acutely visible through the presence of SAR NGOs operating in the Mediterranean, which challenges the sanctity and singularity of European authority over the peripheral spaces of the region.

Second, I engage with what I characterize as ‘standoff politics’ in the Central Mediterranean as an emergent form of bordering taking place at sea. In particular, the project revolves around the emergence of standoff politics in the Mediterranean. These standoffs represent the production of bureaucratic blockades, a form of political theatre, and a mechanism for controlling time and space. I argue that the act of containment on boats moves beyond the territorial confinement experienced by people on the move. Moreover, standoffs become a means of asserting state sovereignty over the commons and serve as a containment mechanism, producing rescue boats as offshore, mobile border sites. The standoff process represents yet another attempt by European actors to manage migrant mobility and extend European borders outward. Europe is making an active claim to the international or the commons of the sea. NGOs directly challenge state authority and claims to this space as the sea becomes transformed into a contested borderscape. I argue that the disruptive politics of NGOs serve as a form of resistance to state bordering practices and as a mechanism of challenging state exclusion, making violence visible and defending solidarity with people on the move.

The performance of bordering through the exceptional nature of that space is tied to notions of ‘crisis’, where crisis acts to produce an environment in which states can leverage power (Mountz and Hiemstra 2014). Constructing crisis and invoking notions of exceptionality provides an opening for routinized, violent and militarized responses as the exception becomes manifest as the norm (Jones 2016). Crisis is employed as a spatiotemporal logic for controlling migration through the enforcement of borders. It is through crisis that reconfigures geographies of sovereignty and expands the claims of sovereign power (Mountz and Hiemstra 2014). Indeed, there is a lower threshold for what constitutes ‘threat’ at the border than what might otherwise be experienced elsewhere

(Salter 2008). In order to illuminate this process, I draw on what De Genova (2013) characterizes as border spectacle or spectacles of migration. Conceptually, he suggests that states approach enforcement primarily through the production of crisis, a temporally bounded state of exception, and by making migrant lives visible. Casting irregular migrants negatively positions the state as a positive and stabilizing force amid the chaos and crisis at sea. The discursive production reveals migrant 'illegality' while reaffirming their exclusion from the state, which can also be tied to the visual production of migrants being saved by border patrols to reaffirm their role (Musarò, 2016). The spectacle of migration helps create an exceptional environment in which an increasingly militarized border becomes justifiable to the public as a legitimate means of ensuring sovereignty and security.

Third, I situate SAR operations within the broader context of the securitization and criminalization of solidarity at sea as states seek to reassert sovereign claim of authority over the commons. The criminalization of rescue and the emergence of standoff politics at sea represent a direct political reprisal for exposing border violence and contesting state authority at sea and the efforts to claim the commons as exclusive state space. While the motivations of these organizations may vary, from more neutral or impartial orientations to more activist orientations, the continued operation and existence of these organizations at sea can be read as an act of resistance to exclusionary state border practices, ensuring irregularized routes of migration remain dangerous and deadly for the marginalized and excluded on the periphery of Europe. Understanding of the trends and patterns in state and non-state responses to migrant mobility at sea, the fragmented governance of search and rescue, and global bordering processes that affect those at the literal and figurative margins of the state provides a deeper understanding of borders as sites of struggle, resistance, contestation, and agency.

## **Methodology and Data Collection**

In the following section, I discuss some of the methodological aspects of the data collection process undertaken for the dissertation. This section is intended to cover some of the logistical and pragmatic considerations that I have navigated during my fieldwork

for the project. In the following chapter, I return to provide a deeper reflection on some of the theory and literature informing the methodology and political commitments embedded in dissertation [[see Chapter 1](#)].

To explore these oppositional border politics, my dissertation employs an ethnographic methodology to analyse NGO interventions at sea and state border enforcement practices. More directly, this also included three months living onboard the German NGO rescue boat, *Sea-Watch 3*, in France and Italy during legal and administrative detention periods. My research bridges the opportunity to write about these movements, with direct involvement in these struggles for rights, recognition, and freedom of movement as an actively anti-racist political project (Bejarano et al. 2019). Beginning in March 2019, I spent six months conducting nearly 60 interviews with NGO activists working in the SAR context and their operations in the region [[see Appendix 1](#)]. Using a combined interview and ethnographic methodology in this project offers a valuable tool for understanding the performance of borders and the politics of space through direct association and involvement with NGOs operating in the Mediterranean borderscape (Graeber 2009). Moreover, the situated nature of the research provides deeper insight into the utilization of the natural environment as a bordering tool while positioning NGO acts of solidarity within a wider framework of global bordering practices (Squire 2018).

The selection of the Mediterranean as the location for my research program provides a dynamic location to examine the practice of the border and the state response to NGO acts of solidarity. The fieldwork for this research took place at numerous sites across southern Europe, namely Marseille, France; Licata, Italy; and Valetta, Malta [[see Figure 4](#)]. As previously mentioned, the majority of my time was spent working with the German NGO, Sea-Watch, in Marseille and Licata. I also spent time in Malta conducting interviews with SAR NGO members. Situating myself in these particular cities was not initially planned, but these port cities had come to represent key staging grounds for many of the NGOs operating in the region. While working most closely with Sea-Watch, I conducted interviews with many other activists presently or previously involved in the civil feet, from organizations including Sea-Eye, Mediterranea, SOS Méditerranée, MSF,

Mission Lifeline, Jugend Rettet and ProActiva, which are active in SAR operations in the Mediterranean borderscape [see Appendix 1; 2; 3].

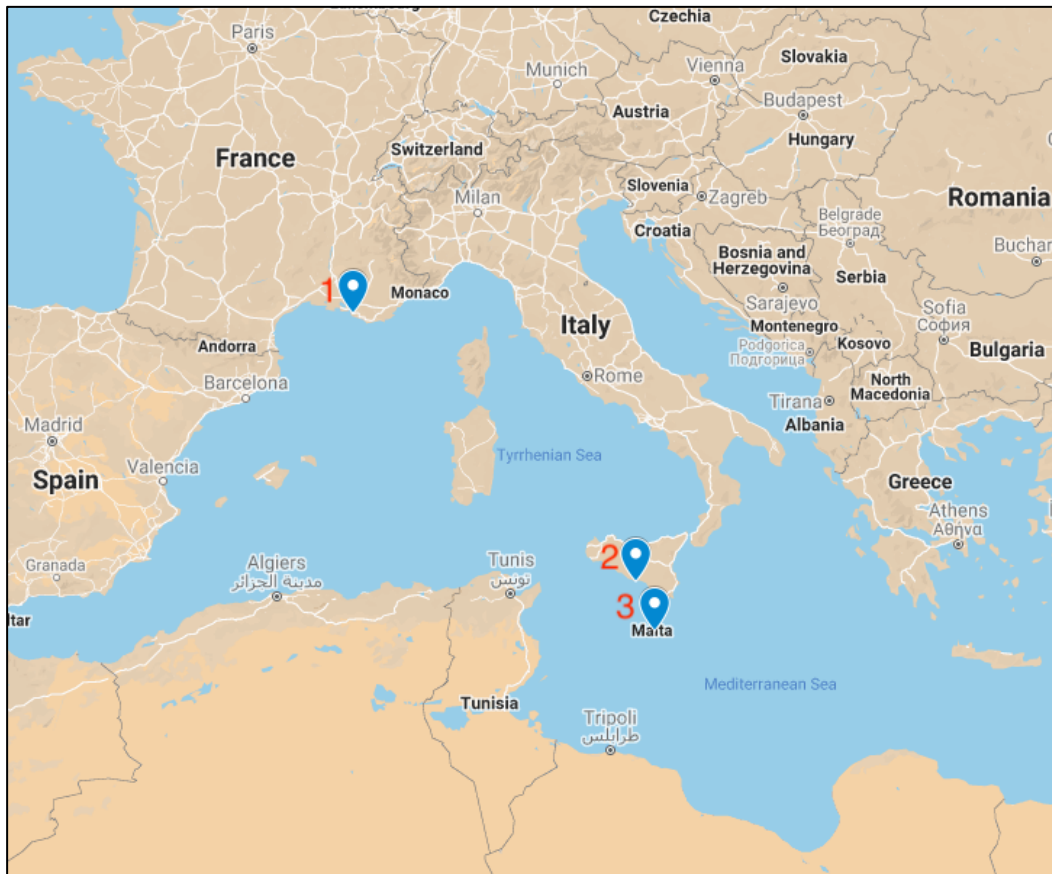


Figure 4: Fieldwork Locations 2019 - (1) Marseille, France; (2) Licata, Italy; (3) Valetta, Malta

The interviews were conducted in English; the working language of the NGOs. Demographically, the crews were generally mixed in gender, with younger individuals in their 20s or 30s, though there were often activists involved beyond that age demographic. As many of the roles with the crew did not explicitly require a nautical background, the crew often came from a variety of occupational backgrounds, including doctors, nurses, mechanics, metal workers, students, paramedics, IT, carpenters, social workers, and photographers, among others. Though I do not want to obfuscate the role of my power as a researcher, I view the project as an attempt to study across as opposed to down towards the migrants or up to the state. My ethnographic work was situated with relatively privileged individuals from the Global North, primarily Germans, but other nationalities were represented within that community, including Italians, British, Irish, French, Dutch,

Austrian, American, and Australian. Because of overlap or movement between the organizations, I was able to speak to people with experience with most NGOs, both previously and presently operational in the Mediterranean. I mainly focus my interview efforts with the crew on board, but there is overlap between the back office and onboard crew.

The fieldwork component for this work began in January 2019 at the University of Warwick in Coventry, England, as part of a visiting PhD research fellowship with Prof. Vicki Squire. The fellowship allowed me to begin the planning and organization for the fieldwork component of the project. While in the UK, the *Sea-Watch 3* had been involved in a multi-week standoff with EUrope [[see Chapter 5](#)]. Following their detention and investigation by the Italian authorities in Catania, Sicily, the ship was transferred to Marseille, France, for scheduled shipyard repairs. What should have been a brief 3-week maintenance period became the starting point of a long period of bureaucratic detention stemming from administrative issues with the then Dutch flag-state. Seeing this opportunity to start my fieldwork, I flew to Marseille in hopes of beginning my interviews and ethnographic research. Marseille, a popular tourist destination for European travellers, is located on the southern coast of France, north of Tunisia. Between March and April 2019, I joined the NGO on two separate occasions. The shipyard is located roughly 5km from the tourist hub of the 'Old Port'. The commercial port where *Sea-Watch* was moored is largely isolated from the main tourist area of the city. As one of the largest French ports and major shipping centres on the Mediterranean, the port was often a busy hub of activity for commercial activity and also served as one of the main ferry terminals on the southern coast.

While my fieldwork began in Marseille, most of my time onboard the *Sea-Watch 3* was spent in Licata, Sicily, from July to September 2019. I joined the crew immediately following a 19-day standoff that culminated with Captain Carola Rackete entering the port of Lampedusa without state authorization, leading to a lengthy criminal investigation and administrative detention lasting over five months [[see Chapter 5](#)]. Here, I lived and worked with the NGO most closely. The time in Licata provided much of the insight and



understanding into the organization, operations and situational awareness informing this project. Licata is a small city of roughly 37,000 on the south coast of Sicily, with a long, sandy beach on the outskirts of the city that mainly attracts vacationing Italians.

In contrast to Marseille, the port of Licata is directly located in the city, only a minute's walk from the restaurants and shops within the city. The commercial port is situated between two smaller harbours for private vessels and marked by a prominent lighthouse, a symbol of the city. The eastern harbour, separated by a quay, is primarily for smaller sailing yachts and pleasure craft. This harbour was also where the *Alex*, a small yacht owned by Mediterranea, was detained following their unauthorised entry into the port of Lampedusa, days after the *Sea-Watch 3*. Two other yachts owned by Mission Lifeline, the provocatively named *Sebastian K* and *Matteo S*, after the far-right populist leaders of Austria and Italy respectively, were also located in this same harbour, though they were not subject to detention by the Italian government at the time of my fieldwork.

A fence separates a large parking lot from the actual port area where the ship was moored in the main commercial port. While the barrier suggests restricted access, a small gap at the end of the fence allows crew and locals alike to hop over to gain entry. The parking lot beyond the fence serves as an informal gathering space for Licata's locals. People of all ages spend their evenings drinking, socializing and walking through the parking lot; on many nights with hundreds of people present. The *Sea-Watch 3* became a focal point of attraction and intrigue for the locals. The dramatic entry into Lampedusa at the end of June and the bombastic rhetoric of then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, seemingly meant that people were well-aware of the presence of the NGO in their city. The *Sea-Watch 3* became, as one crew member suggested, akin to a zoo attraction for the local population as locals peered through the fence or took photos of the vessel and crew as we socialised on the deck of the ship at night.

While onboard the *Sea-Watch 3* in Licata, the *Mare Jonio*, operated by the Italian organization, Mediterranea, was also detained for similar legal and bureaucratic investigations. As the commercial area of the port of Licata is relatively small, the limited

space meant the *Mare Jonio* was literally tied to the starboard side of the *Sea-Watch 3*. Their crew routinely walked through the *Sea-Watch 3* to access the quayside. Though the *Mare Jonio* crew mostly spoke Italian, they would often take time to interact with the *Sea-Watch 3* crew, exchanging jokes or friendly waves back and forth. This close proximity provided opportunities to interact with their crew, tour the ship and, on occasion, share meals or social activities together.

While *Sea-Watch* was at sea, I travelled to Malta for two research trips in May and June 2019. Malta is a small, rocky island (roughly 316 km<sup>2</sup>) in the Central Mediterranean that has been colonized by various empires, including the Romans, Carthaginians, Phoenicians and French, among others. Prior to becoming an independent republic in 1974, the island served as a strategic hub for the British during WWII. Malta is a popular European tourist destination, with tourism serving as one of the primary income sources for the state. More recently, the island had become an important staging ground for civil fleet operations in the Central Mediterranean. While Malta is no longer a staging ground for NGO SAR operations, it has remained a focal point for the Mediterranean migrant context. Though civil fleet ships no longer disembark directly in Malta, the government still receives migrant disembarkations when transferred to Armed Forces Malta (AFM) coast guard vessels. It also has been the site of several high-profile criminal investigations, including the *El-Hiblu*, where three minors have been charged under the state's terrorism laws (Smoke 2020), and the case against the German NGO, Mission Lifeline, and their captain, Klaus Pieter Reich [[see Chapter 2](#)]. During my fieldwork, Mission Lifeline and their eponymously named ship were detained in the Grand Harbour at the base of the Maltese capital city, Valletta. While not spending time onboard the *Lifeline*, I was able to interview several crew members who were with the ship conducting maintenance during their detention at the hands of the Maltese government.

#### *Access – Developing Relationships with Study Participants*

Gaining access to the SAR NGO community was one of the challenges of the research process. Particularly with the ethnographic portion of my work, access took time to develop. Understandably, given the heightened sensitivity and politicization

surrounding SAR operations in the Mediterranean, NGOs are cautious with whom they grant access, especially researchers. There have also been documented cases where state spies have infiltrated organizations, leading to constant underlying fear of being 'bugged' or compromised (Gostoli 2018). The ability to gain access and develop trust was a slow process. While in Marseille, after being given contact information for a member of Sea-Watch, I reached out to coordinate what would become the core of my fieldwork research. Over several days I exchanged emails with a few members of the organization to coordinate my visit. I was initially granted access for three days to interview crew members. The activist that coordinated my first visit to Sea-Watch was integral to how the project grew, and to whom I am deeply grateful. Over those three days, I interviewed 11 activist crew members. After leaving to attend a conference, I remained in contact with the crew. Doing so enabled me to rejoin the crew upon my return, where I continued to conduct interviews in Marseille.

I believe that my ability to gain this access and develop trust with the community was primarily based on two elements. First, was my ability to demonstrate a degree of knowledge, expertise and understanding of the civil fleet SAR operations and their evolution in the Mediterranean (Hoffmann 2007; Apoifis 2017). Tied to this was my willingness to centre the politics of my research in the informal discussions with crew members. As part of my commitment to politically engaged research, I made it clear to crew members how I felt about the work and my support for what was being done [[see Chapter 1](#)]. This openness, I believe, was central to the ability to develop relationships with the Sea-Watch crew members.

The second aspect that helped to develop trust and gain greater access to the crew was my willingness to participate in the work being done on the ship. While seemingly trivial, this began with vegetables. Before leaving after my first visit on the *Sea-Watch 3*, I had some downtime between interviews. While I was waiting, my contact asked if I would want to help with dinner preparations by cutting some vegetables for the meal. Though a seemingly benign contribution, the willingness to help out became a way to signal my keenness to work alongside the crew. Little by little, I began taking on more tasks with the

crew, from washing dishes to de-rusting, from painting to adjusting the mooring lines on the ship. My participation in the ship's daily operations helped generate a greater openness while also developing personal relationships with the crew and an enriched understanding of the work of the civil fleet (Apoifis 2017). Over time, I was given incredible access to Sea-Watch, something I am exceedingly appreciative of and deeply thankful for. Eventually, I began staying on the ship and participated in the work of the NGO directly. From the daily morning meetings, crew discussions, briefings, operational training (media, first aid, embarkation, psychological) and sharing meals, I developed relatively unprecedented access to the Sea-Watch in a manner rarely seen by academics working on civil fleet SAR operations.

During my first visits with Sea-Watch, I was primarily there conducting interviews with crew members. As previously mentioned, the initial interviews were arranged for me by my contact with the NGO. Beyond those first interviews, my contacts within Sea-Watch were gathered mainly by word of mouth and talking with other crew members on board. In one instance, I had approached a crew member about doing an interview, and they were sceptical about participating. At that moment, another crew member interjected and mentioned that the interview was an excellent opportunity to talk about the work and even relayed that the project itself was interesting. In another instance, one crew member had been hesitant to talk to me for the project. When I interviewed them later on, they stated that they viewed the interview as an opportunity to help them process some of the challenges they had experienced during previous missions. I even had a few times where crew members approached me to do an interview before I had the opportunity to make the request. Once I became embedded with Sea-Watch, my primary focus was gathering interviews with the crew members there, while continuing to contribute to the work being done onboard.

With the other NGOs I had contact with during my fieldwork, I was able to gain access to interview participants through snowball sampling techniques. Access and trust, in many of these cases, were often developed virtually. Typically, developing contacts and arranging interviews was largely dependent on sending introductory emails, hoping that I

would be put in contact with crew members who would be willing to interview with me. Often, this process involved an email exchange explaining the premise of the project, and in most cases, the point person would pass along contact information for me to reach out directly to crew members to arrange an interview. Especially with the other NGOs in the civil fleet that I had less direct contact with, I generally concluded the interviews asking if they had other crew members that they thought might be willing to be interviewed for the project. Sometimes this would lead to new contacts, while in others, it led to a dead end.

The process of ethics and informed consent was something that I have taken very seriously in the research process. From a positional standpoint, from the beginning, I was open to everyone I encountered with Sea-Watch that I was there as a researcher. While this was important that they knew who I was and what I was doing in their community, this also allowed me the opportunity to talk about my work and how I situated myself within that research. In the process of conducting formal interviews with crew members, I began by providing a preamble to the project itself, explaining what I was doing in the context of this project, and what I was interested in exploring throughout the interview. I had a Letter of Information (LOI) that I would give each participant to read as I talked through the contents. While the interview itself often proceeded in a casual, semi-structured format, I attempted to introduce the project and what was being done with the interview process as clinically as possible. In doing so, I made every effort to reassure those participating that protecting their information, identity and observations was my highest priority. I made a conscious effort to break down the LOI and consent process slowly. More importantly, I made it clear that the interview could take as long or short as they wished, they could not answer any question they felt uncomfortable with, which some members took the opportunity to do, as well as making clear that the interview could end at any time of their choosing. Undoubtedly, there is risk associated with this work, especially considering the increasing criminalization surrounding this work and the genuine threat of legal action against crew members of other organizations, such as Jugend Rettet [[see Chapter 5](#)]. As a result, there is certainly reason for suspicion and a hesitancy to talk to me about this work. Practically speaking, interviews generally took place after work, during ‘gangway

watch'<sup>17</sup> shifts, or other downtimes for the individuals. The interviews took place in a variety of spaces including, but not limited to the ship itself, café's, on a beach, or at a participant's home.

In documenting the interviews, I would record our conversation while also taking notes. These interviews were later transcribed and served as the basis for the dissertation. This was an exceedingly tiring and time-consuming process. Despite grossly underestimating the amount of time and work this would involve, listening back to the interviews often revealed valuable information that I had not 'heard' during the initial interview. This process also brought back strong emotions of the people, conversations and experiences of fieldwork, which I believe brings a deeper, richer understanding of the work itself. While some of the context or emotion cannot be captured by drawing out excerpts from these interviews, I committed to using longer passages to allow some of this to come out. Indeed, the choice of passage and how it is inserted into the broader discussion of the project is undoubtedly a subjective process, I wanted to allow the voice of those I interviewed to come through with as much context as possible. While at times I abbreviate the passages included for the sake of brevity and conciseness, I have generally tried to insert the interventions of the crew members in such a way that it allows the reader to see and experience the evolution of the response to the questions they were asked in order to provide a fuller understanding behind their comments.

With the ethnographic portion of my research, I would routinely document observations, thoughts, questions and emotions on my smart phone. These notes would often be filled out and expanded later on. On occasion, I would also use record voice notes and then transcribe them. In writing up the project, I primarily draw upon the interview transcripts and field notes gathered during my time with Sea-Watch in 2019. The interviews work in tandem with the ethnographic portion of my fieldwork as a triangulation

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<sup>17</sup> The gangway refers to the small platform used to get on and off the ship while in port. Gangway watch is used in port to control who can access the ship. Given sensitive security environment, ensuring knowledge of who is on the ship and who is not is important not only for the safety of the crew and vessel, but ensures the ship is monitored at all times. Watches run 24-hours a day, and are often broken down into 2-hour segments where a crew member is responsible for who boards and exits the ship.

of sorts. This primary source information is supplemented with a wide array of sources was an intentional effort to situate the responses in relation to other information sources from publicly available sources, including news reports, independent reporting organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch or Forensic Architecture as well as NGO websites. This took place both during the ethnographic portions of my work and outside of it.

## **Chapter Outline**

### [Chapter 1](#)

In the first chapter, I provide a deeper reflection on the methodology of the dissertation. This is not, however, a methods chapter in the traditional sense. While the turn towards interdisciplinarity has been significant within the social sciences, this chapter draws on the various disciplinary intersections of the project in outlining my case for the inclusion of ethnography in IR. Moreover, this chapter is an effort to push back against the notion of objectivity in social research while making a direct and clear claim for the centrality of political claims in the work being done as social researchers in the field. In doing so, I aim to situate the project and my position within this work, as a direct and active contestation of state bordering practices.

### [Chapter 2](#)

In the second chapter, I provide an overview of many of the actors constituting the civil fleet. I discuss the evolution and emergence of the civil fleet while also attempting to locate some of the political divergence and nuance that exists between these various actors. I situate the civil fleet as a heterogeneous collection of organizations that while often having differing or divergent understandings and approaches to the SAR operations in the Mediterranean, all remain committed to mitigating the violence produced by the operationalization of the Mediterranean as a border space, in which Europe projects sovereign power and control. Here, I also identify and discuss some of the varied motivations that bring the different actors to the work in the Mediterranean. Due to the duration of time spent with Sea-Watch, they remain the primary focus in this chapter, and the dissertation more broadly.

### Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, I analyse how NGOs enact a contentious politics of solidarity with people on the move. NGOs have played a vital role in SAR operations in the Central Mediterranean Sea as they actively work to counter the violence of state bordering practices that have contributed to exacerbating the so-called ‘European refugee crisis’. I explore the contentious politics embedded in the work of the civil fleet SAR operations with a primary focus on Sea-Watch, where my fieldwork has been based. In doing so, I argue that their work serves to enact a contentious politics of solidarity with people on the move. This chapter reorients NGO work in SAR operations from the more passive understandings of humanitarianism at sea towards a politically active form of solidarity. Solidarity, as envisioned here, contributes to the breaking of social order directed by the state border system, which structures, filters, and governs the movement of people across borders by challenging these forms of state regulation. In these acts, the contestation of state bordering practices becomes implicit in these active political claims to freedom of movement. While contextualizing the work as a form of solidarity, I recognize it does not escape the problematic framings of humanitarianism embedded in this work, or how it feeds into the broader structures of migration management and border control. Solidarity, here, is envisioned as both a liberatory and subjugating act. This work joins ongoing efforts to re-contextualize and re-politicize the space of the sea.

### Chapter 4

Looking at the spatial politics of the Mediterranean, Chapter 4 discusses the sea as a political space, and contextualizes the Mediterranean borderscape. In developing an understanding of the spatiality and politics in these acts of rescue, I examine Ong’s (2006) work on zoning. I explore the production of graduated sovereignty as it shifts the concepts of territoriality and sovereignty while intersecting with notions of humanitarianism and responsibility, as a means of re-bordering Europe. I employ a broader conceptualization of zoning in terms of redefining the meaning of humanitarianism in the Central Mediterranean, producing exceptional spaces of humanitarian intervention and exclusion in the peripheral spaces of Europe. I suggest it is through the intentional act of zoning,



which further empowers state incursions into international space. The sea is zoned as state space in order to enable intervention through establishing sovereign authority and control over those otherwise unseen spaces. Conceiving of the Mediterranean in terms of zones moves away from traditional notions of sovereignty and territoriality in our conceptualization of the international while disrupting the politics of solidarity at sea.

### [Chapter 5](#)

In Chapter 5, I explore the use of standoffs as a form of blockading occurring at sea. The Mediterranean Sea has been transformed into a hyper-visible site of exclusion in producing the European border spectacle. Recent developments in the European political landscape has meant that standoffs commonly occur between Europe and the civil fleet following rescue operations at sea. As a result, migrants are often barred from disembarking and left stranded on NGO vessels for an extended period of time, creating rescue boats an intermediate space of off-shore containment. The act of containment on boats moves beyond the territorial confinement experienced by people on the move, and becomes manifest in these specific mobile border sites. Standoffs produce islands of exceptionalism as a mechanism to structure and filter mobility. In effect, standoffs serve as a mechanism of containing migration which turns rescue ships into mobile offshore border sites or sites of detention where the state can remotely control their mobility through utilizing NGO rescue ships as the spaces of confinement beyond state territory. Standoff politics operate as a technology of governing populations through the ability to define, discipline and regulate life through expressions of sovereign power, which depends on this process to constitute an assemblage of biopolitical control. This is enabled by targeting special populations (people on the move) and space (the sea) to address supposed problems of wealth production, migration control, economic expansion and the ever-present notions of in/security.

As part of the examination of standoff politics, I also look at the criminalization of rescue that has become a trend in the Mediterranean SAR context. Criminalizing rescue marks the refusal of European actors to acknowledge the responsibility of regional border policy in producing migrant deaths at sea. Moreover, the criminalization of rescue

highlights active efforts to remove SAR NGOs from challenging this necropolitical governance of the European maritime border. These acts of solidarity with people on the move have been crucial to making the violence of borders visible while highlighting the abdication of state responsibility in protecting life at sea. The chapter argues that the involvement of civil society SAR NGOs disrupts regional bordering practices and contests the perceived singularity of state authority at sea, as European actors seek to re-articulate international space as the sole purview of the state. Furthermore, the criminalization of rescue ensures the maritime border remains a space of violence and death for people on the move.

## Chapter 1

### **Studying Humanitarian Sea Rescue at the Margins of EUrope: Activist Ethnography as Boundary Challenge**

#### **Introduction**

Studying SAR at the periphery of EUrope poses both challenges and opportunities to engage in the fight against a racist, exclusionary, and xenophobic border system. My work focuses on the intersections of borders, irregularized migration, and humanitarianism at sea. In a similar orientation to Nyers' (2012b, 97) suggestion that we "investigate citizenship as a site of struggle, and not as a settled status, to better understand the political agency of precarious subjects who mobilize to make claims, demand rights, and thereby constitute themselves as political." I, too, work to explore the processes of SAR operations to understand the politics of the border and see that space as a site of struggle and contestation of state authority. In researching the border as a site of struggle rather than a fixed or settled status in the spatial politics of the sea, the activists involved in this work animate the Mediterranean as a contested space of solidarity with people on the move.

The operationalization of activist ethnographic fieldwork serves to interrogate the messiness of border politics in EUrope. The use of ethnography in social research has a long history that has evolved over the years. More traditionally situated in the disciplinary fields of Anthropology, Sociology and even Geography, International Relations has also incorporated ethnography within the field of study. While not without its challenges or detractors, this methodological expansion has provided valuable insights into the interconnectedness between states, power and society. Ethnography, as a tool for interrogating the border, should be viewed as an opportunity for expanding our understanding of the implications of migration controls. Particularly within critical migration and border studies, ethnography has played an essential role in developing our understanding of the contours of power within these fields (H. L. Johnson 2014a; Squire 2015; Brigden 2018; Mainwaring 2019). This work is central to the understanding of how

the border is seen and experienced by those confronted with the enactment of sovereign power in the peripheral spaces of the state.

Social scientific methods have traditionally steered towards the production of 'scientific knowledge' and ordered research, embedded within a positivist epistemological orientation (G. King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Maxwell 2012; Gerring 2011). Conversely, while critical methods actively contest this positioning of their research (Aradau and Huysmans 2014; Salter and Mutlu 2012). Methods, of whatever form, are performative as opposed to representational. The particular methodology used serves not just as a means of knowledge extraction, but a specific mode of performance that shapes the understanding of the world around us. Indeed, the methods employed, alongside the choices made as social researchers are also highly political. The political nature of data collection utilized is not only embraced within my research, but I work to centre the political in the methodological approaches through the use of activist ethnographies. The politics of my research is not only located in the theoretical framework of the project but embedded in the methodological approach that also acknowledges how those decisions serve to enact the world in which we live. As such, social research must foreground methods as a material practice that enacts worlds (Aradau and Huysmans 2014). Drawing from the critical migration and border studies literatures, I continue to push the methodological boundaries of IR through the inclusion of activist ethnography in the study of migration, borders and state power.

Situating my work as activist-scholarship, I incorporate a more activist-oriented ethnographic methodology in this project. The activist methodology employed consciously and overtly foregrounds the political aims of the work, both in my approach to studying borders, migration and solidarity, and how I situated my research with SAR activists over the course of my fieldwork (Bisaillon 2012). Recognizing that social research is not value-neutral, this overtly political orientation is an intentional aspect of the work. Beyond simply foregrounding the political motivation behind the work, I also try to orient this project to be useful for the civil fleet. The politically engaged nature of the work done by these NGOs opens space for an equally politically oriented methodology interrogating these forms of

solidarity and resistance work in the Mediterranean. In my view, it is not enough for activist ethnographers engaging with questions pertaining to borders, migration and oppressive state structures to passively witness, experience and document practices of state power. Importantly, this research must work towards challenging and changing these oppressive structures and practices. As a result, the academic community is challenged with producing scholarship capable of being useful beyond an abstract, theoretical, and intellectual exercise (Reedy and King 2019). Through approaching my work as a form of activist-scholarship, it pushes back on the traditional positivist approaches to research tied to notions of objectivity in social inquiry. In doing so, I aim to challenge the several operating assumptions of positivism, namely the separation of subject/object, research/field, and theory/praxis among others, through clearly and directly identifying the politics at stake in this project.

My aim is not to develop this dissertation as ‘propaganda’ for the civil fleet. Rather, my project serves as a critical engagement with the enactment of solidarity at sea as operationalized through the civil fleet. In situating my dissertation in this manner, I view my work as an opportunity to bridge academia and activism in a practical manner. Other scholars have engaged with the entanglements of border politics and NGOs operating in the Mediterranean, but few have done more than conduct interviews, only to leave shortly after as the subsequent scholarship remains confined within the academic community. Unsatisfied with the more extractive methodological approaches to SAR NGOs, I wanted to have a practical element to this project that can contribute to the work of the civil fleet while also engaging with the academic community. I view my work as an academic branch of this fight against violent border systems tied to the ongoing legacies of racism, colonialism and imperialism through joining in these struggles, albeit in a limited manner, as a means of engaging these movements more directly. Getting dirty and partaking in the daily physical and emotional struggles of the civil fleet, whether that be de-rusting and painting an old ship, changing engine oil, hearing racist and xenophobic rhetoric from people passing by the ship, or as we mingle in town, provides valuable insights into the materiality of state power as it exerts pressure on these organizations. In effect, this

project is also an autoethnographic account of my experience with Sea-Watch and the SAR community more broadly.

However, the question remains: should ethnography as a method of inquiry be used to study International Relations? If so, how does ethnography fit into the broader disciplinary picture? Finally, are there ways to rectify problematic elements and possible concerns regarding the use of ethnographic methodologies in relatively unfamiliar territory? To wade into this methodological and theoretical debate, I argue that the use of ethnography is, and will continue to be, a valuable inclusion in the study of IR. This argument is rooted in the notion that ethnography in IR provides not only an opportunity to challenge the construction of ontologized disciplinarity in the social sciences but, more importantly, it offers a venue through which state power can be made visible in the everyday. Foregrounding the political motivations and orientations of the work, as I have done in my dissertation, works toward fulfilling and embodying an ethos of activist scholarship motivated by political conviction and direct action. I centre my politics in the work being done in the writing of this dissertation and as an active part of the data collection process. The use of activist ethnography is an effort to work alongside these NGOs not just to gather data informing the research but also to join in the struggle of these organizations in some small way. In doing so, I orient the politics of this work toward creating a more fair, just and equitable society that seeks to confront, challenge, and overthrow these systems of oppression. Repositioning ethnographic work in this way pushes disciplinary boundaries while centring the intersections of politics and praxis as a means of striving for transparent, reciprocal and reflexive research that is both politically motivated and based on a rejection of positivist-oriented research strategies.

### *Chapter Outline*

This chapter outlines my methodological approach to studying the civil fleet. First, I situate ethnography in the study of IR and the border while discussing why this is a valuable inclusion as a means of pushing the bounds of disciplinarity. Here, I suggest that ethnographic methodologies allow social researchers to be attentive to the ‘messiness’ of the socio-political worlds in which we work through making power visible. In the next

section, I join the scholarly push for the inclusion of ethnography in IR through reorienting the method as a form of activist scholarship. In doing so, I provide an overview of how I have approached, understood and situated my work as a form of activist ethnography. Moreover, I argue that the political reorientation of the work serves to produce a more ethical and responsible means of bridging the academic-activist divide. In sketching out how this has been employed in my dissertation, I will outline four ways that I situate and understand my particular orientation towards activist ethnography. In doing so, I draw on several of the interrelated knowledge strands and intellectual commitments in the development of an activist ethnography that I believe is valuable in studying the politics of borders and space in the Mediterranean. As part of this effort, I suggest that this explicit, politically oriented, and active approach to research pushes the boundaries of ethnographic methodologies within IR. Primarily, I frame this orientation around a discussion of politics, praxis and production, as an on-going research process and commitment to the community we work alongside as scholars.

### **Ethnography, IR and the Border: Pushing the Boundaries of Disciplinarity**

The ethnographic turn in IR represents a challenge to the rigidity of disciplinarity. As Geertz (1977) suggests, anthropology is ethnography. With that in mind, how does situating ethnography within the disciplinary confines of IR fit in this context? Though IR has not been entirely sympathetic to the role of ethnography within the field, I argue that in the interest of engaging with the complexity of the socio-political world, it should. As scholars of IR, making the political visible and interrogating power relations through that process is central to the field. Ethnography provides that insight on the micro-level experience and implications of broader state power structures, which to this point, has largely been ignored by mainstream IR<sup>18</sup>. As some border and migration scholars have identified (Amelina et al. 2012; Anderson 2019), there is a need to move away from methodological nationalism in an effort to have a more representative vision of the field. Indeed, the often-entrenched notion of methodological nationalism within the institutional

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<sup>18</sup> While the resistance to the inclusion of ethnography has been prominent in mainstream IR, it has long been the focus of more critically oriented, post-positivist perspectives within the discipline. In particular, feminist IR has utilized ethnography in their interventions in the field (Cohn 1987; Beier 2005; Zalewski 2006; Ackerly, Stern, and True 2006; Dauphinee 2013).

structures of academic research serves, in large part, to shape the questions that scholars can ask. This is particularly true in migration and border studies, “which have fuelled the understanding of certain kinds of human movement as a ‘problem’ to be solved” (Anderson 2019, 3).

The use of ethnography in IR challenges the ontologized conceptualization of disciplinarity and pushes the bounded nature of discipline to allow a broader and more full understanding of the issues at hand. Disciplines, though largely constructed as such, are not ontology but they become performed into being. As Beier and Arnold (2005, 43) argue, “Disciplinarity, however, is not a condition; disciplinarity is a practice.” The established borders constructed to represent disciplinarity are ripe for contestation as they cannot adequately reflect the inherent complexity of the social issues studied (Dogan 1997). Pushing the boundaries of disciplinarity creates a sensitivity to excluded or exiled voices (Ashley and Walker 1990). While challenging the use of ethnography, Vrsti (2008) recognizes that it provides insight into lived experience and highlights the implications of state power on the individual. Similarly, efforts to push disciplinary boundaries reveals the domestic implications of IR as argued by Werner, Davis, & Bueno de Mesquita (2003). Incorporating ethnography within IR’s methodological scope assists in making both power relations and the violence of the state visible from a micro-level. The use of ethnography, not only as a method *in* IR but as a method *of* IR, can provide insight into areas that the discipline has not been able or willing to see.

Traditionally, ethnography centres the lived experience of the ethnographer in the field. Yet, the inclusion of ethnography within IR has largely been reduced to a mechanism for data collection, largely based on distanced participant observation rather than a directly engaged and potentially transformational political tool. This more reductive approach has been encompassed within the so-called ‘practice turn’ in IR scholarship, which fails to capture the complexity of the method (Vrsti 2008; Coleman 2015). Rather, ethnography should be understood more as a methodological theory or orientation than a prescriptive research approach (O’Reilly 2012). In response, critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility that addresses issues of inequality and injustice, moving



towards a more emancipatory goal by moving away from asking, ‘what is’ to ‘what could be’ (Chari and Donner 2010, 76). Situating critical ethnography as an ethical responsibility to address injustice moves beneath the surface understanding to interrogate the commonly placed assumptions, which serve as a disruptive force against the status quo. The research itself is representative of an ethical responsibility to address issues of injustice and inequality. Doing so moves beyond simply adopting a reflexive approach to the research, but rather, is actively writing against injustice (Chari and Donner 2010).

As Squire suggests, critically engaging in research involves a commitment to “attuning to mess” (Squire 2012a). For her, this methodological approach acknowledges that existing academic categories fail to consider the research subject’s complexity and nuance. In doing so, she suggests that “[P]rojects that take the inconveniences and irregularities of mess seriously are able to explore how the object of analysis is enacted in ways that are both complex and multiple” (Squire 2012a, 37). In turn, ethnography challenges the neatly defined categories and modes of knowing in which research projects and their participants must fall, and sees that messiness not as a dilemma or problem needing to be overcome, but as a productive space that situates the work in the space between academia and activist (Collective 2010). Though attuning to mess in the methodological approach it “can be a way to engage in research around a concrete object, *without presuming that we know what we are talking about*” (Squire 2012a, 37 original emphasis). Rather than being fixated on creating a clean, linear narrative, ethnography is about acknowledging the “windy and bumpy road I travelled from research questions to finished manuscript”, which also serves as a “logistical strategy to piece together the disparate pieces of my research” (Vrasti 2012, 61).

Moreover, as Väyrynen (2012, 172) suggests, “[o]ur task as researchers is to establish a dialogue between the material and us and demonstrate the steps of our interpretative processes.” Ethnography establishes the dialogue between the material and the researcher as a means of interpretation and to sort through that mess. Hanson (2018, 137) adds to this notion by suggesting that “ethnographic methods are key to capturing the slippery, messy, overdetermined, and contradictory processes of collective meaning-

making. Indeed, ethnography, at its best, is attuned to the incomplete and the incoherent.” There is tremendous value in the research undertaken, even if it is messy. As Hyndman (2001) notes, it is a mediated process that produces value in carefully working through the messiness of the research. The communities involved in scholarly research are not homogenous, and scholars require the depth of knowledge to interrogate the messiness of these situations (O’Reilly 2012). The NGO SAR community is no different. As I will explain later [[see Chapter 2](#)], there is diversity in terms of motivation, political orientation and the approach to the work in the Mediterranean, along with how activists see and understand the emancipatory potential of the work they are involved with.

While there are certainly elements of research that remain unique to ethnography, it also draws on a diverse scope of methodological tools to form the basis of the work. The multi-methodological approach encompassed within ethnography provides great strength as a layered methodology, particularly within the more critical applications. Moreover, it becomes a means of engaging emotion and sensory perceptions of the field, shaping the understanding and context of the work (Herbert 2000). Ethnography works as a more holistic approach that contextualizes the experience of the population's study based on exchange, rather than a unidirectional research process (Salter 2012, 51).

Importantly, ethnography can serve as a form of participant-led research that allows participants to direct the work as the questions asked are shaped by the experiences researchers have with the participants. Speaking to this notion, Johnson (2014b, 363) identifies that, “In studies seeking to understand impacts and consequences, how the policies and practices of security affect the everyday lives of people, and how, and why, change can be achieved, ethnography offers critical scholars powerful tools.” This responsive strategy views the research experience as a more participatory practice. In doing so, it is less concerned about the replicability of that experience while also producing space in which participants speak back to the researcher through combining ethnographic observation with semi-structured interviews (Squire 2018). The inclusion of interviews within ethnography produces a living text for analysis situated within a broader scope of study and should not be viewed as a source of bias but a text in which deep and

diverse insights into the border might emerge (Brigden and Mainwaring 2019). Included in the production of these living texts are the fieldnotes collected in the process. These notes are integral to the work because it captures how we as researchers make sense of the things we see and experience (Eriksson, Henttonen, and Meriläinen 2012). Recognizing the critical importance of the field notes also requires reflexivity as scholars think through the implications of our observations and how that shapes our understanding of the field.

### *Seeing Power and the Everyday through Ethnographic Methodologies*

One of my primary motivations for including ethnography in an IR project about the production of contested borderscapes is to make the power, but more importantly, the violence of borders visible. This visibility, I argue, is one of the critical contributions of an ethnographic methodology. Utilizing ethnography in my research provides an opportunity to interrogate existing power structures and forms of in/security occurring in the peripheral spaces of the Global North. Ethnographic methodologies are adept at making the connections between the perceptions of in/security (Hanson 2018). In doing so, however, it moves towards a more relational understanding of the world that expands the scope through which researchers can interrogate notions of power and in/security.

In part, the inclusion of ethnography is also a means of capturing the political realities and implications of the security orientation towards migration as “ethnographic work describes how people breathe life into policies and law” (Hanson 2018, 137). Studying the production of the EUropean border regime through interrogating how it exerts control over NGOs and people on the move becomes a means of interrogating the implications of this structural violence embedded within. The months spent with the *Sea-Watch 3* in various forms of administrative and criminal investigation are the manifestation of the anti-migration, security logics governing EUrope. Understanding the existence and perception of this structural violence is achieved through immersion in the everyday activities (Ratelle 2012). The ethnographic work conducted on ships under varying forms of detention, seizure and blockading [[see Chapter 5](#)] serves to deconstruct the everyday violence and helps deepen the understanding of the sea as a contested borderscape.

Through this work, state violence and coercion are made visible as they become embedded in the social performances of the SAR activists and state actors in the Central Mediterranean.

In looking at search and rescue in the Mediterranean, the understandings of temporality and power are seen and experienced through the control of time during periods of legal and administrative detention by states as an expression of power over the NGOs. Moreover, control over time is also manifest as a form of power over migrant lives at sea [[see Chapter 5](#)]. As Brigden and Mainwaring (2019) suggest, ethnography operates as a form of potentially disruptive knowledge that challenges assumptions within the literature, through producing subversive scholarship that studies ‘up’ in an attempt to locate how borders are resisted beyond the centres of power. In this work, researchers are also focused on locating the possibility of rupture situated within the work of SAR organizations, particularly in the material struggles against “the exclusionary, violent, and division-making practices and policies that underpin the EUropean border regime” (Stierl 2020b, 13).

Ethnography is particularly useful for identifying the multiple ways power manifests in the everydayness of structural violence in the Mediterranean borderscape. As a sensory method, ethnography serves to understand the practice and performance of borderwork (Rumford 2012), alongside the interactions between state and non-state actors through interrogating the implications on the everyday experience and manifestation of the border (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012). The use of ethnography is an embedded method innately focused on exploring everyday human interactions (Marcus 1995). Doing so, requires a constant mindset of learning and functions as a sort of apprenticeship guided by reflexive practice that shapes how we learn and perceive the everyday (Jenkins 1994). It is this constant learning that ultimately serves to shape the politics of our work. Aradau and Huysmans (2014) see this as a process of enactment rather than construction in recognizing the shifting fluidity to the performance and representation, which changes how individuals make and remake the world around them. These identities are then seen or understood as fragile rather than fixed in our everyday experience. As Vvasti argues, the

fundamental value of including ethnography in IR is about bringing the everyday experience into conversations around power, which challenges disciplinary, professional and spatiotemporal boundaries of academic research. More directly, she suggests that “Ethnography, with its ambition to repopulate international politics with human life and recreate the dramatic milieu of everyday experience, and, above all, its confidence in the power of writing to transcend disciplinary, professional and other spatiotemporal boundaries, I continue to believe, is one of them” (Vrasti 2012, 62).

Ethnography becomes a means of situating oneself in the everyday experience of the individual to understand the manifestations and intricacies of power (Ratelle 2012, 78). In the context of working on a detained rescue ship, this provides understanding through experiencing the banality of the detention process, the emotional impacts on the crews involved and how it shapes the work of the NGOs [see Chapter 5]. Researching these spaces enables seeing how glimpses of information are conveyed or filtered through the crews and the emotion tied to these experiences; what is visible to them and what is not. In these situated moments, the on-going paranoia surrounding surveillance and observation from state authorities is made visible. The interactions with the local communities in which ships are detained, and the variation in response to their presence are experienced. The academic or journalistic community has not sought to explore these more mundane aspects of SAR work. Without a sustained presence in these spaces, it is difficult to grasp the highs and lows of that process or understand that experience. Moreover, in doing so, this oversight also misses the politics located in that space (Väyrynen 2012, 169). Utilizing ethnography to see the politics in the mundane, especially in the case of boats in detention, allows researchers to locate the micro-practices of state power embedded in the everydayness of detention.

### **Towards Activist-Scholarship**

My research is guided by the principle of activist-scholarship. I try to embody this ethos by not only writing about these actions, but actively working alongside these groups through direct involvement in some of these struggles for rights, recognition and freedom of movement. Activism in this particular conceptualization is understood as a socially and

discursively produced term that is fluid and flexible rather than fixed in nature (Maxey 1999). The social world is created through our actions, and therefore how activism is located in the research context becomes part of reflecting and acting on that socially and discursively produced condition. Activist-scholarship operates as a reflexive engagement with the work, which is a mental process as much as it is a physical or material practice (Maxey 1999). Centrally located within this conceptualization of activism is the understanding of it as an on-going process that should encourage and foster “a continual process of reflection, challenge and empowerment” (Maxey 1999, 201). Creating and maintaining an enduring connection with the communities involved in this research pushes activist-scholarship beyond what more objectivist-inspired approaches offer. In doing so, however, this demands a willingness to be politically and emotionally engaged in this work beyond the scope of the project itself.

As a praxis-oriented approach to research, activist-scholarship is situated as a continual work in progress rather than a fully established prescriptive methodological toolbox. It is a particular political orientation guided by critical reflexivity and relationality through learning from those I worked alongside (Reedy and King 2019). Activist-scholarship becomes an opportunity to translate experiences into something capable of speaking to power (Fine 1993). In some ways, this form of translation work occurs between the activist sites of struggle and the privileged academic spaces of the institution (Stavrianakis 2006), but also as a means of blending those voices that enables the work to speak in both communities (Coleman 2015). It is not an attempt to privilege the academic voice in this work or suggest an academic saviorism or emancipation in our work. Instead, activist-scholarship is rooted in acknowledging the forces of domination in society and the need to work against those structures.

In turn, activist-scholarship can also be understood as a process of aligning the academic work with communities involved in localized struggles. I seek to do that with the work of civil fleet through the development of situated solidarity in, “ways that reject, but do not ignore, the violent and imperialist histories of the academy” (Routledge and Derickson 2015, 391). The notion of situated solidarity acknowledges that the researcher

is not coming empty-handed to the table. Instead, it recognizes the value and utility of those particular skills that we as academics possess, which can be used in some way by the movements we work alongside (Routledge and Derickson 2015). These situated solidarities challenge traditional roles and hierarchies to break down boundaries between the academic and activist (Routledge 1996), which also serves to disperse power through the connection with these activist communities. Activist-scholarship then becomes an attempt at dismantling “the ‘fences’ that separate those with access to resources from those who do not have access as well as the fences that reside in the minds of scholar-activists, for example, concerning assumptions about who produces knowledge, and how and from where that knowledge is transferred” (Routledge and Derickson 2015, 397). Rather than expressions of solidarity with those engaged in the work researchers write on, this is an effort to come alongside activist communities, in part, by becoming directly involved in the work itself.

While scholars are not able to be continuously involved ‘on-the-ground’, what activist-scholarship does is contribute another ‘tool’ in the fight against oppressive structures through the self-conscious alignment, “with groups and individuals struggling against oppression in an attempt to bolster forces of resistance” (Stavrianakis 2006, 154). Activism serves as a means of doing what you can from where you are located through a range of places and possibilities. It is an act of bringing what you can from where you are to contribute to the struggles we, as scholars, choose to involve ourselves (Maxey 1999). This work becomes a mechanism through which researchers can contribute to these struggles in a meaningful and practical manner. In working with Sea-Watch, this is something that I have attempted to continue despite relocating back to Canada. While not directly involved in the work onboard the ship, I have maintained relationships with individuals and the NGO itself and contributed to several on-going projects within the organization (Gordon 2019; Gordon and Squire 2019; Sea-Watch 2021).

In effect, activist-scholarship “is a playing out in the practice of the feminist slogan of the political as personal, but in this case, it is the political as synonymous with the professional persona and, within the latter, what used to be discussed in a clinical way as

the methodological” (Marcus 1995, 113). In a similar orientation to this work, Stierl (2020b, 14) suggests, “[a]cknowledging that as a researcher on migration and borders I am ‘part of the field of struggle and a participant therein’ (De Genova, 2013: 252), I have opted to engage in activism that seeks to directly counter and ideally prevent the devastation produced by Europe’s violent border enforcement.” Squire (2018) suggests that the act of marrying no borders activism with research can be done to pursue change and affect the realities both on land and at sea through the involvement in the work of SAR operations. It is precisely the ambitious political orientation towards the research on the solidarity work of the civil fleet and the spatial politics of the Mediterranean that I have aimed to do in this project.

Regardless of how scholarship is produced, the research academics engage in is a political intervention in the field that changes the outcomes and futures of the communities they work alongside (Brigden and Hallett 2020). I have attempted to move towards a more transformative ethnographic methodology by foregrounding the politics of my work, owning that position and being transparent with both the subject and the audience. Understanding and situating the research as a form of resistance rather than merely observing and categorizing social, cultural, and political phenomena can become a powerful tool in reorienting the potential for work (Maillet, Mountz, and Williams 2016).

Yet, it often remains challenging to think about knowledge production entirely in terms of the contributions to struggles against oppression rather than the personal benefits for academic advancement and the creation of scholarly discourse (Herring 2006). Indeed, this personal benefit is still important, even more so as a junior scholar working to enter the academic community. However, it is imperative that the researcher locate how the project is relevant beyond the strictly academic scope of the work. Activist-scholarship demands that researchers challenge our assumptions of power. Indeed, scholars hold power both through privilege and positionality within the institution. Moreover, this privilege is also experienced through the ability to inscribe categories on those we work with and, in the context of fieldwork, having the ability to leave (Routledge and Derickson 2015).



## **Embodying Activist-Scholarship**

Here, I situate my work as a means of pushing the boundaries of the use of ethnography in IR. In drawing on ethnographic and activist-scholarship contributions in other disciplines, I make a case for including activist ethnography to broaden the scope of IR methodologies used in the field and the utility of this practice in the interrogation of the spatial politics of the border. Activist ethnography, as I will outline, is oriented around politics, praxis, production and process. While not suggesting this as a prescriptive approach, the categorization becomes helpful in understanding the methodological contributions of the work. I draw on several approaches to ethnographic research, including organizational ethnography, Participatory Action Research (PAR) and militant ethnography for their respective strengths and complementary functions (Reedy and King 2019). My particular methodological approach emerged, in part, by plan, but it was also shaped by the context of the work and access issues. As a result, it changed and adapted along the way. In outlining my approach to method, I am not seeking to provide a rigidly defined, prescriptive direction to the work as might be found in the more traditional visions of PAR. Instead, I posit that my approach incorporates several traditions within the overarching ethnographic methodology wherein I view this work as a methodological toolbox to be drawn from for the project. I argue that an activist-oriented ethnographic methodology makes a vital contribution to the study of borders and migration through foregrounding the politics of the research, direct involvement in activist struggles against exclusionary state bordering practices, supporting activists through academic scholarship and recognizing the work as an on-going process, rather than one characterized by extraction.

### *Activist-Scholarship as a Heterogeneous Methodology*

As I mentioned, my approach to ethnography draws on multiple traditions within ethnographic research. For example, institutional ethnography, which builds from the work of Dorothy Smith (1989; 1990) and George Smith (1990), moves beyond the cultural focus of more traditional approaches to ethnography. Instead, institutional ethnographic research “proposes a dramatic reversal of the typical paradigm where the sociologist or

anthropologist aims to make sense of the curious habits of the Other. Instead, institutional ethnography shows how the practices of ethnography can be turned against ruling institutions in society. Institutional ethnography is an incitement to return the gaze so that oppressed people can look back at their oppressors to see how the oppression they live in is socially organized. In institutional ethnography, we look upon the lookers to see how they do it [...] Institutional ethnography and political activist ethnography have intimate connections to social movements and activism.” (Frampton et al. 2006, 6). In drawing on these methodological traditions within sociological research, institutional ethnography “begins from the standpoint of people. Institutional ethnographers explore questions about the social organization of everyday life, and how people experience and help produce that organization.” (Hussey 2012, 4). In part, the research project builds on this by looking at the structure and organization of the NGOs themselves. In the following chapter [[see Chapter 2](#)], I look at how the organization of the civil fleet informs some of the political activism within the NGOs to varying degrees with a particular focus on Sea-Watch. Moreover, this allows for the material impacts of the EUropean border regime to be made visible.

In expanding on the contributions from institutional ethnography, Participatory Action Research (PAR) works to craft the research project with the individuals themselves. In doing so, “PAR aims at creating relevant and accessible knowledge for both academics and practitioners [...] PAR scholars acknowledge similar messy realities and tensions. However, it is more alert to the role of the procedural virtues in aiding the ethically concerned researcher, sharing with organizational ethnography a stress on power relations, the emotional dimensions of close relationships with participants, and the potential consequences of seeking social change as part of research.” (Reedy and King 2019, 572). PAR attempts to study problems that are meaningful to the individuals they are working with and includes the participants in the research intervention itself (Reedy and King 2019). Incorporating participants in the research itself took place, most commonly, through informal conversations with the activists I worked alongside as we talked about the vision of the project and different areas of inquiry for the research to follow as the project evolved. In drawing upon PAR as an aspect of the activist-scholarship

I am seeking to operationalize in this project, it provides an opportunity for the researcher to understand what is important to the participants in their involvement in this research. In this effort, I aim to make this study relevant for the activist struggle against the violent EUropean border regime, but also elevate the political goals of their work.

As another contribution to the activist-scholarship methodology of the project, I also draw on other politically centred ethnographic approaches. For example, militant ethnography pushes the boundaries of ethnographic work in many ways as it also involves engagement in the work of the activist community. As such, it necessitates that “researchers have to become active participants” in social movements and help with “actions and workshops, facilitating meetings, weighing-in during strategic and tactical debates, staking out political positions, and putting one’s body on the line during mass direct actions” (Juris 2007, 165). This approach to ethnographic work is characterized through involvement with the activist community that goes beyond simply producing knowledge about them, to becoming enmeshed in the relations of power that shape the movements themselves as a means of generating an intimately situated and embodied understanding of the activist networks through interventionist practice (Reedy and King 2019). Moreover, as Apoifis (2017, 4–5) identifies, “At its core, it requires researchers to demonstrate participation and political solidarity with their collaborators, alongside a commitment to distribute knowledge after the research is completed, in an equally politically-minded fashion.” Similarly to PAR, militant ethnographers work to achieve a participatory and politically informed involvement in the field that intentionally blurs the lines between the academic and the activist in the production of knowledge with the communities they are situated in (Juris 2007; Apoifis 2017).

Activist ethnography is an overtly political, reflexive, emancipatory research practice that engages the research as a form of academic activism (G. W. Smith 1990; Bisailon 2012; Hussey 2012; Reedy and King 2019). Emerging as a more specialized form of institutional ethnography, it developed from the work of George Smith (G. W. Smith 1990; Frampton et al. 2006). While sharing similar epistemological and ontological orientations with institutional ethnography, activist ethnography approaches the work from

an explicitly political standpoint dedicated to producing scholarship that is useful for the activists that the ethnographer works alongside (Bisaillon 2012). Built upon a dedicated commitment to reflexivity, activist ethnographers view knowledge production as a social process in which the interactions and involvement in activist work in the research exists as a form of social practice. Moreover, activist ethnography rejects the notion of objectivity in social research in recognition that neutrality and objectivity obscure the ruling, dominant sociopolitical structures innately tied to the international system. Instead, this particular orientation is more keenly focused on developing knowledge from the standpoint of social justice (Frampton et al. 2006). In this orientation, the activists involved in the research are not objects for study but active subjects and collaborators that are integral to emancipatory potential and impact of the scholarship. Not only are the research participants central to the framing of the project, but more importantly, it centres the politics of the research within the design and articulation of the project. Rather than a passive observation, this particular orientation towards ethnographic research is framed as a form of resistance and contributes to the political claims made by the research participants engaged with in the study.

### *Praxis and the Micro Politics of Activist-Scholarship*

Praxis is another critical feature to the methodological orientation of activist scholarship engaged with in this project. Incorporating a practical element into the work becomes a means of bringing the politics of the research into practice alongside the communities engaged with. In the context of my work praxis, “refers to the fusing of theory and practice where the two mutually constitute and inform each other. This merging incites researchers and practitioners to move beyond interpreting and studying the social world to actively engaging and acting within it. Doing this serves as a useful reminder to the researcher that she or he also inhabits and participates in the social world she or he endeavours to investigate and understand” (Bisaillon 2012, 617). Involving oneself in the struggle is not merely a pragmatic issue of gaining access to the desired research community. Instead, engaging academic scholarship in this way is guided by, and overtly oriented towards the political, as a means to develop genuinely participatory research. As

with foregrounding the politics in the work, praxis-oriented activist ethnography is an explicit effort to engage with the politics of the work.

In part, this draws from the traditions of militant ethnography, yet I am slightly hesitant to see the work that I was doing with Sea-Watch as a move to overtly shape the politics and directions of the work being done by the NGO, as might otherwise be seen in the interventionist modes of militant method (Juris 2007; Reedy and King 2019). This is partly because I believe it raises some important and challenging ethical questions while increasing the potential risk for the communities I have worked alongside. Instead, I prefer to see this move towards praxis as a more subdued form of political intervention in the work. This was a means of being ‘a pair of hands’ to help in the practical tasks of the work onboard, but also moving beyond merely being an observer in that space (Reedy and King 2019). The act of being on a ship under detention and working with Sea-Watch activists is, in and of itself, a political act as it also made me visible to the state through the work that I was doing. Most directly, this occurred as I tried to rejoin the Sea-Watch crew in Licata, Sicily. Following the June 2019 standoff and subsequent detention in Sicily, all crew were subject to approval from the Italian authorities before joining as background checks were conducted on all crew joining the ship. This often led to delays in crew changes and difficulties in performing some of the more basic functions onboard the ship.

Invoking praxis in the research through participation in the work of the organizations embeds a sense of commitment to the community while also giving back in some small manner. The small act of reciprocity in this work allowed me not only to give back to the community that had given so much to me, but it also allowed me to participate in the work of an organization that I strongly believe in as the work moved from the theoretical to the more pragmatic. It is also about gaining legitimacy in activist and academic communities (Caretta and Jokinen 2017). It becomes, in some ways, a pragmatic means of gathering data by situating myself alongside them in the work they are doing by showing that I am willing to get dirty with them, but it also enables my participation in the political struggles. As one Sea-Watch activist mentioned while attempting to motivate the crew, being here is doing SAR. The research is then not simply

a passive act of documentation, but an active role within the group and guided by a politically-motivated involvement. For me, this comes in the form of a politics of free movement. Instead of seeing the researcher as a validation of the moment or providing something that is missing in the movement (Appadurai 2001). Instead, this orientation towards activist ethnography considers the work as a move to inhabit the third space (Routledge 1996) between academia and activism as a dialogue and critical engagement seeing how those spaces can not only be bridged, but fostering greater interconnectivity by committing ourselves to be involved in the practical aspects of the work (Novelli 2006).

The political work we find ourselves engaged in also involves the mundane or monotonous work that becomes instrumental to the function of the movement. This is also a form of reciprocity and solidarity with those in the struggle as the researcher becomes situated alongside them in their fights (Chari and Donner 2010). This was ultimately my main goal for the ethnographic work I was hoping to take part in. It did not turn out quite how I had planned, but it was nonetheless a valuable opportunity to engage in these mundane politics [[see Introduction](#)]. My initial desire for the project was to go to sea as part of a SAR mission. Despite not being able to realize that goal, engaging in the work of the civil fleet in this manner was incredibly productive. The time spent in port as a result of state efforts to blockade the ships return to sea [[see Chapter 5](#)] allowed me to engage in this work in a different manner. As previously mentioned, my time spent with Sea-Watch during the various periods of administrative seizure involved contributing to the maintenance and preparation of the ship alongside the daily tasks of life onboard the *Sea-Watch 3* [[see Introduction](#)]. From painting and de-rusting the aging ship to helping prepare meals and cleaning toilets, engagement in the mundane work onboard not only provided an opportunity to gather interviews for the project, but allowed me to participate in the less-visible work of the civil fleet. During a crew meeting one evening, the Head of Mission (HoM) at the time recognized some of the frustration emerging around the inability to go to sea as a result of European blockading efforts. Yet, in that moment they intervened to suggest that even though the ship may be detained and everyone wants to be at sea on mission, the time spent in port is not only important for SAR, but that this work is SAR. Engaging in the micro-politics of SAR in this way becomes a way of participating in the

continued efforts to push back against the exclusionary politics of the European border regime. The maintenance and preparation of the ship is integral to the ship's ability to go to sea and participate in what is more commonly understood as the higher impact aspect SAR, yet this work is necessary to making that return happen.

Activist ethnographies work in part to produce scholarship that is potentially useful, valuable and accessible to the activist community (Hussey 2012). In some ways, working alongside the Sea-Watch crew was a language learning process. This was not in the sense of speaking German with the crew but as a process of grasping and mastering “not only words but different grammars of thought, alongside recognition of the impossibility of adequately translating concepts into other parameters of legibility” (Coleman 2015, 273). Learning the language of the civil fleet becomes integral to the ability to translate that within the academic community and the broader public, while remaining relevant to the activists themselves. Though a challenging process, “Only writing can establish the authority of the ethnographic voice (or destabilize it), bring stories and characters to life, reconstruct the local colour, open up the text to the non-academic public, and translate theory into practice” (Vrasti 2012, 60). Approaching ethnographic research in this manner is also a means of animation and engagement with non-academic communities.

I am keen to engage with a broader public than the academic community, where research tends to stay. Bringing the experience and understanding of the research is important, and part of a wider commitment within my work. This commitment is operationalized by not only speaking about my experience in different academic settings but also using my writing to engage with these discussions outside of the academy. The approach to producing scholarship that is useful beyond the institution is an effort to incorporate participatory action into the research. Doing so in a way that is sensitive to providing radical critique is also important to offering an alternative means to recast or challenge the status quo (Reedy and King 2019). Practically speaking, for me, this has meant not only publishing in public access venues (Gordon 2019; Gordon and Squire 2019) but also trying to approach my work within the institution in a way that is accessible to non-academic audiences. Balancing the academic obligations in presenting the

research while also desiring to keep that work accessible necessitates minimizing the academic jargon that so often characterizes the work (Routledge and Derickson 2015). Broadening the accessibility of the research also becomes a means to mitigate the power imbalance between myself as the researcher and the communities that I work with as I am charged with holding some of their knowledge and producing representations of them through the work (Apoifis 2017).

### *Activist-Scholarship and Reflexivity in Social Research*

Approaching social research as a reflexive process is one of the central contributions brought forward by ethnographic methodologies. Reflexivity as understood within my own work recognizes “the interactive and mutually determined character of the social world and the knowledge produced about it” while also working to foreground the researcher as a means of challenging and pushing back against objectivity (Bisaillon 2012, 618). Importantly, reflexivity is not to be understood as a passive process but one that requires and demands self-scrutiny and awareness (Pillow 2003). Reflexivity is not merely about engaging in the process of introspection as a benefit to our understanding of the subject matter. More acutely, it implores social researcher to engage with an intentional deliberation on how knowledge is produced. Incorporating reflexivity in social research represents a process of self-analysis and political awareness through reflection on self-location, positionality and privilege within the scholarship. As Pillow (2003, 178) argues, “To be reflexive, then, not only contributes to producing knowledge that aids in understanding and gaining insight into the workings of our social world but also provides insight on how this knowledge is produced [...] which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses of our research.” Maxey (1999) suggests there is a particular radical potential developed by engaging reflexivity in scholarly research. Reflexivity has the potential to offer ways to conduct research differently and in a manner that is sensitive to the intersections of race, gender, class and power but it can also be used to conceal these practices.



Reflexivity, like activism, remains potentially problematic in that it can be used to obscure or blur power relations and perpetuate oppression (Maxey 1999). Superficially situating research within a commitment to reflexivity can allow for problematic aspects of the work to be glossed over or inadequate engagement with the weakness and deficiency in the positions held. Rightly, this should lead to calls for transparent reflexivity that makes visible the power relations within the work. Thus, reflexivity must remain an on-going process of re-evaluation and renegotiation, lest we risk concealing the power dynamics and relationships between the agency of the researcher and the power embedded in that engagement. Employing a “reflexivity of discomfort” (Pillow 2003) furthers the call to continually question and reflect on the knowledge production process and how subject representations are established through that process. Engaging reflexivity in this way becomes a mechanism to hold the assumptions, exclusions, or marginalizations accountable in the research (Eriksson, Henttonen, and Meriläinen 2012). Moreover, consciously tackling the assumptions in our research through reflexive engagement is “the very essence of ethnography” (Herbert 2000, 563). Some scholars have identified the need to commit to an overzealous reflexivity to remain vigilant to the implications of the research. In doing so, the ethnographer must constantly reflect on how are we positioning ourselves in relation to those we work alongside. In blurring the categories of self and other, it works towards decolonizing the practice of ethnography by challenging the rigidity of these categories (Hanson 2018). This is not only about how scholars investigate power in the work, but rather, a conscious effort to do that work differently (Pillow 2003). Constantly questioning how research is conducted allows for scholarship to developed with a sensitivity towards producing work that is empowering, non-exploitative and helps foster political action.

There are certainly criticisms that emerge from adopting a reflexive approach to ethnographic work, particularly in how it results in centring the researcher. Though incorporating reflexivity in the research process can often lead to charges of navel-gazing, according to Cabot (2019), it is through understanding reflexivity as a form of praxis that brings scholarship into a more comprehensive dialogue beyond the academic spheres. Researchers have a particular narrative privilege in knowledge production. It is not so

much the veracity of the claims made, but how researchers arrive at that specific point of veracity and who is enabling that verification process to occur. Given this reality, the partialness of the work done and the claims made needs to be acknowledged. Scholars cannot have a complete or whole representation of the people and phenomena studied. Orienting my research in this manner, means acknowledging the partial, qualified nature of the claims being made through this research. In effect, all methodology is interpretative, but the approach to ethnography in my dissertation makes that overt (Herbert 2000).

Part of the reflexivity required in ethnography remains in adopting a position of modesty in the work through the awareness of the limits of the claims being made. Rightly so, ethnography remains limited in scope in what it can say and the insight the method can provide. While other theoretical and methodological approaches seek to develop and generate grand theory from the research process, ethnography is confined to recognizing the limited, grounded accounts of experience, understanding and interpretation (Geertz 1977). Ethnographers ultimately need to have qualified truth claims, acknowledging that our findings are *an* interpretation of reality. Recognizing this partial nature of the work, I remain cognizant that the observations are ultimately made from a subjective standpoint on the experience of a performance. My understanding might be different from that of other ethnographers and the subjects involved in the study, and even still, those divergent claims may hold an element of truth. In approaching my work in this manner, I have tried to hold these truths loosely, recognizing the subjectivity and potential fallibility in this perceived experience. As Jenkins (1994) suggests, ethnographic findings will never be exactly reproduced or repeated. Truly reflexive ethnography requires moving away from positivist approaches of establishing an absolute truth. Acknowledging that particularly in the social world, this objective of absolute truth becomes arduous to achieve, it then opens space for the subjective interpretation of the ethnographic experience.

Understanding the social world is an interpretative process, with culture acting as symbolic actions and representations, where writing ethnography becomes an interpretation of that culture and the understanding situated within it (Geertz 1977). Aptly, scholars are reminded that “any form of representation is inevitably a process of

interpretation and abstraction” (Bleiker 2001, 532). With this caution in mind, regardless of how we situate the mechanism for understanding and interpreting social processes within IR, it is distilled down to the interpretation and abstraction of meaning. Engaging with the reality of an inability to truly know, and therefore, represent the other in our research stems from the acknowledgement that our interactions are always informed by myths or legends of the other (Inayatullah and Blaney 1995). Invariably, whatever is written as an ethnographic account of the experience of the individual will be imperfect in its representation (Beier 2005). The observations and understandings made are always partial, and therefore the claims should also be moderate through the interpretation of that data (Herbert 2000). In the process of writing the dissertation, I am not making definitive claims but rather partial observations on the field. To see findings as immutable facts should raise concern for readers. Fieldwork can never capture the entire scope of the situation from which the scholarship emerges. In fact, according to Hyndman (2001), the whole picture does not even exist. Instead, what is produced through this work is more representative of situated snapshots and interpretations of an experience.

As Vrasti (2008, 290) aptly notes, “ethnography is a political choice, not just a matter of style, technical skill, or aesthetic choice.” What becomes included or excluded in social research projects are, at the very core, political decisions that can have profound implications. Acknowledging that all knowledge is produced, and in reality, both imperfect and incomplete is an integral part of this work. Ethnography is no different from other means of study and interpretation of the social world or experience of the other as it is argued, “representation is always an act of power” (Bleiker 2001, 515). Rather than trying to narrow the gap between the form of representation and what is represented, this representation “is the very location of politics” (Bleiker 2001, 510). Reflexivity recognizes the limits of the work and situates the knowledge as something tenuous rather than fixed (Pillow 2003). This has required myself, as the researcher, to hold the findings with an open hand. The claims made are not necessarily representative of the entirety of the field, but there are theoretical contributions that can be made through the work itself. Ultimately it is a recognition of the limit of the work that keeps from overstressing the political claims of the work (Baiocchi and Connor 2008).

*Pushing Back on Objectivity in Social Research*

Activist ethnography, as I have employed in this dissertation, intentionally pushes back against the notion of objectivity in social research and suggests that it cannot be done, but moreover, it should not be done. This orientation towards social research is guided by the belief that the overt focus on objectivity hides structural inequality while excluding and marginalizing particular forms of knowledge and voices that combat those structures of oppression. There are political implications for the choices made in research. Efforts to assume some form of neutrality or objectivity in the research as a means of depoliticizing the work are, in fact, a political move, without actually addressing the harms that this approach to scholarship may have on the groups or communities studied (Herring 2006). As a result, the attempt to situate research within the frame of objectivity enables a form of harm that can be reproduced in the search for scientific objectivity or a politically neutral orientation to the work. Despite the potential harm associated with this approach to social research, it remains a dominant fixture within more mainstream orientations. In locating how this can manifest in social research, Stierl (2020b, 14–15) suggests, “Nevertheless, and despite such impact in the ‘real’ world, activist engagement as a way to produce critical knowledge on migration is widely frowned upon in the migration discipline, consistently accused of failing to constitute ‘real’ research, whereas policy-relevant research rarely faces such accusation, not least due to its claim to objectivity and value-neutrality.” In as much as scholars are responsible for the choices or actions taken in the course of situating ourselves within the research, the lack of choice or inaction also has its consequences that need to be addressed but are often ignored and hidden behind the guise of objectivity.

Critical and politically engaged researchers cannot and, more importantly, should not erase the position and role of the scholar in our work (Brigg and Bleiker 2010). It is not as though scholars haphazardly stumble across facts in the research process. Instead, critical scholarship is a process of interpreting and constructing an image of the world shaped by our individual understanding and experience of it. Attempting to erase the scholar in search of some form of objectivity is not only disingenuous, but it has the

potential to overlook important insights in the work (Brigg and Bleiker 2010). Refusing to separate the research and the researcher is one of the key contributions of critical research methodologies. Through making the personal political as implored by feminist scholars, understanding that position as a positive contribution to the research produces greater transparency in the knowledge production process. By comparison, more mainstream, positivist-oriented analysis attempts to remove or erase the role of the researcher from the research itself in an effort to produce supposedly objective social scholarship (Brigg and Bleiker 2010). Indeed, there is a need to centre the insights and experiences of the researcher, but not out of an egotistical, self-congratulatory perspective or as a means of confession. Rather, centering the researcher in the scholarship emerges from the reality that the research and the researcher cannot be separate and are, more importantly, codependent in the production of knowledge (Caretta and Jokinen 2017). Social researchers create particular renderings of the world rather than objective fact or truth. Instead, we come to this work with preconceptions that shape our understanding (Jenkins 1994). As Brigg and Bleiker (2010, 784) note, “Our efforts to know, to justify or ground our categories and inferences, invariably fall back upon some aspect of being human. We cannot escape, in short, the fact that social science research requires that we are both the subject and object of inquiry.”

The conscious act of foregrounding the researcher and the politics of the work integral to honest and transparent social research. This not simply targeted at how the research is communicated within the academic and public spheres, but it also involves how this political orientation is articulated with the participants themselves. Moving beyond merely understanding what is occurring within the research field, there needs to be a commitment towards changing it. In doing so, centring the politics of the research reorients the scholarly commitments towards striving to produce a more fair, equitable and just society (Wright 2010). In foregrounding the politics of the research, Stavrianakis (2006, 151–52) suggests it necessitates making the political commitments of the scholarship clear through “actively choosing sides.” She elaborates by noting that, “In this scenario, academics explicitly choose to research instances or structures of social injustice, often conduct research with rather than on particular subjects, and use their research to inform

campaigning and protest. This is neither necessarily biased research nor the production of propaganda (although of course, like any research, it can be)” (Stavrianakis 2006, 151–52). Scholars cannot expect the research to do the work of political engagement on its own (Cabot 2019). Instead, orienting scholarship in way demands researchers approach the work as politically and ethically engaged actors in that process also requires acknowledging the subjectivity of that work. On the one hand, this is about the modesty of the claims made in our research, but also a call for engagement beyond the politics of the work through engaged forms of action. The ‘politicality’ of the research is not necessarily dependent on the method itself, but rather the orientation that informs the work and seeks to rupture orderly worlds or modes of being (Aradau and Huysmans 2014, 611).

Situating my relationship within the research in this manner is about maintaining transparency and honesty with the activists I work alongside in the knowledge production process, and represents a move towards a more explicitly political ethnography. This is not to suggest that ethnographic projects undertaken within the field have not been political in their orientation. Rather, this is to suggest that the politics and orientation of the work are not always transparently foregrounded in the relationship with the participants themselves and obscures the ability to produce emancipatory scholarship. Instead, by centering the politics and subjectivity of social research in such a manner, it demands being explicit in communicating the values shaping the work and acknowledging that the values inscribed on the projects undertaken are a choice that all researchers make (Stavrianakis 2006; Novelli 2006). Clearly articulating the research from the outset in this way serves as not only a pragmatic move towards building trust but also represents an ethical commitment to the politics of the work itself. Centring the politics and subjectivity of the research in developing relationships with our research communities becomes an act of connecting the scholarship to activist struggles in the process of knowledge production.

## **Conclusion**

Situating my work as activist-scholarship, I incorporate a more activist-oriented ethnographic methodology in this project. The activist methodology employed consciously

and overtly foregrounds the political aims of the work, both in my approach to studying borders, migration and solidarity, and how I situated my research with SAR activists over the course of my fieldwork (Bisaillon 2012). Recognizing that social research is not value-neutral, this overtly political orientation is an intentional aspect of the work. Beyond simply foregrounding the political motivation behind the work, I also try to orient this project to be useful for the civil fleet. The politically engaged nature of the work done by these NGOs opens space for an equally politically oriented methodology interrogating these forms of solidarity and resistance work in the Mediterranean. In my view, it is not enough for activist ethnographers engaging with questions pertaining to borders, migration and oppressive state structures to passively witness, experience and document practices of state power. Importantly, this research must work towards challenging and changing these oppressive structures and practices. As a result, the academic community is challenged with producing scholarship capable of being useful beyond an abstract, theoretical, and intellectual exercise (Reedy and King 2019).

The chapter has contributed in three primary ways. First, it serves as a call to embrace the interdisciplinarity of social research in IR, including incorporating other methodological approaches, such as ethnography, into the research. Second, it engages with the use of ethnography as a valuable tool in uncovering the socio-political context of the research and allows for researchers to attune to the messiness of this work. Third, the chapter has situated the project as a form of activist scholarship. In doing so, I argue that centring the politics of the work engaged with in this dissertation is an attempt to produce more ethically engaged and responsible research. My dissertation is, in part, an effort to push back against the notions of objectivity in social research and to make the call to centre the political claims being made in this work.

## Chapter 2

### The Civil Fleet at the Maritime Borders of Europe

#### Introduction

Since 2015, NGOs have played an increasing role in Search and Rescue (SAR) operations in the Central Mediterranean as they work to counter the violence of state bordering practices that have contributed to exacerbating the so-called 'European refugee crisis'. While SAR is one of the primary functions of state coast guards, the field of actors involved in these operations has evolved with the changing dynamics in the Mediterranean. Increasingly, non-state actors, including commercial and civilian rescue operations at sea. This chapter explores the emergence of civilian SAR operations responding to irregularized boat migration in the Mediterranean. In response to the ongoing European inaction in addressing deaths at sea, an opening was created in which civil society moved beyond the rhetorical denunciation of European border and migration policies, and shifted towards pragmatic responses in the development of self-organized rescue missions at sea (Esperti 2020). The civil fleet is often defined by young activist-oriented individuals who have assumed SAR operations at sea, drawing on the notion of 'Mare Liberum' as a legal categorization of international waters to mount the solidarity work in the Mediterranean (Esperti 2020). While the dissertation primarily draws on my work with the German NGO, Sea-Watch, this chapter also seeks to locate the work of other civil fleet actors working in the Mediterranean as a constellation of NGOs responding to people on the move at sea.

The chapter argues that the civilian SAR NGOs are constituted by a heterogeneous mix of organizations defined by their operational, advocacy and political approaches to SAR operations. More importantly, however, there has been a marked evolution in the politicization of NGO interventions at sea stemming from the European failure to concretely respond through providing safe and legal routes, or a coordinated SAR operation in the Mediterranean. There is a trend coalescing around an increasingly political message across the spectrum of the civil fleet. While the political message is still often tied to the practice of humanitarian care, a more combative and confrontational



relationship with Europe is emerging as both the NGOs and their members have grown increasingly political in response to the ongoing death and violence at sea. This growing politicization is particularly apparent in their shifting motivations for involvement in the work.

### *Chapter Outline*

The chapter proceeds by first outlining the history and emergence of Sea-Watch operations in the Central Mediterranean while also looking at the evolution of the NGO itself. Second, I highlight a range of other actors constituting the civil fleet. While this is not an exhaustive overview, it provides insight into the emergence of many of the organizations operating at sea while also locating some of the political divergence associated with the work. Third, I discuss some of the motivations for activist involvement in SAR operations to highlight the range and differing motivations for the work. Finally, I draw some conclusions on the range of actors and the politics of SAR embedded in these operations and organizations. In this effort, the chapter provides a brief activist history of the civil fleet while mapping the landscape of the SAR community in the Mediterranean.

### **History and Emergence of Sea-Watch**

Founded in 2014, Sea-Watch is a German NGO initially established by a group of four families from Brandenburg, Germany. In the wake of several tragic shipwrecks off the coast of Lampedusa that coincided with the end of the Italian ‘military-humanitarian’ mission, *Mare Nostrum*, the families pooled their collective resources to mount a response to the increasingly deadly crossings occurring in the Central Mediterranean. As one crew member keenly pointed out, “Sea-Watch was founded because *Mare Nostrum* stopped, not the other way around” (27 Sea-Watch 2019). As Stierl (2018, 714) has identified, the original families involved in the formation of Sea-Watch viewed “themselves as ‘ordinary people who were lucky enough to be born in Central Europe’, these families of labourers, educators, and engineers came together as they did not ‘want to sit back and watch how people in the Mediterranean Sea are dying because there is no legal way for them to come to Germany/Europe to obtain the right of asylum.’” As part of their operational launch, one of the original family members was invited to a German talk show to discuss

the proposed work of the newly formed NGO. Instead, he stood and called for a moment of silence for the nearly 600 people who had died a few days prior in a shipwreck off the coast of Lampedusa (Fieldnotes, Licata 2019). This emotionally powerful and symbolic gesture immediately raised the consciousness of the ongoing situation in the Mediterranean with the wider German public. While the initial operational start-up costs were covered by the pooled financial contributions from the four families, the intent was to grow and involve others in this project. The intent on expansion led to the NGO growing the funding base for the project through the contributions of small donors and individual citizens supporting the work (Fieldnotes, Licata 2019). As Sea-Watch has grown, the operational funding has expanded to incorporate large fundraising campaigns across Europe to facilitate the expenses associated with the ongoing work.

The crews for the SAR missions are drawn from a predominantly younger demographic of people from across Europe. Demographically, Sea-Watch is a largely White organization with many activists in their 20s and 30s. The national backgrounds of those I had the opportunity to work alongside and interview were primarily German, but they also included individuals from Austria, Spain, Italy, France, Belgium, Malta, Ireland, Portugal and the Netherlands. Beyond EU member states, there have also been activists involved in the work from countries such as Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom [[see Appendix 1](#)]. Sea-Watch also draws from a range of employment backgrounds in crewing their ships. As one crew member pointed out, “Sea-Watch is full of people from all walks of life. There are sailors, there are engineers, journalists,[...] medics who are getting involved” (34 Sea-Watch 2019). The crews are drawn from not only diverse professional backgrounds but also political motivations for the work. As one crew member states, “[T]here are still people who started this from a political ‘no borders’ perspective who come and volunteer from that perspective. And then there are some people volunteer strictly from a humanitarian, ‘people should not die,’ and there is a very wide range of views as well” (03 Sea-Watch 2019).

Sea-Watch operates as both a political and humanitarian organization wanting to pressure state actors to create safe, legal pathways, not only for those deemed to be

refugees, but more expansively, to include all people on the move (Cuttitta 2018b). Rather than seeing civilian SAR operations as a solution, the work of the civil fleet is understood, in part, as a gap-filling response predicated on the absence of safe, legal routes for migrants (Stierl 2018). In part, their engagement stems from the in/visibility of the sea as part of the European borderscape. Sea-Watch began as a monitoring mission with the intent of shining a light on state inaction in the unseen spaces of the sea to make visible both the bodies moving through that space and the violent implications of the restrictive European border regime. Sea-Watch began as a “Hand-raising, attention thing” (07 Sea-Watch 2019) intending to draw attention to the violence occurring along Europe’s southern maritime border. Integral to this notion of hand-raising is the elevation of a politics of visibility [[see Chapter 5](#)]. In talking about the work of the Sea-Watch, one crew member speaking to the intent of work of the NGO suggested that “[I]t’s to not allow the situation to go away, which is what the EU is trying to make it do. So, to maintain like a...maintain a profile of the issue, rather than just allow it to get brushed under the carpet and vanish from the newspapers and stuff like that [...] This isn’t something that should be allowed to be forgotten” (13 Sea-Watch 2019). Adding to the notion of the European failure to respond to the ongoing tragedy at sea, another activist pointed out the imperative of this work by stating, “it’s a fucking important job to show...show the world [...] that out there, the EU is breaking international law on a daily basis” (18 Sea-Watch 2019).

The NGO is a form of political action dedicated to highlighting how restrictive European migration and border policies directly contribute to migrant deaths at sea. From its inception, Sea-Watch has clearly spoken out against the exclusionary European border regime that has transformed the sea into a deadly border space. As Stierl (2018, 714) notes, “Sea-Watch was always envisioned as an outspokenly political intervention.” The politically engaged nature of the work has continued to evolve in response to the deteriorating situation in the Mediterranean, particularly in response to the criminalization of civilian SAR operations. In contrast to other organizations involved at sea, one activist suggested,

I think it’s the agenda, and it was from the very first day, it was a political thing, and not like some other NGOs, for example, MOAS, or maybe also MSF at

some point, who were way too much focusing just on the rescue and not so much on the political work. Or Sea-Eye in the first years. Great boats, great teams, good work. But from the very first beginning, until now, Sea-Watch always was political (43 Sea-Watch 2019).

For some, the organization is, on the one hand, a very basic practical response to the ongoing violence at sea. As once activist suggests "...[I]t's fucking simple to prevent dying out there by just lending a hand and something that floats. So that's the obvious, easy approach, we just don't want people to die out there" (18 Sea-Watch 2019). Yet, they continue on to state that, "there's, of course, a political side to it, which is this observation work we're doing" (18 Sea-Watch 2019). For other activists within the organization, the NGO serves as an essential accountability mechanism for Europe. The work is connected to notions of holding European actors to account for their failure to respond, while also challenging the harmful discourse that has emerged around irregularized migration. One crew member remarked that "[T]here needs to be an independent presence that holds our duty bearers to account in this area of the world in the deadliest border in the world" (34 Sea-Watch 2019). Beyond holding European actors to account for the violence enacted on the southern border, this activist continues to state that "there are also bigger impacts that we are making and we'll continue to try to make, which is to oppose this very divisive and deadly rhetoric right now and political discourse in Europe and to hold people to account. You know, people in power who abuse it systematically to hold them to account and say we are here, we are exposing what you're doing" (34 Sea-Watch 2019).

Rather than adhering to traditional humanitarian principles that seek to eschew the politics associated with intervention or resist open confrontation with states perpetuating border violence, Sea-Watch directly identifies and engages those issues. Sea-Watch, as Stierl (2018, 718) notes, is "willing to openly denounce the often invisibilised violence of the European border regime." As a citizens' initiative, they are less bound to notions of neutrality or subject to the will of state pressures, and as a result, they have opted to speak out in direct opposition to those politics (Vandevoordt 2019). The public positioning of the NGO, in some ways, adopts a political-humanitarian orientation that seeks to assist those in need while actively challenging the political decisions that have led to the current situation. While Sea-Watch publicly adheres to this positioning, it is in some ways a

differentiated understanding of humanitarianism from other NGOs in the Mediterranean. The work is innately tied to the broader politics of European society. For many, this work is situated as a part of a fight for radical social change and creating a positive discourse on migration. Much of this difference is also connected to their understandings of the implications of colonial, neoliberal, capitalist international systems of exploitation that have shaped the region (Fieldnotes, Licata, 2019).

For Sea-Watch, the work is more than simply not letting people drown from a lack of state intervention or the persistence of exclusionary border policies. Speaking to the need to move beyond the practical response, one activist noted, “yeah, to me, it's really much more than rescuing people. But it's also about creating a discourse. That involves deep change in our, yeah, how our society is structured” (42 Sea-Watch 2019). Echoing this sentiment, another activist suggested that, “On one hand, we are saving lives. But on the other hand, it's not just about saving. It's about political claims. And apart from concrete political claims like safe passage [...] I would even name it a philosophical attitude to reclaim equal rights for everybody, or to tackle our privileges” (35 Sea-Watch 2019). Indeed, the work involves providing care and material aid for people in distress, which materializes in the form of medical care, shelter and food. More importantly, however, involvement in this work goes beyond a limited understanding of providing practical humanitarian care to one that is more politically situated. While caring for the basic needs of people on the move is necessary, it also enables them to speak out against and directly question the political structures enabling a situation where SAR NGOs need to exist. Despite the underlying current of humanitarian reason and logics of care invoked in these interventions at sea, this work can also be understood as a means of enacting a contentious politics of solidarity with people on the move that amplifies these political claims [\[see Chapter 3\]](#).

### *The Evolution of Sea-Watch*

What began as a small collective of families responding to the border violence along Europe's southern frontier, Sea-Watch has experienced significant growth and evolution since 2014. The NGO's intervention at sea has provided flight aid for people on

the move, elevated the awareness for the ongoing situation in the Mediterranean and helped to amplify the political claims of migrants at sea. Migration in the Mediterranean is not only an issue concerning the politics of border control and migration management, but also, it speaks to the political struggles for mobility and belonging being fought by people on the move at the margins of the Global North. Sea-Watch works to elevate these struggles while contesting the space of the sea as an exclusive site of sovereign authority. This active contestation of the sea facilitates flight migration and vocally denounces the violence of a border regime that restricts mobility for many in the Global South, resulting in thousands of deaths at sea. The Mediterranean SARscape is shifting due to the increased criminalization of rescue and efforts to bar NGOs from going to sea, which has contributed to the political evolution of the organization [[see Chapter 5](#)]. In particular, one activist alluded to this organizational evolution by saying,

I mean, Sea-Watch started with the aim of getting state actors back to do their responsibilities to save people from drowning. And now we're at a point where we have to fight for us being allowed to do that...[I]n the last three years, we've been on a big reverse from our claim being, 'it should be government's job,' what we do, to 'we have to stop governments from preventing us [doing] what we do', so that's definitely a big political protest side to it too. (27 Sea-Watch 2019)

Echoing this sentiment, another medic and RHIB<sup>19</sup> driver identified a similar trend suggesting that “things are changing so much that also like the work of Sea-Watch changed. Like in the beginning, the idea was more like being an eye in the sea, seeing people in distress, call[ing] for help. And then it changed a lot to being like a real rescue asset and rescuing loads of people out of the sea. So this was basically like we [did] the sea rescue. Now it's much more like a political institution who is doing sea rescue” (43 Sea-Watch 2019). The work of the broader organization is innately tied to the work being done on the ship. While the NGO has grown and evolved, the work of the ship remains central to the mission as an activist noted, “[T]he whole broader organization works for

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<sup>19</sup> Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat (RHIB) – These are small speed boats carried onboard the ‘mothership’ during SAR missions. In the event of a distress case, these smaller boats are lowered into the water via crane (davit) and serve as the primary point of contact between the NGO and migrant boats at sea. They are used to conduct the rescue mission as they transfer people on the move from the migrant boat to the NGO vessel and then craned back onto the ship.

this one part, which is interesting, but this part wouldn't work if the rest wouldn't work and the other way around, obviously. I mean, they're depending on each other quite a lot" (15 Sea-Watch 2019). This work has led to the development and expansion of broad activist networks, which has also been tied to increased political representation within the European and state-level legislatures (Esperti 2020).

Sea-Watch has also evolved with respect to the professionalization of their work. In its early days, Sea-Watch was regarded as somewhat of a confrontational outsider in relation to some of the more 'professional' organizations at sea, such as Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) or Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). As one crew member who had worked with MSF at one time suggested, "I have to say that they [Sea-Watch] were considered a bit of a 'cowboy outfit'" (46 Sea-Watch 2019). However, this "cowboy outfit" designation has changed through the growth of the NGO. Coupled with the need to develop organizational structures and standard operating procedures, the focus on professionalizing the work of the NGO has been done to enable a more efficient and effective operation. More recently, these changes have also stemmed from Europe's increasing criminalization of SAR NGOs, which has resulted in a growing list of bureaucratic and administrative measures targeting the ship's operation [[see Chapter 5](#)]. Now, this move towards professionalization serves as a point of distinction between some of the other smaller NGOs operating in the Mediterranean. One activist pointed out that,

Among the other NGOs, I think the bigger difference, this level of professionalization. So apart from the MSF, Sea-Watch being the biggest and oldest, NGO doing SAR and therefore also the most professional one, which I think sometimes is a good thing, sometimes is annoying because it also, you know, you have the big office and decisions take much longer and there's all the lists to fill out and stuff like that. Um, also the higher level of specialisation within the crew, I think can be good but can also lead to a feeling of separation. (27 Sea-Watch 2019)

The bureaucratic pressure mounted by European state actors has forced an operational evolution within Sea-Watch. The European response has also led to changes within the organization as a whole, and necessitated a broader focus on the professionalization of the work in order to sustain the operational objectives.

### *Sea-Watch Fleet*

The literal expansion of material capacity mirrors the organisation's evolution. The growth of the NGO and the context of the situation in the Mediterranean has shifted how Sea-Watch responds to people on the move at sea. I will briefly outline the evolving capacity of Sea-Watch, through detailing the different iterations of their fleet.

#### Sea-Watch 1

The NGO began its sea operations in 2015, with the purchase of the *Sea-Watch 1*. As a small, repurposed fishing cutter, the nearly 100-year-old, 21-metre ship was crewed by a small group of activists that sailed to the Central Mediterranean with the primary intent of watching for migrant boats in distress (Cusumano 2017a). Initially, the project was not intended to be directly involved in conducting rescue operations by taking migrants in distress on board the ship. Due to the limitations in the size of the *Sea-Watch 1*, it was practically impossible to take all people on board. Instead, they intended to stabilize the distress situation through deploying life rafts, providing water, lifejackets and limited first aid, while relying on other actors with greater capacity to conduct the actual rescue and disembarkation (Fieldnotes, Licata, 2019). Upon locating a distress case, the crew would notify the responsible Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre<sup>20</sup> (MRCC) to coordinate the rescue of the boat in distress and transfer the migrants to a larger ship (commercial, military, or coast guard) that would then be responsible for their transfer to a European port of safety (Fieldnotes, Licata, 2019). As one crew member stated, “[I]t went on, 2015 being most [of the] time on that little ship which was not fit for rescue at all. It was more a media stunt, although we helped 4,000 people...to save them like on the spot, and then wait for the authorities at the time, to come” (30 Sea-Watch 2019). Upon completing their operations with the *Sea-Watch 1*, the ship was sold to another small NGO, Mare Liberum, which continued to use the ship in their similarly oriented monitoring mission in the Aegean Sea.

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<sup>20</sup> Most commonly, the Italian MRCC Rome or MRCC Malta have been the responsible entities involved in the coordination of NGO SAR operations in the Central Mediterranean.



## Sea-Watch 2

Recognizing the clear physical limitations of the ship and the ability to only monitor boat crossings, Sea-Watch increased their capacity and bought the *Sea-Watch 2* in 2016. Most importantly, the larger ship enabled Sea-Watch to now take people on board as part of the rescue operation. Speaking to the need for an increased physical capacity, one crew member discussed the evolution in their SAR operations by stating,

[T]he ‘watch’ part is what we thought we would do in the beginning. We would just go there and by the fact of a European asset being there and saying, ‘oh, I can see you, I can see you, I can still see you,’ that would lead to rescues, which is only what happened during the very first mission that I was on. After that, no, it didn’t work like that. We had to start rescuing people ourselves because nobody would come, or we would see somebody drowning, obviously, then you can’t look away. (03 Sea-Watch 2019)

The new ship provided greater capacity to physically take people onboard as well as now having a functional hospital capable of treating medical cases. The medical cases seen by Sea-Watch commonly range from skin burns caused by the caustic mix of fuel and saltwater; to maternal care for pregnant mothers and newborns; to traumas sustained in the journey through Africa, including torture, rape and other forms of abuse inflicted while in Libya (Fieldnotes, Licata, 2019). In launching the *Sea-Watch 2*, the NGO pointedly indicated that the boat itself “has become a symbol of the continuous failure of the European Union, whose efforts to seal herself off cost the lives of thousands of people at sea” (Sea-Watch 2016). Despite the increased size and capability, the new ship was still largely dependent on assistance from other ships. This would commonly include other NGOs and European navy and coast guard vessels, with greater capacity to transfer the guests to European shores (Fieldnotes, Licata, 2019). The rapidly evolving nature of boat crossings in the Mediterranean meant that Sea-Watch was again quickly confronted with the physical limitations of the ship to effectively conduct rescue operations on the scale being required. The *Sea-Watch 2* was then sold to another emerging NGO, Mission Lifeline, increasing the civil fleet capacity at sea.

### Sea-Watch 3

With the continued presence of migrants at sea and the lack of any coordinated response to Mediterranean boat migration, the NGO acquired the *Sea-Watch 3* to once again increase the response capability. The new ship, formerly named *Dignity I*, had previously been operated by MSF as part of their Mediterranean SAR mission. The *Sea-Watch 3*, as a former offshore supply vessel, dramatically increased the SAR capacity of the NGO. The 50m ship is the largest available vessel capable of being sailed under a pleasure yacht designation. Importantly, this designation expanded the pool of captains available to sail the ship with a lower level of professional qualifications. Moreover, this also enabled the activist crews to operate with similarly less stringent professional qualifications (Fieldnotes, Marseille, 2019). The apparent loophole in the ship classification system became a point of contention with European authorities, and efforts to close the gap ensued by increasing the required qualifications for activists wanting to join on mission (Fieldnotes, Marseille, 2019).

In 2017, the first mission of the *Sea-Watch 3* involved a dramatic confrontation with the so-called Libyan coast guard (scLYCG) and resulted in multiple migrant drownings (Heller and Pezanni 2018). This initial experience, re-created by the Forensic Oceanography team located at Goldsmiths, foreshadowed the changing context of civil fleet SAR operations emerging in the Mediterranean. In particular, concerning NGO interactions with the scLYCG, and more broadly, with respect to Europe's willingness to outsource border control to the Libyans. In June 2019, the ship once again became the widely publicized focal point of media attention following a lengthy standoff with the Italian government. This particular standoff culminated in the ship, under the direction of Captain Carola Rackete, 'illegally' entering the port of Lampedusa to disembark the guests onboard<sup>21</sup> (Gordon 2019) [see [Chapter 5](#)]. The *Sea-Watch 3* continues to operate but has experienced a series of lengthy periods of detention for both criminal and administrative investigations.

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<sup>21</sup> Immediately following the arrest of Carola Rackete and the seizure of the *Sea-Watch 3* was when I spent the majority of my fieldwork with the NGO during the detention in Licata, Sicily.

### Sea-Watch 4

The most recent addition to the Sea-Watch fleet came in 2020, when the NGO acquired a new ship, the *Sea-Watch 4*, in coordination with the United4Rescue movement, a pro-migrant collective spearheaded by the German Ecumenical Church. The new 60m vessel offers even greater capacity to tend to medical cases onboard and the ability to endure long standoffs with EUrope. Sea-Watch also briefly partnered with MSF in this newest operation (Sea-Watch 2020a). In this short-lived configuration, Sea-Watch was responsible for coordinating the majority of the ship's crew and rescue operations while MSF, having ended their partnership with SOS Méditerranée in 2020, provided the medical crew for the ship. The new ship is an interesting development in many ways. To start, Sea-Watch is a more radical and politically outspoken organization in comparison to MSF. On top of that, the emergence of the United4Rescue collective into the SAR field, which has provided much of the financial backing for the ship has also been notable. The *Sea-Watch 4* conducted their first SAR mission in late August 2020 and were involved in several rescues during the operation. During that first mission, Sea-Watch also coordinated taking guests from the *Louise Michel*, a ship funded by the underground street artist Banksy, which had been involved in a rescue a few days prior (Tondo and Stierl 2020b; Louise Michel 2020) [[see below for additional information](#)].

### Airborne

Beyond their operations on the water, Sea-Watch has expanded their SAR capacity with the development of the Airborne division, or more commonly referred to as simply, 'Airborne'. Emerging in 2016 as a response to an already apparent move towards closing the sea to civil fleet SAR operations, the development of the Airborne wing of Sea-Watch was intended to provide additional SAR support for the civil fleet and human rights monitoring through aerial reconnaissance missions. Airborne began in partnership with the Swiss-based NGO, Humanitarian Pilots Initiative (HPI), operating *Moonbird*, and Pilotes Frontières, operating *Colibri*. In 2020, Sea-Watch acquired another plane, *Seabird*, which has a greater capacity to fly longer missions over a greater area of operation. While the operation remains a joint venture between HPI and Sea-Watch, they have stated that "we are Sea-Watch, but we fly for everyone, of course" (48 Sea-Watch 2019). As a result,

Airborne regularly meets with civil fleet crews before departure to explain how they operate, provide an overview of the operational processes, and explain what is to be expected on mission to ensure smooth cooperation and coordination amongst the NGOs (Fieldnotes, Licata, 2019).

Beyond coordinating with the civil fleet, Airborne also attempts to cooperate with commercial vessels and the limited European naval assets in the area. The monitoring missions attempt to spot distress cases at sea and then relay the pertinent information to nearby ships and the relevant MRCC, in order to coordinate SAR operations (Fieldnotes, Licata, 2019). The Airborne operations employ a ‘disobedient gaze’ in their efforts to monitor the Mediterranean by observing and reporting human rights violations, illegal pullbacks by the scLYCG, as well as, identifying cases of European inaction and negligence in responding to distress cases at sea (Pezzani and Heller 2013; Heller, Pezzani, and Stierl 2017). Similar to other civil fleet assets, Airborne has faced several barriers to their operations, which have sought to keep the SAR planes from conducting monitoring missions in the Mediterranean. Despite the growing criminalization, Airborne has largely evaded the same extent of legal and bureaucratic barriers faced by NGOs at sea, allowing for more consistent operational capacity.

### **Heterogeneity in the Civil Fleet SAR Operations**

What I attempt to do in this next section is to sketch out brief portraits of a number of the other SAR NGOs operating in the Mediterranean space [see Appendix [2](#) & [3](#)]. In effect, this section serves to map some of the organizations in the civil fleet landscape, while also providing an activist history of their operations. This does not necessarily capture the entirety of the NGO landscape or the complexity of these organizations. Rather, it serves to highlight the heterogeneity of the political spectrum on which these organizations exist.<sup>22</sup> These NGOs are part of a “lively and heterogeneous spectrum of

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<sup>22</sup> There are a few smaller NGOs including the German organization, RESQSHIP (*Josefa; Nadir*) and the Spanish organizations Salvamento Maritimo Humanitario (*Aita Mari*) and Proem-Aid (*Life*) which are also involved in the SAR community. They are much smaller organizations with limited SAR experience due to both administrative barriers and funding. There are also organizations that have been previously active, for example, Save the Children (*Vos Hestia*) and the German NGO Lifeboat Project (*Minden*), but are no longer

actors engaged along the European borderzones on the land and at sea in attempts to support migrants and refugees in the process of border crossing” (Mezzadra 2020, 430). While all NGOs in the civil fleet share a common goal of saving lives at sea, there are differences in how they frame their work, which suggests a range of understandings of humanitarianism, resistance, and indeed, the politics of SAR. Indeed, as Stierl (2018, 709) suggests, it is important to interrogate these differences that “demand a subtle reflection on the positionalities, possibilities and limitations of humanitarian action.” Upon greater reflection, the organizational differences amongst the civil fleet become more apparent in how they understand the politics of humanitarianism, borders, and migration in the Mediterranean (Cutitta 2018b; Stierl 2018).

The heterogeneity amongst the civil fleet is not automatically understood as a problematic barrier to the work being done. Indeed, reaching a universal agreement on the politics of SAR interventions may even be unattainable in the current operational context. No organization exists as a monolithic entity. There is divergence and heterogeneity not only amongst NGOs in the civil fleet, but also within the organizations themselves. As one SOS Méditerranée member identifies, “[W]e all have our own ways of acting and it's impossible to have a complete cohesion on what to say and then in which manner, or how to act. Some are more willing to respect instructions from the competent authorities. Others are less willing. I don't think there's that way nor a point in harmonizing all of that because things are a different project[s] and we remain so” (22 SOS 2019). Echoing this sentiment, one Sea-Watch activist suggests, “...I think that there are organizations that are organized in different ways. I think we have a common goal, which is clear, which is to rescue people over there. To fill this lack of anything. They want to fill this is...the empty space. How we do, and the implications are pretty different, and that makes really difficult the cooperation between the NGOs” (37 Sea-Watch 2019).

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operational in Mediterranean SAR missions. Moreover, there are also a number of smaller organizations operating exclusively in the Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey, including UK-based Refugee Rescue (*Mo Chara*) and the German NGO Mare Liberum (*Mare Liberum*; *Sebastian K*). I have chosen to limit the scope of engagement in this chapter to some of the ‘main actors’ involved in the civil fleet.

While all NGOs are undertaking the same fundamental mission to rescue people in distress at sea, the political differences may not always be as apparent. The divergence occurs along a range of political and ethical considerations, from how organizations cooperate with European actors or fund their operations, to more politically oriented questions pertaining to the European asylum system, borders, or the freedom of movement in a globalizing international system. The heterogeneity and variance among SAR actors also produce varying degrees of susceptibility to cooptation and capture in state logics of policing and control (Walters 2011). While there are certainly overlaps in how the NGOs understand the work, there is a notable cleavage within the civil fleet regarding their political orientations towards SAR. In particular, how they conceptualize the role of the NGO interventions as humanitarian assistance often differs amongst individuals within the civil fleet. Despite this cleavage, there has been a notable turn towards recognizing the inability to divorce their work from the political context in which it occurs. Given the escalation in state efforts to criminalize the work of the civil fleet, it is increasingly apparent that separating the politics of mobility from SAR operations is not possible, nor, I would argue, desirable.

### *The Civil Fleet*

#### Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS)

Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) was the first non-state SAR actor to begin operations in the Mediterranean in August 2014. In deference to state authority, MOAS sought to be granted informal permission from the Italian authorities before launching their first SAR mission (Cutitta 2018a). They expanded their operation in 2015 to include a partnership with MSF, where MSF provided a medical team to assist in SAR operations onboard the *M.Y. Phoenix*, as well as chartering another ship, *Responder*, primarily responsible for operations in the Aegean Sea (Cusumano 2017a). Described as a “private philanthropic initiative” (Esperti 2020) or “venture philanthropy” (Stierl 2018, 716), MOAS was founded by the Maltese-American couple, Chris and Regina Catembrone. The pair is described as “two young entrepreneurs and humanitarians who founded the Migrant Offshore Aid Station after seeing the lack of response to hundreds of drownings in October 2013 off the Italian island of Lampedusa” (MOAS 2020a).

More problematically, however, they are also the founders of the Tangiers Group, “a firm providing insurance investigations, evacuation, and intelligence for firms operating in dangerous environments” (Cusumano 2017a, 92). Practically speaking, the company provided coverage for US military contractors operating in Iraq. In effect, Catembrone was actively profiting from the instability in the Middle East, while also attempting to address increasingly dire boat migration situation emerging from the same instability and forced displacement he was benefiting from (Fieldnotes, Valletta, 2019). Originating from this ‘business’ background, Chris Catembrone stated, “I rescue people for money in my other job. I know what to do” (Tremlett 2015). For MOAS, the seemingly inadequate response to Mediterranean boat migrations was largely seen as an issue lacking appropriate resources dedicated to rectifying the situation. As Stierl (2018, 711) identifies, “MOAS imagines itself as offering a pragmatic solution to suffering at sea. Rescuing lives for MOAS is not a political matter in itself but a question of resources and capacity, which, once mustered, can be utilised to tackle what it makes out to be ‘the problem’.” Ultimately, MOAS understood their involvement in the Mediterranean as a material solution to a lack of resources, rather than seeing the work as innately tied to the politics of borders and migration governance.

MOAS was arguably the most conservative NGOs in the civil fleet that often sought to divorce the politics of the European border regime from the context of the SAR operations. Adhering to more traditionally conceived humanitarian principles, “MOAS uses a rights-based ethos in all of our work, abiding always by the principles of impartiality and neutrality. We exist to alleviate suffering and to aid those in distress, regardless of their political affiliation, race, religion or gender” (MOAS 2020b). MOAS had taken an explicitly apolitical stance on SAR operations, claiming their priority was to “Save lives first, Sort out the politics later” (Cuttitta 2018b). At the outset of their Mediterranean SAR operations, MOAS stated, “We must take politics out of search and rescue. We must put saving lives at the top of the agenda” (MOAS 2015). For MOAS, people on the move at sea were problematically seen as “politically impotent”, passive victims, devoid of agency, who

needed to not only be saved from exploitative smugglers, but from themselves (Stierl 2018, 717).

In their commitment to ‘professional’ SAR operations, they actively relied on recruiting former Armed Forces of Malta (AfM) coast guard and military personnel to crew their missions, rather than volunteers, as with most other SAR NGOs in the civil fleet (Cusumano 2017a). Their willingness to not only cooperate but acquiesce to European demands quickly became an obvious and problematic point of tension within the NGO community. In one example, not only were MOAS willing to allow state security personnel to join them on their mission, they willingly turned over the personal information of two people on board that they suspected of being smugglers to state authorities for investigation. Ultimately, this willing cooperation was a breaking point in their relationship with MSF, who found any continued collaboration between the two NGOs untenable (Cuttitta 2018b). For MOAS, their “operations do not stand in contradiction to more traditional border policing operations that seek to control the movement of people on the move by intercepting bodies and making them legible” (Pallister-Wilkins 2017a, 93). MOAS’ eagerness to work with security personnel highlights the emergent friction within the SAR community. While most NGOs often respect the pragmatic work of MOAS in their Mediterranean SAR operations, the NGO has become a common focal point of derision across much of the civil fleet.

In the face of mounting pressure and the criminalization of civilian SAR operations by European authorities, MOAS decided it was no longer feasible to continue their work in the Central Mediterranean. In 2017, they ended their SAR operations and left the region to continue their work in Bangladesh (MOAS 2020b). Rather than rebuff European efforts to close the sea to civil fleet SAR operations, as most other NGOs did, MOAS decided that the most pressing need for the philanthropic resources of the NGO was located elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> In December 2020, however, MOAS announced their return to the

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<sup>23</sup> The decision by MOAS to abandon their work in the Mediterranean in the interest of relocating to the Adnan Sea and working to provide humanitarian assistance in Cox’s Bazaar, Bangladesh was perplexing to many in the SAR community. In talking with one former member of MOAS, they pointed to the



Mediterranean as part of a newly formed partnership with Sea-Eye, where they would provide the new mission with “personnel, resources, strategic input, and expertise” (MOAS 2020c). Though it appeared that MOAS was set to rejoin the civil fleet, the agreement with Sea-Eye fell apart shortly after the announcement. While not stated publicly, MOAS has been the source of much criticism within the SAR NGO community due to their highly problematic background, approach and understanding of the context of Mediterranean SAR operations.

### Sea Eye

Sea-Eye, another German NGO, began Mediterranean SAR operations in 2015. They initially operated along the same model as Sea-Watch, where their missions consisted of spotting boats in distress, providing immediate medical attention, life vests, and water to stabilize an ongoing distress situation (Cusumano 2017a). Similar to Sea-Watch, it quickly became apparent that merely observing distress cases was untenable and Sea-Eye have since increased their capacity to respond to the ongoing situation. Since its inception, the NGO has conducted numerous SAR missions and operated several ships as part of the civil fleet. In 2019, Sea-Eye renamed their ship, the *Alan Kurdi*, after the 3-year-old Syrian boy whose lifeless body was found washed up on a Turkish beach (Deutsche Welle 2019a). The images served as a temporary moment of shock for the international community during one of the most deadly points in the so-called European Refugee Crisis. In the following years, his aunt, Tima Kurdi, has become a vocal spokesperson for the organization. In November 2020, the NGO announced their new collaboration United4Rescue alongside their new 55m repurposed offshore supply vessel, *Sea-Eye 4* (Sea-Eye 2020b). Later in December 2020, they also announced that this new collaboration would include a short-lived partnership with MOAS (Sea-Eye 2020c).

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Catembrone's religious convictions as devout Catholics as one possible explanation for the seemingly overnight decision to end SAR operations in the Mediterranean. They noted that, “The Pope had said that plight of the Rohingya is the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time on Thursday, and then on Monday he cancelled the Med missions and then sailed to Bangladesh” (Fieldnotes, Valletta, 2019).

Organizationally, Sea-Eye adopts a more traditional humanitarian orientation towards SAR operations that often tends to opt for a less confrontational engagement with Europe. As one Sea-Eye member described their work, “I think it's extremely simple. What we do is sea rescue. And also documenting and observing human rights violations. And that is basically all we do. That is our main goal, our main focus and everything” (54 Sea-Eye 2019). Expanding on this notion, they continued to suggest that they actively resist the politicization of their work, suggesting “[A] lot of people always try to push us into a very political direction, as if we were political players playing a political game. But in truth, I think that's really not the truth at all. And that's just something that people kind of want to attribute to us. But it's not something that we actually see ourselves as” (54 Sea-Eye 2019). A current Sea-Watch activist who previously worked with Sea-Eye noted that “the Alan Kurdi is more low profile, let's say, for dealing with the situations. It deals a bit more in a diplomatic way” (37 Sea-Watch 2019). Despite this less confrontational positioning, the NGO has still found itself engaged in legal battles with EU member states. Most combatively, Sea-Eye has also sought to sue the Italian government over the illegal detention of their ship (Sea-Eye 2020a). Though initially less antagonistic than some other members of the civil fleet, the legal provocation and inability to escape European criminalization efforts has contributed to a more notably political discourse around their work.

### SOS Méditerranée

SOS Méditerranée (SOS) is a French NGO that began operations in 2015. Similarly to MOAS, they have sought to distinguish themselves from the other civilian rescue NGOs, “emphasizing the professional character of its humanitarian mission at sea always staying in partnership with institutionalized and recognized international humanitarian NGOs” (Esperti 2020, 442). As one member described, “SOS wanted to distinguish itself from other, what they might characterize as less professional search and rescue missions and more political. There was this kind of...it was quite clear to them that they were...that we were the best equipped and had the best ship and the best-trained staff” (02 SOS 2019). In previous years, SOS has developed their operational capacity through partnerships with NGOs like Médecins du Monde and MSF on board the *Aquarius* and *Ocean Viking*.

From its inception, SOS was “created to respond to an absence of action or, no, of complete action, but the lack of enough capacity for rescue the central Mediterranean. So, it's basically filling up for a gap that the states are leaving. And in order to do so, it has been that association has been conducting search and rescue operations for two years and a half in the central Med” (22 SOS 2019). As one crew member describes, the main objectives of the NGO are “to rescue people and to protect them. Meaning providing medical care and bringing them to a place where they can be safe [...] to testify about the situation, to raise awareness among the European public and as far as possible with the European governments as well [...] And to be able to speak up about it as long as we can” (22 SOS 2019).

SOS opts for a markedly different approach to their interventions at sea and the project as a whole. Speaking to the unique approach to the work, a crew member states that, “SOS is different. It's not a political project as such. As I said, it's impossible to remain completely out of politics when you interact and operate in such a political space. But I think it's important also not to be completely seen as a political project because it shouldn't be so much a question of politics” (22 SOS 2019). In framing their work, they have suggested that “We want the Mediterranean to be a civic space and not only a military space. We would like to be the eyes of the civil society at the maritime borders” (Esperti 2020, 445). For SOS, “that part of raising awareness is really important as well because I see our work as being there to rescue but also to really testify of [to] the mess that is being created currently by governments in the Mediterranean” (22 SOS 2019). In recognition of the less political, more overt professional humanitarian framing of SOS's work, one Sea-Watch activist suggested that “[I]n France, like, all humanitarian help is quite professional [...] like it doesn't mean that people are not doing great work or stuff, but they don't come from the same political background, and also it's restraining, a lot, the action because people learn the process how to deal with this stuff and sometimes it's hard for them to un-stick to it” (52 Sea-Watch 2019). Though approaching SAR from a less confrontational standpoint, SOS has remained an active member of the civil fleet and a vocal proponent for safe passage in the Mediterranean. Efforts to raise awareness, document rights

violations, and increase the visibility of the ongoing situation at sea is a calculated attempt to elevate the politics of SAR in a less combative manner.

### ProActiva Open Arms

ProActiva is the main Spanish NGO operational in the Central Mediterranean and began SAR operations in 2016 (Cusumano 2017a). The Barcelona-based organization grew out of a lifeguard association that shifted their focus towards SAR following several high-profile shipwrecks in the Mediterranean. Similarly to Sea-Watch, ProActiva began operating monitoring missions with a small sailing yacht, the *Astral*, which remains active, before expanding their fleet to accommodate the need for an increased rescue capacity. As part of the expansion, they repurposed a fishing boat, *Golfo Azzurro*, which was in use until 2017 when they acquired their current vessel, the *Open Arms* (Cusumano and Villa 2021). In late 2021, the NGO announced they acquired a new 66m ship, *Open Arms Uno*, to facilitate their growing SAR operations. The new ship brings with it a heli-pad, four deployable RHIB's and a hospital outfitted with 26 beds to tend to a range of medical cases onboard (ProActiva 2021).

ProActiva is self-described as “a non-profit, non-governmental organisation with one principal mission: to protect those who try to reach Europe by sea, fleeing from armed conflict, persecution or poverty; and also to inform and educate on land so that those who migrate can make decisions with complete freedom and knowledge” (ProActiva 2020c). Speaking to their origin story, they suggest that “It all started with some photographs of drowned children on a beach. We thought: if our job is maritime rescue and we do it on our beaches, why are they dying over there without anybody to help them?” (ProActiva 2020c). While involved in SAR operations, they also “continue to denounce all of the injustices that take place that nobody talks about” (ProActiva 2020c). As of November 2020, they had reportedly been involved in rescuing over 61,000 migrants at sea across their Mediterranean and Aegean missions (ProActiva 2020a). ProActiva has also garnered media attention stemming from the involvement of several high-profile celebrities. Among them, this list includes former Toronto Raptors player Marc Gasol who joined as a crew member for a mission in 2018 (Tondo 2018a), as well as Richard Gere

who met with the crew and guests of the Open Arms during a protracted standoff in August 2019 (Burgen 2019).

In contrast to other SAR NGOs, ProActiva is also involved in awareness campaigns, primarily located in West Africa. Recognizing the region as a common 'origin point' for many Mediterranean migrants, in 2019, they launched a pilot project in Senegal designed to address the 'origins' of migration (ProActiva 2020b; n.d). For ProActiva, these awareness campaigns were designed to inform potential migrants of the harms associated with the journey. This is a marked difference from other NGOs who, while recognizing the danger of the journey both towards Libya and in the Mediterranean, are not involved in what can be easily understood as highly problematic work. In effect, the awareness campaign developed by the NGO clearly replicates similar efforts by organizations like the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM). The campaigns help foster soft security approaches to the governance of migration by attempting to dissuade potential migrants from undertaking potentially dangerous journeys (Andrijasevic and Walters 2010). Awareness campaigns like those developed by ProActiva and the IOM, problematically assume that the persistence of migrant journeys through the Mediterranean result from a lack of awareness, rather than the inherent need for escape physical or economic hardship. Indeed, the dangers associated with migrant journeys through Africa, towards Europe is a now well-documented phenomenon (Squire et al. 2017; Crawley et al. 2016). These campaigns, however, reaffirm notions of 'inplaceness' for migrants while promoting a narrative of the unaware migrant, devoid of agency. Through these efforts, people on the move are rendered as a helpless victim in need of saving, not only from the sea but from themselves.

#### Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)

MSF is a large, well-established international NGO that has traditionally been involved in medical missions in 'crisis' and disaster situations globally. Primarily operational throughout the Global South, their work varies from running maternal health programs in Afghanistan, Ebola clinics in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), vaccination programs in Malawi, or outpatient clinics in Honduras (MSF 2020a). In 2015,

MSF announced they would be joining the still small field of NGO SAR actors in the Mediterranean. Similarly to Sea-Watch, the ending of *Mare Nostrum* led to MSF's decision to get involved in Mediterranean SAR operations (Cuttitta 2018b). Their initial SAR mission was coordinated through the MSF Amsterdam office and began in partnership with MOAS, by assuming responsibility for the medical care onboard (del Valle 2016). MSF quickly expanded their operations with two boats of their own, the *Bourbon Argos* and the *Dignity I*, as part of the growing response to migrant deaths at sea (Stierl 2018). In broadening the operational capacity, these two new vessels were run out of the MSF Belgium and MSF Spain offices (del Valle 2016). As of August 2020, MSF SAR operations had reportedly assisted over 81,500 people in the Mediterranean (MSF 2020c).

The initial discussions around a Mediterranean SAR operation were subject to intense debates within MSF. The hesitancy around MSF's involvement in SAR highlights the organizational struggle to negotiate the balance between the humanitarian imperative to act in times of 'crisis' and the willingness to actively confront European migration and border policy (del Valle 2016). In the early stages, there was little appetite for framing their intervention at sea around a more politically oriented 'no borders' discourse or positioning the mission as an active contestation of the international border regime. For MSF, "It was one thing to question immigration policies that contributed to marginalisation and suffering, but arguing for the demise of the Westphalian world order altogether was a step too far. The doctors 'without borders', it seemed, were not so borderless after all" (del Valle 2016, 29). Despite the initial hesitancy towards a more confrontational positioning with Europe, MSF were, however, the first NGO to call for safe passage, a position now taken up by all NGOs in the civil fleet (Esperti 2020). As one crew member stated, "[A] big part of MSF is advocating and showing the world what is happening and that mission it was, you know, very, very crucial, more than most others" (01 MSF 2019). The campaign to raise the awareness and visibility of the Mediterranean was intended "to spread a more humanized image of migration, one which is alternative to the stereotypical picture of an invasion caused by criminal actors, and, second, to ask for safe passages" (Cuttitta 2018b, 641). While originally less confrontational than other NGOs, their missions have increasingly engaged in advocacy campaigns to elevate the visibility of European inaction

and the repeated abuse of international law occurring at sea. MSF's targeted efforts have sought to hold European governments accountable for perpetuating the ongoing situation in the Mediterranean.

As previously mentioned, despite the initial partnership with MOAS, tensions quickly emerged due to the Maltese NGOs willingness to cooperate with security personnel. Speaking to the schism created by the stark difference in approach, one MSF representative suggested that "They [MOAS] regard themselves as service providers for the state. [...] We are in tension with the reality of the state, they are OK with it. They don't go beyond saying that no one should die at sea" (Cuttitta 2018b, 640). MSF was keenly aware of the possibility of being co-opted into the security network of state control through facilitating the data collection of migrants on board and were ultimately unwilling to be further enveloped in this process. Leveraging their humanitarian position, MSF opted to rebuff calls to turn over personal information, photographs and other identifying data to state authorities in stark contrast to MOAS (del Valle 2016). As a result of the ideological difference, MSF ended their partnership after a few months, but independently continued operations with their two other ships. In subsequent years MSF have gone on to work with other NGOs such as Save the Children and SOS Méditerranée through providing medical teams to assist in SAR operations. Their partnership with SOS was their longest-standing collaboration with another NGO, but during this time, they faced repeated efforts to criminalize their work on both the *Aquarius* and the *Ocean Viking*. In early 2021, MSF announced they would relaunch SAR operations in the Mediterranean with their own 77m repurposed research vessel, the *Geo Barents* (MSF 2021).

While MSF invokes the principles of neutrality and impartiality, there is also an acknowledgement of the impossibility of separating the humanitarian work from the political environment in which they operate (Cuttitta 2018b). Despite espousing these more traditional humanitarian principles, MSF has repeatedly shown a willingness to actively confront European state leadership. They have pointedly sought to illuminate Europe's perpetuation of a violent border regime while highlighting the direct and active role in producing a 'humanitarian crisis' in the Mediterranean (MSF 2015). The more

confrontational approach stems, in part, from the sustained efforts to criminalize SAR operations in the Mediterranean. Yet, their work at sea has also represented the first time MSF had explicitly denounced the actions of European governments (Vandevoordt 2019). Throughout their operational tenure in the Mediterranean, the confrontational posture has drastically, and rightly, escalated. In one statement, MSF says, “The responsibility for these deaths lies squarely with EU member states, as the concrete and inevitable outcome of their murderous policies of non-assistance and the active blocking of NGO rescue ships” (MSF 2020e). MSF’s political messaging has evolved from calls for safe passage, to directly blaming Europe for the continued shipwrecks occurring at sea (MSF 2020e), the facilitation of illegal pullbacks to Libya through European coordination with the scLYCG (MSF 2018), and stating that European inaction is condemning migrants to death in the Mediterranean (MSF 2020d).

### Jugend Rettet

Jugend Rettet, or Youth Rescue, is a small German NGO that began Mediterranean SAR operations in 2016. Similar to other NGOs, the primarily young, activist crew initially came to this work in response to the gaps created by European inaction. As one crew member suggested, Jugend Rettet, with other NGOs, “...seeing that there was no program for, like governmental program, for rescue at sea, and that these people kept dying. They well, they fundraised a lot. They got ships and they started building these crews [...] Almost every country has a rescue team. But I don't know of any rescue team that is faced constantly with numerous boats, with more than 100, 200, 300 people on board, right?” (31 Jugend Rettet 2019). In contrast to some other NGOs, Jugend Rettet understands the work as a rescue operation directly tied to the European political context. As they state, “We believe that the ongoing deaths on the Mediterranean have a political cause. Therefore, the solutions can only be political” (Jugend Rettet 2020a).

The contrast between the work of Jugend Rettet and other NGOs was noted by one activist now with Sea-Watch stating, “[I]n my perspective, some other NGO[s] shows...are more, let's say that they are more focused on the big purpose, which is



rescuing people, and not necessarily that brings with it all the awareness and all the political message” (42 Sea-Watch 2019). Their interventions at sea represent both a symbolic action and political intervention in European border politics that provides a platform to mobilise engagement (Jugend Rettet 2020b). Beyond serving as a platform for political mobilization, their work was also envisioned as a mode of empowerment for Europeans in resistance to the politics of neglect that have dominated the Mediterranean. For Jugend Rettet, the *luventa* is seen as “a concrete field of action and a symbol simultaneously. We ourselves are active and make a change. We're showing that it's possible to do something against the dying. We are breaking through the sensation of powerlessness which is dominating politics” (Jugend Rettet 2020b). As one Jugend Rettet activist states, “The *luventa* isn't just a rescue ship. It's a symbol of opposition to European policies which have turned the Mediterranean into one of the deadliest borders in the world. It's also a symbol of solidarity – and humanity – towards people fleeing war, persecution and poverty” (Amnesty International 2021).

Most notably, Jugend Rettet has been the subject of an intense and targeted campaign to criminalize SAR NGOs at sea, through the seizure of the *luventa* in 2017. Jugend Rettet had carried out 15 SAR missions before the Italian authorities suddenly detained them on charges of aiding ‘illegal immigration’ and collusion with smugglers (Trilling 2020). Afterwards, it was revealed that the ship's bridge had been ‘bugged’ by the Italian authorities as part of their investigation into the NGO (Boffey and Tondo 2019). In what has become a long and drawn-out investigation by the Italian authorities, despite the initial charges, the ten crew members had been waiting to see if they would face those charges before the Italian courts (Trilling 2020). In March 2021, Italian prosecutors announced formal charges for ‘aiding illegal immigration’ would be laid against 21 individuals, including the colloquially known, *luventa 10* (Akehurst 2021). The pending criminal proceedings and inability to go to sea have shifted their work from direct involvement in SAR activities to mount an active and vocal advocacy campaign denouncing the criminalization of rescue, European inaction and a drawing on a broad base of support for ongoing SAR operations. I will return to discuss the implications of criminalization for the civil fleet [[see Chapter 5](#)].

### Mission Lifeline

Mission Lifeline began SAR operations in late 2016 with their boat, *Lifeline* (formerly the *Sea-Watch 2*). The Dresden-based operation is one of the smaller NGOs operating in the Mediterranean. Similar to other members of the civil fleet, Mission Lifeline have been detained for lengthy periods stemming from criminal and administrative investigations by both the Italian and Maltese states. These investigations have resulted in relatively limited experience at sea. Following their six sea-going missions, *Lifeline* found itself engaged in a week-long standoff with 234 people onboard off the coast of Malta. The standoff culminated in their ship being detained for administrative violations and their Captain Claus-Peter Reisch facing charges of facilitating illegal migration. While the criminal charges were eventually dropped, the administrative charges resulted in a lengthy court battle that only ended in 2020 (Brincat 2020).

In 2019, they acquired a much smaller vessel, *Eleonore*, which was also captained by Claus-Pieter Reich. The ship was only involved in one rescue, which took over 100 people onboard their 20m boat and was subsequently engaged in an eight-day standoff with the Maltese and Italian authorities (Deutsche Welle 2019b). Upon disembarkation in Sicily, the ship was seized and as of December 2021, the *Eleonore* remains confiscated by the Italian authorities. Mission Lifeline also acquired two small sailing yachts, which they named *Matteo S* and *Sebastian K*, after the far-right Italian (Matteo Salvini) and Austrian (Sebastian Kurz) politicians, respectively. These two boats represented the first assets in what they termed, Yacht Fleet, which was modelled partly after the monitoring and observation missions initially undertaken by Sea-Watch. Ultimately, the project never fully panned out, resulting in only one support mission with Mediterranea. The ships have since been sold to Mare Liberum to continue the monitoring work in the Aegean Sea. Since then, Lifeline has also acquired another small ship, *Rise Above*, which began SAR operations in late 2021. Despite showing a continual desire for innovation and operational maneuvering to remain active at sea, they have had limited success in realizing those goals.

Mission Lifeline has a clear understanding of the role of the civil fleet in the Mediterranean. As one activist indicated, “[W]e help people who have to flee from countries like Libya or Turkey, and we try to help these individuals, this is one point. And the other one is to show there is always a way through this deadly border” (23 Mission Lifeline 2019). Their work is directly tied to the notion of flight aid and assistance for autonomous forms of migration. Mission Lifeline actively locates the responsibility for the continuing border violence at sea with Europe and the restrictive migration policies enacted. They state that “Although these people have a legal right to protection and to have their claim reviewed, the European Union blocks their way. The EU will go to any length to hold people who are on the run – even at the cost of human lives. This is inhuman (sic), and we cannot accept it!” (Mission Lifeline 2020).

### Mediterranea

Since 2019, *Mediterranea* has operated the retrofitted tugboat, *Mare Jonio* and a small sailing yacht, *Alex*. Founded, in part, by academics Sandro Mezzadra and Michael Hardt, it represents the only Italian civil fleet operation at sea. In identifying one of the core distinctions between *Mediterranea* and the civilian SAR operations, Mezzadra (2020, 430) is explicit in stating that “we insist that ‘Mediterranea’ is not an NGO but rather an ‘NGA’, a ‘Non-Governmental Action.’” The expansive understanding of *Mediterranea* joins together the action on both sea and land, which strives for an inclusive, society-wide response to the rising far-right politics of Europe. Speaking to this inclusive understanding of their work, one activist remarked, “Mediterranea, it doesn't belong to anyone particularly, but everybody's *Mediterranea*” (47 *Mediterranea* 2019). The Bologna-based group has received support from across Italy and maintains a small crew of sea-going activists and professional seafarers responsible for the operation and maintenance of the ship. As of July 2021, *Mediterranea* has been involved in roughly ten SAR operations. While maintaining a unique orientation towards their intervention at sea, *Mediterranea* has collaborated with other NGOs to develop the project “foreshadowing the formation of a real ‘civil fleet’” (Mezzadra 2020, 430).

Mediterranea is a broad-based platform with an explicitly political focus and activist orientation that goes beyond the humanitarian provision of care at sea. Instead, their work encourages the politicization of SAR operations as a core aspect of their response to the European border and migration discourse. While many NGOs have grown into a more political and confrontational understanding of the work at sea, Mediterranea was conceived with a very direct political intent. In doing so, they play an integral part in resisting the increasingly far-right politics of the Italian government through “radically contesting at sea, on the land, and in court its legitimacy, compelling the government to account for its action, and eventually succeeding in rescuing and bringing to Italian shores hundreds of migrants and refugees. In a way, we can say that we played a (modest) role in the process that led to the weakening and fall of Salvini” (Mezzadra 2020, 430). Emerging as an Italian-based movement engaged in migrant justice amongst a field of predominantly German, Spanish and French SAR NGOs was incredibly important as Italians were now actively resisting the xenophobic, anti-migrant politics that has been dominating Italy through their work at sea. As one activist succinctly states, “when we go on the sea, [it] is the most important 'fuck' to Salvini in the last two, three years” (47 Mediterranea 2019). Mediterranea also takes partial credit for the “radicalization of humanitarian actors,” which has shifted the understanding and narrative around civilian SAR operations and a critical rethinking of the approach to this work spurred by “a reflection on the implications of the criminalization of humanitarian intervention” (Mezzadra 2020, 430).

### AlarmPhone

While not having a physical presence at sea as other NGOs, AlarmPhone plays a crucial role in Mediterranean SAR operations. The AlarmPhone is a civilian-led, 24-hour emergency hotline dedicated to responding to migrant distress cases at sea. The self-organized network has members located across Europe and North Africa who have maintained a presence in the Mediterranean region since 2014. Speaking to the core operational and political beliefs of the NGO, one activist suggest, “AlarmPhone, it’s a political project which believes in freedom of movement for all, so of course, it’s about alerting, or [...] trying to prevent loss of life at sea” (02 SOS 2019). Practically, AlarmPhone

“functions as a tool to listen to and support those moving through dangerous spaces [...] besides offering advice to precarious passengers and the option to make their emergency situations publicly known, it monitors whether authorities respond to distress calls” (Stierl 2016, 562). Upon receiving a distress call from a migrant boat in transit, AlarmPhone alerts both state and non-state vessels to the presence of the ongoing case. Coupled with their formal communication efforts, they also simultaneously publicize the case through social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Through this process, they are (theoretically) able to leverage the visibility of ongoing distress cases through vocalizing their presence at sea to pressure state and commercial actors to intervene (Heller, Pezzani, and Stierl 2017). AlarmPhone effectively represents a low-tech, low-budget solution to making the otherwise unseen spaces of the sea visible to the public through the act of listening to migrant distress calls, enabling AlarmPhone to “disobediently observe the Mediterranean Sea” (Heller, Pezzani, and Stierl 2017, 10). Importantly, AlarmPhone embodies “...a citizen watch platform which also tries to [...] make it less easy for states to be able to wash their hands from stuff that is happening outside of their territorial boundaries” (02 SOS 2019).

AlarmPhone has led calls for ‘Ferries not Frontex’ drawing on the need for safe and legal routes for migrants en route to Europe. This stems, in part, from the recognition that despite European efforts to close borders through the surveillance and militarization of the sea, people will continue to move and face potential death at sea. Moreover, AlarmPhone recognizes that even if state actors adhere to their legal responsibility to rescue migrants in distress at sea, the continued necessity for migrants to cross the Mediterranean in unseaworthy boats will ensure that shipwrecks and migrant deaths at sea remain a persistent reality (Stierl 2016). Increasingly due to the active non-cooperation between European Rescue Coordination Centres and SAR NGOs, AlarmPhone is also involved in alerting civil fleet ships at sea to ongoing distress cases. This provides vital information to NGOs incapacitated by the lack of European cooperation, as they are effectively left to blindly navigate the SAR area. Through this work, AlarmPhone is “able to turn to non-state actors and thereby challenge the monopoly of state authorities in this borderzone” (Stierl 2016, 571). Their coordination with NGOs

also becomes an effective measure to circumvent and contest state control over the space of the sea.

### Louise Michel

One other notable recent addition to the civil fleet is the ‘fast rescue boat’, *Louise Michel*. The repurposed French coast guard vessel is financed by the underground street artist, Banksy, and began operations in August 2020 (Tondo and Stierl 2020a). The ship itself was painted by Banksy and is artistically emblazoned in bright pink while depicting a small girl holding a life ring in the shape of a heart on the side of the ship. While not a formal NGO, the ship is a feminist-anarchist project named after the French anarchist, Louise Michel. The *Louise Michel* is a smaller, fast-rescue ship with limited capacity to take people on board. On their inaugural mission, they conducted multiple rescues involving over 130 people. Due to its size, the ship quickly became incapacitated and required assistance from the *Sea-Watch 4*, which was also on their maiden sea-going mission. Louise Michel represents an open and direct confrontation with the politics of Europe. In recasting the idea of search and rescue, they suggest that their work is also an act of “solidarity and resistance” (Louise Michel 2020).

### **‘The Activist, the Antifas and Me’ – Motivations within the Civil Fleet**

The heterogeneity of the civil fleet at the organizational level is also reflected in the motivations of the individual activists amongst the NGOs. As a result, there is a wide variance in how individuals situate themselves within the field, and ultimately, drives their involvement. What I attempt to do in this following section is loosely sketch out some of the varying motivations for an individual’s involvement in the civil fleet. Similar to discussing the various actors in the civil fleet from an organizational perspective as outlined in the previous section, my attempt to identify the myriad of individual motivations should not be understood as an exercise in typologizing. Rather, the following analysis seeks to further highlight the heterogeneity and complexity of the civil fleet. Certainly, some individuals approach SAR as a form of humanitarian care, while others have a politically combative vision for the work. Indeed, some view SAR as a pragmatic response, while others have experienced an evolution in their motivations and understanding of the

work. Yet, clear distinctions are often hard to come by, with overlapping or intersecting motivations commonly appearing amongst the crews. For example, while there might be an explicitly political motivation for an individual's involvement in SAR, there can often be an intersecting element of humanitarian care and compassion that clearly emerges alongside. Similarly, while others may approach SAR with a less politically-oriented desire to resist the violence of the European border regime, there is also routinely an acknowledgement of the deeply political implications embedded in this work.

Despite the diverse orientations towards SAR operations, a crew member with SOS suggested there needs to be an openness to including these voices in the work. In pointing out the need to bring people together for a common cause, they said,

I have a different perspective from other activists. For example, I think that also activism has to be open to people who are maybe less radical and that you can also politicize people especially through this kind of project, that is so mediatized so I find it really inspiring when people that are not your average Black Bloc and will come and join it and recognize that kind of work is important. (02 SOS 2019)

The inclusive approach to activism draws on the desire for individuals to be involved in the movement, recognizing the need for a functional collaboration to support the work. This 'big-tent' orientation is also identified Sea-Watch crew members, with one suggesting that "You have on this boat, mixed people. You have the seafarer. You have the activists, the Antifas and me, like people like me. I'm a very normal guy" (17 Sea-Watch 2019). The persistence of Europe's failure to positively respond to the ongoing violence at sea has brought together a broad coalition of people drawn to varying aspects of the work, whether located in more humanitarian notions of care, or more radical, emancipatory visions of free movement and support for autonomous migration. Nevertheless, a common dominator across the civil fleet is the clear desire to ensure that no one dies at sea. Beyond this pragmatic point, the heterogeneity of the civil fleet is evidenced in the differing nuanced approach's to how that is achieved. Yet, the civil fleet brings together seemingly disparate strands within the individual organizations to the point of functional operation in Mediterranean SARscape.

Despite the ideological or tactical differences amongst the civil fleet, the public perception of their work often leads to a homogenizing effect. In doing so, all NGOs are effectively lumped together as a monolithic whole, which can be seen as problematic for some. Pointing to this idea, one member of the more strictly humanitarian-oriented SOS Méditerranée suggested that “[T]he public perception doesn't necessarily notice the differences between the different organizations. They just see them all as a group of search and rescue organizations without something that there are different positionings and different types of engagements... which can be an issue” (22 SOS 2019). While not without creating friction, the heterogeneity also serves as a generative process, spurring dialogue within each NGO and across the civil fleet. Within the SAR community, the common cause is not necessarily oriented towards a ‘no borders’ politics or situated within more critical visions of free movement. Instead, the commonality often coalesces around less radical slogans demanding ‘Safe Passage’ or ‘Ferries not Frontex’. From a practical level, while some NGOs and activists may hold more radical political visions for the work, they often bring these diverse orientations towards activism together in response to the context of the Mediterranean.

The fluid movement between SAR organizations complements the heterogeneity of the NGOs. As one Jugend Rettet activist noted, “There were lots of crew that went on one ship and then on the other and then they would just change ships, and they would do basically the same work, same kind of operation in the different ships.” (31 Jugend Rettet 2019). This fluidity is, in part, a response to the shifting politics of the organizations coupled with the mounting criminalization of the civil fleet, which routinely bars ships from going to sea. Often, there is a disconnect between the motivations and political orientations of the individual activists in relation to the approach of the NGO they work with. As one nurse with MSF states, “I'm way more an activist than MSF is [...] I always, or almost always understood why they would do that to preserve their integrity and their neutrality, which you're right, up to a certain point, neutrality is blurry. But they are definitely more neutral than I am, or I am more of an activist or however you want to phrase it” (01 MSF 2019). While recognizing the need for MSFs approach to the work in such a manner, there remains a tension with how that plays out in relation to the individual



motivations to fight back against harmful European policies. Another activist with Sea-Watch similarly noted that “All the other NGOs, also their crew, are not always like the NGO and their politics” (43 Sea-Watch 2019). Mediating political differences between individual perspectives drawn to more passive humanitarian motivations and more radical visions of an alternative societal structure, is part of what makes the homogenous characterization of these dynamic NGOs challenging to reconcile, both on the individual and organizational level.

### *Humanitarianism, Moral Duty and Anti-Politics in the Civil Fleet*

The humanitarian imperative to save lives, provide care, and assist people in need, is one of the overarching motivations for many civil fleet activists. As one doctor said, “For me, it's mostly a humanitarian project really because I'm here as a doctor and this is my daily work, what I'm doing here on the ship, I do in Germany as well. For me, it's just that I want to...I want all people to have access to medical care and not medical care being...a privilege to people” (20 Sea-Watch 2019). Despite the focus on the provision of medical care to people in need, they also suggested, “I do understand that Sea-Watch is political work and also, I was involved in the political work when I did media, yeah but it's mostly humanitarian for me” (20 Sea-Watch 2019). Yet as they also identify, while there is a humanitarian component tied to their involvement, many recognize the politics innately embedded in the work.

As I discuss in the following chapter [[see Chapter 3](#)], humanitarianism is routinely operationalized in some highly problematic ways. Most notably, well-founded critiques have identified the perpetuation of tropes enmeshed within patronizing and paternalistic visions of ‘the Other’. Moreover, other critiques have identified how humanitarianism are also rooted in the ongoing legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Despite these problematic narratives and practices, activists have made concerted efforts to reconcile this criticism in different ways. Speaking with one activist, they acknowledged some of the criticism associated with humanitarianism, specifically in the context of SAR operations. Yet, they also distanced themselves from that characterization by saying,

[S]o the humanitarian word gives this sort of self-defined hero complex maybe. Whereas actually just doing the human thing, which should be to preserve the lives of other humans, I think could be my sort of preferred way of defining the work—just doing the right thing, really. It's not even just about being human. I think it's just doing the moral thing, the right thing. So a moralism...there probably is a term...moralitarian [sic] [*laughter*]. (24 Sea-Watch 2019)

For them, and many others, their involvement in SAR is more closely associated with a moral imperative to do 'the right thing'. Recognizing the ongoing nature of the Mediterranean boat migration phenomenon, some activists draw on a sense of moral duty to help people in need as part of their motivation for involvement in the civil fleet. As once activist identifies, there is a moral imperative to act, stating that “[I]t becomes like morally...like a moral obligation to have rescue vessels ready there to give assistance to these people. So from a moral point of view, I think it's also pretty clear, pretty obvious that somebody's had to do something, right? It's not the ideal situation at all because, I mean, ideally, people wouldn't even get in those boats” (31 Jugend Rettet 2019). In locating their primary motivation for involvement in SAR emanating from a perspective of humanitarian care, one crew member noted a similar sense of moral guilt associated with inaction. Elaborating on this, they pointedly state that “I really can't imagine looking back ten years into the future and, you know, thinking half a million people drowned and we didn't give a fuck. That absolutely terrifies me” (26 Mission Lifeline 2019). Understandably, the acuteness of the suffering at sea provides, at least in part, a moral imperative to intervene at sea.

The moral duty to rescue manifests in other ways. For crew members with a seafaring background, they often invoke the notion of the duty-bound seafarer's code as part of their motivation to be involved in SAR operations. Within seafaring traditions, there is an entrenched belief that no one should die at sea, regardless of who they are, where they are found, or why they are in that situation. As one crew member explains,

It's [the sea is] a barren, dangerous place, and we don't really belong in. And we can only survive in there with ships. And you know, it's utterly inhospitable. And all travelers on the sea need to look after each other. And if that's not happening, if the authorities have that responsibility aren't doing that, then it's

civilians, to fill the gap, first of all. So, it is a humanitarian response, but actually, I think it's just more of a...for me, it's just a seafarer's response. You can't just let people drown. And for the navies and stuff to be present, nearby and to not take that responsibility, it's like the cardinal sin, you know. You just can't do that. You know, even in wartime, people did that. You know, they'd sink someone's ship and then rescue the survivors...it is a response to people that need help (13 Sea-Watch 2019).

The sea is rightly understood as a vast, potentially dangerous, and unforgiving space, often foreign to many. Indeed, the physical realities of transiting an inhospitable space also produces a necessity for those at sea to assist others and commonly recognized by seafarers of all backgrounds. Beyond the legal obligations to assist boats in distress under the UNCLOS, SOLAS, and SAR Conventions, the notion of a seafarers code has within in it a humanitarian duty of care. Stemming in part from the inhospitable nature of the sea and recognizing that without assistance, people will die at sea, many working within the civil fleet are drawn to SAR from a sense of moral duty to help.

In speaking to SAR as a more pragmatic response, several crew members drew on the anecdote of firefighters responding to a structural fire. As one crew member describes, "if a building is burning and there is fire people on the scene, no one asks them to stop and wait to understand who put the fire, is it the people inside or not, did they do it purposely or not, how much is it going to cost if we save them to find them another place and what kind of resources we are going to need. We just save people and then everything else is decided" (01 MSF 2019). Similar to the notion of the seafarers code, rescuing people in distress is closely associated with responding to an exceptional, emergency situation, without considering why, how or who they are responding to in that moment. Instead, the civil fleet is understood to have the capacity and capability to respond and therefore, a duty bound necessity to assist those in need emerges.

As I discuss later in the chapter, most NGOs and activists associate the work being done as a form of political intervention. Yet, some desire to separate the politics from the act of rescue and the overarching work of the civil fleet. Recognizing the implications of an explicitly political orientation to the work, one activist preferred to see the work as "rights driven" rather than as part of a wider "political agenda" (46 Sea-Watch 2019). They

continued saying, “I don't like to think of it as a political tool...and it's very polarizing as well. And so, I think in some ways both sides use the issue for their own gain and they're human lives and I think that there's an element of callousness in doing that” (46 Sea-Watch 2019). In part, it adopts an ‘anti-political’ stance towards SAR that divorces the action from the wider politics of mobility in the Mediterranean. Indeed, some are even critical of the political orientation toward the work. Understanding SAR as a form of political activism, rather than a more pragmatic form of humanitarian response, does not sit well with everyone in the SAR community. As one crew member said,

[M]y first kind of first awareness [...] was when certain crew members refer to themselves as activists, not humanitarians, that I really started to dwell on what the significance of this wording meant. And the political fight came before the situation, whereas for me, the situation sparked the response. And I think that's really a very kind of practical way to assess how you perceive your involvement in this situation. If people weren't drowning, I wouldn't be here (26 Mission Lifeline 2019)

Putting the politics of the work before the humanitarian response was cause for concern for this particular individual. They continued on to express that, for them, SAR almost became an opening to graft anti-statist, resistance politics associated with the struggle for the freedom of movement onto the more altruistic visions for humanitarian assistance for those in need. One crew member suggested that they were not naïve to the political realities behind the work being done by SAR NGOs, as they stated, “You can't do this and say it's not political” (07 Sea-Watch 2019). Yet for them, despite the political context associated with SAR, their focus was primarily humanitarian. Echoing this sentiment, another crew member acknowledged the limits to the desire for a purely humanitarian approach saying, “[W]e cannot avoid [that] the consequences are political” (37 Sea-Watch 2019). While some view the humanitarian care work as divorced from the wider political context, many acknowledge that despite their personal orientations to the work, it be clearly tied to the border politics of Europe. Yet, as I develop throughout the remaining chapters, SAR operations of the civil fleet, cannot and more explicitly, should not be separated from the politics of mobility intricately tied to the work. Instead, the mere presence of the civil fleets at sea is, at baseline, a political response that counters and contests the violence of the Mediterranean borderscape.

*Evolving Motivations: Locating Border and Mobility Politics in SAR Operations*

Despite many individuals initially motivated to join Mediterranean SAR operations from a morally driven, humanitarian duty to care, there is often an ideological evolution occurring for many in the civil fleet. For some, their experience at sea has spurred a growing politicization in how they view the work. Speaking to this evolution, one crew member notes, “It was not my motivation...I'm not a ‘no border’ activist or something before, so...but from mission to mission, I think I will be more of that, because it's crazy, what you see” (17 Sea-Watch 2019). For others, a profound shift has occurred in how they understand civil fleet SAR operations in response to their continued involvement in the project. A medic with Sea-Watch with previous international humanitarian relief experience in places like Afghanistan and along the so-called ‘Balkan Route’, explains this personal evolution by stating,

It changed a lot for me. At the beginning it was the same motivation, more or less, that I had for all the other stuff, that ok, saving a life is enough and I don't have to change the system [...] But it became more political over time because when you see what is happening, and when you see how governments and authorities react to what you do, which was at the beginning a very naïve humanitarian, ‘Nobody should die’ kind of thing and a very unpolitical thing in a way. (03 Sea-Watch 2019)

They continued to explain that the politically-rooted transition in their orientation towards SAR emanates from the increasingly restrictive European approach to bordering at sea [[see Introduction](#)]. In particular, the growing criminalization of the civil fleet, coupled with outsourcing SAR responsibilities to the scLYCG, and the withdrawal of European rescue assets have reinforced the Mediterranean Sea as a violent borderscape for people on the move. In identifying their political evolution they go on to explain,

And then they [EU member states] start pulling back, they start closing borders, they start implementing things that are so ugly and so dangerous and so horrible by finding loops in their own set of rules. And then for me, I became much more political in my views and also in my views about this, because I don't want to be a part of a Europe that says, ‘I have given myself humanitarian standards so I cannot take people back to Libya, I cannot put people back in concentration camps because that is against my rules, but what I can do, is I can take Libya, who does not have these rules, they never

signed, they don't have a government, they don't have a proper organization of a country, and therefore they are not part of any of these treaties'. (03 Sea-Watch 2019)

The move towards a more deeply political understanding of civil fleet SAR operations in this case, stems in part from the European response to migration in the Mediterranean. For this medic, the perpetuation of violence at Europe's margins serves a marked divergence from their political imaginary of what they thought Europe was supposed to represent. More importantly, it spurred their desire not to be complicit in allowing this violence to go unchallenged. Similarly another crew member echoes this sentiment by suggesting that "I don't want to go along [with] a system that considers that there's human beings of different categories and that some are worth being saved and others are just ok left dying" (22 SOS 2019). One activist with Jugend Rettet recalled initially coming to the SAR work from a more altruistically humanitarian orientation towards the work, bound to a duty to care for those in need. Yet, this vision has dramatically shifted in recognition of the need to specially locate blame for the deteriorating situation at sea. They said, "I feel that considering this purely humanitarian is blind. Because that's almost like admitting that this problem is just some misfortune that fell upon these people. And that's hardly the case. [...] So to say that it's humanitarian, that it's only a humanitarian question, issue, I think it's almost like saying that it's nobody's fault" (31 Jugend Rettet 2019). The move towards a more political understanding of SAR emerges from recognizing that the separation of the humanitarian and the political is an impossibility given the context and environment of the work. Developing this critical evolution in the following chapter [[see Chapter 3](#)], I discuss how this often-entangled notion of humanitarianism can have deeply problematic implications in migration governance. Yet, as another activist notes, their envelopment in the politics of SAR became something inescapable as they suggested,

Sea-Watch's primary goal is to save lives. But instantaneously, you become part of this political conversation. And as soon as you're part of that, you're part of that [...] I think it is very interesting the way that my mind shifted from, oh, I'm just here to save lives. You know, I'm here to drive a RHIB and whatever. But the reason I'm here is political. Actually, what I'm doing is a political statement, and although that's not my interest, that's what has happened. (24 Sea-Watch 2019)

The political turn, in this case, was somewhat inadvertent as they initially joined because of their practical skill set. They very quickly recognized, however, that their involvement in this work and the continued presence at sea was, in effect, a deeply political statement. While not motivated by politics, the inability to divorce the politics from the work being done became inescapable. Even for individuals guided by more traditional humanitarian visions of SAR, there is often an acknowledgement that the persistent failure of Europe's border policy to address boat migration at sea in a manner that also, importantly, facilitates free movement, is innately tied to a wider politics of violence, exclusion and xenophobia. The shifting political landscape marked by the rise of far-right populist leaders in Europe, such as Matteo Salvini (Italy), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Sebastian Kurz (Austria) and Marine Le Pen (France), coupled with the ever-evolving context of SAR operations in the Mediterranean has also lent itself to the reorienting the motivations for many in the civil fleet.

#### *Activism, Resistance and Political Motivations in the Civil Fleet*

The political motivation for involvement in SAR operations is an overriding current for many. While the extent of the political vision differs for each individual and NGO, there is a clear move towards a more political understanding of the work of the civil fleet. For some, their political motivation is rooted in activism. Succinctly stated by one individual, "I'm an activist. I am in Mediterranean because I am an activist" (47 Mediterranean 2019). For others, their participation stems from their connection to the anti-racist, activist community in Germany, rather than an explicit connection to the sea. One crew member said, "I come from a left-wing activist background in Berlin. I always did anti-racism, out of parliament work in Berlin, so I already had this activism background" (18 Sea-Watch 2019). Echoing this sentiment, another activist states, "I'm coming from the radical left-wing movement in Germany. So as I'm saying sometimes, I'm not being here because I like boats. I'm ok with boats now, but, I started or I got involved with the migration issue, especially the issue of people fleeing from their countries and ending up in shitty situation[s] in Central Europe, [in] 2013" (43 Sea-Watch 2019). They continued on to detail how their medical support for a migrant hunger strike in Munich was a formative moment

in their connection to migrant struggles in Europe and led to a seemingly natural fit within Sea-Watch. As they remarked, it was “Quite a tough experience. Quite interesting as well [...] the migration issue is always, like for my political work, always like the most important or...an issue that is moving me a lot. And especially connected with like medical treatment, so Sea-Watch was kind of, ok, that basically seems like an action [that] I should take part [in]” (43 Sea-Watch 2019). As seen in this case, amongst other, the work at sea is clearly understood as an extension of the activism individuals engage in on land. Similarly, another activist noted that they were involved in supporting migrant housing squats and other social projects with migrant communities in Europe (47 Mediterranea 2019). Their involvement with Mediterranea then became an extension of the political struggles they were fighting for in Italy.

There are intersections between humanitarian notions of care that are also directly tied to an understanding of civilian SAR operations as a resistance to the border regime. One activist states, “It's definitely also humanitarian. I mean, we have people who are in physical danger. But it's also a form of protest against the border regime that I do not feel to be justified in any...with any arguments [...] Yes, it's definitely also a form...also call it a form of protest” (27 Sea-Watch 2019). The work of Sea-Watch makes an important connection between a public demonstration or direct action involvement in resistance to European bordering regimes while simultaneously enmeshed within a practical form of assistance in support of people on the move. As one activist described that Sea-Watch,

[F]its in that struggle and supports people on the move and I think that's important to support. Yeah, sometimes it feels a bit like that it's really strange that it is very political to save lives. I mean, it should not be political. But then again, if there were no borders, then Sea-Watch would not even have to exist, so I think Sea-Watch exists because there are borders and so people have to take dangerous routes and then, I think it's good and in line with what I want to do to support those people in their trying to reach Europe. (41 Sea-Watch 2019)

SAR is routinely understood as a direct-action resistance to the European border regime for many within the civil fleet. One activist recognizing the politically embedded nature of the work suggests that Sea-Watch, “...have become the players on [in] this



political game [...] The overall goal or achievement, in my opinion is...well, we're doing politics. I don't think politics has a real target, it's just something you do in the present, like on the very...something very direct and the work you're taking, the actions we're taking, it's a very direct action" (16 Sea-Watch 2019). This involvement is understood as a means of 'doing politics', which stems, in part, from a response to the ongoing criminalization of SAR and Europe's facilitation of refoulement occurring through the scLYCG. The confrontational political orientation towards Europe, as mentioned by some, challenges the more neutral approach taken by other NGOs. One activist was critical of the less politically defined members of the civil fleet. For them, adopting a non-confrontational position with state actors obscures fault and responsibility by insisting that if European states are "...responsible for a problem, then, it's better and more honest to also blame them for that, and to go there and to say 'why don't you stop it', instead of, 'we saved again 300 people, again 500,' that are numbers, but I want to change it" (08 Sea-Watch 2019). Rather than seeing SAR as a passive intervention in the Mediterranean borderscape, it becomes situated as a form of direct action in challenging the violence of the European border regime.

Embedded within the direct action motivations, SAR operations become a space in which political claims for free movement and anti-border politics are also located. Recognizing the confluence between the humanitarian imperative and the politics tied to the intervention, one crew member suggested "it was a way, with direct action to achieve both saving lives and also fighting a political fight" (48 Sea-Watch 2019). For this activist, however, beyond serving as a form of direct action, there was a desire for more radical claims to be made by the NGO stating "...safe passage is what Sea-Watch advocates for, but for me, it goes beyond that. It goes to open borders..." (48 Sea-Watch 2019). SAR operations, for many, are often innately tied to the aspirational goals that seek freedom of movement in a world without borders for all people. This fight for freedom of movement is embedded in an anti-border politics, as one activist identified by saying, "...[The] final thing I'd like to see is [...] to tear down all borders [...] So what I want [is], freedom of movement for every human being [...] But of course, Sea-Watch will not make this happen, [...] the goal of these missions, I would say, is rescue people, basic[ally] prevent[ing] from

drowning and then...educate EU citizens on...on what a fucked up government we have” (18 Sea-Watch 2019). Short of tearing down borders, recognizing that SAR will not achieve that in the long run, the advocacy work to expose Europeans to the injustice of state actions becomes integral to the mission of the civil fleet.

The fight against borders is located, in part, with how they operate as a filter for certain types of mobile bodies (Walters 2006). One activist remarked, “[F]or me borders are a really big problem. They are like a perfect membrane. Everything can pass through them, but humans. So, I'm definitely, one to also want to join the fight against borders. I know that's a utopian vision, but it's already considered a fight to save people from drowning, it shows where we have gotten that basic human rights aren't expected anymore” (51 Sea-Watch 2019). Freedom of movement for others is understood in the context of access to ‘universal rights’ as one activist states, “If I'm free to move, everybody should be free to move. I know this is like a utopian way of thinking, but still, it doesn't prevent me from doing it” (35 Sea-Watch 2019). While acknowledging the utopian nature of this vision and recognizing the implicit challenge of achieving that goal, they continued to explain,

I do believe that we should live in a world without borders. But I also know that this won't happen from today, until tomorrow [...] I think...and this is an important issue to talk about...I think the constructive dimension, namely how to organise a society where migrants, people from abroad come and arrive, this work is to be done...on land, in the cities, in different things that are going on there. (35 Sea-Watch 2019)

SAR, in this orientation, becomes a form of ongoing transversal struggle for freedom of movement located both at sea and beyond. Despite the challenge associated with the struggle for a universal vision of free movement, there is a productive aspect of the work achieved through concerted efforts to rethink how society is organized on a more fundamental level. In doing so, recognizing the need to address the inequality and violence built into the current international border system, one activist states,

I think for me, the involvement in actually being at sea came from my politics and for me [...] I guess a radical belief in equality and the current way that the migration regime is set up globally is inherently unequal and produces

violence. So, for me, the personal involvement is about trying to address that inequality and violence and feeling a personal drive to work with other people who believe in the same things on these topics. (02 SOS 2019)

Locating the inequality produced by the global bordering system, these motivations also often come with recognising the necropolitical governance of the space of the sea and the resistance to the continuation of this practice. Indeed, persistently restrictive migration policy directly contributes to death and violence in the peripheral spaces of EUrope as the natural environment is operationalized as a tool for controlling migrant mobility [[see Chapter 4](#)]. In particular, there is a clear association with EUrope's intentional failure to provide accessible, safe, legal migration routes, which ultimately means that despite people on the move continuing to seek irregularized entry to the continent, they will continue to die in these marginal spaces.

Identifying the inherent violence of borders spurs the politicization of the work and more importantly, an understanding of SAR as a form of resistance tied to civil fleet interventions at sea. As one crew member states, “[T]here is an element of trying to resist through a current normative way that things are set up and believing that, that set up is inherently violent. So, therefore, by facilitating or assisting people in need in situations which are created by that setup, then I do feel that it's a form of...or that there is a political element to it” (02 SOS 2019). Tied to this political, activist motivation is a clear undercurrent that understands SAR as a means of subversion and resistance to bordering practices, if not the organization of the Westphalian state system more broadly. In part, the work does not exist solely because of migrants at sea, but also because of the failure of EUrope to respond to the continued presence of people on the move in the Mediterranean. NGO SAR operations can then be viewed as counter-hegemonic action and resistance to the development and emergence of isolationist visions of Fortress EUrope. As one activist states, their involvement in the work of the civil fleet “...is fighting Fortress Europe, what we're doing here” (35 Sea-Watch 2019). The resistance work to the construction of Fortress EUrope is an integral aspect of the interventions at sea as a means of continually pushing back against the isolationism of the region. Echoing this vision, another activist says, “I think that, like the resistance that the NGOs...NGO

resistance to European border policy is super important. It's...let's just say it hasn't been insignificant. It has an effect on EU border policy in some ways" (33 Sea-Watch 2019). The resistance to state bordering practices is partially operationalized through the re-politicisation of the work through recognizing the politics of space, borders, and migration, embedded in Mediterranean SAR context (Cuttitta 2018b).

For many, locating the spatial politics of SAR is also associated with recognizing the connection between capitalism, colonialism and Europe's destabilizing role throughout the Third World. The continuation of colonial politics embedded in an imperial vision of the Mediterranean ensures that European states have a direct hand in producing an environment in which people will continue to die at sea. The involvement of the civil fleet in that space then seeks to counter the sea as a deadly border space and reorient it as a space for political intervention. Indeed, as long as the sea remains a deadly border space for people on the move, it will also serve as a space for political intervention for the civil fleet.

## **Conclusion**

The civil fleet is a heterogeneous collection of organizations and individuals actively working to contest the violence of state borders at sea, that ensure precarious and often deadly journeys for people on the move. Across the field, a noticeable shift towards an increasingly political visions of SAR operations, even amongst the less politically confrontational NGOs, is clearly occurring. Despite many people coming to SAR operations in the Mediterranean out of some sense of duty to help people in need, more akin to a traditional conceptualization of humanitarianism, this particular orientation is increasingly changing at both the organizational and individual levels. The shift is commonly tied to recognising how that work is situated within a broader political context in Europe and the global border regime. The politicization of the work recognizes the politics of space, borders and migration, which constitute the Mediterranean borderscape. The involvement of the civil fleet in that space represents an attempt to resist the operationalization of the sea as a deadly borderscape and reinterpret it as a space for political intervention and solidarity with people on the move.

### Chapter 3

## **Enacting Solidarity: Irregularized Migration, Search and Rescue and the Maritime Borders of Europe**

### **Introduction**

The civil fleet have played a vital role in SAR operations in the Central Mediterranean. Their work actively and directly seeks to counter the violence of state bordering practices that have exacerbated the so-called ‘European refugee crisis’. In this chapter, I explore the contentious politics embedded in the work of the civil fleet and situate their operations as a means of enacting solidarity with people on the move. In doing so, I seek to complicate the understanding of SAR NGOs at sea as mere providers of humanitarian care operating within the logic of humanitarian reason. Instead, I recast this work as a form of politically driven solidarity with people on the move. While I have discussed the heterogeneity of the civil fleet in the previous chapter [[see Chapter 2](#)], the focus here is to reconstitute the labour of SAR as a form of politics emerging from this diverse range of actors at sea. As with the broader dissertation itself, my exploration here is directly centred on the work of Sea-Watch.

Stierl posits several vital questions to consider when examining the potential for political dissent to emerge from a humanitarian perspective on SAR operations. He suggests it is essential to reflect on several issues, including: “To what extent do humanitarian aid practices depoliticize specific conflicts? What intended and unintended political effects do they have? And in which ways is there a possibility for political dissent to be formulated and enacted from within humanitarian reason?” (Stierl 2018, 706). Following Stierl, I explore whether solidarity can emerge from within the notion of humanitarian reason by problematizing the perceived binary between political activism and depoliticized humanitarian action. In doing so, I argue that the civil fleet serves to enact a contentious politics of solidarity with people on the move, rather than a form of reconstituted humanitarian reason guided purely by an ethic of care. In turn, this chapter reorients NGO SAR operations from the more passive understandings of humanitarianism at sea, towards a politically active form of solidarity.

Solidarity, as envisioned here, contributes to the breaking of social order directed by the state border system, which categorizes, structures, and filters the movement of people across borders by challenging these increasingly violent forms of state regulation and exclusion. As I return to argue [[see Chapter 4](#)], those particular acts of solidarity serve to contest the space of the sea and the violence of borders embedded within. In these acts, the contestation of state bordering practices becomes implicit in these active political claims to freedom of movement. While contextualizing SAR as a form of solidarity, I recognize it does not escape the problematic framings of humanitarianism tied to this work. Moreover, this is not an attempt to overlook how SAR feeds into the broader structures of migration management and border control. Solidarity here is envisioned as both a liberatory and subjugating act. This work contributes to ongoing efforts to recontextualize and repoliticize the space of the sea.

### *Chapter Outline*

In this chapter, I begin by unpacking the discourse of humanitarianism and problematize the concept in relation to SAR operations. In doing so, I highlight the contested nature of humanitarianism at sea and challenge some of the dichotomous understandings of humanitarianism and solidarity. Second, while I challenge the dichotomy produced between humanitarianism and solidarity, I also examine important distinctions between the two, and situate the enactment of solidarity as a political intervention located within a material and discursive practice. Third, I explore how NGOs like Sea-Watch navigate relationships of care as a form of enacting solidarity, rather than situating the work within traditional conceptualizations of humanitarianism. Fourth, I discuss enacting solidarity as representative of a contentious politics at sea that not only serves to fill gaps of state protection, but to further expose the cracks in the narratives of state control at sea. Finally, the chapter concludes by addressing the enactment of solidarity at sea as a means of repoliticizing SAR operations in the Mediterranean.

## Conceptualizing Humanitarianism

The work of SAR NGOs is often characterized as a form of humanitarianism by both activists and the broader public discourse [[see Chapter 2](#)]. While humanitarianism is routinely used to signify different forms of care work, particularly amongst marginalized populations, there remains a wide range of differing understandings of what exactly constitutes humanitarianism (Barnett and Weiss 2008; Ticktin 2011; Malkki 2015; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Fassin 2011). Stemming from the conceptual plurality of humanitarianism, there is not a coherent, unifying or ‘objective’ definition or interpretation of what constitutes humanitarian action (Calhoun 2008). Some approaches to humanitarianism adopt a narrower conceptualization of its application to temporally bound moments of emergency as a means of saving lives through the provision of acute relief to human suffering. Here, humanitarianism is often predicated on an ethic of care. Rather than serving as a transformative act that alleviates or changes the conditions of an individual’s existence, it focuses on addressing and alleviating the pain of the present moment (Ticktin 2011). The immediacy of the present situation also relies on crisis narratives rooted in a supposed existential emergency to justify, legitimize, and support those actions (Mezzadra 2020). In these supposedly exceptional circumstances, there is an effort to both fix and reproduce the crisis narrative. The idea of the humanitarian emergency has become “an awkward symbol, simultaneously of moral purity and suffering, of altruistic global response, and the utter failure of global institutions” (Calhoun 2010, 29). Other scholars, however, identify humanitarianism envisioned within the scope of protecting and enhancing human rights for individuals in positions of vulnerability and embedded within more all-encompassing notions of “promoting the well-being of mankind” (Cuttitta 2018a, 785). In effect, the lack of consensus around what constitutes humanitarianism can lead to understanding it as what Connolly (1993) terms an “essentially contested concept.”

### *Exploring Humanitarian Reason*

Beyond the lack of a coherent or unified definition of humanitarianism, a deeply critical understanding of the politics and political orientation associated with this work remains. Criticisms of humanitarianism stem, in part, from the notion of ‘humanitarian

reason' and the implications of this work as a form of governmentality and state control (Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2011; Walters 2012). For Fassin (2011, xii), humanitarian reason is captured as an orientation towards care that is "morally driven, politically ambiguous, and deeply paradoxical strength of the weak." In particular, humanitarian reason operates to depoliticise instances of intervention as a mechanism that results in the "masking and reproduction of structural power relations" (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020b, 411). This masked reproduction of structural power relations become visible in SAR operations and embedded within a governmental logic of control as humanitarian reason acts to "govern precarious lives" (Fassin 2011, 4). Acts of humanitarianism commonly evoke certain notions of a seeming apoliticalness. This depoliticized or even anti-political orientation is often purported by prominent international institutions such as the International Committee for Red Cross, which are "structured around the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence" (Pallister-Wilkins 2017b, 23). As one of the fundamental principles associated with more traditional conceptualizations of humanitarianism, impartiality is often espoused by organizations such as MSF, where aid or assistance is distributed based on need rather than the relation to broader political contexts (del Valle 2016). Care is then couched in the notion of neutrality, where humanitarian assistance is to be understood as representing a technocratic fix to the suffering of the individual, rather than a form of political intervention (Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2011).

Humanitarian reason serves to create subjects both in terms of developing the narratives of humanitarians as heroes (Malkki 2015) while migrants are relegated to passive victims in need of assistance (Vandevoordt 2019; Aradau 2016). This subject creating act established through problematic narratives of people on the move can also result in individuals being reduced to mere 'bare life', as they are stripped of political agency and relegated to voiceless subjects (Agamben 1998). Victimhood is routinely tied to the individual's innocence, while relying on constructions of victimhood as a form of powerlessness.<sup>24</sup> This is not to suggest that individuals have not been confronted with

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<sup>24</sup> It is also notable that not all victims are 'created equal'. Indeed, idealized victims are often racialized, gendered and infantilized in this hierarchy. In these intersecting constructions of victimhood, there is also a need for the perceived innocence of the individuals involved.



tremendous and multiple forms of violence. These narratives, however, become problematic when the political subjecthood of the individual becomes reduced to the position of a powerless victim, devoid of agency as often takes place with racialized migrants at sea. The discursive framing shifts the understanding and subjectivity of the individual as a recipient of aid through addressing physical and biological needs, rather than an articulation of political subjectivity.

Care can be inspired by genuine material and discursive expressions of solidarity. It is not to say that this does not, nor cannot exist. However, when these notions of unidirectional ‘care’ towards ‘victims’ become embedded in the reproduction and perpetuation of an asymmetric relationship it becomes increasingly problematic. As Mezzadra (2020, 433) suggests, “What is important to stress is that even in the direst conditions people are never completely victims, are never fully deprived of their capacity to act and resist.” Humanitarianism relies on narrow emotional response and limits the response to the material act of assistance where care is situated as the benevolent acts of states or institutions (Ticktin 2016). Narratives of victimhood and powerlessness then rely on processes of dehumanization of the individual, which positions migrants as unequal, reduced forms of humanity in the production of bare life.

Humanitarianism, for those adopting a critical perspective on such actions (Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2011), replicates power relations structured around paternalistic, vertical relationships, which depoliticizes the inequality between groups (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020a). Moreover, it has a long and well-documented history shaped by practices of colonialism and imperialism (Barnett 2011). Indeed, this work is also increasingly guided by efforts to control migration through situating the humanitarian response within frameworks of management and control as a means of regulating mobility (Dadusc and Mudu 2020; Pallister-Wilkins 2017b). Humanitarian reason serves to depoliticize the individual, the act, and the space of intervention. In doing so, the acts of care become divorced from the conflicts and contexts that have produced the situation, which are often rooted in an ongoing history of colonial exploitation (Mezzadra 2020). Rather than seeing acts of mobility as a form of autonomous movement [[see Chapter 5](#)],

migrants at sea are strictly portrayed as passive victims of unscrupulous smugglers, subject to the benevolent care of the humanitarian provider, and devoid of any connection to historical colonial linkages that shape individuals and their journeys (Pallister-Wilkins 2017b; Andersson 2017).

### *Migration Management and the Governmentality of Care*

Humanitarianism has long been associated with a politics of control. In the Mediterranean context, both state and non-state actors have utilized the language and discourse of humanitarianism, which has simultaneously contributed to developing and strengthening the border regime (Perkowski 2016). Though the association of humanitarianism within forms of governance appeals to a higher moral principle concerned, at least superficially, with the alleviation of suffering (Fassin 2007a), it becomes understood as a function of border control shaped by governmentality (Walters 2006). As Walters (2011, 243) suggests, humanitarianism is not merely "a set of ideas and ideologies, nor simply as the activity of certain nongovernmental actors and organization, but as a complex domain possessing specific forms of governmental reason." Indeed, there is a burgeoning literature echoing this notion of humanitarianism as an emergent governmental technology operationalized as a tool of border and migration management (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Vaughan-Williams 2015a; 2015b; J. M. Williams 2016; 2015). Rather than understanding humanitarian reason as paradoxical or existing as a limited set of principles and ideology, it functions as a complex form of governmental reasoning predicated on control. Humanitarianism becomes operationalized to control mobile populations that functions as an asset deployed by state actors. Conversely, this also means that situating NGO work as an exclusively humanitarian act makes it increasingly susceptible to cooptation by state actors in controlling migrant mobility [[see Chapter 4](#)].

Particularly in the space of the sea, the state operationalization of humanitarian reason is often employed in a contradictory manner. In what Stierl (2018, 708) identifies as "EUrope's selective or schizophrenic humanitarian reason", there is a puzzling contradiction that emerged in the discourse on humanitarianism at sea following one of

the largest shipwrecks of the so-called European refugee crisis, and coinciding with the culmination of the Italian military-humanitarian mission, *Mare Nostrum*. In this effort, he notes the response of the European Council, which emphatically declared: “The situation in the Mediterranean is a tragedy. The European Union will mobilise all efforts at its disposal to prevent further loss of life at sea and to tackle the root causes of the human emergency that we face, in cooperation with the countries of origin and transit. Our immediate priority is to prevent more people from dying at sea” (European Council 2015 cited in Stierl, 2018). Particularly when applied to Mediterranean SAR operations, the seemingly paradoxical understanding of humanitarian reason has largely shaped the justification of European border policies to legitimize their actions as a form of saving lives and protecting human rights, despite the embedded exclusionary and prohibitive nature (Cuttitta 2018a). Here, the operationalization of humanitarian reason creates an environment and subject position for state and non-state actors to insulate from criticism. In effect, these acts of care are purported to ‘save lives’, despite the continued perpetuation of structural violence inherent in European border policy (Pallister-Wilkins 2015). In effect, this problematic narrative produces a necessity for increased border governance built upon the logic that in the absence of strong border control mechanisms, people will surely continue to die at sea.

Autonomous migration serves directly challenges the governance of the borderlands, producing a rupture in the preservation of social order and exclusion intended by restrictive border regimes. The humanitarian governance of borders creates new points of friction appearing along multiple fronts (Walters 2011; Tsing 2004). Humanitarianism can dampen this apparent friction produced by migrant mobility who, out of necessity, often do not adhere to border management and migration control efforts. The focus on management and good governance depoliticizes border policies to the point where it becomes merely a technocratic process designed to address migration flows (Cuttitta 2018b). Rather than acknowledging the deeply embedded politics tied to seemingly innocuous bureaucratic decisions, the managerial focus obfuscates the centrality of the state in producing the violence tied to these bordering efforts. The act of governance tied to humanitarianism becomes relegated to that of technocratic process

and develops its own form of ‘technostrategic language’ (Cohn 1987), while subsequently politicizing irregularized migration to reaffirm the exclusion from the state. In part, the perceived neutrality of humanitarianism enables the incorporation of broader forms of governmental control, especially along the frontier spaces of the Global North (Mezzadra 2020). In the following chapter [[see Chapter 4](#)], I return to interrogate the emergence of what Walters (2011) terms the ‘humanitarian border’ in greater depth.

### *Humanitarianism as a Contested Concept*

Humanitarianism exists as a contested process involving an expanding number of actors working at the margins of Europe. While there is warranted cause for criticism in the operationalization of humanitarianism, it is not a homogenous characterization, and therefore, a degree of caution should be applied. As previously noted, assistance and aid have historically been situated as moral gestures detached from the political situation in which they exist (Dadusc and Mudu 2020). This reality is especially true where humanitarianism is centred around the “ethical and moral imperative to bring relief to those suffering and to save lives” (Ticktin 2006, 35). While certainly correct and not easily avoided, in the context of NGOs like Sea-Watch, the assistance provided is not simply understood as “individual moral gestures detached from politics” (Dadusc and Mudu 2020, 7). As Ticktin (2016, 265) argues, “Indeed, when humanitarians do feel compelled to condemn war outright, they renounce their status as humanitarians; to pass explicit judgment is a political stance and not compatible with humanitarian work, even if humanitarianism is in itself, of course, a form of politics.” In part, this is spurred by the apparent anti-politicalness of humanitarianism. Once judgement is passed and NGOs move beyond neutrality, impartiality, and independence, towards making a political claim against the border regime, it shifts that relationship.

However, it is worth noting that the commitment to traditional principles of humanitarianism is a political decision in and of its own right. Nevertheless, for organizations like Sea-Watch, politics remains a central pillar to their work, nor are they blind to the context they operate within [[see Chapter 2](#)]. Conversely, the wider politics of the European border regime is something readily identified by many activists as innately

ties to their work. As a result, while many push for this work to be viewed within a more altruistic humanitarian context, activists routinely identify the impossibility of divorcing the politics from their actions. The inability to separate the political implications from the supposed humanitarian altruism associated within civil fleet SAR operations is an implicit acknowledgement of the politics entrenched within the border regime. The broader context of European border politics playing out in the Mediterranean ensures that the work of the less antagonistic NGOs in the civil fleet remains deeply political, despite their less political orientation towards the work.

While the language of humanitarianism remains ubiquitous, some have speculated there is a utilitarian calculation behind efforts to employ such terminology in the characterization of the work of the civil fleet. Speaking to the discursive utility of adopting the language of humanitarianism, Debono and Mainwaring (2020, 96) identify, “SAR NGOs employ a discourse of solidarity, social and global justice, and humanitarianism. Yet, it is the latter that they emphasize in their official communications and on social media. It also underpins their claims to legitimacy when accused by states of rule-breaking. Indeed, contrary to the solidarity work we encountered in Europe, SAR NGOs continue to emphasize the ‘emergency’ nature of their work and the moral imperative of humanitarian action in the face of death in the Mediterranean.” In part, the emphasis on humanitarianism serves as a ‘strategic essentialization’ (Spivak 1994) of the work that becomes more palatable to broader populations than a more ‘radical’ message predicated on ‘no borders’ politics, or as a form of escape or flight aid.

Some scholars, however, situate the relationship between humanitarianism and political activism or resistance as diametrically opposed phenomenon. As Dadusc and Mudu (2020, 9) argue, “While borders fuel discontent, rage and potential resistance among displaced and immobilised populations, humanitarianism has the role of taming, channeling and subtly repress this discontent.” Indeed, humanitarianism plays a role in taming violence and perpetuating the governmentality of border management, which certainly exists in particular narratives of the SAR operations. However, recognising the political context of the work is undoubtedly not taken lightly by NGO activists. Beyond the

scope of academic criticism, many within the SAR community acknowledge the problematic aspects of the work that can be reconstituted as a form of control and keeping people in place. As one Sea-Watch activist notes,

For me, personally, humanitarian work is, a lot of the time, part of the externalization of borders because it's mainly White people going to other countries to settle people on the move and fix them in a specific point. Like a refugee camp in the country, it's basically that. You create an infrastructure so people will gather there. But then also it's people who have needs, and it could be also considered as solidarity work somehow, so it's really tricky. So, I think it really depends who is doing it and if people have a reflection on it and I think some, also big organizations have really a huge reflection on that. And I think they're also working with this thing of never wanting to create a permanent space. (52 Sea-Watch 2019)

It is important to understand the care embedded within SAR as deeply tied to a broader political goal. In effect, the civil fleet is not solely operating to mitigate harm. The work is, more importantly, tied to shifting the narrative around the interventions at sea. It is imperative to have the practical work of SAR connected to a more explicitly political goal of affecting a broader societal change, rather than exclusively situated in a humanitarian ethic of care. Pointing to this idea, another Sea-Watch activist suggests their work is dedicated to “[...] trying to change the system in such a way, that it's no longer needed, that people would actually need your assistance. And I think humanitarianism is only offering help, but not solving any problem, well maybe in some individual cases, but not in a structural way. Whereas radical action would do that” (41 Sea-Watch 2019). There is an acute understanding among many civil fleet activists that readily identify how the politics of their work is situated in relation to the European border regime. Indeed, given the organizations' heterogeneity, more altruistic notions of humanitarian action that are seemingly adverse to, or devoid of politics, do exist. Sea-Watch, however, has actively sought to position its work as a political intervention since its inception. Concerted efforts to locate their ongoing actions, both at sea and on land, as a political intervention moves beyond the traditional notions of humanitarianism as might be seen elsewhere. Instead, there are resolute efforts to move away from an altruistically humanitarian characterization of the work, and towards a more radical politics of free movement. Making the conscious decision to eschew the politically ambiguous humanitarian orientation towards SAR

recasts interventions at sea beyond a simple ethic of care, which opens space to counter the monopoly of state control at sea (Stierl 2018).

There have been efforts to reconceptualize humanitarianism to encompass a more political orientation towards the work. This is partly evidenced in efforts to resist hierarchies that exist within more traditional conceptualizations of humanitarianism. Some scholars have viewed this altered relationship as a form of ‘subversive humanitarianism’. Encompassed within this reconceptualization, subversive humanitarianism represents “[A] shift from a humanitarianism that transforms forced migrants into recipients of aid, to a form of solidarity that allows more room for their socio-political subjectivities” (Vandevoordt 2019, 264). For Vandevoordt, subversive humanitarianism becomes operationalized through acts of civil disobedience, the contestation of symbolic spaces such as the sea, assuming equality among all people, and the reconstituting of social subjects.

Moreover, humanitarian care can also become radical or subversive in the context where it is unwanted and criminalized by the state (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020b). As I return to discuss later in the dissertation [[see Chapter 5](#)], the criminalization of the civil fleet also serves to turn what may have been understood as relatively benign actions in one instance (i.e. assisting people in distress at sea) into something politically radical or subversive through the criminalization of those acts. The reconstituted notion of subversive humanitarianism represents a shift from more traditional forms of humanitarianism where migrants are passive recipients of aid, towards one that acknowledges and elevates the political subjectivity of the individual. Building upon this idea, I suggest that it is more productive to see the work of SAR NGOs as enacting a contentious politics of solidarity with people on the move. Understanding the solidarity actions of the civil fleet as a form of flight aid that supports autonomous mobility, rather than simply humanitarian care, serves to locate the political stakes embedded in the work.

## **Solidarity and the Civil Fleet**

Conceptually, solidarity has been used rather expansively. Here, I situate acts of solidarity in sea rescue operations in a similar manner. In doing so, I aim to position SAR operations as a form of solidarity with people on the move. Moreover, rather than seeing solidarity as a diametrically opposed concept in relation to humanitarianism, I suggest they become co-constitutive in the acts of sea rescue. In positing this recharacterization of sea rescue, I argue that solidarity emerges from an active and direct engagement with the politics embedded in the migrant crossings at sea. Reading SAR as an act of solidarity with people on the move is an intentional effort to shift the discourse surrounding these interventions at sea as an alternative to liberal notions of humanitarianism. I re-position the work as an alternative to the paternalistic forms of care and control situated within traditional notions of humanitarianism, which has garnered significant criticism as discussed above. Solidarity, as utilized here, is not to be seen as an essentialized or neatly defined category of action. Nor am I intending to impose a rigid definition to encompass all that is bound within the term. Rather than understanding solidarity in any fixed terms, I choose to follow other critical interventions on the concept that builds on Laclau's notion of a 'floating signifier', and employ the concept as such (Tazzioli and Walters 2019; Agustín and Jørgensen 2019; Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020b). Solidarity then exists as a sort of 'placeholder' (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020a) imbued with both descriptive elements that shape the understanding, while marking a broad-based conceptual tool to characterize the work of the civil fleet in the Mediterranean.

There has been growing reference to solidarity in the literature on various political movements tied to migration and people on the move, which has come to define much of the work constituting the field (Tazzioli and Walters 2019; L. Johnson 2015; Rygiel 2011). Not only is solidarity common among the migration literature, but it also "represented one of the political backbones of the EU since its creation" (Tazzioli and Walters 2019, 176). In the context of Mediterranean boat migration, solidarity is an often-referenced ideal touted by the European Union as a plea for cooperation and coordination regarding migration management and redistribution efforts while serving as a foundational narrative of the EU imaginary (Grimmel and Giang 2017).



*Acts of Solidarity and the Politics of Belonging*

There is a well-documented presence of solidarity efforts on land, operationalized through providing food and shelter to people on the move alongside welcoming newly arrived migrants into communities throughout Europe (Nyers and Rygiel 2014; Rygiel 2011; Vandevoordt 2021; Dadusc 2019; Mensink 2020). Indeed, some notable examples arose in Germany during the summer of 2015; often referred to as the ‘Summer of Welcoming’. During this time, citizens could be seen lining up at train stations to welcome the newly arrived migrants to Europe (Hamann and Karakayali 2016). As part of these efforts, people would routinely provide travel advice, transportation and shelter, often occurring despite the increase in violent right-wing populist backlash to growing migrant arrivals across the continent (Ataç, Rygiel, and Stierl 2016). In the Mediterranean, solidarity emerges in support of autonomous forms of mobility that are initiated and sustained by people on the move. Migrants themselves are the genesis of this process through their implicit claims to free movement alongside the resistance to, and active denial of state bordering regimes intent on constraining their mobility. Rather than situating NGOs as paternalist saviours of the destitute, enacting solidarity with people on the move represents a form of ‘political struggle and action’ that supports autonomous forms of mobility being undertaken by migrants (Mezzadra 2004b). Solidarity here, works to mitigate the harm associated with irregularized crossings and helps to facilitate the ‘right to escape’ (Mezzadra 2004a) when confronted with an oppressive and violent border system.

As enacted through the work of the civil fleet, solidarity is cast as an antagonistic response to the traditional conceptualizations of humanitarianism, and relies on the politicization of their work. Politicizing the assistance provided to people on the move is crucial to the broader fight against the violence of borders. Speaking to this notion, one Sea-Watch activist suggests the work of the civil fleet “needs to be political because it's often political decisions that are against...it can be, political decisions that are taken against humanity. And then I would say, it means giving as much as possible, equality to every human being. And since that's not a state that we are in. It's something that needs

to be fought for and justified as political” (27 Sea-Watch 2019). Solidarity is situated as a conscious political positioning that supports and advocates alongside people on the move. Enacting solidarity through SAR operations in the Mediterranean amplifies and elevates the political claims being made both for free movement and safe passage, as well as, for inclusion and belonging within Europe. As one activist has stated, “Solidarity is standing together. We’re not giving them a voice – they already have a voice. They’re screaming. No-one is listening” (Amnesty International 2021). Through these actions, solidarity functions as a means of subverting “discourses of neutrality, assistance and protection” (Dadusc and Mudu 2020, 14). More potently, however, situating the work as a form of solidarity acts to “...challenge and refuse the control and commodification of migrants and the extraction of value from their mobility. Instead of reproducing the apparatus of assistance and detention and facilitating the management of migration, they aim at creating collective forces in resistance to detention, deportations and racialised hierarchies and violence” (Dadusc and Mudu 2020, 14).

The fluid and dynamic reality of autonomous migration provides space where enacting solidarity with people on the move challenges a static conceptualization of citizenship and belonging. Enacting solidarity does not find its political potency solely in the work of SAR NGOs, but rather, through people on the move challenging state efforts to control their mobility creating new forms of political subjectivity (Rygiel 2011; Aradau 2016; Topak 2021). In effect, people on the move act as “citizens without frontiers” and, in doing so, “produce interstitial spaces between sovereignty and connectivity, and create political subjectivities that traverse frontiers. It is these acts that traverse frontiers and produce political subjectivities that are creative, inventive and autonomous despite limits imposed upon them” (Isin 2012, 10). Building on this, Darling (2017, 730) suggest that acts “are recognised by the production of new subjects. Acts are thus disruptive practices of subjectification, but unlike political interventions, they actualise their disruptive potential and constitute new political subjects.” Enacting solidarity is then understood to create disruptive potential. In part, the work of SAR NGOs contributes to this disruption by supporting people on the move in contesting Europe’s exclusion of the irregularized non-citizen.

As Stierl (2016, 572) suggests “subjects do not need to be ‘authorised’ by sovereign powers to claim and perform (citizenship) rights, protection and movement.” While migrant mobility exists as a direct challenge to state authority and ability to exclude, NGOs represent one potential mechanism to facilitate the movement and inclusion denied to the irregularized non-citizen. In this manner, solidarity can contribute to producing forms of citizenship and belonging beyond the state. Moreover, enacting solidarity builds upon claims focusing on legal citizenship status or changes in state policy enabling the inclusion of people on the move, and shifts “towards migrants who act as citizens by participating in protests or continuing to move across borders” (Vandevoordt 2019, 5). Drawing on Agustín and Jørgensen’s (2019) work on solidarity, DeBono and Mainwaring (2020, 92) suggest that solidarity should be understood as a “relational spatial and contentious practice” creating new political subjectivities, identities and imaginaries. Encompassing a wide range of activities, solidarity can exist on a broad spectrum between more humanitarian orientations towards care and assistance, to more anarchistic forms of activism predicated on a ‘No Borders’ politics and freedom of movement for all (Walia 2013; N. King 2016; Anderson, Sharma, and Wright 2009; Jones 2019). In the following chapter, I return to discuss the spatio-political dimensions of enacting solidarity at sea [[see Chapter 4](#)].

While there is a marked difference between certain forms of solidarity and humanitarianism, they do not automatically stand in contrast to one another, nor are they mutually exclusive terms. For example, as Tazzioli and Walters (2019) note, the provision of food is often understood as a form of humanitarian action. However, they go on to question what happens when that provision of food is organized and identified as a form of solidarity. There is often an element of humanitarian care embedded in acts of solidarity, while solidarity can also exist in acts of humanitarianism and assistance. However, to loosely demarcate solidarity from humanitarianism, one can locate a divergence with solidarity existing as a political response to oppression, that is not simply a form of care, but an active contestation of the violent structures of oppression that undergird the perpetuation of that system. Enacting a contentious politics of solidarity moves away from

exclusively producing subjectivities of suffering by taking sides, making political claims, and by rejecting the humanitarian ideal of neutrality. Vandevordt (2019, 252) posits an alternative reading of humanitarianism centred on more inclusive forms of solidarity where “The key idea is that humanitarians ‘respond to people as fellow humans’ rather than define people as recipients of aid or instances of bare life.” Indeed, solidarity is not simply meeting needs or tending to bare life, but actively recasting alternative forms of societal organization that could exist.

In speaking of the distinction between humanitarianism and solidarity, one activist suggests, “it doesn't stop with the act of rescuing people because the mere act of rescuing people would not mean much if it's not accompanied by political work” (42 Sea-Watch 2019). Similarly, another notes that “On one hand, we are saving lives. But on the other hand, it's not just about saving. It's about political claims. And apart from concrete political claims like safe passage, it's also yeah, I would even name it a philosophical attitude to reclaim equal rights for everybody, or to tackle our privileges” (35 Sea-Watch 2019). While the discourse of humanitarianism is commonly utilized in justifying the interventions of the civil fleet, this has also shifted in recognition of the political implications of SAR. The deeply embedded political nature of the work has become constitutive of the interventions at sea, which has produced a changing narrative around the work itself. Shifting relations in solidarity towards a more explicitly political focus assists in subverting the discourses of neutrality, assistance and protection more commonly found in traditional humanitarian orientations of the work.

In developing the concept of political solidarity, Chandra Mohanty situates the idea “in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here – to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances” (Mohanty 2003, 7). Political solidarity is constituted by foregrounding communities that have chosen to fight together and predicted on mutually established relationships in these

diverse communities that emerge. In the Mediterranean, the collective and intentional practice of solidarity is centred around the fight for free movement, but also occurs more broadly.

In building on Mohanty's (2003) understanding of solidarity, Tazzioli and Walters (2019) caution against liberal conceptualizations of the term that have framed pro-migrant solidarity networks emerging across Europe. They argue that, at times, employing a discourse of solidarity can lead to a tendency towards "flattening asymmetrical and racialised power relations in the name of an unconditional support to human beings whose survival, presence and social life in a space is under threat for disparate reasons" (Tazzioli and Walters 2019, 180). They continue by pointing to "the need of reinscribing the notion of solidarity within the 'fabric' of social and political struggles. Such an analytical angle enables a perspective on current solidarity acts and networks in Europe less as gestures of hospitality towards the migrants than as the laborious and ongoing production of temporary common terrains and safe spaces" (Tazzioli and Walters 2019, 180). Similarly, Mezzadra (2020, 424) argues, "the link between solidarity and the building of a new collective power as well as the emphasis on the need and possibility to radically transform the 'world' we inhabit continue to provide us with a powerful and effective framework for political theory and action." Enacting solidarity with people on the move serves as a transformative practice capable of shifting the landscape through the actions SAR NGOs undertake at sea and on land, functioning as means to repoliticize SAR more broadly. Rather than strictly neutralizing difference, solidarity can be reinscribed on social and political struggles, seeing the work less as a form of hospitality, and instead, as a creation of a common space for political action.

However, in understanding acts of solidarity, it is important to heed the caution that acts not be understood in a reductive form, or relegated to mere practice. Rather, acts contribute to the breaking of, and with, the social order established within a particular society where we can then understand acts as "a rupture to the given" (Isin and Nielsen 2008, 25). Building on this, Schwiertz and Schwenken (2020b, 15) suggest that "Actions and practices do not become an act by their intention, but by their effect." Through the

dynamic interplay between the intention and the effect, the emergence of the transformative and emancipatory potential of the enactment of solidarity with people on the move appears. The work of SAR NGOs in concert with people on the move has contributed to multiple ruptures within European society. By supporting irregularized populations, the civil fleet challenges the exclusion of people on the move as they make claims to belonging through autonomous forms of migration. In part, this has exposed the fault lines within the liberal imaginary of Europe, while also reckoning with the ongoing colonial and imperial legacies directly tied to migrant mobility at sea. Acts of solidarity are political through the articulation of injustice experienced by people on the move, and amplifying claims for both addressing and rectifying this injustice. These acts of solidarity also exist as performative practice in the transgression of borders and the material challenge to state attempts to control borders and autonomous forms of mobility. In doing so, SAR ships become utilized as “flexible platforms for the development of legal and political battles for an alternative public opinion” (Mezzadra 2020, 430). Solidarity serves as a ‘radical alternative’ to humanitarianism that rebuffs the commitment of neutrality and impartiality, while actively taking sides in opposition to the violence perpetuated by an exclusionary European border regime.

Solidarity is not assumed as an inevitable process that is guaranteed to emerge in times of struggle. For Squire (2017, 14–15) acts “do not in any sense rely on a particular conception of what an actor is or does.” Instead, acts of solidarity must be actively fought for both as performative and material practices. Schwiertz and Schwenken (2020b, 413) suggest that this is understood as “doing solidarity.” In this context, solidarity in practice by Sea-Watch exists not only as a means of facilitating recognition and inclusion but also establishing practices and relations of solidarity that redefine the understanding of citizenship more broadly (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020b). Rather than maintaining bare life, activist solidarity with people on the move pushes beyond the provision of care, becoming a performative mechanism that supports claims to free movement and autonomous forms of migration. Given the transgressive nature of irregularized border crossings, which can further replicate exclusionary effects produced by borders, solidarity requires a continual, ongoing and indefinite process of reproduction (Schwiertz and

Schwenken 2020b). Solidarity is not to be conceptualized as a finite instance, or temporally bound act, but something that must constantly be reproduced in the relationship.

Enacting solidarity does not stop at the point of rescue, but requires a continued commitment to the ongoing struggle of the political fight for freedom of movement in the fight for inclusion and belonging. Opening borders alone will not address the inequality embedded in the global economic system. Rather, it requires a continued political fight to challenge the oppressive societal structures that perpetuate this process. As Mezzadra (2020, 437) argues, “Important as it is to intervene along international borders and maritime frontiers, border struggles are far from over once they are crossed. A politics of freedom of movement must take seriously the proliferation of borders beyond territorial demarcations.” Locating the work of the civil fleet as part of an ongoing political struggle, one activist echoes this sentiment arguing, “When I said that it doesn't stop with the act of rescuing people because the mere act of rescuing people would not mean much if it's not accompanied by political work. And that's, I think, what risks to be done calling like you said, you use the same word for humanitarian work that is aimed to the defence of our borders and to the repression of a phenomenon” (42 Sea-Watch 2019). It is imperative that the work tie into the broader politics at play beyond the acts of care for people in distress. While there is work being done at sea, there has also been an effort to connect this to broader efforts on land through movements such as Seebrücke, which translates to ‘sea bridge’, that emerged in 2018 as a response to the closure of European ports to NGO ships in the Mediterranean (DeBono and Mainwaring 2020). The work of the civil fleet does not end at the point of rescue but is something that continues to manifest in the ongoing relations to struggles for belonging and inclusion occurring beyond the point of disembarkation. Solidarity represents an ongoing and continual process that challenges the multiplication, shapeshifting, and fluid production of borders beyond the state's territorial demarcation.

In light of the discussion on solidarity and humanitarianism, there remains a need to express a degree of caution in the discourse utilized in civil fleet responses to

autonomous migration. In speaking to this, Mezzadra (2020, 434) rightly identifies, “There is a need to repeat that speaking of the autonomy of migration does not imply romanticizing migration or downplaying the hardship, pain, and violence that surround it. It rather opens up a perspective from which to analyze and possibly criticize in a more effective way such hardship, pain and violence as well as what are usually called the ‘structural’ roots of migration.” As I maintain through this dissertation, this project is not an effort to romanticize irregularized migration, or the acts of solidarity undertaken in the work of the civil fleet. Instead, it is an effort to highlight how civilians have responded through direct action against a global border regime predicated on exclusion through enacting solidarity with people on the move and contesting the manifestations of state power at sea.

### **Resisting Hierarchy: Enacting Solidarity through Relational Care**

As mentioned above, the existence and persistence of hierarchical, asymmetric power relations between the subject and provider of care, remains one of the most problematic issues within humanitarian work. These relationships, while challenged, can also be present in solidarity work despite efforts to establish flatter, more horizontal relationships within these movements. In creating horizontal relationships, the embedded resource and power imbalances, which in many cases are also tied to citizenship, continue to exist and remain evident within SAR. As one activist points to, “We are divided, not by my skin colour or like cultural background, but with our passports. So I think the basic thing is about citizenship. So we have the citizens, and then we have the non-citizens on the other side [...] But as soon...because then it gets a bit more complicated as soon as you get your passport out, we can use the tool of citizenship, I would call it” (43 Sea-Watch 2019). Solidarity with people on the move in SAR operations will likely never be free of unequal power dynamics, or achieve true equality given the present restrictions of the international state system and citizenship regime.

These asymmetries are further complicated by the different lived experience between activists and people on the move. In the shift towards relationships predicated on horizontality, Vandevordt (2019, 259) cautions that it is not that “the relations between



volunteers and refugees are effectively horizontal in these initiatives. There are power asymmetries in every social relation, especially if one of the actors depends on the other for his/her basic needs – several scholars have indeed described the power dynamics at play within such initiatives.” Instead, they argue there is a particular discursive power present within this shift where “these horizontal relations are significant as a discourse circulating among volunteers, and as a genuine belief that guides their actions” (Vandevoordt 2019, 259). This shift in how these relationships are understood and approached, in part, serves to distinguish between the solidarity actions of SAR activists and traditional forms of humanitarianism. The distinction between solidarity and humanitarianism is one that “ultimately relies on the inequalities of lives that the latter is predicated upon, as well as on the asymmetrical, see hierarchical, power relations that humanitarian interventions entail and foster” (Tazzioli and Walters 2019, 181). In situating SAR as a form of solidarity as opposed to traditional understandings of humanitarianism, it recasts the work as a practice that intentionally resists perpetuating the hierarchies that rely upon inequality and asymmetrical power relations.

Solidarity can then be understood as part of a dynamic and fluid relationship between citizens and non-citizens that seeks to move away from the vertical power imbalances towards a more horizontal relationship (Schwartz and Schwenken 2020a). While concerted efforts are made to reduce the existence of these hierarchies, it remains difficult to entirely eliminate them in practice. Though power asymmetries exist, more critically oriented NGOs, such as Sea-Watch, are cognizant of this reality and attempt to combat this within their organizations, through active efforts to work against further perpetuating or deepening those hierarchies. Notably, the “discourse of horizontality [...] puts in place a distinctly relational ethics of care that allows room for local contexts, individual biographies and mutual trust” (Vandevoordt 2019, 260). These actions “have the potential to develop people’s empathy and solidarity beyond national belonging, to build new relationships in a post-migrant society, and to form a counterweight to anti-migrant movements and policies” (Schwartz and Schwenken 2020a, 507). The material and discursive effort to position the work as a form of solidarity, in progress towards horizontality, is predicated on a relational ethic of care, rather than the replication of top-

down, hierarchical forms of aid. This distinction remains an essential point of departure between solidarity and more traditional forms of humanitarianism and why I have sought to position the work of the civil fleet as such.

Humanitarian care work has received due criticism for paternalistic orientations towards the recipients of assistance, yet care also remains an integral aspect of enacting solidarity. While critical readings of solidarity advocate for the creation of more horizontal relationships, it is not situated, “in simple contrast to humanitarianism, compassion, and charity. Rather, the modern concept of solidarity itself is derived from traditions associated with these concepts” (Schwartz and Schwenken 2020a, 496). In the context of enacting solidarity, however, care shifts towards taking a more relational understanding. Enacting solidarity as a relational form of care emerges from social and political practice. In some cases, this can also evolve and be facilitated by the institutionalization of these groups in the form of NGOs, as seen in the Mediterranean (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019).

The transformation of humanitarianism to include solidarity has led to what some have called the rise of ‘solidarians’ (Rozakou 2017). This shift represents a concerted effort to embed an emancipatory politics in the humanitarian acts of care and challenge the fixed, dichotomous and hierarchical relationship between the ‘victim’ and the ‘humanitarian’. In the context of Sea-Watch, this can take shape in seemingly minor ways, yet they remain an important divergence from replicating these vertical relations of power. For example, beginning with the terminology used by Sea-Watch activists to describe people on the move brought on board the ship. Illustrative of the discursive shifts occurring in the provision of care within solidarity movements, they are commonly referred to as ‘guests’. Initially, this struck me as a curious description for someone recently pulled from an unseaworthy boat and brought on board the *Sea-Watch 3*. I probed this idea in an early interview, and it was explained by suggesting,

So...the ship is our home for the time we are on it, and if extra people come onboard, they are our guests, and that’s how people should be treated that come see you at home. And it has a lot to do with how we think the world should be in general. Because they are fleeing, they are refugees when they leave, and they will be refugees when they get back to land in Europe, and

they will not be treated very well. But while they are with us, in the limits that we can, they will be treated as our guests [...] it sets the mood for everybody onboard. (03 Sea-Watch 2019)

While the guest/host binary remains a hierarchical one, it is in these small efforts that seek to shift the relationship between passive recipients of care, to more genuine relationships of hospitality. In any context where care is provided, there is an always implicit and often explicit asymmetry in that relationship. In the Mediterranean, this remains abundantly clear. Even to the point of the materiality of the boats. In a material sense, dinghies are inherently different than a 50m European-flagged supply vessel. That difference is not something that can be erased. If anything, embracing that particular difference enables the acts of solidarity to take place. Acknowledging the associated privilege and then reappropriating its operation can become a vital means of enacting solidarity.

Beyond the discursive modification, there is also a conscious effort to engage in relationships with people on the move that emphasizes the individuals' agency. While remaining cognizant of the paternalistic notions of humanitarianism, activists have sought to recast that work as a means of supporting people making the conscious decision to move that now find themselves in distress situations at sea. As one activist argues,

One thing we try to avoid and which the state is doing a lot is like, this kind of paternalism [...] Like the state is saying, 'Oh, you're bringing [sic] yourself in danger. Now, it's your fault. Now, we decide what's next.' So we say, 'OK. It's your decision to go at [to] sea.' And we will not say, 'hey, what you are doing is wrong.' Or we're not saying [...] 'OK, you have to go back to Libya. You have to go to Tunisia.' We're saying, 'You decided to come to Europe, and we try to help you.' I think that's what you try to do [...] this is the idea [...]. (43 Sea-Watch 2019)

Rather than solely adopting the exclusive narrative of saving lives, there is an effort to situate the work as a form of help or support for people deciding to make the journey to Europe. From the point of first contact with a migrant boat at sea, Sea-Watch activists approaching a distress case take these seemingly minor efforts to reaffirm the agency of the individuals on board. Upon arriving on scene, this is practised, in part, by the activists

explaining who they are, where they are from, and then asking those on the boat if they require assistance. As one activist describes,

It's also one thing I like very much about our SAR operation that when we approach a rubber boat, if it was not sinking already and people were in the water, and everything was [is] super hectic, we would ask them if they want assistance. They always said [say] yes, but I think it's important not to go there and just tell them afterwards that. But you ask like, to tell them, 'We are Sea-Watch, a German NGO. We are a search and rescue organisation. Do you need our assistance?' I think also in terms of dignity, I think that's really important, give people the choice. (27 Sea-Watch 2019)

Though a seemingly trivial question in this context, it is done as a means of ensuring the agency of all people is respected and reaffirmed, even in the most dire situations. Indeed, the ability to establish horizontal relationships is challenged by some of the material realities existing on the ship. The constant effort to challenge the hierarchy and distinction between guests and crew is repeatedly articulated by Sea-Watch activists, as they seek to redefine the relationships of care on board. As one individual notes, “When we have guests, we really try to fight this idea [of hierarchy]. We try to share information for example, and we try to get the people busy and not just laying around. We try to involve them in the process where it's possible [...] we try to involve everybody who likes to get involved. And we try to create a safe space” (08 Sea-Watch 2019). This sentiment is echoed by another activist who states how they “try to integrate them decision making as much as you can. Even if it's just, what do you want for dinner? Rice or beans?” (43 Sea-Watch 2019). Despite the structural limitations of life on board the ship, efforts are made to minimize the hierarchy through a relational approach to care offered to the guests. There are concerted efforts to allow individuals to retain an element of choice and agency in their care present in the seemingly minor and limited choices that occur onboard. In conversation with one activist, they described one of the guest coordinators commitment to this very idea, even under strained conditions such as prolonged standoffs at sea. As I remark in my fieldnotes in my conversation with [18],

He said that he [08] gave them a choice as to what they would get first. Food or blankets. He [08] said that was important because it was the first time in a long time that people were given the choice for something. He [18] said that normally they just hand out food and blankets, but that returning the

choice to the people gave them a sense of agency and worth in their ability to make choices in very practical ways. He [18] said that they also had a chance to vote on their food between rice, beans and couscous. So in one case someone said they didn't like couscous and then everyone voted and they went with something else. He [18] said it was empowering for the guests to have choice even though it was limited and he credited that with keeping the morale on the ship high despite a shitty situation. (Fieldnotes, Licata, Sicily, 22 July 2019).

Challenging the 'us' and 'them' narrative is crucial, and efforts taken to mitigate the distinction in those relationships are fundamental to enacting a contentious politics of solidarity. While the different positionalities between guests and activists are certainly not erased, there are conscious decisions to try to lessen the gap. As one activist describes,

The class distinctions on the ship, they're not rigid. And I think the crew often do things which are above and beyond the call of duty, let's say. So something as simple as the cook will cook a meal for everybody, where like everybody eats the same meal. Or often crew members will come out and eat meals with the guests. The guests are served like kind of rudimentary, rice and beans. And so there is this solidarity which you see with food, which you see with accommodation. Like, I think on the standoff here in Malta, there was stormy conditions and the crew actually brought a lot of the migrants, or all of the migrants perhaps inside. You know, there's the on the ship, there's the space that's the safe space for women and children. I think in that case, they, like, brought everybody into the safe space. So the distinctions aren't rigid. But I think, even when the crew is very accommodating, they still exist. (33 Sea-Watch 2019)

It is important to note that "practices of solidarity do not necessarily lead to unification, that they neither not suspend differences nor level them out; instead, practices of solidarity serve as a starting point to relate differences to one another" (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020b, 414). Solidarity does not mean the erasure of difference, flattening the hierarchy or unification, but serves as a starting point for a reflexive relationship between people and a means of negotiating and mediating difference. Nevertheless, there is a temporal limitation in some ways to the work being done by NGOs at sea. As Debono and Mainwaring (2020, 98) argue, "for those at sea, their transgressive solidarity work is both spatially and temporally circumscribed. Although they embrace less hierarchal forms of solidarity, such as identifying those they save as 'guests' rather than victims or aid recipients, their interactions with them are temporally and spatially circumscribed to hours,

days, or weeks at sea. They must disembark their ‘guests’ on land, where they are re-captured by the state and where further violence, detention, and deportation await them.” Despite the discursive framing, this does not escape the capture and control mechanism of the state where the disembarkation leads to new forms of state control over migrants.

### **Enacting a Contentious Politics of Solidarity: Filling Gaps or Exposing Cracks?**

For solidarity to emerge from and move beyond the entanglements of humanitarian reason, situating the enactment of solidarity as a form of contentious politics becomes a helpful mechanism in reorienting the work. For this chapter, contentious politics can be defined as “concerted, counter-hegemonic social and political action, in which differently positioned participants come together to challenge dominant systems of authority, in order to promote and enact alternative imaginaries” (Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto 2008, 157). Enacting a contentious politics of solidarity moves beyond humanitarian care, tying into broader counter-hegemonic political struggles in their challenge to established systems of authority, while working towards building alternative futures alongside people on the move. Again, this is not to say that humanitarianism is not political. Despite the outward appearance of the work’s apolitical or even anti-political nature, that too is a political expression. Instead, enacting a contentious politics of solidarity adopts a confrontational positioning in relation to systems and structures of oppression. As Ataç, Rygiel and Stierl argue (2016, 536), “A contentious politics approach is preferable for studying refugee and migrant protests because it does not isolate the dynamics of movements, such as organizational aspects, resource mobilization, and framing strategies of actors, from contextual factors.” They continue, stressing the importance of framing this dynamic by stating that the various factors included in this process such as border and rights regimes “...have an impact on the political and social context of migrants and refugees and at the same time represent significant targets of their activism” (Ataç, Rygiel, and Stierl 2016, 536). Enacting a contentious politics of solidarity moves beyond a neutral or impartial humanitarian ethic of care, through situating the work as a form of direct political intervention in response to migrant mobility at sea.

The enactment of a contentious politics of solidarity here, exists as both a discursive and material practice of flight aid in supporting people on the move. Understanding solidarity as a form of contentious politics, mobilizes various material and discursive strategies through the development of campaigns, demonstrations and struggles associated with people on the move through direct action. Centring the politics of migration, borders and migrant struggles through making the violence and contradictions embedded in systems of exclusion visible to a wider population, works to support people in the move in those struggles. Moreover, it also functions to mobilize citizens to act and join in this process to create “new relationships, political subjectivities, and communities and ways of thinking about citizenship” (Ataç, Rygiel, and Stierl 2016, 530). This is mobilization not only bound in the actions that facilitate flight, which often exists ‘under the surface’ but also coupled with calls for the freedom of movement for all people and challenges to the existence of repressive border regimes (Stierl 2016). A contentious politics of solidarity is not tied to a particular form of identity but predicated on building transversal alliances across space and time.

Conversely, what could be considered more simplistic notions of humanitarianism or acts of aid, instead, reduce migrants and their struggle for mobility to mere victims of border violence; helpless and in need of rescue; devoid of agency or political subjectivity (Anderson 2008; Aradau 2004; Mainwaring 2016). This reductive act of removing agency from specific mobile populations also “denies the possibility of establishing a common ground in struggling for freedom of movement and equal access to mobility” (Tazzioli 2018b). Heeding this caution, solidarity becomes helpful as a means of highlighting “both actions undertaken by citizens in support of refugees and, more importantly, the transversal alliances between migrants and non-migrants” (Tazzioli 2018b). In the Mediterranean, NGOs serve as a bridge to support the struggles for autonomous migration. Solidarity as a form of political intervention is manifest through actions taken by citizens in support of migrants and their struggles, both in mobility and in establishing the presence of place in a particular location, i.e. people wanting to move or people wanting to stay. More than simplistic efforts to help or save them, solidarity becomes a particular form of politics existing in shared spaces. Nevertheless, in these interventions, there is a

need to remain aware of how bodies, both migrant and citizen, are made precarious, exploited and governed by state power, albeit the forms of governance often differ quite vastly as it concerns individual mobility.

### *Filling Gaps or Exposing Cracks?*

Enacting a contentious politics of solidarity is manifest in multiple ways. On the one hand, solidarity exists as a mechanism to fill the gaps of state protection. In the Mediterranean, gap-filling occurs due to increasing inaction and reluctance to engage in a coordinated European SAR mission similar to the Italian SAR operation, *Mare Nostrum*. Indeed, a common refrain among SAR NGOs suggests they are filling the gaps of state protection at sea. One activist points to the gap created by European states regarding the protection of life at sea, while also monitoring the human rights violations taking place to ensure that people do not die due to state neglect and inaction. They say that the work “fills a vacuum created by our governments. So the responsibility to make sure that people in flight are protected and don't lose their life is neglected by our governments. So we're stepping in their place. And actually monitoring [...] we do monitor the situation in the Central Mediterranean more broadly” (34 Sea-Watch 2019). As another Sea-Watch activist argues, “To me right now, Sea-Watch does what...what would be a European job to do, and a pretty fucking obvious one, on our...on European borders. People drown on a daily basis and so far, the only ones caring since Mare Nostrum [ended] are NGOs. So I see [...] what work of Sea-Watch is [as] a fill-in for the non-existing EU work in the Central Med” (18 Sea-Watch 2019). While filling gaps as a pragmatic aspect of conducting SAR in the absence of state presence at sea is clear, this is also understood to be done in a markedly different fashion that situates the relationship to the work in an oppositional lens. One activist points to this by saying,

In a physical way, I think we attempt to fill a gap which is the failing of the European Union to respond properly to this. And, you know, which is kind of responding to the fact that there are not enough SAR assets in the area. And so we have a SAR asset and we're in the area and it is that simple. [...] And although they are also pulling people out of the water [...] on the ethical side, we're quite diametrically opposed in whatever way that they're protecting the border, and we're there protecting human life over the border and that's obviously a massive, massive difference. (21 Sea-Watch 2019)



There is an ontological difference that emerges in the understanding of the work. In fairly stark terms, another activist suggests that the work not only fills this gap, but also sheds light on the inaction at sea that creates “this black void where people's lives and their stories just disappear” (44 Sea-Watch 2019). As I will return to discuss [see Chapters [4](#) & [5](#)], the space of the sea is produced as a unique environment of in/visibility that becomes innately tied to the performance of state sovereignty and control. In part, an understanding of the Mediterranean as a contested borderscape emerges. While filling gaps plays a vital role in the current context of migration at sea in the Mediterranean, others will push back on this premise of this sentiment more directly. As one activist states,

It's not filling the gap is just...because to say it's a gap is to say that, you know, someone's just failing to provide it. And it's not [a] failure to provide it. It's a deliberate act. It's a deliberate shift to not provide it. So, it's, yeah, I don't like the 'filling the gap' thing. Because there is no gap. You see warships down there all the time. There is plenty of rescue assets. They could do what we do, but a thousand times better. And they choose not to do it. There's no gap. (13 Sea-Watch 2019)

They continued to say, “So responsibility is an issue; people aren't fucking taking it. And it's not that they're neglecting it. Or not aware of it, or unable to respond or anything like that. It's deliberate. It's absolutely deliberate and calculated” (13 Sea-Watch 2019). Echoing this idea, another activist states, “literally everyone that dies in the Mediterranean but also because of borders is because of Europe and its member states. And it's not only it's lack to respond [sic], but also by making that whole system possible in the first place” (41 Sea-Watch 2019). While there is an element of gap filling that occurs as NGOs enact solidarity with people on the move, there remains a distinct willingness to lay blame at the feet of European actors. In doing so, a clear commitment to suggest that Europe is ultimately responsible for the ongoing situation in the Mediterranean emerges, and it is through European inaction, that people continue to die at sea.

As I envision here, enacting a contentious politics of solidarity more closely resembles a form of what Dadusc and Mudu (2020) define as ‘autonomous solidarity’. For them, solidarity is understood “...not as a practice that ‘fills the gaps’ of the state and other

bordering agencies but instead create cracks, resisting both the commodification and depoliticisation of border violence” (Dadusc and Mudu 2020, 3). Solidarity with people on the move is operationalised not simply as a form of care or assistance, but more potently, as a form of direct resistance to border violence. Indeed, this work is not just a means of filling gaps but rather, creating cracks or fractures in the forms of control produced through the European border regime. Solidarity is not merely a response to injustice or oppression that has emerged from an exceptional instance or in reaction to the current political context. Conversely, it serves as a means of creating new social relations and patterns where solidarity is constituted by “practices that contest and challenge sovereign violence [...] Rather than relying on humanitarian ethics of control and ‘compassion’ for ‘vulnerable others’, these projects produce alliances with migrant struggles and carry on a common struggle against borders” (Dadusc and Mudu 2020, 14). Enacting solidarity in this manner contests and challenges sovereign violence through direct action in confronting the oppression of the European border regime.

Instead of relying solely on notions of compassion and care as the rationale for action, enacting a contentious politics of solidarity exists to support migrant struggles for free movement. These acts of solidarity are not merely creating a more tolerable situation or mitigating violence due to border regimes structured around race, class, and gender (Dadusc and Mudu 2020). Rather, a contentious politics of solidarity makes an active claim for freedom of movement that both exposes the violence of the border and contests the perpetuation of those practices. Drawing on Mohanty, Mezzadra (2020, 436–37) suggests, “A politics of freedom of movement emphasizes the moment of struggle and claim, it does not envisage as its goal the opening of borders by decree.” He continues to argue that “there is a need to ‘acknowledge the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment that borders represent’ in order to articulate struggles across all these lines of demarcation – with the aim of reinventing ‘solidarity’.” For Mezzadra, this is not simply looking for open borders as a benevolent gift from the state, but rather, supporting a politics of mobility demanded through autonomous forms of migration. In recognizing the fault lines, it enables the reinvention of solidarity where open borders are not simply requests for safe, legal routes, but also something to be brought into existence by the

mobility of individuals themselves. In effect, migrant movement through the space of the sea is coupled with the acts of solidarity that facilitate those processes of free movement. It is this active contestation of the global border regime that makes the enactment of solidarity particularly dangerous. In doing so, autonomous migration together with the enactment of a contentious politics of solidarity represents a direct challenge to state authority and border governance, exposing the fault lines of sovereign power in the spaces of mobility that states purport to control. Enacting solidarity with people on the move as a form of contentious politics centred on the freedom of movement is situated in the struggle against state systems of exclusion.

The broader context of migration governance in the Mediterranean and the criminalization of rescue has resulted in targeted attacks on NGO vessels operating at sea. In response to state repression, the continued operation and existence of the civil fleet serves as a form of resistance to the border politics of Europe despite the humanitarian framing of the work. Both the continual presence of migrants at sea and the involvement of SAR NGOs in that space creates cracks in the figurative wall of 'Fortress Europe' and forces a constant renegotiation of governmental tactics of control. The approach to deepening these cracks situates solidarity as a political practice of resistance and highlights the inability of states to control the gates, despite the narrative of sovereign control and authority over the space of the sea. As a result of this politically potent contestation of state authority, these acts of solidarity are increasingly criminalized and rendered 'illegal' through accusing the civil fleet of supporting or facilitating 'illegal migration' (Tazzioli 2018b; Fekete 2009). I will return to discuss the criminalization of solidarity and how this becomes operationalized in the Mediterranean context, as well as exploring the politics of space and NGO solidarity efforts as a means of contesting state border control regimes [[see Chapter 5](#)].

## **Conclusion**

While aspects of the work done by Sea-Watch and the civil fleet is undoubtedly embedded in a humanitarian politics of care, their operations at sea and in the air serve to enact a contentious politics of solidarity with people on the move. Through enacting

solidarity with people on the move, Sea-Watch serves as an imperfect response to an ongoing European border system predicated on the violent suppression of autonomous forms of migration. The enactment of solidarity is also couched in notions of opposition, resistance and subversion to violent state bordering practices, which moves beyond a humanitarian ethic of care, towards a politically engaged emancipatory vision of mobility in a supposedly globalized international system. In doing so, enacting a contentious politics of solidarity moves beyond simply filling the gap created by the lack of state response. Instead, these efforts in support of autonomous forms of mobility push back against state exclusion and serve to not only expose the fault lines and fractures that emerge in the space of sovereign control but deepen the ruptures created by autonomous forms of migration.

Moreover, enacting solidarity with people on the move serves to repoliticize SAR operations in the Mediterranean by shifting towards situating the work as a form of contentious politics that creates an “emergent zone of politics” (Walters 2011, 157). Framing the work of SAR actors as a contentious politics of solidarity serves as a direct confrontation to the often-depoliticized notions of the work. Beyond a push back against the depoliticized characterization of NGO work at sea, enacting a contentious politics of solidarity is a direct effort to repoliticize the broader context of migration and border management. As Cuttitta (2018b, 635) writes, “If depoliticizing means obscuring, repoliticizing means revealing and reviving the political (that is the plural and conflictual) character of politics.” In the next chapter [[see Chapter 4](#)], I explore the construction and performance of the sea as a violent, contested borderscape. In doing so, I return to some of the themes developed here to highlight how the enactment of solidarity with people on the move not only serves as a means of support but as a politically transformative act that contests state authority and violent bordering practices at sea. The presence of the civil fleet at sea exposes the fallacy in the contrasting narratives of the sea as an empty space but also as a hyper-regulated space of state control. While NGO SAR operations represent an active effort to contest state authority at sea, it is also enveloped in the politics of the emergence of the humanitarian border, which is also situated in the borderscape of the Mediterranean. Yet, in recognition of the implication in those practices,

that reanimation of the sea as a space of political action produces the sea as a contested borderscape.

## Chapter 4

### **Zoning the Mediterranean Borderscape: Contentious Politics and the Spatiality of the Sea**

#### **Introduction**

The sea is an important location to interrogate the spatial politics of borders, sovereignty and territoriality in the global context. In discussing the spatio-political dimensions of the sea, I seek to move away from the naturalness of space by disturbing the often perceived staticness or immutability of the concept itself. My goal is to highlight the deeply rooted politics embedded in the space of the sea. Spatially, the sea is not unchanging, immutable, or static, but rather it is defined by relational interactions with it. In this effort, this chapter explores the relationship of the civil fleet with the space of the Mediterranean Sea. The spatial politics of the Mediterranean are manifest in the hotly contested discourse that emerges around irregularized immigration. The autonomous mobility of migrant subjects highlights the fractured myth of unilateral sovereign power over the borderlands and the ability to control what is perceived as state space. The contestation of aqueous borderscapes at sea underlines the relational interactions with space through NGO SAR operations in the Mediterranean.<sup>25</sup>

In looking at the spatial politics of the Mediterranean, I explore the production of the sea as a contested borderscape. The conceptual framing of the Mediterranean as a borderscape highlights the dynamic relationships between state and non-state actors occurring in this interstitial border region. Moreover, developing an understanding of these relationships to incorporate social, political and spatial dimensions of the border that moves beyond a finite point of territorial demarcation provides a more intricate and nuanced vision of the sea. The Mediterranean borderscape is increasingly claimed as a sovereign space or territorial extension of Europe itself, as NGOs are systematically obstructed in performing SAR operations. By examining the production of the sea as a contested borderscape, the nexus of humanitarianism and security can be observed as

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<sup>25</sup> Contesting the space of the sea happens not just with NGOs but migrants themselves – right to escape (Mezzadra 2004a). However, the focus here, and of the dissertation more broadly is on the civil fleet active interventions in the Mediterranean borderscape.

firmly embedded in the reconstructed imaginary of the sea. The spatio-political production of the sea enables an erasure of the politics tied to the Mediterranean and facilitates an attempt by state actors to delegitimize the work of civil fleet SAR operations.

Moreover, the chapter argues that the Mediterranean is actively rendered as an exceptional yet contested borderscape through which increasing efforts to produce state actors as the sole authority within that space emerges. Primarily, the act of spatial erasure is facilitated through producing the sea as an empty space, divorced from political and historical context. At once, the Mediterranean is situated as both an anarchic space of freedom and mobility as well as a site of hyper-regulation and state control. Producing the sea as 'empty' provides a canvass on which state actors attempt to re-inscribe authority onto that space, as the sea is recast as an exclusive realm of sovereign prerogative. Despite overt efforts to undermine the legitimacy of non-state actors at sea, the determined and contentious presence of NGO acts of solidarity with people on the move represents an active challenge to state claims of sovereign authority over the Mediterranean borderscape.

### *Chapter Outline*

In exploring the Mediterranean and its production as a contested borderscape, I first address the spatial conceptualization of the sea. Primarily, I approach understanding this dynamic setting through the spatial interpretations of SAR activists' experience at sea. In situating the Mediterranean as a borderscape, I attempt to move beyond the static understanding of space towards a more complex, socio-political environment. Utilizing the emergent borderscapes literature, I contribute to broadening the conceptualization of the border to more effectively capture the social, political and economic dimensions of that space. Second, the chapter maps Ong's (2006) concept of zoning onto the Mediterranean to highlight the spatial politics of the sea. While drawing on Ong's seminal work to interrogate the spatial politics of the sea, I invert the understanding of zoning in its application. In doing so, I highlight how rather than ceding control over state space to the whims of commercial actors, zoning functions to enable seemingly contradictory claims to sovereign authority over the sea. Here, zoning the Mediterranean borderscape occurs as

EUropean states actively obscure the attempted transformation of the sea into a space of sovereign control through the erasure of the socio-political dynamics. Third, the chapter identifies how zoning contributes to the emergence and perpetuation of Walter's (2011) concept of the humanitarian border. Finally, I discuss zoning in relation to the conceptualization of the Mediterranean as a contested borderscape through SAR NGO actions at sea. By exploring the production of the sea as a contested borderscape, I seek to complicate the territorial politics of sovereign control occurring at sea.

### **Conceptualizing the Mediterranean**

The sea is an important environment to explore the spatial politics of state power. Encompassing a multitude of socio-political dimensions, the sea is a space of material and performative production in the expressions of sovereign power and authority (Lefebvre 1992; 2009). It is a relational and dynamic social environment of mobility (Squire et al. 2017; Squire 2020b; 2020a) that is also encapsulated as a space of governmentality and control (Elden 2007a; Walters 2012). Broadly, the sea also operates as a complex and fluid geography of immense capital flow that serves as a high-volume trade route, a valuable source of resource extraction and enables the mobility of global supply chains facilitating the expansion of the modern capitalist system (Campling and Colas 2021; Cowen 2014; Chua et al. 2018; Khalili 2020; Chua 2018). More specifically, the Mediterranean Sea is a space through which billions of dollars of capital flow annually, representing nearly one-third of all global maritime traffic (Plan Bleu 2015). The physical environment of the Mediterranean itself also serves as a valuable source of oil extraction and fishing resources that contribute to sustaining both EUropean and global resource markets. Aside from a space of capital flows, it is also a place of leisure, recreational escape and relaxation. Annually, the Mediterranean generates millions of dollars in revenue for the tourism industry and serves as a vacation destination for thousands of tourists (Plan Bleu 2015). Moreover, the sea is also a highly militarized space with strategic importance for controlling maritime logistics and regional security. The United States alone has over 130 aircraft, at least ten warships and over 9,000 sailors operating in the Mediterranean Sea (Faram 2019). The sea also functions as a militarized border



space predicated on the continuation of violent exclusion as the boundaries of Europe are extended beyond the traditional territorial demarcations (Jones 2016).

Beyond serving as a valuable economic space, the sea produces romanticized visions of a space of freedom with its own mythology and imaginary capturing an often unknown or unexperienced place. As one activist points out,

For many people, they've never had that experience of the vastness of the ocean and feeling really, really small and vulnerable like that, especially being out in a small boat in a storm, those kinds of experiences. And so, we have a lot of the mythology around it and the sea; it's in songs and books. How many people have sailor-inspired tattoos? Well, all that kind of stuff that and so...it's not whimsical, it's a romanticized notion of what the sea is without really much of an understanding of it is. And there's a fair bit of fear of the sea as well. (46 Sea-Watch 2019)

The sea is a space that most people do not physically experience, and as a result, it is mediated by the interpretations and experiences of others. With a horizon all around, you are entirely surrounded and inherently vulnerable without the protection of a seaworthy vessel. As another activist suggests, the sea is “a very mythical thing in our history and in our understanding” (03 Sea-Watch 2019). As this mythology is created, a perception of the sea is produced with a romanticized imaginary, often without having a visceral understanding of it or experience with it. One activist observed that the sea creates a suspended, dreamlike feeling recalling that “when I was there, it felt completely unreal. Because it's very unnatural for humans to be there, to be in the middle of it. And it felt like it was suspended. It was really not real” (42 Sea-Watch 2019).

Beyond a space of imagination, the sea represents a harsh and unforgiving environment. One activist captures this sentiment by stating,

For me, the ocean is the only true wilderness because we've modified all of our landscapes, so it's really the one place where natural elements can dominate, really completely, and we don't have control over it and I find it's kind of egalitarian. It's an equalizing force where we all kind of, if we don't have a ship, we all die. So, we all need some kind of artificial construct in order to survive. And without it, it doesn't really matter who you are, where you're from, which territorial waters you're in. What the weather is even, you'll

die without that ship. So, there's that kind of equalizing of it and the fact that it's not like you can...it's not like in the bush where you might survive for a couple of weeks. You do actually die. There's nothing to keep you afloat. (46 Sea-Watch 2019)

The sea represents a space where natural elements dominate, and as a result, it becomes an egalitarian equalizing force governing life and death. Another activist echoes this vulnerability produced by the harsh environment stating that “in the water, like everybody is the same, right. It kind of really reduces you to your, I don't know, minimal human form” (54 Sea-Eye 2019). In some ways, the sea becomes an equalizing force where you are exposed to the natural environment beyond your control. The sea can change in a matter of minutes; you can disappear, and no one will notice. Nevertheless, the dangerousness of the sea is also utilized in producing the narratives around people on the move themselves. One activist argues that “This danger of sea this enforces and stabilizes this picture of irresponsible migrants coming here” (16 Sea-Watch 2019). As I return shortly, the volatility and unforgiving nature of the sea is an integral aspect of the bordering practice. Similar border control practices employing the harshness of the environment as a mechanism to control migrant mobility is also evidenced in the US-Mexico border context and elsewhere (Androff and Tavassoli 2012; Chacon and Davis 2006; Giordano and Spradley 2017; Miller 2019). In the Mediterranean, this occurs by utilising the sea's violence to ensure the continued precarity for people on the move while reaffirming narratives of the irresponsible, ‘illegal’ migrant.

It is apparent through examining the different conceptualizations and understandings of the sea, that it is a site of deep contradiction. The sea is at once a space of both anarchy and hyper-regulation governed by multiple, often overlapping legal frameworks that shape the dynamic interactions that occur (Braverman 2020). Conversely, it is representative of a common space of freedom, transit, leisure and utility for seafarers under the principle of *Mare Liberum* (Freedom of the Seas) (Grotius 2012 [1609]). As a space of freedom and mobility, one activist argues,

I think the sea is one of those few places, so to speak, that we have, or spaces where we are not...so ruled by this thought of, or this creepy ghost of

nationalism, right. I mean, outside the 24-mile zone.<sup>26</sup> And I think that this is also part of why I love this so much. It's this space of, you know, freedom where you're completely free, but you're also completely exposed, right? (54 Sea-Eye 2019)

Despite visions of the sea as a free space, it is also increasingly subject to claims of state authority through efforts to assert the sovereign prerogative to govern and regulate the sea. In doing so, state incursions into the sea also extend territorial claims to that space and enable sovereign capture. One activist argues that “obviously, governments try to apply their own law to the sea. Like it's the extension of their land. And that's what actually causes all this political friction of all these struggles with the NGOs” (44 Sea-Watch 2019). The sea functions as a natural border space imbued with both political and economic dimensions that oscillate to produce a form of in/visibility. In connecting the sea to this understanding of the border, one activist suggests that,

You know, borders sometimes are just like a line that is drawn out of political and economical [sic] reasons. Other times they are a line that follows mountains or natural shapes. And in the sea, it's totally invisible. You know, so like that limit, I mean, of course, it's super visible because it [...] it like it makes very obvious the discontinuity between two countries. But at the same time, it makes very blurry the actual limit. (42 Sea-Watch 2019)

Borders are manifestations of economic and political division. As Jones (2016, 166) argues, however, “borders and lines on maps are not a representation of pre-existing differences between peoples and places; they create those differences.” While often following natural spaces such as rivers, mountains or other visible physical landmarks, the ability to ‘see’ the border at sea remains more challenging to visualize. On the one hand, it is difficult to locate the ‘place’ of the border at sea to the point where it appears invisible. On the other hand, it is understood as a highly visible border reaffirming the separation of the Global North and South. More abstractly, the sea makes the border visible because it highlights the physical disconnect between Europe and North Africa,

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<sup>26</sup> The 24-mile zone referred to here, is more commonly understood as the ‘Contiguous Zone’ as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This stratified band extends from shore where states have limited legal jurisdiction, primarily for the purposes of preventing an “infringement of its customs, fiscal, immigration or sanitary laws and regulations within its territory or territorial sea” (UNCLOS 1984 Part II; Section 4; Article 33.1.a). The civil fleet SAR operations are conducted outside of the contiguous zone [[see Introduction](#)].

but it actually blurs the limit of that spatial divide. Adding to this, one activist succinctly identifies that the Mediterranean operates as “a natural border between Europe and Africa” (26 Mission Lifeline 2019). They continue to suggest, “I see it as creating a buffer between Libya and the open sea, to really reinforce the Mediterranean’s role as a border. I mean, this is not a particularly original thought, it really is externalizing border security, border policy” (26 Mission Lifeline 2019). Utilizing the sea as a buffer zone between Africa and Europe reinforces the role of the Mediterranean as a border space. Pragmatically, as one activist argues, “it comes in really handy that there is a sea in between. They’d have a lot more troubles with putting up walls and fences, which they are doing at the land borders, I guess” (48 Sea-Watch 2019). The sea is a useful space ensuring the physical separation between Europe and Africa, despite the growing interconnectivity created by a globalized international system. While there are challenges to erecting barriers on land, the sea is operationalized as a border of convenience that naturally maintains this divide.

Indeed, the in/visibility of the Mediterranean is another defining feature of the sea. State and non-state actors at sea perform the politics of visibility in several important ways that contribute to understanding the Mediterranean as a contested borderscape. As a high traffic economic corridor, the Mediterranean is one of the most intensely surveyed bodies of water with multiple forms of ‘real-time’ monitoring and surveillance occurring to create a visible and governable space. Among other forms of visualization, states can monitor life at sea through ship tracking systems (AIS), satellite imagery, aerial surveillance, and previously sea-level SAR missions (Pezzani and Heller 2013; Andersson 2016a; 2014a). Pointing to the realities of this visibility, one activist states, “Europe knows in which...hulls they are built together because you can see it from satellite pictures or you can reconstruct where they must build the boats together. Everything is known. You know where the refugee boats will be approximately at what time...and still, no one is coming for their rescue” (20 Sea-Watch 2019). Effectively, there is relatively very little that is unseen by the state gaze as it concerns the movement of people and goods through the Mediterranean. State disclosure acknowledging their ability to visualize and ‘see’ particularly irregularized forms of movement often oscillates between projections of hyper-visibility and seeming willful blindness to distress cases taking place at sea. In effect, the

sea becomes yet another space where the state's presence creates legible and governable subjects (Scott 1998) capable of being subject to state capture.

Despite the hypervisibility that creates legible subjects, the sea also remains a space of invisibility produced by the opaque perceptibility by the public, creating a 'black hole' in which people continually die, often unknown to anyone. Alluding to the challenges of invisibility produced by the space of the sea, one activist describes this reality by stating, "it's kind of this black hole of, you know, we make assumptions about how many people have died trying to cross the Mediterranean, but we actually have no clue. We don't know how many shipwrecks there were, how many attempted crossings, how many pullbacks" (34 Sea-Watch 2019). Pointing to the political dimensions of this black hole mentality, another activist describes that in the Mediterranean, "no one can really see what is happening in the sea because no people live in the sea, it's just empty and...I would say the sea is an apolitical space, but politics are transferred to the sea" (20 Sea-Watch 2019). Yet, despite these physical realities of the sea, the invisibility and opaqueness of the Mediterranean is also actively challenged by SAR actors through their operations (Heller, Pezzani, and Stierl 2017). I return to discuss the politics of in/visibility later in this chapter. Moreover, in the following chapter, I also address how in/visibility is operationalized in the emergence of standoff politics and blockading in the Mediterranean [\[see Chapter 5\]](#).

Increasingly, the sea also functions as a space of autonomous mobility that enables escape (Mezzadra 2004a). Though in the act of escape, the Mediterranean also represents an interstitial space in which people on the move have departed from North Africa yet not arrived in Europe. Speaking to the spatial interstitiality of the sea, one activist notes that "because of that, it's part of the escape, because you're escaping Libya into that wilderness, into that limbo area where you know you aren't in one place or another" (21 Sea-Watch 2019). As I return to discuss in the next chapter [\[see Chapter 5\]](#), the interstitial nature of the Mediterranean enables state actors to capture and contain people on the move, effectively barring them from arriving on European shores through indeterminate periods of detention. Most recently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this has been operationalized by quarantining migrants on now-unused cruise ships and tour

boats due to their perceived biological threat to the citizens of Europe (Tondo 2020d; Urbina 2021). In effect, this produces islands of detention (Mountz 2015) at sea, where migrants have yet to physically arrive in Europe and are thereby denied the ability to make legal asylum claims.

Despite the efforts to situate the sea as a space of state control, the Mediterranean is increasingly a site of political action that challenges the perpetuation of Fortress Europe. In highlighting the multiplicity of the sea as a political space, one activist suggests "one could argue migrants claim to be their transit zone, traffic zone, whatever. States would claim it as their border protection. And we could argue we claim it as a space for political action" (27 Sea-Watch 2019). There is a utility to the space of the sea as a venue for political action, which NGOs actively claim through SAR operations. Indeed, the sea becomes a unique space for political action against the global border regime. Building on this notion, another activist argues that they view the sea as,

The space where you can do a political action towards the European border. Because the difference at sea is from other kinds of borders that we usually see such as, you know, walls, fences, checkpoints. You shouldn't be able to put those at sea. And the violence, these borders for migrants, it's actually easier than to cross this other kind of border. So it's almost funny to go at [sic] sea and be able to think like, you can control this. You cannot put borders here. (47 Mediterranea 2019)

There is a practical impossibility of placing the same physical barriers to mobility as seen on land.<sup>27</sup> Another activist echoes the sentiment of the impossibility of closing the border at sea, stating that "[T]hey cannot close the border because there's no border. It's a mass of water, the border" (37 Sea-Watch 2019). While I have outlined the utility of the harsh environmental conditions of the sea as a border tool above, a counter-narrative of the sea emerges precisely because of the vast expanse of that space and the inability to

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<sup>27</sup> While there are obvious challenges to creating physical borders at sea, this has not stopped states from attempting to do so. In the Aegean Sea, Greece has begun trials to implement a 'floating barrier' at sea in an effort to hamper migrant crossings from Turkey to the Greek islands (Kitsantonis 2020). Though the physical and logistical challenges presented with this attempted 'fix' are apparent, it has not stopped states from trying to extend physical barriers into the sea. Yet, as is also common on land, these barriers while in some ways temporarily effective in slowing or impeding migrant journeys, are not able to completely stop irregularized migration from occurring.

effectively control the border. Indeed, the sea is used as a natural environment to ensure the separation and perceived civilizational divide to protect Fortress Europe through conscripting the environment as a border control mechanism. However, when operationalized as a space of counter-politics, activists at sea can escape some of the same political and bureaucratic challenges produced through territorial border control efforts. As I discuss in the following chapter, however, though the sea removes some of the barriers to political action experienced on land, alternative barriers emerge in an effort to remove NGOs from the sea [[see Chapter 5](#)].

As is increasingly evident in the Mediterranean, the sea functions as a political battlefield for the mobility rights of people on the move (Mezzadra and Stierl 2019). Alluding to this idea, one activist states that “the sea always has been a political battlefield” (35 Sea-Watch 2019). Echoing this sentiment, another activist suggests that viewing the sea in this way incorporates a corporeal aspect of control. Elaborating on this notion, they state that while the sea is operationalized as a political battlefield, “you’re fighting against [it], using people’s lives” (44 Sea-Watch 2019). The battlefield exists as “a zone of conflict. I mean, the last standoffs and all the stuff that has been going on, especially during the last months, showed that this is a space that is not neutral but being fought [...]. The Central Med has been even filled up with more politics than it has been before” (35 Sea-Watch 2019). For people on the move transiting the Mediterranean, the sea is a zone of conflict, and as a result, it is not neutral but rather, a space needing to be actively fought and contested. The contested borderscape of the sea highlights how the political nature of that space can shift as it is filled or emptied of politics. Ultimately, the sea remains at its core, a political space as one activist suggests, “any space at a certain time turns into something political, or even not used spaces are something political” (35 Sea-Watch 2019). Despite this continual transformation into an ever-increasing zone of exclusion, the sea remains a space of active contestation by people on the move and now by SAR NGOs enacting a contentious politics of solidarity with them.

*The Mediterranean as a Borderscape*

As previously mentioned, there is an emergent trend in the border studies literature centring on the concept of borderscapes to understand the spatiality of border regions. The concept's utility is particularly instructive when examining the space of the Mediterranean Sea and the intersecting politics of SAR operations. Borderscapes emerged from the perceived limitations of the static conceptualizations of territoriality and sovereignty, shifting towards understanding borders as a process. In doing so, it sees borders as “dynamic social processes and practices of spatial differentiation” (Brambilla 2015, 15). In effect, this means not only “dis-locating and re-locating borders, but it also involves a reflection on the multiplication of border forms, functions and practices through their distribution and proliferation in a variety of social and political arenas, which determine a progressive movement of borders from the margins to the centre of the political sphere” (Brambilla 2015, 15). Emerging, in part, as a response to Agnew’s (1994) notion of the ‘territorial trap’, this conceptual shift allows “for identifying and interrogating what and where borders are and how they function in different settings, with what consequences, and for whose benefit” (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012, 729). Drawing on the work of Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007), when conceptualizing the spatial politics at play, the borderscape “embraces the multiplicity of social interactions and navigates them with the dynamics of ‘othering’ and ‘distancing’” and views this space as “a fluid, mobile, open zone of differentiated encounters” (Krichker 2021, 2). In the context of this dissertation, the focus is placed on the dynamic social interactions between states and the civil fleet at sea. Building on Balibar’s (2009) notion of vacillation, borders are no longer merely situated at the edges of the state but become dislocated to represent the centre of political space (Brambilla 2015). Viewing the spatial production of the Mediterranean Sea as a borderscape captures a myriad of social, political and economic interactions, while also serving as a site in which sovereign authority is claimed.

Conceptually, borderscapes emerge from and draw upon Appadurai’s (1996) use of the ‘scape’ to highlight the fluid and uneven ways that various spaces manifest in movement across boundaries in a multidimensional globalized system. In turn, borderscapes bring to light the constantly evolving nature and “vitality of borders to our



attention, revealing that the border is by no means a static line, but a mobile and relational space” (Brambilla 2015, 22). In adopting Mezzadra and Nielson’s (2013) understanding of the ‘border as method’, borderscapes shift from a fixed, linear notion of the border towards viewing them as dynamic spaces of (re)negotiation. In doing so, this conceptual reorientation allows the border to be recast as a site of struggle for mobile subjects in a globalized world. Spatially, borderscapes are then “inhabited by continuous processes of claim and counter-claim, also affect and call into question every predetermined social and political order, showing the urgency to rethink the modern categorisations of political belonging by revealing their fluid and contextual character” (Brambilla 2015, 28). Borderscapes are used to highlight and “identify spaces in which meanings and identities are established, hegemonic ideas about nationality and citizenship are reimagined, and transnational, translocal, and transcultural identities are renegotiated” (Godin and Donà 2021, 3277). However, when situated as a more expansive, dynamic, and interactive space, the borderscape becomes a site of productive struggles for new forms of agency and subjectivity to emerge (Brambilla and Jones 2020). In conceptualizing these interstitial spaces as borderscapes, moves away from the state-centric orientation towards that space, and instead, sees how these socio-political sites are (re)made and contested and countered by a vast array of actors.

While the borderscape views the space of the border beyond a fixed point or line, it also recognizes how that particular point is also very much tied in the multiple forms of violence that emerge and how that space has been created with overlapping and intersecting relationships that tie together, history, politics, gender, race and class (Brambilla and Jones 2020). Through this shifting orientation towards the socio-political understanding of spatiality of violence, it is also possible to understand the borderscape of the sea within the context of necropolitical governance (Mbembé 2003; T. Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi 2017). Indeed, the border can be located, in part, as a fixed point and a founding site for the violence of sovereign power. Though I believe the ‘point’ of the border is a crucial space of analysis of the violence and necropolitical governance, in the context of the sea, viewing this point in a broader context is helpful to understanding the spatial politics at play. By viewing the border as a ‘scape’, we can understand it as a

practice that manifests itself in the material relations with the individual and the interactions with the border.

Borders serve as ‘critical locations’ that are perceived outside of the normal discourses of the state (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020b, 407). In the Mediterranean, the sea exists as the interstitial space of transit, commerce and embedded in a deeper history of colonial expansion while increasingly serving as a space of border security produced in a supposed civilizational divide (L. T. Darling 2012). The sea represents what Walters (2011) refers to as a ‘faultline’ in the smooth, fluid spaces of globalization between the Global North and South. Here, the struggles for free movement occur in both hidden and hyper-visible ways. Moreover, borderscapes operate as spaces of contention that facilitate and exacerbate racialized and classed separation by utilizing citizenship to reaffirm exclusion. In the territorial spaces of EUrope, the movement of people across borders, particularly within the Schengen Zone, is understood as integral to the function of the region and one of the core benefits of that space as a political and economic zone. Meanwhile, in the peripheral spaces of Fortress EUrope, mobility is conversely framed as a threat to the sanctity and security of the sovereign state.

The active struggle for mobility rights emerges in response to the performance of state control over the supposedly peripheral spaces of sovereign territorial authority. Yet, SAR actors are also central figures in this spatial performance of the Mediterranean. Through their work, the civil fleet contributes to producing the sea as a dynamic border space by enacting a contentious politics of solidarity with people on the move [\[see Chapter 3\]](#).<sup>28</sup> As Ataç and their colleagues (2016, 540) note, “Struggles for and around rights to movement emerge in response to strategies and spaces of control and containment, but they also provide a means to re-connect sites and scales of politics with the potentiality of creating alternative citizenship geographies and political community.” Moreover, in

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<sup>28</sup> Though in highlighting the important role that these non-state actors play in the spatial production and performance of the sea, it is necessary to recognize the role of migrants themselves as integral actors in producing this same space and contentious politics. They are, after all, the reason why NGOs are operating at sea. This, however, is not the focus of the dissertation. There have been several important interventions that focus on the role of people on the move as contentious political subjects (Rygiel 2016; 2011; McNevin 2013; Dadusc 2019; Nyers 2018).

building on the work of Lefebvre (1992), Martin and Miller (2003, 145) argue that space becomes “produced through social relations and structures.” In doing so, space becomes an important canvass on which contentious politics are performed through the social relations that ultimately shape the political actions that occur. Drawing on Martin and Miller (2003), Ataç and their colleagues argue that spatial production is not to be seen as a ‘container’ in which action occurs. Instead, they suggest that “it constitutes and structures relationships and networks (including the processes that produce gender, race and class identities); situates social and cultural life including repertoires of contention; is integral to the attribution of threats and opportunities; is implicit in many types of category formation; and is central to scale-jumping strategies that aim to alter discrepancies in power among political contestants” (Ataç, Rygiel, and Stierl 2016, 539). Identifying the dynamic relationship to space as part of the performance of contentious politics is vital to understanding the operation and actions of the civil fleet in the Mediterranean.

### **Zoning the Mediterranean**

The act of zoning is central to the efforts to (re)define the Mediterranean borderscape. In the territorial context, Ong (2006) examines the expansion of the neoliberal governance regime through situating it within the emergence and development of graduated sovereignty and zoning. In developing these concepts, Ong suggests they serve as part of an act of “reconfiguring relationships between governing and the governed, power and knowledge, and sovereignty and territoriality” (Ong 2006, 3). The shifting spatial relationship produces graduated sovereignty as a “flexible management of sovereignty” (Ong 2006, 78). The flexible management is not solely the process of adjusting state priorities to the dictates of the economy, but also enabling the production of exceptional space in which state actors can assert authority. Importantly, this approach to the flexible management of sovereignty has “created new forms of inclusion, setting apart some citizen-subjects, and creating new spaces that enjoy extraordinary political benefits and economic gain” (Ong 2006, 5). Highlighting the pervasiveness of neoliberal modes of governance, Ong argues that zoning is central to (re)shaping the societal organization of state space. More than an economic doctrine, neoliberalism is understood to shift relationships between governance and knowledge, thereby enabling the

production of non-political problems and resulting in technocratic solutions (Ong 2006). Through reconfiguring relationships beyond the economic, neoliberalism becomes a means of technocratizing the response to problems of state governance. Practically, this is evidenced through the European response to people on the move in the Mediterranean and the often depoliticized, bureaucratic governance of both migration and the border.

Zoning is most commonly applied to the territorial state space. Expanding on the production of exceptional space, rules, and norms beyond everyday state practice, zoning in a broader context becomes evident when applied to the sea. The act of zoning operates to preserve the neoliberal spaces of the Europe. Conceptually, I utilize the notion of zoning beyond focusing on the strict economic reorganization of that space to one which sees the space of the sea reorganized as a contested borderscape. In part, this exists through protecting the internal spaces of Europe from external interference through the continually failing efforts to control the region's periphery (Andersson 2016b). Zoning the Mediterranean borderscape enables the enactment of both exclusion and envelopment of state reach to occur. The sea becomes separated from the 'normal' acts of state politics and reassigned, meaning that it enables the exception to be situated as a reasonable response to the so-called 'crisis' at sea (Agamben 2004). This production of exceptional state space also produces the sea as an extension of sovereign territorial control. Zoning reaffirms the ability for states to dictate authority in those spaces while creating new forms of inclusion and exclusion based on citizenship, preserving both political and economic authority for those in power. Examining sovereign power here does not view it as a "formulaic or container view of sovereignty" (Ong 2006, 90). Instead, utilizing zoning to examine sovereign power shifts the analytical gaze to see the various tools and governance processes enabled by establishing graduated sovereignty. Sovereign authority is then understood as part of an assemblage rather than a political singularity. Therefore, zoning enables the production of an assemblage of state control as it becomes part of producing an expanded role of the state through the production of the sea as a space enveloped within the territorial grasp. This act, in turn, produces further impetus for state-based intervention.

Producing the sea as an exceptional space employs multiple technologies of neoliberal governance. Zoning technologies actively work to regulate mobile populations by controlling the ability to move and access to the state embedded in current approaches and understandings of state-based citizenship. In doing so, these technologies are utilized in creating political spaces and conditions of variegated sovereignty, allowing for these differentiated borderscapes to be performed. As Ong argues, zoning technologies produce "a more extreme form of zoning practice that creates spatially fixed and distinctive enclaves. 'Zoning technologies' refers to political plans that rezone the national territory...By deploying zoning strategies, sovereign states can create or accommodate islands of distinct governing regimes within the broader landscape of normalized rule. The political outcome is an archipelago of enclaves, the sum of which is a form of variegated sovereignty" (Ong 2006, 103).

For Ong, there are two primary ways of employing zoning technologies: subjectivity and subjugation. Technologies of subjectivity increase the efficiency and fluidity of a particular area to facilitate the continued expansion of the neoliberal space (Ong 2006). This zoning technology operates to optimise the efficiency and control of the state by differentiated regulation of mobile populations through the use of spatial practices. Moreover, zoning takes place by employing technologies of subjugation, which serve to establish biopolitical control over mobile populations. Zoning works to create the Mediterranean borderscape into an optimized, yet highly differentiated, space in which the fluidity of the sea enables both capital and privileged bodies to move with ease, narrowing time and space. Conversely, for people on the move and those that assist them, zoning the Mediterranean functions to slow time and mobility through making migrant journeys increasingly precarious and by the emergent blockading processes routinely accompanying SAR operations [[see Chapter 5](#)]. In doing so, zoning the sea enables the capture of mobile subjects into state control efforts.

In looking at the technocratic response to migration governance, Cuttitta (2018b, 4) argues there is an increasing effort "to locate the issue of migration in technocratic arenas played an important role in structuring the relevant field in depoliticized, restrictive

and security terms, and in making such frame appear inevitable and hardly questionable.” Though he continues to suggest that the “depoliticization was also preceded and accompanied by processes of politicization aimed at making the electoral use of the issue of migration profitable, which was clearly the case, for example, for securitization” (Cuttitta 2018b, 4). In effect, technocratizing migration governance serves to depoliticize state claims to authority over the sea, thereby justifying the exclusion of migrants and NGOs operating in that space. Despite efforts to depoliticize migration governance, leaning into the technocratic response ultimately results in politicizing the governance process. The act of governance becomes depoliticized and relegated to that of a technocratic process while subsequently politicizing the process of irregular migration and migrant bodies in an effort to reaffirm the exclusion from the state. The depoliticization of space enables a technocratic vision of border management to emerge. NGOs actively push back against this technocratic narrative to suggest that it is an intentional and active process of exclusion rather than couched in passive management narratives.

While drawing on Ong’s notion of zoning, I deploy her concept differently. This conceptual adaptation of zoning can be utilized to see how SAR operations at sea produce islands of exceptionalism (Mountz 2010), leading to shifting notions of sovereignty and the production of differentiated authority. EUropean bordering practices in the Mediterranean and the production of the humanitarian border (Walters 2011) operates as a zoning technology that manufactures an exceptional space of state intervention through producing differentiated access to the state and normative legal protection within those spaces. Zoning operates as a technology of governing populations through the ability to define, discipline, and regulate life and sovereign power, which depends on this process to constitute an assemblage of control. Bordering in the Mediterranean Sea through my adapted reading of zoning highlights state efforts to perform state control and authority over the proverbial gates of EUrope.

### *Zoning as Spatial Manipulation: Mare Nullius and Abject Space in the Mediterranean Sea*

In the previous section, I discussed some of the core tenants of Ong’s theory of zoning. Here, I develop a conceptual adaptation of her theory to explore how it is applied

differently in the Mediterranean. Zoning the Mediterranean borderscape occurs through manufacturing a duality of a hyper-political rendering of the sea and a depoliticized understanding of state intervention in that same space. The act of constructing what Mainwaring (2019) terms as *mare nullius* produces an ‘emptiness’ to the Mediterranean Sea in an attempt to reconstitute the spatial politics of the region. Stripping the sea of historical context and excluding colonial histories from current geopolitical imaginations allows for multiple competing forms of re-inscription to occur. Part of the ability to zone the sea as a space of exception is manifest through emptying the sea of the politics which have shaped it (Danewid 2017). Once the sea is emptied of linkage to a broader geopolitical context, the sea is at once an exceptional platform of humanitarian intervention, but also a hotly contested space of security and supposed criminality (Stierl 2016). As a physical space of separation between the Global North and South, the borderscape of the sea ensures the continuation of the colonial and imperial project (Walia 2013; Danewid 2017). One activist notes that the ongoing context of boat migration in the Mediterranean is symptomatic of the larger colonial project in saying, “I think we are witnessing the symptom of colonialism. It's the aftermath of slavery and conquest of the whole world outside of Europe. It's really just the tip of the iceberg, if you want, what we're seeing” (16 Sea-Watch 2019). It is impossible to separate what is taking place now from those longer colonial and imperial legacies. While Ong's use of zoning does not see this same separation, the operationalization in the Mediterranean applies in a different way.

Zoning the Mediterranean borderscape divorces colonial histories, politics and violence tied to present bordering practices at sea and extends to an understanding of the ongoing process of colonialism and imperialism that continues to shape the Global South. Zoning is ultimately an attempt to facilitate the spatial manipulation of the sea in service of state bordering efforts. While Ong views zoning as the relinquishing state authority in service of neoliberal capital expansion, I view it as an effort to extend sovereign territorial claims through the manipulation of space. Constructing *mare nullius* enables the particular variegated and fluid state responses to people on the move in the Mediterranean (Mainwaring 2019). In doing so, this enables a distortion of state authority in the Mediterranean borderscape that facilitates the intersection of humanitarianism and

security-based interventions into the space of the sea. The sovereign exception delinks sovereign authority from territory to expand beyond the traditionally conceived limits of the state, by way of subsuming the sea under the exclusive purview of state control. Zoning the Mediterranean borderscape as a space of *mare nullius* ties together the production of exceptionality and the removal of broader political understandings located in the sea to expand EUropean bordering practices into the MENA region (Mainwaring 2019). It is precisely because of the emptiness that creates a supposed absence of authority, allowing for state intervention to be justified to regulate the apparent lawlessness of the sea.

As part of the zoning practice in the Mediterranean, emptying the political and historical lineage of the sea operates as a form of abject space production. For Isin and Rygiel (2007, 181–83), abject space manifests as “extraterritorial spaces where international and national laws are suspended...We refer to these as abject spaces to indicate that those who are constituted through them are rendered as neither subjects nor objects but inexistent insofar as they become inaudible and invisible.” Moreover, they are conceptualized as the spaces “where the mobility of people is regulated and national and international laws temporarily suspended through the creation of buffer zones through which people can be processed” (Isin and Rygiel 2007, 190). In the Central Mediterranean, this does not occur through a formal suspension of either international or domestic law. Instead, this rearticulation of space functions as a *de facto* suspension of legal norms to enable the continuation and expansion of the exclusionary border policies governing the peripheral spaces of EUrope. The production of abject space creates geographical and social isolation where claims to citizenship or asylum are actively denied. In effect, this produces buffer spaces in which the rights of individuals are reassigned, while the production abject space functions to make them legible (Scott 1998) and thereby governable by the state. In part, this spatial manipulation facilitates the desired processing and sorting function inextricably linked to bordering practices (Walters 2006; Salter 2008). In the empty, abject space created, states can then make sovereign claims to ‘settle’ the anarchic space of the sea.



Despite efforts to empty the sea and produce it as a depoliticized, supposedly lawless space, it remains a highly regulated neoliberal space of complex histories that facilitates the movement of people and goods; trade and commerce; multi-million dollar cruise ships and dilapidated migrant boats. There is a deep international commitment to regulating the sea through various legal conventions that govern and order that space. Indeed, a multitude of regulatory efforts have been designed to ensure the preservation of economic interest and the movement of goods through the sea (i.e. UNCLOS 1984). Although the realities of the modern political system regulate much of the international activity at sea, Walters (2008) suggests the imaginary of the sea as a space of lawlessness is still capable of reactivation. Removing, then reassigning authority in that supposedly anarchic space is crucial to the enactment of the state. Once the sea is rendered as an empty and lawless space, then paradoxically, state claims to the commons as a space of sovereign prerogative are enabled. The production of lawlessness and exceptionality as states seek to assert sovereign claim to the Mediterranean borderscape extends the more clearly defined territorial control beyond the land-based container of the state. State actors reactivate the sea as an anarchic space that demands the injection of state authority for regulation and control. In effect, this parallels colonial tropes that have been utilized in an attempt and justification to settle and civilize supposedly empty or anarchic spaces. Claiming the Mediterranean as a space of sovereign authority allows for the externalization of the border regime while positioning people on the move and the civil fleet in direct confrontation with the state security apparatus. The Mediterranean borderscape becomes operationalized as a space of conflict and control as well as solidarity and resistance as people on the move and SAR NGOs challenge the sovereign power of exclusion.

### *'Crisis' and the Mediterranean Borderscape*

Invoking notions of 'crisis' is integral to zoning the sea and the production of the Mediterranean borderscape. Crisis invokes a sense of exceptionality, thereby allowing for an injection of state presence which hinges on the rhetoric of responsibility associated with acts of rescue at sea. Moreover, crisis also operates as an organizing logic where it is through disorder that increasing managerial governance is then required. As Brambilla

and Jones (2020, 295) argue, “We are witnessing a routinisation of emergency which goes hand in hand with a routinisation of violence that the sovereign authority is entitled to exercise in order to manage crisis/emergency situations.” Producing narratives of crisis and emergency facilitates the routinization of state violence where the border becomes operationalized and legitimized in response to the supposed crisis at hand. However, as Jones (2016) aptly suggests, the enactment of the border serves as the source of violence, not the response to it. The material expressions of violent exclusion are enabled to protect the perceived sanctity of the border and the territorial integrity of the state. Crisis then becomes understood as a self-perpetuating mechanism in which state policies reaffirm the continuation and expansion of structural exclusion while projecting the failure of those policies onto migrants themselves. Intervention into the “non-space” (H. L. Johnson 2013) of the sea requires being situated in a ‘crisis’ narrative to enable an exceptional response, allowing for the violent material expressions of sovereignty and territoriality to occur. Through the material practice of the border, structural violence becomes manifest as personal violence for people on the move.

Bordering in the Mediterranean produces a humanitarian-security nexus enabled through the production of ‘crisis’, where the sea is zoned as a space of both humanitarian rescue and state intervention. Through the ever-apparent security response, state presence at sea is justified as a mechanism for taming and controlling what is perceived as European space.<sup>29</sup> The seemingly contradictory expression of the humanitarian-security nexus enacted at sea dually frames irregular migrants as helpless victims deserving of assistance and needing to be saved, while conversely being perceived as a threat to the safety and security of the state (Andersson 2017). Within this framework, people on the move can occupy a position where they are at once produced as both victims and villains in the migration process (Anderson 2008; Mainwaring 2016). The result necessitates both the securitization of the individual and, in turn, the enhancement of active and benign bordering practices that also seeks to remove NGO SAR actors from

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<sup>29</sup> For example, the Italian ‘military-humanitarian’ SAR operation, *Mare Nostrum*, translates to ‘Our Sea’. Despite the Mediterranean Sea existing a shared space between Europe and North Africa, not to mention a global shipping zone, the Mediterranean is often claimed as ‘Europe’s Sea’

the sea. The performance of bordering through the supposedly exceptional nature of that space invokes notions of crisis to produce an environment in which states can leverage sovereign power (Mountz and Hiemstra 2014). Constructing crisis and the invocation of exceptionality provides an opening for routinized, violent and militarized responses to autonomous migration at sea (Jones 2016). Crisis is employed as a spatiotemporal practice for controlling migration through the enforcement of borders. Through the production of crisis, geographies of sovereignty are reconfigured, and claims of sovereign power over the Mediterranean borderscape are expanded (Mountz and Hiemstra 2014).

Little and Vaughan-Williams (2016) argue that the intersections of humanitarianism and security are not contradictory processes but rather symptomatic of a biopolitical mode of governing migration. The humanitarian-security nexus emerges not as a contradictory manifestation of the border employed by state actors but rather as a central feature derived from the governmentality of bordering practices. Again, through these acts of policing, mobile populations are made both legible and governable to the state (Pallister-Wilkins 2017b; Scott 1998). Securing the state is a central narrative embodied in the development of border policy regimes. The legibility and thereby governability of people on the move are facilitated in part through the registration and documentation of asylum seekers to render them visible to the state. For states, this is a process whereby the control of the individual is enabled through bureaucratizing the control of migrant populations (Bigo 2002; 2014). Migrant bodies are re-inscribed as hybrid subjects where they are both in need of assistance and entitled to protection, but also criminalized and situated beyond those protections found within state territory (Aradau 2004; Andersson 2017). Even where the discourse of illegality or criminalization is not employed, the pullback of migrant boats or the denial of asylum claims is justified as being done in the individual's best interest. Pullbacks to Libya or deportations to an individual's 'home' state are perversely construed as a benevolent protection mechanism, in effect, to save migrants from themselves as the sea is a dangerous place.

## **Entanglements of the Mediterranean Borderscape**

Zoning the Mediterranean facilitates the emergence of humanitarian practices within the borderscape. This evolution of zoning as a border practice is linked to, and structured around, what Walters (2011) defines as the ‘humanitarian border’. Walters (2011, 138–39) argues that “The humanitarian border emerges once it becomes established that border crossing has become, for thousands of migrants seeking, for a variety of reasons, to access the territories of the Global North, a matter of life and death. It crystallizes as a way of governing this novel and disturbing situation and compensating for the social violence embodied in the regime of migration control.” The precarious assemblage of the humanitarian border is by no means a fixed process but one dependent on forms of depoliticization (Walters 2011). However, this fluid, unfixed and incomplete assemblage opens up possibilities of reclamation as a space of politics, contestation, and fracture.

The humanitarian border is part of a broader governmental assemblage of control that manifests in the spaces of contestation. Moreover, it challenges and reaffirms state processes of exclusion whilst creating a more palatable façade of the bordering process through producing new spaces of governance. Again, because of the particular application of border control mechanisms on what is deemed an excludable subset of the population, the humanitarian border becomes actualized in different spaces and at different times in response to state performances of the border and the enactment of sovereign control. The humanitarian borderscape is then to be understood as a part of the wider practice of “rebordering” (Andreas and Biersteker 2003). Utilizing this framework highlights how the humanitarian borderscape is (re)made and performed (Butler 2006) through state and non-state actors as an active means of contesting the perception of state space. Understanding the emergence of the humanitarian logic embedded within the Mediterranean borderscape serves to both unsettle sovereign spatial claims over the sea and expose the production of power occurring in the liminal spaces of governance.

As previously addressed [[see Chapter 3](#)], NGO SAR operations can be interrogated as being enveloped within this form of governmentality and biopolitical

control. Borderscapes become spaces of both care and control, which are undergirded by state control practices. In the spatial production of the borderscape, care and compassion associated with humanitarianism is simultaneously enveloped in processes of repression (Ticktin 2016; 2011) and co-opted as a form of ethical policing (Pallister-Wilkins 2015; 2017b). In this particular representation, Moreno-Lax (2018, 121) suggests that “Humanitarianism (re-)presents interdiction as benign and performed in the interest of migrants.” Rather than seeing the emergence of humanitarianism in relation to policing as a seemingly contradictory process betraying liberal notions of care, it should be understood as “deeply intertwined logics and point to novel modalities of border governance” (Stierl 2018, 707; Garelli and Tazzioli 2018). Despite the humanitarian support for people on the move, there remains a risk of capture within the governmental framings of control. The production of the humanitarian border indicates an expansion of the border characterized as ‘borderwork’ (Rumford 2006; 2008) and encompasses the multitude of ways that the border is defined, performed and challenged. As part of this expansive process, the intertwining of humanitarian reason in this process through what has been understood as humanitarian borderwork is made visible (Pallister-Wilkins 2017a). Through the emergence of the humanitarian borderscape at sea, rescue operations can be viewed as an attempt to perform care for people on the move while simultaneously, and arguably unwittingly, being captured by differing forms of state control (Ticktin 2011; Pallister-Wilkins 2017b). Elsewhere, this has also been argued to produce control without care (Dadusc and Mudu 2020).

The potential for the envelopment of the civil fleet within the state bordering regime is not necessarily an automatic or intentional process. As Mensink (2020, 1225–26) suggests, “Activists and scholars alike struggle to capture how protests often simultaneously renounce and reproduce the boundaries of belonging they are contesting.” Moreover, governmental control is inextricably reliant on the ability of SAR actors, in particular, to identify and recognize “humanitarianism [as] an inherently political concept, and one that is always already implicated in a relation of violence” (Nyers 2006, 42 cited in Stierl, 2018). Previously, NGOs such as Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), for example, have willingly worked directly alongside state security operations (Cusumano

2017a). Increasingly, however, the evolving nature of Mediterranean SAR operations has shifted that relationship with state border personnel. In part, this shifting relationship has created a more oppositional positionality between state and non-state actors at sea, often marked by confrontation and criminalization, standoffs and blockades [[see Chapter 5](#)]. There is a tension to the degree that NGOs are willing to comply with state demands, with interest in preserving the operations' longevity despite the blockade production directly tied to their criminalization.

The entanglement of NGO SAR acts of solidarity and the practice of bordering is not intended to replace more violent state security practices with softer, less harmful practices. On the contrary, the envelopment within the security apparatus emerges as a supplemental component of governmentality in response to the perceived necessity to control problematic segments of the global population (Pallister-Wilkins 2015; Cuttitta 2018a). The reconfiguration of state security practices to envelop modes of care thereby broadens the assemblage of governmental control. Rather than producing a “false dichotomy” between securitization and humanitarianism (Perkowski 2016, 334), the interwoven practices become co-constitutive of an expansive mode of bordering that incorporates both care and control.

As Dadusc and Mudu (2020, 5) suggest, “Often framed as bottom-up or ‘radical’ private and non-governmental initiatives work side-by-side to institutionalised missions. In the face of the violent apparatus of border militarisation, both governmental and non-governmental humanitarian interventions figure as the least of all possible evils.” They continue to argue that “rather than fostering autonomy and acting in solidarity with migrants’ struggle, humanitarian operations often discipline, de-politicise and commodify the lives and subjectivities of those who allegedly receive their care” (Dadusc and Mudu 2020, 5). SAR NGOs exist as political actors involved in those politicized relations between states, institutions and people on the move. As evidenced in Chapter 3, I have sought to counter these critiques of humanitarianism and the envelopment of SAR actors in the wider scope of the global border regime. In doing so, I suggest that recasting the work of SAR actors at sea as enacting a contentious politics of solidarity highlights how

many activists working in that space seek to push back and challenge these problematic structures within their operations. Indeed, this does not escape some of the clear and poignant criticisms of this work in terms of replicating structural inequalities (Fassin 2010a), serving as an outsourced form of border control (Pallister-Wilkins 2017b), and furthering the paternalist, White saviour tropes through this work (Clayton 2020). This is not a simple binary position but rather an entangled relationship that is often messy and imperfect. Despite this often fraught positioning, there remain committed efforts to engage with complex moral and ethical dilemmas within much of the civil fleet.

### **Contentious Politics and the Mediterranean Borderscape**

State actors construct the sea as an exceptional sovereign space defined by the acute necessity of saving lives in grievous distress due to the perceived imminence of death. The violent and untamed nature of the sea demands state intervention. It is well documented that refugees can and often do live for years, decades, if not, generations in refugee camps (Loescher and Milner 2005; Hyndman 2013). The sea, however, presents an entirely different challenge as survival at sea may be limited to hours, if not minutes. While invocations of humanitarianism can occur with migrants in the deserts of Arizona, New Mexico, and California, there is something unique about the sea and the ability to reassign meaning to that space that renders it exceptional. Through invoking the discourse of humanitarianism, crisis, and security in relation to SAR operations, European narratives of the sea blur the politics and violence of borders while situating rescue operations within an exceptional environment. The treacherous nature of the sea alone is not necessarily enough to warrant state intervention in those spaces. Constructing the Mediterranean as a space of exception allows state actors to preside over the life and death of individuals at sea while depoliticizing the governance and control of the borderscape. This sovereign claim over the sea is, however, not without challenge. The sustained presence of the civil fleet in the Mediterranean represents an active challenge to state claims of sovereign authority while contesting the exclusionary practices of bordering occurring at sea. The sea emerges as a stage for contentious political action that serves to reclaim space through political action.

One of the critical actions of civil fleet is to challenge the in/visibility of the borderscape. Not only does this contest the singularity of state authority in the process of rescue, but it also highlights the bodies moving through the borderscape and the violence they are subject to in transit. Making the Mediterranean visible is an essential form of political labour that highlights the contested spatial politics of the sea. NGOs provide a crucial source of monitoring that exposes the violence of state actions at sea. Part of the work in making the Mediterranean borderscape visible is done by documenting the human rights abuses taking place. Pointing to the importance of this role, one Sea-Watch activist argues,

We also bring an eye on what is happening there, so we are also doing monitoring of the situation, especially of the different actors, of...especially the Libyan Coast Guards but also the behaviour of the different European governments...and try to inform the people, as much as we can about the situation and about how human rights are treated, or how humans are treated. (08 Sea-Watch 2019)

The monitoring function makes the conditions at sea visible but also documents the abuse occurring in collusion with the scLYCG. Echoing this sentiment, another activist suggests that “cooperation between the European assets and the Libyans, is something that they really want to keep quiet and which is also, potentially illegal. If we're there, we have eyes and ears. Yeah, they don't want that” (48 Sea-Watch 2019). Similarly, another activist argues that the continued visibility of the situation at sea becomes a cause for concern for European state actors wishing to keep these continued injustices from sight. They state, “there is definitely an interest from European countries and Italy particular to drown this phenomenon and to silence it. And to keep it away from public opinion and to not give proper information about it” (42 Sea-Watch 2019). As a result of the politically damaging nature of the documentation of these rights violations, abuse and collusion, the ability to keep the space of the sea visible is under constant attack. Increasingly, the aerial observation missions undertaken by the Sea-Watch planes, *Moonbird* and *Seabird*, coupled with the work of AlarmPhone, are integral to pulling back the cover of state secrecy in the otherwise opaque space of the sea. In effect, this allows NGOs to take a political position whereby they can challenge and condemn the in/action of Europe, while



also documenting the violations of international law and legal frameworks, which highlights the inadequate state response (Sea-Watch 2021; AlarmPhone 2019).

The vastness of the sea and the way in which drowned bodies disappear is a challenge posed by the Mediterranean. Keeping deaths at sea invisible to the broader public is of fundamental importance to European narratives of the Mediterranean borderscape. Alluding to this notion, one activist argues that the sea is

Being used as a cloak by EU leaders who have a vested interest in people disappearing in this body of water like...yes, if there was a way to find if we had evidence of dead bodies, I mean, that would change things, wouldn't it? It would really if you had a mass grave on land that was as big as the number of people who drowned in the Mediterranean, there would be almost no escaping the crimes that have been committed by our governments. But we don't see them. They just, they disappear within a matter of minutes. (34 Sea-Watch 2019)

Another activist highlights the importance of the NGO presence at sea as a means of bearing witness to what is occurring as the sea itself contributes to hiding the evidence of the violence occurring in that space. They state that,

All the SAR ships were detained, and there were no independent monitoring mechanisms to like actually bear witness to whether people are drowning or crossing or not. And I think that's kind of exploited. That's kind of exploited because in a desert, on a mountain, or a forest, you can't hide evidence of people. The sea, it does that for you. And so possibly, that's quite convenient that this does take place at sea because it is quite...it's not that visual. You see boats on the radar and then they disappear. (26 Mission Lifeline 2019)

The sea is enlisted as a passive form of border control, providing a 'moral alibi' (Doty 2011) in which the harshness of the environment is used to explain away the death occurring in that space, but it also hides the evidence of what occurs. Making the sea visible is a form of countermapping state efforts to zone the sea and define the Mediterranean borderscape. Resisting the construction of the sea as the state-centric space produces a counter-narrative that employs a "disobedient gaze" (Heller, Pezzani, and Stierl 2017) to challenge the exclusionary power of sovereign authority. As one activist argues, the NGOs "do their best to exploit social media and get their message out and

counter the political message, you know, to counter that the government or EU line on migration. I think that they're well aware of that, and they do it relatively well" (33 Sea-Watch 2019). Countermapping and documenting the on-going violence and human rights abuses occurring at sea is essential in challenging the narratives of migrant crossings perpetuated by European actors. Making the experience of the sea visible only furthers the friction between state actors and NGOs as one activist suggested "That's one of the reasons why they hate what we do, because we show the conditions of these boats. And, you know, without images, you could also claim that what we say is not true" (42 Sea-Watch 2019). In effect, that visibility gives legitimacy and credibility to the claims made by civil fleet and those transiting the Mediterranean. In the following chapter [\[see Chapter 5\]](#), I continue interrogating the politics of in/visibility through the emergence of standoff politics.

The sea is a symbolic space of contentious solidarity, which enables the transformation of that environment into a symbolically significant border zone, shifting the borderscape into a space of rupture and contestation. As Vandevordt (2019, 255) notes, "In these border-like places, citizens and refugees transformed abject, invisible places into symbolically significant sites of contentious solidarity." Crossing frontiers for migrant populations is done not simply through physically transiting border spaces. Traversing these frontiers can also be understood as a symbolic act of resistance to the ordering of the state. As posited by Isin (2012, 158), these acts of transversal citizenship represent "ruptures in the given order of things." SAR NGOs enacting a contentious politics of solidarity contribute to this rupture by helping to facilitate irregularized journeys and, in turn, signifying space through the strategic manipulation of the imaginaries of the sea. Acts of solidarity in the Mediterranean both highlight and challenge the fluidity of borders at sea. On the one hand, the sea becomes an abject, exceptional space of state control. On the other hand, the sea also becomes a space of contestation as people on the move and the work of the civil fleet creates a rupture in the state's ability to exclude.

In pointing to the work of Alarm Phone, Stierl (2016, 573) suggests their actions are "able to amplify the political claims to international citizenship that are enacted in

movement and enunciated in distress calls from the sea. Subjects of escape and those in solidarity with them enact international citizenship by performing their right to move, cross, survive and arrive as well as by challenging and assigning responsibility to governments." In effect, through repoliticizing SAR operations and the space of the sea, it also functions as an amplification of political claims being made by people on the move. The repoliticization of SAR becomes embodied in the acts of solidarity with people on the move. Enacting a contentious politics of solidarity is not simply as a mechanism to counter death and violence at the borders of Europe but to elevate political claims of belonging and the right to mobility. The repoliticization of SAR embedded in the contentious politics of solidarity becomes a direct attempt to "reactivate the sea as a space of unaccountable human loss" (Stierl 2016, 574). This work has "created a contentious presence in the Mediterranean Sea, able to listen to, translate and amplify calls emanating from migrant vessels [...] They want to create a Mediterranean space of free movement, exchange and solidarity, and make such an emergency phone-line unnecessary. But, for the time being, even deep in maritime spaces, the ringing of a phone continues to be a sign of stubborn survival and, possibly, a wake-up call for Europe" (Stierl 2016, 574). Even though it is acknowledged that civil fleet SAR operations are not a solution to irregularized migration in the Mediterranean, their work is reactivating the sea as a political space and amplifying migrant claims for free movement.

Civil fleet operations function to challenge the governmental mechanisms of control that serve to define the international state system. Deepening the fractures of a segregated international system enforced through the current global border regime resists the increasing militarization of borders and the growing criminalization of migration. Beyond simply exposing fault lines, cracks, and friction associated with the global border regime, enacting a contentious politics of solidarity in the borderscape widens and deepens these gaps through the disruptive practice of their work. These cracks, fractures and friction emerge as a result of autonomous forms of migration as mentioned above. Enacting solidarity is keenly focused on dismantling rather than humanizing migration policies through widening the cracks or ruptures within the violent foundations of 'Fortress Europe' (Dadusc and Mudu 2020; Burrige 2009; Ioannidis, Dimou, and Dadusc 2021).

As Perkowski (2016, 334) argues, “The movement of people across the Mediterranean has reanimated the Mediterranean as a political space, defying the security and humanitarian logics of the European border regime. In turn, this reanimation has challenged attempts by European actors to construct the Mediterranean as a political space in their image.” Animating the production of the sea as a zone of European exclusion and contested space of political action, the work of the civil fleet actively challenges the exclusionary vision of the European border regime.

## **Conclusion**

Challenging imaginaries of the sea as an empty space serves to make migrant lives visible and highlights the in/actions of European actors. Increasingly, civil fleet SAR operations illuminate the how European actors facilitate the on-going violence occurring at sea through employing the harshness of the environment as a border control tool, or more directly, through colluding with the scLYCG operations in the Mediterranean. Yet, making state in/actions visible in the otherwise unseen spaces of the sea also expands the perceived legitimacy of state presence as a means of settling the supposedly anarchic space of the Mediterranean. Indeed, the supposed lawlessness of the sea suspends the normalized reality of governance in that space, while extending the reach of sovereign authority. Emptying the sea from the politics that have shaped it provides a justification for the sea to be recast as a space of exclusive sovereign control through the act of zoning. Reinterpreting the socio-spatial politics of the sea enables the application of graduated sovereignty to those spaces. Contrary to Ong’s assertion of zoning being applied as a means of relinquishing state authority in service of neoliberal capital expansion, at sea, this practice enables the injection of state presence into the Mediterranean. Notably, this is not to suggest that the sea is an anarchic space devoid of state presence. Conversely, the current involvement of the state in those spaces allows the sea to be reassigned as a space demanding increased regulation and control. Simultaneously, this act justifies further militarising the transitory space at the periphery of Europe, supposedly to ensure the safety of migrants at sea.

Importantly, civil fleet SAR operations contribute to reanimating the sea as a political space (Perkowski 2016). Through enacting a contentious politics of solidarity, the work of the civil fleet very directly challenges the authority of European migration governance over the Mediterranean. NGOs expose the cleavages in the state's ability to exert absolute authority in the sea. Examining the politics of civil fleet operations in the Mediterranean illuminates how SAR contributes to the blurring the politics and violence of borders while disturbing the inside/outside dichotomy that has evolved around state sovereignty and territoriality. The repoliticization of SAR specifically, and the Mediterranean borderscape more broadly, highlights when the relational practices of solidarity, particularly in the border zones and margins of Europe, become problematic for states (Tazzioli and Walters 2019, 186). In challenging the governmentality of borders through the repoliticization of SAR, the contentious politics of enacting solidarity “[W]hile not giving up the aim of completely abolishing the control of mobility, adopts the critical attitude consisting in ‘the art of not being governed like that’ that Foucault saw emerging as consubstantial to governmentality practices” (Pezzani and Heller 2013, 295). Enacting a contentious politics of solidarity operates to challenge the border management regime, not as an immediate mechanism for abolishing borders but rather to shift how migration is governed in order to not being governed like that.

While the production of the sea as a contested borderscape emerges, this has also provoked the criminalization and repression of SAR actors to reclaim space, reaffirm a fractured vision of sovereign authority at sea, and reassert European control of the proverbial gates of the region. This has manifested itself in the emergence of standoff politics as a novel form of blockading [[see Chapter 5](#)]. While narratives of the globalized system defined by free movement across borders have emerged, the reality remains that this is unequally accessed. Identifying this conceptual illusion exposes the friction, fault lines and fractures that exist in the effort to maintain the ‘global colour line’ (Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam 2014) and facilitate the perpetuation of a system of ‘global apartheid’ (Richmond 1994). The fault lines or ruptures in the supposedly “smooth space of globalization” (Stierl 2018, 707) produces gaps in which alternative forms of control can emerge in the defence and maintenance of distinct spaces of the Global North and South.

## Chapter 5

### **Boats, Borders and Blockades: Standoff Politics and Carceral Borderscapes in the Central Mediterranean**

#### **Introduction**

In 2019, irregularized boat crossings in the Central Mediterranean had largely dropped from the front pages of global media outlets, with only the spectacular events making the news for a fleeting moment. In late June, the politics of the sea once again forced its way back into the public consciousness as the culmination of a 17-day standoff<sup>30</sup> between Sea-Watch and the Italian government ended with the *Sea-Watch 3* entering the Italian port of Lampedusa (Gordon 2019; Squire 2019). The NGO was left to drift at sea without a safe port to disembark the 58 migrants rescued off the coast of Libya. Initially, the *Sea-Watch 3* was directed to disembark in Tripoli, which has become a routine direction from MRCC Rome, as then Italian Interior Minister, Matteo Salvini, had issued a decree barring the SAR NGOs from entering any Italian port (Geddes and Pettrachin 2020). The captain of the *Sea-Watch 3*, Carola Rackete, refused disembarkation in Tripoli because this would violate the international legal protection of non-refoulement. While some of the survivors on board had been disembarked on medical grounds, the ship remained blocked from entering the port and left to trace the boundary of Italian territorial waters, 12 nautical miles from the coast. Taking to various news and social media outlets,

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<sup>30</sup> The language employed by different NGOs is an interesting venue to explore both the politics of these organizations as well as the standoff process. While some NGOs take a more depoliticized approach to the process, others view the interactions with Europe in more antagonistic and deeply political terms. There are differing political orientations around the messaging that is taking place. The depoliticized approach sees the 'standoff', or as they may characterize, 'standby', as the start of a process of negotiation with Europe. Conversely, as organizations actively challenge the politics of exclusion, this process is understood or articulated as a standoff and represented as an antagonistic engagement that challenges state efforts to exclude. The language of 'standby' has been utilized by organizations such as SOS Méditerranée and MSF, while the term 'standoff' is employed by NGOs such as Sea-Watch, Lifeline and Mediterranean, in their characterization of the practice. The use of distinctively combative language, or lack thereof, becomes indicative of the political divisions within the civil fleet. In part, this terminology highlights the political orientation of the organizations, how they understand their work in relation to the European border apparatus, and broader discussions around the freedom of movement for people on the move. More politically in line with the orientation of Sea-Watch and others, I consciously choose to employ the language of standoffs. This particular terminology more accurately represents the politics embedded in the governance of migration and the operationalization of borders at sea.

Rackete called on Europe to provide a safe port of entry to disembark the remaining 42 survivors on the ship as a multi-week standoff ensued.

Standoffs have become increasingly common and represent an emergent norm for civil fleet operations in the Central Mediterranean. As NGOs challenge the singularity of state authority at sea, enacting a contentious politics of solidarity collides with biopolitical modes of state control. While the work of the civil fleet has never been without contention, there has been a marked shift in the spatial politics of the sea. The emergence of standoff politics has become a normalized part of the rescue process. This shift in the governance of the sea ensures that NGO vessels are transformed from spaces of rescue and liberation for people on the move into sites of confinement and control. In part, European actors are working to marginalize and criminalize the contentious politics of solidarity enacted by these groups. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the emergence of a multifaceted attempt to blockade the Mediterranean through the use of standoff politics. Moreover, I explore how this now routinized practice of the standoff transforms SAR vessels into carceral spaces in the Mediterranean borderscape.

In this chapter, I argue that blockading, as evidenced through standoffs politics, further animates the sea as a contested borderscape, as discussed in the previous chapter [[see Chapter 4](#)]. As NGOs challenge the singularity of state authority at sea, standoff politics become a means of reasserting sovereign authority over the commons. The civil fleet interventions in the Mediterranean disrupts regional bordering practices and contests the perceived singularity of state authority at sea as Europe seeks to rearticulate international space as the sole purview of the state. The emergence of standoff politics signals an effort to utilize legal and bureaucratic mechanisms to assert sovereign authority over the commons as exclusive state space. Moreover, standoffs animate the European strategy of containment that produces NGO rescue boats as offshore, mobile border sites signalling the escalation and evolution in the criminalization of solidarity.

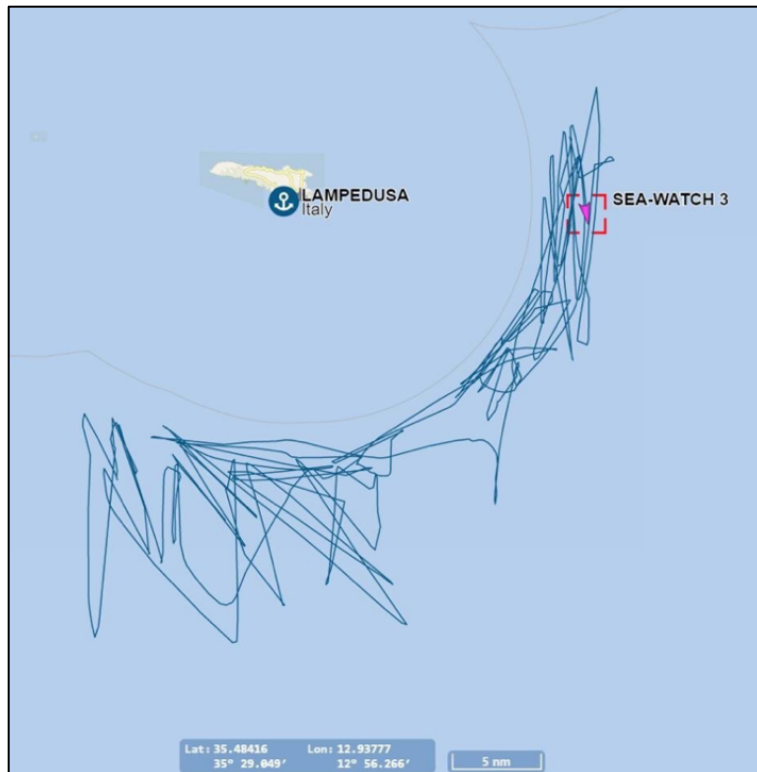
### *Chapter Outline*

First, I outline what I have termed ‘standoff politics’ and provide an overview of how I situate the practice occurring at sea as a form of blockading. Second, I trace the evolution of standoffs and blockading in the Central Mediterranean and beyond. Third, I situate standoffs as a form of spectacle in the performance of state authority. In exploring standoffs as spectacle, I return to discuss how the process renders certain bodies in/visible while highlighting the utility of the practice in asserting sovereign authority at sea. Fourth, I interrogate standoff politics as a manifestation of spatiotemporal containment and the production of archipelagic carcerality at sea. Here, I discuss how standoffs operate as a mechanism of slowing time for people on the move while identifying how NGO boats are subsequently transformed into punitive carceral spaces at sea. Finally, I explore the emergent criminalization of solidarity as a form of bureaucratic blockading occurring in the Mediterranean.

### **Standoff Politics and Blockading in the Mediterranean Sea**

The June 2019 Sea-Watch standoff highlights the emergence of a novel form of bordering taking place in the Mediterranean. Salvini and his government, in effect, employed a form of bureaucratic blockade in denying the entry of the *Sea-Watch 3* to an Italian port for disembarkation. For nearly two weeks, the ship was left to trace the boundary of the Italian territorial waters outside Lampedusa, a small island off the southwest coast of Sicily [see Figure 5]. In light of the continued refusal to allow for the disembarkation in the Italian port, Sea-Watch challenged the port blockade through direct action. The *Sea-Watch 3* entered into Italian territorial waters hoping that Italian state actors would grant entry to the port, or at least disembark those remaining onboard. Despite entering territorial waters, the Italian government denied the *Sea-Watch 3* entry to the port of Lampedusa.





*Figure 5: Sea-Watch 3 traces Italian territorial waters off the coast of Lampedusa (Sea-Watch Twitter Account, 23 June 2019)*

As conditions onboard continued to deteriorate, Rackete declared a state of emergency, again, believing the move would force the Italian government to action. Ultimately, the standoff culminated in the early hours of 29 June 2019, when the ship entered the port without receiving formal authorization from the Italian government after nearly 17 days at sea. In describing the events precipitating the port entry, one activist recalls,

What took place was that we had no port of safety, and then we get into the national waters, which is something that everyone is actually free to do, have to do with people on board. And we get into the national water and nothing happened. And no disembarkation happened. So the country didn't take the responsibility to disembark people who were inside the territorial waters, so we had to enter the port. We have to force it because it was not enough (37 Sea-Watch 2019)

In breaking the state blockade of the port, Salvini declared the unauthorized port entry and subsequent docking in Lampedusa “an act of war” (Hughes 2019). In the following days, the *Alex*, a small sailing yacht operated by the Italian NGO, Mediterranea,

also entered the port without authorization to disembark the 41 survivors rescued in the same area off the coast of Libya (The Guardian 2019). While the duration of their standoff had been much shorter, the willingness of the Italian state officials to allow an 18-metre yacht with 41 people on board to drift off the coast of Lampedusa highlights an emergent trend in the European approach to bordering the sea.

Following the disembarkation of the guests and crew, *Rackete* was taken into custody for interrogation, with formal charges later issued by the Italian state. State prosecutors later opened a second investigation into *Rackete* on the grounds that she had committed an act of violence against an Italian warship alongside resisting a public official during the port entry (Amnesty International 2020b, 67). In describing the situation onboard prior to the port entry, *Rackete* stated that “Various people in my team expressed serious concerns, one of the doctors said the reactions of people on board could not be foreseen, the smallest thing could have made the situation unravel and the coordinator-host said that people were losing trust in the crew” (Amnesty International 2020b, 66). Speaking to the decision to enter the port, *Rackete* continued on to tell prosecutors, “We tried for 14 days not to breach the law” (Amnesty International 2020b, 66).

While these two standoffs represent the most direct confrontation with any European state to date, standoffs are now a normalized part of the SAR process for NGOs at sea. In contrast to previous events, the *Sea-Watch 3* directly challenged the enactment of the standoff through the active refusal of the bureaucratic port blockade. Initially, as the ship breached the imaginary line demarcating Italian territorial waters, the final challenge to the port blockade transpired through the direct refusal to adhere to the legal mechanisms employed to keep the ship at sea. In refusing the Italian blockade and entering the port of Lampedusa, *Sea-Watch* effectively challenged the sovereign authority of the Italian state. The response from the Italian government was swift, as the captain was immediately detained, pending a criminal investigation for the actions (Al Jazeera 2019). While this particular standoff serves as a dramatic example of the contentious politics of solidarity embedded in SAR operations at sea, the overt criminalization of

solidarity actions occurring at sea has become increasingly apparent in the Mediterranean. I return to discuss the criminalization of SAR later in this chapter.

What is seen through the assistance of AIS ship tracking programs [see Figure 5], is a clear visualization of the nautical borders of the Italian state. This imagery captures the essence of standoff politics as state officials establish a zone of exclusion evidenced by the clear demarcation of the dichotomous inside/outside relationship between the civil fleet and Europe. As the ship navigates through the interstitial space of the sea, the jagged movements of the ship stand in stark contrast to the seemingly smooth spaces of state authority. In visualizing the juxtaposition of dis/order created through these movements, the *Sea-Watch 3* maps, traces and performs the nautical borders of the Italian state.

### *Defining Standoff Politics*

The emergence of standoff politics and the blockading of European ports effectively relies on the use of the legal mechanisms predicated on sovereign territorial authority. These legal mechanisms are operationalized, in effect, to block ports by keeping both people on the move and the civil fleet at sea. Standoffs occur as states are unwilling to disembark migrants onboard NGO vessels (and occasionally commercial vessels), often leading to prolonged waiting periods at sea as ships are barred from entering a port of safety. Following a rescue, in any case, states are legally obligated under international maritime law to assign a port of safety for the vessel involved in the operation (UNCLOS 1984). The overt and often public denial of a port of safety to disembark those onboard signals the beginning of the standoff between NGOs and European states. Despite standoffs appearing to exist as a finite event, I see standoffs extending beyond the moment itself. Instead, standoffs can be understood to encapsulate a wider blockading phenomenon occurring in response to irregularized migration at sea and encompasses what precedes and then follows that actual event. In doing so, blockade production in the Mediterranean is, in effect, working to keep both migrants and NGOs in place, further slowing down time.

Beyond state efforts to contain, disrupt and slow migrant journeys at sea, standoff politics represent a form of blockading. Traditionally, blockades are understood as physical barriers to mobility used as a means of stopping entry, protecting space shaping movement through urban centres, rural areas and seas (Hazan 2015). At sea, however, the SAR blockades utilized by states can be more appropriately conceived of as bureaucratic blockade, effectively producing the Mediterranean as a ‘carceral seascape’ (Stierl 2021). There are two elements to blockade production in the Mediterranean. While not manifesting in the traditionally understood physical blockade, the development of legal-bureaucratic blockades to mobility are employed through both barring both the entry to and exit from European ports.<sup>31</sup> At sea, NGOs are prevented from entering ports following rescues, illuminated by the emergence of the highly visible standoff process.

Conversely, in port, NGO vessels are also routinely prevented from returning to sea due to criminal and administrative investigations that effectively serve to detain NGO ships. The legal-bureaucratic blockades produced by European states further the development and characterization of the sea as a hyper-political contested borderscape. In the Mediterranean, this form of blockading utilizes seemingly benign, everyday practices that draw upon legal and bureaucratic mechanisms to stop NGO vessels from conducting SAR operations. The detention of rescue vessels produces a form of structural violence, in part, as detaining NGOs with this practice ensures people on the move will die at sea, be pulled back to Libya, or be subject to increased precarity in their journeys.

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<sup>31</sup> There are parallels with other manifestations of blockading that have occurred at sea. While not utilizing the overt militarized blockading of ports that has been seen in historical cases (Cuban Missile Crisis, Israeli Port Blockade), there is still a militarized element to this process in the Mediterranean. Specifically, state coast guard and navy vessels will routinely monitor ships from a distance as they trace state boundary waters. At times, they have also been known to harass ships by shining search lights on NGOs ships during the night. There are other historical instances where barring entry of boat migrants has also occurred. For example, during WWII the now highly publicized case of the *St. Louis* comes to mind. In this case, a ship carrying Jewish migrants sought refuge in an effort to flee the rise of Nazi regime in 1939. The ship was systematically denied safe harbour in Canada and the US and eventually returned to Europe, where many of those on board were ultimately exterminated in Nazi concentration camps (Lawlor 2016). There was a deep sense of shame stemming from the rejected claims for asylum, which endured for decades in the aftermath of WWII. In November 2018, the Canadian government issued a formal apology in recognition of their failure to assist people in need (Stroh 2018). While not a direct correlation, invoking the memory of the *St. Louis* can provide a powerful claim to refuge in the present, as the denial of safe ports and the forcible return of migrants to the well-documented violent conditions in Libya continues to inflict harm on migrant populations.

By using standoffs and blockading in the governance of irregularized migration in the Mediterranean, the sea is maintained as a profoundly unequal and violent space as states weaponize bureaucratic modes of control against the civil fleet and people on the move.

The production of blockades at sea functions to deny entry to a port by utilizing legal-bureaucratic mechanisms to bar entry. Commonly, states will also utilize the political dysfunction of Europe in leveraging the blockade. In justifying this practice, states often suggest a lack of solidarity among EU member states for the pejoratively termed ‘burden-sharing’ of asylum seekers in the region (Balboni 2021). This rhetorical stance is further coupled with calls for a formal, EU-wide strategy to address the continued arrivals. These concerns around solidarity, ‘burden-sharing’ and migration management have become a central feature of the EU’s New Pact on Migration and Asylum introduced in September 2020 (European Commission 2020). Currently, the redistribution of migrant boat arrivals is done on an ad hoc basis. Often, the non-existent disembarkation strategy leads to prolonged periods of detention at sea as ships are summarily blocked from entering a port while these ad hoc arrangements are finalized. As I will return shortly, though the supposed need to settle ad hoc redistribution agreements is often stated as the reason for the delays in port entry and disembarkation, there are certainly deeper, more nefarious political objectives being operationalized in this blockade production.

Bureaucratic blockades exist beyond these dramatic moments at sea that periodically make their way to the front pages of European newspapers. While blockades serve to keep NGOs from entering ports, conversely, they also work to stop the civil fleet from leaving European ports on future SAR missions. Bureaucratic blockades employ seemingly benign, everyday practices that effectively function to produce immobility in migration. Preventing port departure enables states to exert legal and administrative power over NGOs through bureaucratic means. In practice, this means investigations can drag on for months, in the case of the *Sea-Watch 3*, if not years, as in the case of another NGO ship, *Iuventa*,<sup>32</sup> which has been under criminal investigation for over three years (FRA 2020b). Moreover, bureaucratic changes to the regulation of the flag-state

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<sup>32</sup> The flagship of the German NGO, Jugend Rettet.

classification of a ship become another means of keeping NGOs from leaving port while also using time as a means of control. More subtly, however, by using the bureaucratic time to keep NGOs in port and therefore diminishing the likelihood that rescue operations will occur at sea, states are effectively ensuring that fewer people manage to arrive on European shores. Coupled with the outsourcing of European border control to the scLYCG, this form of bureaucratic blockades further animates the sea as a hyper-political and highly contested borderscape.

### **Blockading the Sea: A Brief History of Standoffs in the Mediterranean**

Standoffs between SAR NGOs and Europe have grown increasingly common. It warrants a brief examination of the emergence of this practice and how it has been applied previously to highlight its evolution as a mechanism of control in the Mediterranean. Blockading has impacted a wide range of actors beyond the civil fleet as they also routinely occur with private and commercial vessels at sea. More interestingly, however, this same practice has also taken place with state Coast Guard ships as they become enveloped into the broader criminalization of SAR. In outlining the evolution of standoff politics, I explore some of the earliest instances of standoffs in the Central Mediterranean. As previously mentioned, standoffs are not a new process but one that dramatically expanded since Matteo Salvini's rise to power in Italy.

#### *Foreshadowing Standoff Politics with the Civil Fleet: Early Indications in the Case of the Cap Anamur*

The case of the *Cap Anamur* in 2004 was the first instance of an NGO standoff occurring in the Central Mediterranean. The German humanitarian NGO and its ship, the *Cap Anamur II*, unexpectedly rescued 37 migrants while conducting a sea test of the engine, 100 nautical miles from the coast of Lampedusa (Calandrino and Bellezza 2017). Following the rescue, the crew sought to enter the port of Empedocles, Sicily, while continuing to search for other possible distress cases in the area. Despite prior approval for disembarkation, the *Cap Anamur's* offer of safe harbour was rescinded immediately before entering the port. To reinforce the state's position, the Italian navy was directed to block the NGO's entry as a 12-day standoff ensued (Cuttitta 2014a). In justifying the move,

the Italian government stated that because the ship did not immediately go to a port of safety following the rescue, the migrants on board had lost their status of protection (Calandrino and Bellezza 2017). After being stranded for nearly two weeks, the ship finally entered port without formal authorization following the emergency declaration due to the rapidly deteriorating conditions onboard (Cuttitta 2014a). During this time, the NGO mounted a high-profile media campaign to pressure the Italian government and make the situation on board publicly visible. This had the effect of widely publicizing not only the presence of migrants at sea but the concerted state effort to block the NGO from disembarking in a European port.

Immediately upon entering the port, the ship was seized, crew members were detained and, “for the first time, rescuing lives resulted in legal prosecution” (Cuttitta 2018b, 638). The crew was later charged with “assistance of illegal entry” as well as “having gained a direct or indirect profit and with the aggravating circumstance of having acted as an organized criminal group” in their effort to disembark in Sicily (Calandrino and Bellezza 2017, 61). Pezzani (2015, 72–73) argues that “Despite the courageous effort to make visible the violence routinely perpetrated against migrants at the maritime borders of Europe, this act of exposure was infamously turned against the migrants and the crew of the ship themselves.” Elaborating on this emergent dynamic, he states, “For the migrants, it implicitly became proof of their illegal status, which led to their hasty deportation; for the crew of the ship, while it was insufficient to prevent them from being brought to court, accused of ‘illegal trafficking’ of migrants, it was enough to morally ‘disqualify’ their intervention as an alleged attempt to attract funding through a ‘high-visibility’ crisis” (Pezzani 2015, 73). Ultimately, as Cuttitta (2018b, 638) argues, “The *Cap Anamur*, much more than fishing boats and cargo vessels, posed a challenge to the monopoly of the state in matters of life and death.” While all crew members charged were eventually acquitted in 2009, the case of the *Cap Anamur* provided a troubling foreshadow of the soon to be normalized relationship between NGOs and Europe.

### *Fishing Vessels and Commercial Shipping*

While this dissertation focuses on civil society SAR NGOs, other non-state actors have been subject to standoff politics with European states. Outside of the NGO context, this process has also occurred with civilian fishing vessels rescuing people at sea. For example, in December 2018, a Spanish fishing vessel, *Nuestra Madre Loreto*, was barred entry to Malta for several weeks after responding to a distress case involving 12 migrants off the coast of Libya (Martín, Burgos, and D’Agostino 2018). In this case, the crew refused to disembark those onboard in Libya, recognizing the potential for refoulement resulting from their return. While the rescue and subsequent standoff took place in the Maltese Search and Rescue Region (SARR), the ship was summarily denied a port of safety in Malta. Despite the proximity to both Malta and Italy, the ship was eventually granted a port of safety in Spain after drifting at sea for several weeks (Martín 2018). It is interesting to note here that the captain of the ship, Pascual Durá, was not affiliated with any ‘radical’ leftist political movement in Spain, but rather, a supporter of the right-wing political party, Partido Popular. This is notable as it points to the broad recognition by seafarers of the indelible duty to rescue people in distress at sea, regardless of citizenship status or the perceived ‘legality’ of their transit through the sea.

Blockading port entry has also occurred with commercial vessels in the region. One of the earliest instances of commercial shipping standoffs occurred in 2009, notably predating the so-called ‘migration crisis’. In this case, a Turkish cargo vessel, *MV Pinar*, rescued 140 people off the coast of Lampedusa. The ship and those on board were left offshore for four days before being granted disembarkation in Porto Empedocles on the southern Italian island of Sicily (BBC 2009). More recently, two of the most high-profile cases involving commercial ships occurred with the Lebanese vessel, *MV Talia*, and the Danish tanker vessel, *Maersk Etienne*. In July 2020, the *MV Talia* rescued 52 people who were then stranded onboard the animal transport ship for five days (D’Agostino 2020). Those rescued were kept in the space normally used for transporting live animals, as the rough sea conditions prevented them from staying on deck. The survivors were finally granted disembarkation in Malta after having been refused a port of safety in Italy. However, the disembarkation was only granted after finalizing an ad hoc redistribution



agreement to ensure those arriving in Malta onboard the *MV Talia* would not be the responsibility of the Maltese government (Al Jazeera 2020). Conversely, in the case of the *Maersk Etienne*, the crew rescued 27 people off the coast of Libya at the request of the Maltese authorities. Despite receiving direct orders from the Maltese MRCC, the *Etienne* and its crew were denied disembarkation in Malta and left without a port of safety for nearly 40 days (BBC 2020). The *Etienne* standoff eventually culminated with the survivors being transferred to Mediterranean's, *Mare Jonio*, to be disembarked in the port of Pozzallo, Sicily. To date,<sup>33</sup> the case of the *Etienne* has been described as “the longest standoff in European maritime history” (Tondo 2020b).

While there have been several instances of assistance by commercial boats in the Mediterranean, they have increasingly been complicit in failing to aid boats in distress. There have been several incidents where the delayed response to an active distress case has resulted in mass casualties at sea, with the disregard for the established international legal norms has had a detrimental impact on the safety of life at sea (Amnesty International 2020a; Heller and Pezzani 2012). Sea-Watch has borne witness to several instances of non-assistance by commercial ships in the Mediterranean. Their aerial assets, *Moonbird* and *Seabird*, have documented this phenomenon while on reconnaissance missions where on multiple occasions, they have contacted commercial vessels in the vicinity of a distress case and watched as the ships failed to act (Sea-Watch 2021). In some instances, this has taken place as the commercial vessel is within sight of the distress case, and yet they refuse to adhere to their legal obligation to rescue. The disruption to commercial shipping activities and the potential for legal action against the company has, in effect, taken precedent over the legal obligation to rescue lives at sea.

The disruption to commercial interests and the possibility of being subject to legal action increases the reluctance for commercial and fishing vessels to respond to distress cases in the Mediterranean (OHCHR 2021a). The potential legal and financial consequences resulting from a rescue and subsequent standoff can directly impact captains, crews, and arguably, more importantly, profits. Even if the standoff and potential

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<sup>33</sup> Accurate as of 30 December 2021.

legal entanglements do not amount to a criminal conviction, delays to the movement of capital serves as an effective deterrent for rendering assistance. The standoff threat has a regulating effect on the action of non-state actors and produces willful blindness to distress cases for an increasing number of commercial vessels.

In response to the failure to assist occurring within the commercial shipping industry, Sea-Watch has developed a “Rescue Kit” for merchant vessels operating in the Mediterranean (Sea-Watch 2020b). The document provides a step-by-step guide for captains and crews of merchant ships explaining how to carry out a rescue operation, the rights and obligations in distress cases at sea while also offering email templates and information on treating medical emergencies. Sea-Watch also offers shipping companies legal, psychological, political, and operational advice to encourage commercial ships not to shirk their responsibility to rescue in light of the potential for a lengthy standoff or legal action. While the effectiveness of this support-driven pedagogical approach to SAR remains unclear, attempts to highlight the legal obligations and provide strategic assistance to commercial ships engaged in standoff with European states is indicative of yet another arm of Sea-Watch’s efforts to mitigate death and suffering at sea.

While focused on European blockading efforts, standoffs also have a long history outside of the Mediterranean region. In 2001, off the coast of Australia, the Norwegian cargo vessel, *MV Tampa*, rescued 433 people from an Indonesian fishing boat in distress in the Indian Ocean (Fox 2010). The ship sought to disembark in Australia, but the state authorities repeatedly denied their request. Not only did the Australian government block the disembarkation, but this refusal was also met with accompanying threats to prosecute the captain as a ‘smuggler’. The Australian special forces eventually boarded the *MV Tampa* after entering into Australian territorial waters following five days of state inaction. The so-called ‘Tampa Affair’ served as the impetus for what became referred to as Australia’s “Pacific Solution”, which increased the surveillance and interdiction of migrant boats at sea (Little and Vaughan-Williams 2016). In the Australian context, people on the move intercepted at sea are not only denied entry to the state but are summarily held in

offshore detention camps as part of a concerted effort to increase the role of the military in offshore policing and border protection (Dickson 2015).<sup>34</sup>

### *State Coast Guard Vessels*

Even state actors have not escaped European port blockades. There have been two notable cases involving Italian Coast Guard vessels that are instructive in examining blockading practices at sea. In August 2018, the *Diciotti* rescued 190 people in the Italian SAR, 17 nautical miles from Lampedusa (Tondo 2018b). Despite being an Italian Coast Guard vessel, the ship was denied entry to an Italian port for five days. Upon entry to the Sicilian port of Catania, the survivors on board were subsequently blocked from disembarking for another five days under the direct order of then Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini. While a small number of people were evacuated on medical grounds, the remaining 177 individuals were trapped onboard as Europe battled over who would be responsible for the migrants (Deutsche Welle 2018). As one activist notes, “it seemed like this clash between like, you know, sort of like a culture of humanitarian responsibility within the coast guard being much stronger, to say the least, than the culture of humanitarian responsibility in the political class, which is leaning to the right” (33 Sea-Watch 2019). Over a week later, those stranded onboard were allowed to disembark after the Catholic Church, Ireland, and Albania<sup>35</sup> agreed upon the ad hoc migrant redistribution scheme (Tondo 2019a).

Though barring an Italian Coast Guard vessel from disembarking in an Italian port may appear to be an anomaly, this was the third time the *Diciotti* had been prevented from docking in Italy (Tondo 2018b). This most recent case was referred to the Italian courts, where Salvini was investigated and charged with illegal confinement. While a seemingly

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<sup>34</sup> Remarkably, the “Tampa Affair” also led to the Australian government excising some of their peripheral island territories, such as Christmas Island, as a means to deny migrants the legal ability to claim asylum in Australia (Hyndman and Mountz 2008). In effect, this meant that even if an asylum seeker had arrived on the Australian territory of Christmas Island, they had not arrived in Australia for the legal purposes of claiming asylum. This nefarious move by the Australian authorities enabled the government to then ship newly arrived migrants to offshore detention facilities on remote, economically marginalized, small Pacific Islands such as Nauru, Papua New Guinea, to be held indefinitely without being granted the ability to claim asylum from the Australian state (Ghezelbash et al. 2018). Despite this practice being widely condemned, it continues to persist and commonly resulting in well-documented psychological trauma and abuse (Boochani 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Notably, both the Catholic Church and Albania are not EU member states.

encouraging legal challenge and pushback against the populist politics of the far-right, the charges were later blocked from proceeding in March 2019 by the Italian Senate, which chose to uphold Salvini's parliamentary immunity (Tondo 2020a).

Following the *Diciotti* case, in July 2019, the Italian Coast Guard ship, *Gregoretto*, rescued 116 people across two separate operations in the Italian Search and Rescue Region. Similarly, the *Gregoretto* was left to drift off the coast of Sicily for five days despite a scabies outbreak and suspected tuberculosis case onboard (Tondo 2020c). While the women and children were allowed to disembark, the remainder were forced to wait until yet another ad hoc redistribution agreement was settled amongst European states. In another echo of the *Diciotti*, Salvini was again charged, this time with kidnapping, following the disembarkation in Augusta, Sicily (Tondo 2020a). In a departure from the *Diciotti* case, the Italian Senate allowed these charges to stand. However, the charges were again later dropped on the instruction of the Italian prosecutors in Catania, as they deemed his violations did not contravene international law or constitute kidnapping under Italian law as it occurred outside Italian territorial waters (Al Jazeera 2021). Despite this legal upset, Salvini has not managed to entirely evade prosecution as he will still face trial in the Italian courts in September 2021 for his role in detaining migrants on board the Spanish NGO ProActiva's ship, *Open Arms*, dating back to August 2019 (Deutsche Welle 2021). If convicted, he could face up to 15 years in prison. As I will return shortly, Salvini's racist and xenophobic bravado has been central in producing the spectacle of migrant illegality generated through the standoff process.

### *The Rise of Salvini and the Use of Standoffs*

As noted above, standoffs with Europe are not an entirely new process but have dramatically evolved in recent years. However, the emergence of standoff politics as a pseudo standard operating procedure employed by Europe began with the ascent of the populist figure, Matteo Salvini, and his far-right Lega Party in Italy. The racist and xenophobic leader rose to power on a vocally anti-immigrant platform, adamantly vowing to 'close the ports' to NGOs and stop 'illegal' migration in the Central Mediterranean (Sciorilli Borrelli 2018). Leading up to his election in March 2018, Salvini enthusiastically

declared that he would “deport 500,000 irregular migrants, called Islam a ‘threat’ that is incompatible with the constitution, and was filmed saying Italy needed ‘mass cleansing’” (Perrone 2018). Upon his election and ascension to the dually appointed position of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, Salvini began formally pursuing his anti-migrant legislative agenda. As part of the broader racist and xenophobic campaign targeting irregularized migrants in Italy, Salvini’s government introduced the “Decree-Law on Immigration and Security” in the Italian Parliament in November 2018. Among other changes to the immigration regime, the colloquially termed ‘Salvini Decree’ “abolished humanitarian protection status for migrants, reduced barriers to stripping migrants of Italian citizenship, lengthened the naturalization process, stopped asylum seekers from accessing reception centres and introduced a fast-track expulsion system for ‘dangerous’ asylum seekers” (Dennison and Geddes 2022, 450).

Escalating the confrontational and combative relationship between the Italian state and the civil fleet, Salvini issued a subsequent declaration in May 2019 explicitly targeting NGOs. The so-called ‘Salvini Decree 2.0’ signalled his intent to formally close Italian ports to SAR NGOs (Geddes and Pettrachin 2020). Seemingly recognizing the inability to literally close ports to the civil fleet, the revamped Salvini Decree sought to include heavy-handed punitive measures to dissuade NGO operations (Ziniti 2019). Practically speaking, the decree sought to imbed high monetary and criminal penalties within the Italian legal framework. Initially, the monetary penalty for NGOs disembarking in an Italian port was set at €50,000 and later raised to €100,000. Moreover, specific provisions within the decree also imposed an additional fine of €5,500 on the NGOs for each migrant disembarked in Italy (Tondo 2019b).

Along with the monetary punishment, there were also codified threats of severe criminal penalties for captains with the potential for ‘repeat offenders’ to have the boat seized. The Italian government prefaced implementing the illegal and draconian attack on NGOs by justifying it as “urgent and necessary” (Winfield 2019). Effectively, the implementation of this formal legislative framework legitimized the criminalization of the civil fleet in an attempt to stop NGO SAR operations at sea (Gordon and Squire 2019).

Despite efforts to mitigate the violence of the Mediterranean borderscape, sustained efforts to criminalize SAR NGOs at sea have materialized. Now faced with increasing penalties and criminal sanctions, these legislative moves represent a targeted effort to eradicate civil fleet operations.

For the civil fleet, blockading and standoff politics emerge as a new norm in the governance of irregularized migration and the sea under Salvini's tenure. The threat of denying SAR NGOs an Italian port of safety first materialized within weeks of his election when the MSF/SOS Méditerranée vessel, *Aquarius*, was barred from entering port following the rescue of 629 people (Kirchgaessner, Tondo, and Jones 2018). While prior threats to 'close the ports' had occurred, it had not yet systematically materialized until June 2018 (Giuffrida 2018). Seeking to disembark the migrants in a European port, the *Aquarius* was denied entry to Italy, and later Malta, in the first standoff under Salvini's leadership. For the ensuing nine days, the ship and those on board were left to drift off the coast of southern Italy. The standoff with the Italian government only ended once Spain agreed to allow disembarkation in Valencia, an additional three-day trip, all while the ship lacked adequate food and water on board for the remaining journey. Since that point, virtually all NGO SAR missions have been subject to European blockading efforts, with standoffs ranging anywhere from three days to three weeks (ANSA 2019).

Despite ousting Salvini from leadership in January 2020, port blockades and standoffs have continued. While Salvini is mainly responsible for initiating this emergent exclusionary practice, the Italian government has ensured standoffs continue after his tenure. Moreover, the frequency at which these techniques are used as a political mechanism for migration control at sea is rising. Though most visibly and vocally occurring with the Italian government, the Maltese, French and Spanish authorities have also repeatedly denied disembarkation to rescue ships. There remains a strong appetite for utilizing blockades and standoffs as a tool of exclusion across southern Europe. Although justified as a result of the lack of cooperation by EU member states, the persistent manifestation of standoffs in the SAR process speaks more clearly to state efforts to assert sovereign authority over the space of the sea that are rooted in maintaining the racist and

xenophobic ‘global colour line’ (Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam 2014) operating in the Mediterranean.

### **Standoff Spectacle and the Performance of the State: Making Bodies Legible in the Mediterranean Borderscape Blockade**

Blockading through the use of standoffs is an emblematic performance of spectacles of ‘illegality’ (De Genova 2013) as states lay claim to the narrative of sovereign control over the Mediterranean. In performing spectacle, migrant bodies are made visible to the broader public while simultaneously highlighting the presence of the state in controlling or ‘combatting’ irregularized forms of mobility. In effect, the political theatre of the standoff makes the state visible while establishing a sovereign presence in the unseen spaces of the sea. Conversely, De Genova (2013) suggests that in performing spectacles of ‘illegality’, states approach border and migration enforcement primarily through the production of crisis and a temporally bounded state of exception. Casting irregularized migrants as ‘illegal rule-breakers’ effectively positions the state as a positive, stabilizing force amid the chaos and crisis at sea (Musarò, 2016). Performing spectacle, in effect, reveals migrant ‘illegality’ while simultaneously reaffirming their exclusion from the state. Moreover, spectacle enables the creation of an exceptional environment in which an increasingly militarized border becomes justifiable and necessary to the public as a legitimate means of ensuring state security. Visualizing control over the proverbial gates of the state, spectacle produces irregularized migrants as existing outside the acceptable forms of mobility while functioning to signal sovereign authority over mobility at sea (De Genova 2013; Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud 2007). In deeming migrant presence at sea as ‘illegal’, states work to shift the public narrative from people in distress in need of assistance, to ‘illegal rule-breakers’ contesting the sanctity and security of the state.

#### *In/Visibility and the Standoff Spectacle*

In/visibility plays an essential role in the double-move of producing the sea as both a space of *mare nullius* but also a site in which people on the move and the activists assisting them represent an existential threat to sovereign control over the borderscape [[see Chapter 4](#)]. Moreover, subjects at sea are not always ‘seen’, as the in/visibility of non-

state actors is utilized to produce the sea as an empty, abject space while also functionally operating to hide the illegal actions of the state. In contrast, the spectacle of the standoff renders the border and the space of the sea hyper-visible for public audiences across Europe and beyond. European actors work tirelessly to ensure migrant boats and NGO rescue vessels are visible to the state and the broader public during a standoff. Migrants and NGOs at sea are cast as 'illegitimate' actors in that space, while state and commercial assets become privileged actors at sea. By exposing what is characterized as a threat (i.e. migrants and NGOs), that threat is made 'real' to domestic populations. Performing the space of the sea through standoffs produces migrants as legible, governable subjects. In doing so, standoffs effectively challenge the ability for migrants to make rights claims. Further, by situating the existence of non-state actors in that space as a question of their legitimate presence at sea, it enables the denial of claims to safe harbour to be justified.

Through the visual and discursive production of the standoff, a material response is enabled with even greater investment into border control infrastructures as a means of addressing the perceived crisis at hand (Andersson 2014b). In activating narratives of crisis and exceptionality through the standoff, Europe enables the imposition of certain discursive, technocratic, bureaucratic, and material forms of governmentality to occur (Huysmans 2006). The act of making migrants and NGOs visible through standoff spectacles allows and, more importantly, justifies increasing security measures conveyed as a means of protecting sovereign space. The ability to map, monitor and surveil the space of the sea produces order and legibility over mobile populations and, in doing so, makes them more manageable, controllable and administrable to the state. Establishing order becomes a pre-condition for security in the modern state, where order supposedly produces a sense of security, or at the very least, a performance of security accessible to the broader public. Simplified, categorized and numbered bodies facilitate state action and justify security responses while simultaneously highlighting migrant bodies at sea as 'out of place' (Murray 2021). In effect, the visibility of spectacle makes NGOs and migrant bodies 'legible' (Scott 1998) to the state as a means of governing irregularized migration at sea. Making the migrant bodies visible in the standoff justifies the exceptional state response to keep NGO and migrant mobility contained at sea.



The production of standoffs as spectacle functions as a part of the wider practice of ‘rebordering’ occurring in the peripheral spaces of the Global North (Andreas and Biersteker 2003). The zoning strategies implemented at sea [\[see Chapter 4\]](#) highlights the complex relationship and assemblage of bordering the Mediterranean. Through the act of zoning, borderscapes are then (re)made and performed as state space. The “strategic reterritorialization” functioning through the practice of zoning allows for various modes of governance to be made visible (Ong 2006, 100). Reterritorializing the Mediterranean through the standoff spectacle ultimately performs state claims to sovereign authority over the space of the sea. In effect, blockading ports is an effort to claim the commons of the sea through positioning the state as the sole arbiter of mobility in that space. State efforts to signal their control over the Mediterranean borderscape to European populations utilize standoffs as a means of claiming the commons by working to delegitimize non-state actors in the rescue process. However, sustained NGO presence in the Mediterranean serves to contest the singularity of state authority at sea as they also make their presence visible in that same space.

### *Fear of Small Numbers*

In the context of political performativity surrounding what Appadurai (2006) characterizes as the ‘fear of small numbers,’ the complexities of state narratives around migration are also made visible. One of the notable developments in the emergence of standoff politics is the temporal realities in which they are now occurring. In reality, the number of irregularized arrivals to European ports are far lower than was seen at the height of the so-called migration crisis in 2015-16 (UNHCR 2021). While the number of rescues being conducted by NGOs and state coast guards is also down, the rescues that do take place are, in most cases, involving much smaller numbers of individuals on board. Before the rise in standoff politics and the criminalization of SAR, there were often multiple NGO boats simultaneously conducting operations at sea. Moreover, prior to the drawdown of the Italian-led SAR mission, *Mare Nostrum*, and the subsequent EU-coordinated SAR missions, including operations *Triton*, *Themis* and *EUNAVFOR MED Sophia*, European SAR assets were also routinely conducting missions (Tazzioli 2016) [\[see Introduction\]](#).

At the height of migrant arrivals, hundreds if not thousands of people would be rescued in a single day, transferred to state military or coast guard ships, and then disembarked in European ports (IOM 2021). In light of the declining arrivals, the emergence of standoff politics and the overt display of sovereign power is even more curious. In part, this speaks to Appadurai's notion of the "anxiety of incompleteness" (Appadurai 2006). Here, as the state strives for unity (or, more contentiously argued, purity), even negligible differences in the desired homogeneity of the state can create a pathological anxiety amongst the citizenry. In effect, the mere presence of migrants and their perceived differences (racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic) represent obstacles to attaining state unity (or again, purity). In effect, the very presence of difference is seen as a barrier to achieving state homogeneity, which justifies and ultimately requires expulsion as a means of maintaining, or at least attempting to maintain, the perception of a pure, unified society. This anxiety is materialized through state efforts to control and regulate who does and does not belong but legitimized through appeals to the good governance of migration and the border.

Despite the markedly decreased number of arrivals, the European response has become even more draconian. The hypervisibility of the standoffs allows for a relatively small number of arrivals to be depicted as a significant existential threat. There is a particular power in the utilization of numbers to generate narratives of crisis. Categorizing migrants as both a threat and the genesis of 'crisis' provides valuable statistics operationalized to fearmonger domestic populations. What emerges through these efforts is a visceral environment of fear in which further investment into counter-migration efforts can be increasingly justified as a reasonable and rational response to the homogenized 'floods' of immigrants (Helliwell and Hindess 2013). Even as Europe experiences declining migrant arrivals and a relatively small number of asylum claims, the mere presence of people on the move at sea is used to generate panic and hysteria while enabling the standoff spectacle to justify the state response. While justified as a response to the number of arrivals, what this represents, in reality, is the public manifestation of the 'global colour line' (Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam 2014) operating at sea.

Indeed, the use of fearmongering around migrant populations and racial hierarchies is not novel. However, the ability to visualize this perceived influx of racialized migrants and those seeking to assist them in their journeys at sea allows for this to be weaponized in new ways by far-right elements of European society through media. While migrants arriving in Europe by sea are not new, the perception of NGOs acting as facilitators or ‘smugglers’ in this process has allowed this narrative to take hold. In effect, the civil fleet is identified as a ‘pull-factor’ encouraging autonomous migrant journeys at sea, despite this claim being soundly and thoroughly debunked (Cusumano and Villa 2019).

In part, the ‘global colour line’ emerges directly from the ‘denial of coevalness’ at the heart of the European border regime. As Seth (2013, 6) describes, the denial of coevalness is predicated on the notion “that some peoples who are very much our contemporaries (for how else could we wage war on them?) nonetheless are in some sense relics of a past (they are ‘backward’, ‘underdeveloped’, ‘medieval’, and so on) who have survived into the present.” He then suggests that the ‘other’, or migrants at sea in the Mediterranean context, represent a particular figure “who first becomes fully visible in the present, in the Western modern. When the latter idea [backwardness] is made to map onto the former, it results in the conclusion that societies and peoples who belong to the past even if they inhabit the present, are not composed of individual subjects, and are not ‘like us’; they are swarms, mobs and crowds, not individuals. Lacking full individuation, they do not value life as we do, and our estimation of the value of their lives, consequently, also cannot be equated to the value ‘we’ attach to our own. Non-Western lives, in short, are worth less than ours: indeed, are cheap” (Seth 2013, 6). This orientalising vision creates the migrant ‘other’ as existing in the past, and therefore, individuals who belong to the past are not knowing subjects but rather objects to be controlled.

Beyond the simplification and ordering enabled through the standoff as already discussed, the spectacle produced can also be understood as a mechanism for ‘colonizing’ the sea. These ‘colonial signs’ (Muppidi 2012) are apparent in European

efforts to make migrant bodies and the sea space legible, thereby, governable for the state apparatus. As Helliwell and Hindess (2013, 82) suggest, “The aspiration of such uniformity and order alerts us to the fact that modern statecraft is largely a project of internal colonization, often glossed, as it is in imperial rhetoric, as a ‘civilizing mission.’ The builders of the modern nation-state do not merely describe, observe and map; they strive to shape a people and landscape that will fit their techniques of observation.” When tied to the crisis narrative of migrant mobility at sea, however, the standoff spectacle blurs the role of state policy in creating precarious journeys for migrants through the exclusionary border policies which actively work to keep the Global South out of the privileged spaces of the Global North. This is exacerbated by the failure to recognize the role and implications of colonial administration, exploitation, neoliberal capitalism and racism that in/directly produce the so-called crisis at hand (Chambers 2008; 2020; Bhambra 2017; Pace and Roccu 2020; Giglioli 2017). The standoff becomes emblematic of the spectacle of migrant illegality at sea and contributes towards producing the narrative of the excludable other and the colonial space of the sea (Khalili 2020; Chua 2018; Mayblin 2014).

### **Spatiotemporal Containment and the Standoff Politics: Archipelagic Carcerality, Disciplined Bodies and Im/Mobility at Sea**

Beyond the standoff functioning as a performance of spectacle, this attempted port blockade at sea is further operationalized as a form of containment to produce im/mobility and carcerality across time and space. Standoffs represent an emergent European bordering technique utilizing temporality in the governance of migration in the Mediterranean borderscape. Controlling time and space through bureaucratic mechanisms is a well-documented tactic employed by states to govern newly arrived migrants on land (Griffiths, Rogers, and Anderson 2013; Bigo 2014). There is an implicit acknowledgement from state actors conceding that completely stopping irregularized migration is realistically unattainable. States can, however, employ various legal and bureaucratic mechanisms to slow down time and exert control over both NGOs and migrants at sea. In effect, the ability to control time is utilized to hamper NGO operations at sea further. While NGO boats will eventually be able to dock, the ensuing standoff

following a rescue allows state actors to exert sovereign power over the ship and those on board by holding them in the interstitial space of the sea for an indeterminate amount of time. The ability to control time through the use of temporal indeterminacy functions as a low-tech response capable of disciplining bodies while generating novel forms of exclusion and carcerality in migration control.

Blockading ports through standoffs effectively weaponizes time in the governance of migration. The standoff is part of an emergent geography of containment beyond European borders as spatiotemporal control is operationalized to produce novel forms of carcerality at sea through the envelopment of NGOs into the state border control apparatus (Andersson 2017; Pallister-Wilkins 2017b; Stierl 2021). This, in effect, produces NGO rescue ships as islands of control and detainment in the migration process, which both structures and filters migrant mobility at sea. The weaponization of state migration controls is not about completely stopping the movement of irregularized bodies across territorial borders. Instead, state efforts to control autonomous migration are more effectively deployed by slowing, diverting, and impeding migrant mobility as different carceral practices are employed at sea.

Standoffs are a politically driven, spatiotemporal technology that operates in an ad hoc, arbitrary and random manner. As previously mentioned, states utilize standoffs as a means to negotiate redistribution agreements on a case-by-case basis. Pointing to this phenomenon, one activist identified the practice taking place with the Maltese government during a standoff with Sea-Watch. They state that “The AFM [Armed Forces Malta] did a bunch of rescues at the same time. I think they rescued maybe 250 people or something during the standoff. And Muscat, like, used the Sea-Watch ship as leverage to negotiate a temporary redistribution” (33 Sea-Watch 2019). Although standoffs are a now routinized element of NGO SAR operations, the duration of the process is never entirely predictable. The indeterminacy results from a tremendous amount of discretion exerted by state actors in dictating the length and extent of the process. The continual ad hoc response by European states to employ temporal control mechanisms ensures the ability to make an informed choice in the migration process unclear. In part, slowing migrant journeys

produces arbitrary, non-static, unpredictable responses to migrant mobility. In some cases, the standoff will last only a few days, while in others, this can last weeks (Gordon 2019; Gordon and Squire 2019). In effect, standoffs make the state's discretionary power visible to people on the move, the civil fleet, and the broader public. What emerges is a concerted effort to slow down time for NGOs and migrants at sea in an effort for European states to exert control (or at least attempt to signal control) over the Mediterranean.

*Archipelagic Carcerality in the Mediterranean Borderscape: Structuring and Filtering Migration at Sea*

As part of the spatiotemporal logic of control, blockading ports through the standoff serves as a mechanism of containing migration by turning rescue ships into mobile, offshore border sites and spaces of carcerality. In effect, standoffs allow states to remotely control migrant mobility through utilizing NGO rescue ships, and increasingly, private cruise ships as the mobile spaces of confinement beyond state territory (Urbina 2021). Yet, even while contained at sea, these carceral spaces continue to move. As Stierl (2021, 2) suggests, “As much else at sea, the maritime confinement is not static but itself on the move.” Similarly to the standoff, offshoring migrant detention is not an entirely novel development in the weaponization of migration governance at sea (Mountz and Kempin 2014; Tazzioli 2018a; Maillet, Mountz, and Williams 2018; K. Williams and Mountz 2018; Stierl 2020a).

In recent years, however, the concerted shift towards utilizing the liberatory space of the ship as de facto offshore space of migrant detention has dramatically transformed civil fleet operations and the carcerality embedded within the Mediterranean borderscape. Migrants become ‘stuck’ (Hage 2009) on NGO ships creating an intermediate space of containment in which people on the move are simultaneously ‘rescued and caught’ (Andersson 2017). In effect, migrants are at once both rescued from the immediacy of distress at sea and simultaneously caught in the state border apparatus. As Pallister-Wilkins (2017b) describes, this reality occurs as an intersection of humanitarian rescue and sovereign capture. Indeed, people on the move are in a functionally safer space than they were during their initial transit through the Mediterranean. However, despite this

increased safety, well-being, and sanctuary on board a SAR vessel, they still have yet to arrive at the ‘end’ point in their Mediterranean journey.

Through the emergence and development of standoffs, NGO boats are transformed from spaces of rescue, liberation, and solidarity into sites of confinement, control, and capture as people on the move are temporarily halted in their journeys and held at a distance from accessing the legal protections available on land. As a result, migrants are often stranded on NGO vessels for an extended period, creating rescue boats an intermediate space of offshore containment in the migration process. The use of the ships in these acts of containment has also been described as a mechanism through which states can ‘kidnap’ migrants as a tactic of border enforcement (Tazzioli and De Genova 2020). Standoffs produce an ‘archipelago’ (Mountz 2010; 2011) of carcerality and control as both time and space are marshalled in service of the European border regime. The act of containing mobile subjects on SAR boats at sea moves beyond the territorial confinement experienced by people on the move and becomes manifest in these floating border sites as European borders extend into the sea.

NGO ships have been utilized by states as sites of containment and control at sea, especially with the ‘closure’ of Italian ports. While these ships offer refuge at sea for the shipwrecked on board, they also become a space of interstice. In effect, people on the move, having departed from the Libyan coast, are no longer in North Africa, but simultaneously, they have also not yet arrived in Europe. Instead, they find themselves in what Johnson (2013) describes as ‘non-space’, in which spatiotemporal control is used to govern mobile subjects. The interstitial space of carcerality produced through standoffs enables the production of the sea as what Isin and Rygiel (2007) describe as a frontier. They cogently argue that “frontiers are those spaces where mobility of people is regulated, and national and international laws are temporarily suspended through the creation of buffer zones, which people can be processed” (Isin and Rygiel 2007, 190). In the frontier of the Mediterranean borderscape, the sea becomes a holding space for people on the move where certain rights, such as the right to claim asylum, become more fluid in their ability to be invoked. The spatiotemporal interstice created by states through standoffs

uses NGO boats as a ‘processing zone’ of legal suspension that enables migrant detention at sea. The standoff blockade is not a *de jure* suspension of the law or legal protections for people on the move. Indeed, the same legal frameworks governing the rights of migrants in Europe remain intact as none of these laws are formally or legally halted. Instead, the standoff enables a *de facto* halting of law where the practice enables the suspension of the liberal rights norms commonly touted by Europe as a hallmark of a civilized, developed and modern society. In the case of those seeking to claim asylum in Europe, that right is effectively denied during the standoff.

Indeed, standoffs temporarily deny the ability for rights claims to be made. The production of the sea as an ‘abject space’ is then about “halting the ability to enact rights” (Isin and Rygiel 2007, 189). If the subject is functionally blocked from a space where the claim to a particular right can be met, they fall outside of the framework in which those rights claims can be made and thereby rendering them as, in effect, nonexistent. The ability to make rights claims of the state, such as the right to claim asylum, is subject to this process of territorial demarcation, in that asylum claims in Europe are only granted in practice once the individual has reached land. The physical act of stepping foot on European territory enables those claims to be made. That point at which individuals can make a rights claim is functionally denied until the rights claiming individual is able to traverse the physical space of the sea. The act of keeping people physically separated from land ensures that people on the move are not able to make legal rights claims of the state. As a result, there is a particular emphasis placed on the terra or the actual “landness” of that border. The interstitial space of the sea becomes weaponized in the standoff to preclude those rights claims from being made. While individuals may still have the right to claim asylum, they are left without the ability to do so. Standoffs produce both a social and, more importantly, geographical isolation. Rather than using technological or physical barricades to facilitate isolation, states utilize the legal frameworks existing within the European migration, border and asylum system to produce barriers to accessing state protection. The SAR vessel then becomes a space enabling the maintenance of bare life (Agamben 1998) and allows for geographic and social isolation.



With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, states have extended offshore incarceration beyond the standoff itself. At the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, both Malta and Italy began chartering cruise ships and tour boats left unused with the sharp decline in global travel and tourism (Urbina 2021). In implementing an ‘at-sea quarantine’ period for people on the move, states justified the action as a prudent health policy measure to protect their two countries from the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Practically, this means that following a rescue and the ensuing standoff, migrants are transferred from a SAR ship to an awaiting cruise ship anchored offshore for an additional two weeks at sea. The movement between the offshore containment sites highlights the archipelagic carcerality operating the sea through the standoff and beyond. Despite migrants aided by SAR NGOs undergoing COVID-19 testing while on board, states have utilized the pandemic as a means of justifying and extending the carceral time to further control, regulate and filter migrant mobility at sea while framing migrants as a potential source of public health risk.

### *Punishing Bodies*

Beyond the standoff producing a carceral archipelago in the Mediterranean, the use of time exacts an often severe corporeal toll on bodies at sea. As noted above, while a standoff may last a few days in some cases, they also routinely last much longer, given the ad hoc nature of the process. The additional time spent trapped on board SAR ships during the standoff compounds the physical toll exacted upon migrant bodies that have endured the time spent in well-documented violent conditions in Libya or from the hours or days they have spent at sea with limited resources to sustain them in the journey (Amnesty International 2017). Routinely, people on the move continue to face exposure to extreme temperatures, rain or high winds. Rough weather, along with the constant strain of rolling waves, commonly leads to seasickness for those on board, adding to the physical strain on the body experience by extended time at sea during a standoff (48 Sea-Watch 2019). While physically safe on board the rescue vessel, the often harsh and unforgiving nature of the sea continues to exact a physical toll on the migrants and crew. Weaponizing the physical environment to punish bodies as a form of migration control has also been seen elsewhere in the borderscapes of the Global North (Doty 2011). Subjecting

migrants to the physical power of the sea can manifest in more benign ways, including directing SAR ships to ports farther away, necessitating longer journeys and extended time at sea before disembarkation. As one activist recalls, “the last one we had one rescue...two rescues, and then we had to take people to Italy, and they gave us a port that was as far away as possible, and we had really... well I can't say horrible weather after the storm that the ship was in on the way here, but it was not nice. It was bad weather, so it took a while. It took five days” (03 Sea-Watch 2019). In the Mediterranean, utilizing the environment in this way is a calculated effort to make the experience at sea continually punitive through extending the time spent at sea.

Beyond the physical toll inflicted on migrant bodies at sea, the psychological trauma associated with various aspects of their journey is compounded with the prolonged detention at sea. There are multiple ways that the standoff produces added psychological strain. For example, during a standoff, European states will routinely employ division tactics as a means of producing further discontent and frustration. Most commonly, this occurs through the willingness to disembark women, children and families from boats stuck at sea while leaving the single males on board to withstand the corporeal impacts of the standoff (Sanderson 2019). There is a persistent need for people on board to fit the trope of the ‘deserving migrant’ to elicit any form of sympathy from audiences viewing the standoff spectacle occurring at sea (Aradau 2016). One activist points to a certain racist logic underlying the need to justify the right to disembark following a rescue. They suggest that,

When I'm asked sometimes by a journalist or whatever, you know, describe the people that you had on board, why was it so urgent for you to come to the shore? I always refused to answer that question because it's unfair. If we had a boat full of Germans and Dutch people and English people and Italians onboard, nobody would question why they need to be taken to shore as soon as possible. Never. It is...there is racism at the heart of this. There is discrimination and rejection and neo-colonialism and everything. Because why do I need to tell you a sob story of someone who's gone through Libya? And actually, it's not a story. It's a whole life. People have gone through hell in Libya. And the first question they ask us is, are you taking us back to Libya? Because that's equal to death. And people have jumped to their death in open sea to avoid being taken back to Libya. And it is painfully clear. So why do I

need to now fight for someone's...why do I need to prove it with a story? Oh, OK, if you were raped and smuggled and trafficked and sold as a slave, alright, ok, then you might be a refugee and you might deserve protection. But if you're anything else, then we don't care. (34 Sea-Watch 2019)

Not only is there an effort to make migrant bodies legible at sea as a means of governing their mobility, but there is also a need to embody innocence and victimhood to be understood as legitimate or deserving subjects of state protection. In doing so, the standoff spectacle also works to produce an image of state benevolence for the viewing audiences. Here, states utilize selective disembarkation to produce the state as compassionate, benevolent saviours in the humanitarian narrative (Musarò 2016). In drawing on the perceptions of the innocent victimhood of women and children and the potentially violent, threatening male figures, states seek to legitimize the selective disembarkation of guests on board. Selecting certain bodies deemed vulnerable by the state works to foment discontent, create division and increase the psychological strain for migrants. In effect, once those deemed as 'highly vulnerable' have arrived on land, the urgency to disembark those remaining is seemingly removed despite those left on board also often having endured differing forms of trauma in the journey.

The sequestration of certain bodies from harm (or the claims to have done so) removes the moral and ethical implications of the standoff itself from the discourse around the violence of the practice for those who remain. At that point, the continued suffering of migrants at sea is deemed legitimate, and therefore physical and psychological trauma is permitted to continue. As one activist notes, the differential treatment often leads to questions of why some people are deemed worthy of protection and not others (21 Sea-Watch 2019). The move to separate women and children from the men also shifts the visual narratives of the demographics of those on board. Often media portrayals of fit, young, Black males left on board do not have the same emotional capital or compassionate response as with women and children (Musarò and Parmiggiani 2017). Commonly, this occurs as states are willing to take women and children because of the underlying perception of innocence, while males are left on board because the public is less sympathetic to their claims for assistance from the state. Instead, they are cast as

threats in their labour potential and the ability to ‘take’ jobs from ‘deserving’ Europeans and the possible security threat they pose.

As standoffs drag on, activists note that guests on board will often express their frustration and confusion with the ongoing process. The often leads to migrants questioning why Europe is not allowing them to disembark (34 Sea-Watch 2019). While there is undoubtedly increased strain for crew members, people on the move have this trauma compounded given the uncertainty of what is ahead of them once they arrive in Europe. In response, crew members make great efforts to reassure those on board that they will not be returned to Libya despite the delays to disembarkation. Speaking to apprehension that develops, one activist states,

They realize something is not quite right. Why is it taking so long? You know, maybe we are going to go around, do other rescue or something. Okay, yeah, fine, no problem. Let us know if we can help. You can get guests up on binoculars watching with us and stuff, great. But then standoff starts to happen, and they realize why aren't we going into port? Oh, it's complicated. OK. Well, after a few days, ‘complicated’ doesn't cut it, and then you have to start explaining things, and then they realize, we're still out at sea because people on land don't want us. It's that simple. And you can't frame it any other way. I will never, ever lie to our guests. I'll tell them a complicated truth over a simple lie, any time. (21 Sea-Watch 2019)

Moreover, the delays due to the standoff can also lead to suicidal ideations emerging on board ships stuck at sea. In the case of the *Etienne*, as described above, after nearly a month stuck at sea, the ship's captain expressed his concern with the deteriorating mental health of those on board. During that standoff, three people jumped from the ship in a desperate attempt to get to land and end their capture at sea (Tondo 2020b). Similarly, this phenomenon has also occurred in civil fleet standoffs. In 2019, as the *Open Arms* was in a protracted standoff near the coast of Sicily, numerous people jumped overboard attempting to swim to shore (Tondo 2019c). In this case, the ship was at anchor less than a mile from the Sicilian coast, with the shoreline well within sight. Despite being able to see the eventual destination, migrants were blocked from disembarking and remained in an interstitial space of waiting. It was only after several medical evacuations and desperate attempts to swim to land, that the urgent

disembarkation of those remaining on board was permitted by Italian state officials (Amnesty International 2020b, 68)

In a different manner, SAR activists also experience other forms of psychological trauma associated with standoffs. As one activist involved in the June 2019 standoff states, “I’m just afraid that I’m really emotional. The last mission was really emotional for me. It was the only one I was so confused at the end, which is a problem I have to adapt because I’m a bit shocked. Well will not shocked, maybe it’s not the right word, but I’m really emotional about a lot of things” (37 Sea-Watch 2019). The use of time in producing the carceral space of the sea has detrimental impacts on the psychological well-being of both migrants and crew, which adds to the corporeal punishment inflicted by the enactment of the standoff.

Tied to the psychological trauma, there is also a sense of personal guilt that can develop due to the standoff and criminalization occurring. Speaking to the June 2019 standoff and the subsequent arrest of Captain Carola Rackete, one activist recalls talking with the guests remaining on board after the dramatic arrest. They state:

I think that it’s something worth noting, that the person who is arrested and taken off the ship, it’s symbolic. But obviously, it takes a toll as well on even on the people that rescued, they felt like they contributed to that in a way. And we really had to sit with them. And they were wonderful people who had so much trust and empathy. And they felt they said like they expressed it in a way that none of us could that, ‘how can it be that when you’ve done something like this for us, that we see you get arrested and taken off the ship, like, is that because of us? Is all of this just happening because of us?’ And I would joke with some of them and say, you know, ‘you are so important to Europe that actually new laws are being drafted just for you and like the highest levels politicians are talking just about you.’ That’s where we’ve come. (34 Sea-Watch 2019)

The movement of irregularized populations through the Mediterranean has produced an increasingly exclusionary approach to migration governance at sea. The response to autonomous migration is predicated on utilizing carcerality to control ‘ungovernable’ movement, which compounds the physical and psychological strain of migration. Using standoffs in blockading entry to Europe is not simply a passive

indifference to the lives of those rescued and the organizations involved in this work. Instead, standoffs are a violent tool used in the active effort to further close the space of the sea to NGOs operating in the Mediterranean. The standoff is a now routine mechanism of including temporality and control over time in governing migration at sea. Time at sea becomes weaponized to discipline bodies and produce new forms of exclusion in the border governance regime.

Standoffs serve as a particularly effective mechanism to slow migration through the Mediterranean by producing NGO rescue vessels as offshore, floating detention centres to contain the mobility of those on board. In effect, these blockades transform the sea into a carceral archipelago, further fragmenting the migration and asylum process. As NGOs continue to expose European border violence and challenge the state's ability to exert control over the border, standoffs become, in part, a punitive mechanism in state efforts to assert sovereign authority over the sea. Through overt displays of the state monopoly on violence, standoffs make state power visible in transforming the sea into a space of archipelagic carcerality for people on the move. States not only passively use the sea and other harsh environments as a containment method, but the structure and operationalization of the border hinges on the environment as a mechanism of exclusion and death as a low tech solution to controlling mobility.

### **Standoffs Politics and the Criminalization of Solidarity at Sea**

Practically speaking, in contesting the blockade at sea by entering the port of Lampedusa without state authorization, the *Sea-Watch 3* directly challenged the sovereign authority and the perception of the Italian state's ability to regulate entry. The legal and political response that followed was clear. The shift towards the criminalization of SAR becomes, in part, about enacting retribution for challenging state control in the Mediterranean borderscape as NGOs become one canvas on which states project sovereign power. Salvini's attempt to push what he has described as 'pirate ships' from the sea (Al Jazeera 2019), has resulted in a targeted campaign to criminalize civil fleet operations in the Mediterranean.

The public displays of sovereign power are just one part of the concerted and wide-ranging effort to marginalize the work on civil society rescue NGOs. Efforts intending to force organizations to cease operations, which they have already been successful in doing in some cases, appears to show little sign of reprieve in the near future. The criminalization of SAR is not confined to a finite instance, but rather represents a broader trend that legally and discursively undermines civil fleet operations. While legal prosecutions occurring on land are a key part of this process, the recurrent use of standoffs coupled with the emergence of bureaucratic forms of blockading is emblematic of the criminalization SAR that extends territorial sovereign power into the space of the sea.

Standoffs are a direct result of the criminalization of rescue taking place in the Central Mediterranean. Criminalizing SAR enables the continuation of the necropolitical governance of the sea by ensuring the maritime border remains a space of violence and death for people on the move (Mbembé 2003). Rather than suggesting that standoffs highlight the failures of state responsibility in protecting life at sea, the emergence of standoff politics and the broader criminalization of rescue is part of a wider form of necropolitical governance of the sea which transforms the sea into a violent, yet contested borderscape. Criminalizing rescue marks Europe's continued refusal to acknowledge the responsibility of regional border policy in producing migrant deaths at sea and highlights the active efforts to remove SAR NGOs from challenging this violent governance of the Mediterranean borderscape (Mainwaring and DeBono 2021). The criminalization of SAR manifests in multiple ways. The implementation of bureaucratic blockades is operationalized in the legal-administrative processes used to block NGOs, both in port and at sea. Yet, embedded in this process are both overt and benign efforts to criminalize solidarity (Fekete 2009), as the civil fleet is slowly pushed from the sea in Europe's attempt to assert European sovereign control over the Mediterranean.

Efforts to stop NGOs from operating are not simply occurring through the formal process of criminal sanctions against civil fleet actors. While these events are representative of the highly visible, dramatic performance of sovereign control, the production of bureaucratic blockades exists beyond these dramatic moments. Blockades

serve to not only keep NGOs from entering ports, but, conversely, it stops them from leaving as well. The port itself is an important space in the blockade production as a mediating point between the state and the sea (Dickson 2021). The ability to both enter and exit ports are central to this form of blockading. In effect, ports function as an intermediary space between land and sea which become integral to the ability to control those two separate, yet intertwined spaces. Manifesting in the blockade production, standoff politics are indicative of an emergent geography of containment existing beyond European borders.

### *Implementing the SAR NGO Code of Conduct*

The initial signs of Europe's displeasure with the civil fleet's involvement in Mediterranean SAR operations emerged as the presence of NGO ships at sea grew. In 2017, the civil fleet had played an increased role in the rescue process, "picking up more than a third of all migrants brought ashore so far this year against less than one percent in 2014, according to the Italian coastguard" (Binnie and Denti 2017). Despite this growing role for non-state actors, the Italian government developed a 'Code of Conduct' for NGO vessels operating at sea. One of the first displays of this slow turn towards criminalizing rescue and the overt efforts to push NGOs from the sea is made apparent through the emergence of the so-called 'Code of Conduct' that came into practice in 2017. Brought into force by then Italian Interior Minister, Marco Minniti, the 'Code of Conduct' was intended to bring a series of limitations on SAR operations into effect with the threat of port closure issued for non-signatory NGOs (Cusumano and Gombeer 2020). The Code was an attempt to limit the operations of the civil fleet, through the imposition of various forms of regulation targeted at undermining the efficacy of the work being done by NGOs at sea. While closing ports was not utilized by Minniti, it effectively foreshadowed what was to come under Salvini's tenure in government. As Cusumano states (2017b) the justification offered in the development of the 'Code of Conduct' was to generate 'greater rescuing effectiveness'. Yet this attempt to 'order' SAR operations was a thinly veiled attempt to hamper NGO operations and implement greater state authority in the rescue process.



Several stipulations within the Code were less controversial and more willingly accepted, at least in part, by many actors in the civil fleet. Among the Code's 13 provisions, several requirements largely reiterated the legal requirements stipulated under UNCLOS, which the state suggested all actors must follow, despite this already being the case within the civil fleet operations. Among the redundant demands of the Code, one provision stated that NGOs were not allowed to switch off their AIS geolocation systems used to monitor their movement while at sea. This particular demand insinuated that NGOs routinely engage in the practice to allow them to become 'invisible' to maritime tracking software as can happen with merchant ships seeking to avoid being drawn into SAR operations (Cusumano 2017b). Yet for NGOs, the visibility at sea afforded by this software is central to their work [[see Chapter 4](#)]. Other redundant demands within the Code instructed NGOs to maintain routine communication with the relevant state MRCC in the coordination of SAR operations, again, despite already doing so. In returning to this point briefly, while NGOs have sought to coordinate SAR operations with the MRCC's in the Mediterranean, there is now little to no coordination coming from the MRCC's. This calculated effort to hamper SAR operations functions as a means of removing the ability for NGOs to more effectively 'see' the sea in order to identify and locate ongoing distress cases.

NGOs were instructed to not use light signalling to make departing migrant vessels aware of their presence at sea. This inference suggested there was coordination between NGOs and 'smugglers' in Libya, despite the absence of any evidence suggesting this practice was occurring. The civil fleet were also required to coordinate with the flag state, which despite often being geographically isolated from the rescue operation occurring, serves to increase the bureaucratic measures associated with SAR operations, which could have the effect of delaying the response to a distress case. This is also not the normal practice for ships conducting SAR operations, but it was added as an additional hoop for the civil fleet to navigate during the course of a rescue operation (Amnesty International 2020b, 57). Finally, among the less problematic demands made within the code, NGOs were to declare their financial sources to the flag state and the Italian government. Despite being registered as charity organizations and therefore required to

publicly disclose their finances, this was another subtle attempt to raise suspicion as to the legitimacy of the NGOs and cast aspersion to suggest there was nefarious financial backing behind their operations.

In part, the Code also reaffirms the sovereign authority of the Libyan state within Libyan territorial waters. Curiously, it contained stipulations that NGOs do not conduct rescue operations within Libyan territorial waters; a practice already undertaken by the civil fleet (Cusumano 2017b). Interestingly, the Code also stated that NGOs are not to hinder the operations of the scLYCG, despite the scLYCG engaging in well-documented instances of aggression, which has also increased the danger associated with rescue operations (Forensic Architecture 2018).

While SAR NGOs largely complied with these new stipulations, three other requirements were markedly more contentious. The first was the prohibition on transferring shipwrecked people from one SAR vessel to another. The practice of transshipment was common between NGOs and also occurred in cooperation with state SAR assets. Under the new regulations, NGO vessels would be required to go to port immediately following a rescue, effectively removing them from active operations, at least temporarily (Mainwaring and DeBono 2021). The second contentious stipulation required that NGOs cooperate with security forces including during disembarkation. Effectively, this meant civil fleet activists were expected to turn over any information collected about those on board including video footage or any documentation gathered while on mission (Cutitta 2018b). Pushing NGOs to act as state informants through the data collection process signaled the intent to envelop the civil fleet into the state security apparatus as the information gathered could eventually be used to expel new arrivals through deportation. Finally, the code stipulated that NGOs were expected to allow police officers and other state officials on board to conduct investigations pertaining to the potential smugglers rescued at sea (Gombeer and Fink 2018). Granting access to security officials to conduct investigations on board was stark redline for many NGOs, recognizing the obvious implications and potential harm for migrants if allowed. While some NGOs including MOAS and ProActiva complied with the code requirements, other NGOs, such as Sea-

Watch, Sea-Eye, Jugend Rettet and SOS Mediterranée abstained from signing on (Binnie and Dentri 2017). Acquiescing to the Code of Conduct became an important political division for NGOs operating at sea as some organizations decided to abide by the newly imposed regulations, while others outright rejected their imposition.

Those that failed to sign the Code were then considered to be operating outside of the legal bounds of SAR operations at sea, despite already largely adhering to the principles stated in the Code. Italian media reported that the Ministry of the Interior had stated that non-signatories would be subject to additional safety check as deemed necessary by the state, while also facing the possibility of having their ship impounded during the process (Amnesty International 2020b). NGOs were also instructed to “demonstrate that their personnel are trained to conduct rescuing operations and the vessel meets all the technical conditions necessary to conduct SAR. As many NGOs are small charities relying on reconverted fishing vessels manned by volunteers, ascertaining their ability to conduct rescuing operations appears justified” (Cusumano 2017b, 110). As I will return to shortly, this turn towards the increased standards for NGO ships, at the surface appears to be directed at elevating the standards on the ships in the civil fleet. However, this bureaucratic stipulation is also used as a mechanism to block ships from returning to sea as they are forced to comply with a myriad of regulatory changes associated with the operation of the ship, effectively hampering the ability of SAR ships to continue operations. The Code was strongly criticized by members of the civil fleet as well as other human rights organizations like Amnesty International, which asserted that the Code would “hinder rescue operations and delay disembarkations in a safe place within a reasonable amount of time, breaching the obligations that both states and shipmasters have under the international law of the sea” (Amnesty International 2020b, 57).

### *Shifting Tides: Intensifying Pressure on the Civil Fleet*

The rise of Salvini also marked an important turning point in the evolution of the code in relation to the cooperation between state coordinated efforts and the civil fleet. In particular, states no longer actively engage in directly coordinating SAR operations between Mediterranean MRCCs and NGOs. While the MRCCs are still involved in the

coordination of disembarkation, they are no longer alerting NGOs to the presence of active distress cases. In recalling the immediate shift in relationship that emerged with Salvini's election, one activist points to the confusion and material consequences of this evolution stating,

We arrived [in Italy] the day after the [Salvini] election. And then the rest of that mission we were halfway through that search and rescue mission. MRCC Rome didn't speak to us at all. The INMARSAT didn't call. So, we knew there were distress cases we were picking up from IOM [...] Yeah, it's really changed, you know. In the beginning of that mission, we found people and worked closely with the authorities and after that mission, we just found empty boats. You know and like the signs of pushbacks by the Libyan Coast Guard. We just didn't really know what was going on. It was really, it was quite a stark difference. And then when Sea-Watch went by to Malta, the ship was detained for five months. And in that time, the number of people who died in the crossing, you know went through the roof. (13 Sea-Watch 2019)

As a result of the concerted shift towards removing NGOs from the sea, the civil fleet is now drastically hampered in their ability to effectively and efficiently conduct operations. Instead of receiving direction from the relevant MRCC's, NGOs now rely almost exclusively on overheard radio conversations or the visual identification of distress cases. In effect, this means that distress cases are either by the vessel themselves or in coordination with AlarmPhone or the aerial assets, *Moonbird* and *Seabird*, relegating the possibility of locating migrant boats at sea to chance. While NGOs remain in constant communication with the MRCC's, European states are not willing to cooperate, often consigning coordination to assigning a port of safety and the disembarkation process. The lack of support in the coordination of the SAR operations dramatically increases the risk associated with the journey for migrant boats at sea. This abdication of state responsibility is clearly linked to the criminalization of rescue taking place as states contribute to making rescue operations more challenging.

Despite already largely engaging in the practices indicated in the Code, by stating the new standard operating procedures, it subtly suggests that NGOs were in fact not adhering to these principles and raises questions around their operations. Wait, are NGOs not following the Law of the Sea? Are they intentionally turning off their monitoring systems

to evade state detection? With added safety checks, surely they are running a shotty operation. Are NGOs going into Libyan territorial waters to bring people to Europe? Are they interfering with the SAR operations of the scLYCG? Though the reiteration of ongoing SAR practices undertaken by the civil fleet seems unnecessary, the stipulations contained within the Code contributes to elevating the suspicion around civil fleet SAR operations. In an effort to divert attention from the obvious attempt to hamper SAR operations and the growing discourse around the supposed criminality of the civil fleet, the public prosecutor in Catania that “NGOs are not the enemy. Prosecutors are not after NGOs.” (Amnesty International 2020b, 59) Despite the assertions, Amnesty International has identified that since 2017, the Italian state has opened at sea 13 criminal investigations into civil fleet SAR operations (Amnesty International 2020b).

The Code of Conduct is part of a wider, targeted smear campaign designed to further undermine the work of the civil fleet. By casting doubt on the legitimacy and legality non-state SAR operations, European states (in this case, primarily Italy and Malta) have been effective in injecting suspicion around a myriad of issues including their falsely-alleged cooperation with smugglers, the financing of these operations, or suggestions that the civil fleet is contributing to increased crossings and deaths at sea, despite this being soundly debunked by academic and even an Italian parliamentary investigation (Amnesty International 2020b). In 2017, the then director of Frontex falsely claimed that “NGOs constituted a pull-factor for people in Libya, that they were not cooperating sufficiently with law enforcement agencies in combatting smuggling and trafficking, and that they had contributed to smugglers using cheaper and more dangerous rubber boats rather than the wood fishing vessels that were used in the past – ignoring the fact that one of the main aims of the EUNAVFOR MED operation was the destruction of smugglers’ boats” (Amnesty International 2020b, 55). In that same year, the public prosecutor in Catania (Sicily) falsely alleged that some members of the civil fleet may be operating to “destabilize the Italian economy” in order to financially benefit from the ongoing situation. (Amnesty International 2020b, 56). Despite these assertions, the Head of the Italian coast guard and the Commander of EUNAVFORMED acknowledged the contributions of the civil fleet in saving lives at sea (Amnesty International 2020b). While their work has been

acknowledged in mitigating death and suffering at sea, the concerted efforts to smear the work of the civil fleet has been effective in undermining their operations, casting doubt on their motivations, and laying the groundwork for the criminalization campaign targeting the civil fleet.

### *Regulation Changes and Bureaucratic Blockades*

In port, bureaucratic blockades also occur through the changes to the flag-state regulations for ships operating at sea. The use of seemingly benign forms of legal-bureaucratic blockading has manifest in administrative attempts to keep NGOs from the sea. Here, the blockade functions through the creation of new regulations and increased inspections as a means of adding additional barriers for NGOs to comply with in order to continue SAR operations. Altering the flag-state regulations for NGOs has necessitated several changes to the crewing structure as well as physical alterations of the ship designed with the intent to keep NGOs ship from sailing. In part, this regulatory effort makes the criminalization of SAR appear to be less about the direct objection to the work being done by the NGOs. The bureaucratic blockade cloaks efforts to impede SAR operations in more benign administrative manoeuvres, often with little to no grounding in the safety of the ship or its operation at sea.

As the European Union Agency for Fundamental Human Rights (FRA) notes, there is “an increasingly common use of measures of an administrative rather than criminal nature based on the laws of navigation and safety at sea, and a decrease of measures against individuals (crew members or NGO staff)” (FRA 2020b). Despite this increasing role of administrative detention, as I return to shortly, the targeted use of criminal proceedings remains a key part of the criminalization of SAR occurring in the Mediterranean. Since 2016, there have been at least 50 legal cases initiated by Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands and Spain in relation to SAR operations across the Mediterranean, with six new legal cases being opened against four SAR ships, primarily originating from Italy (FRA 2020b). The use of administrative detention effectively creates multiple “petty sovereigns” in the governance of NGOs and migrant bodies (Butler 2006). Administrative detention utilizes low-level state bureaucrats to wield profound powers

around the inclusion and exclusion of people on the move. It allows for the power of the state to be exerted through bureaucratic mechanism to continually impede SAR operations and increase the precarity associated with migrant journeys through the Mediterranean.

In the case of Sea-Watch, this took place in 2019 with the implementation of changes to the Special Purpose Ship (SPS) regulations which their ships operate under. The SPS code sets both physical and normative standards that each ship is governed by, which is administered by the flag-state of each particular vessel. In effect, these changes, render SAR operations “more complicated for NGO vessels to comply with more stringent security and maintenance requirements when engaging in rescue at sea” (FRA 2020a). While justified as a move to increase the protection for shipwrecked individuals rescued by SAR NGOS, in practical terms, the SPS changes sought to establish limits on the number of people allowed onboard. The changes also increase safety standards on board depending on the number of people rescued. These changes are a cynical move by states to burden NGOs with additional requirements for ship operations and establish limitations on the number of people they can rescue. Utilizing the administrative power of the state effectively serves to further hamper SAR operations while ignoring the role of European states in creating the challenging conditions on board resulting prolonged standoffs at sea. As a result of the SPS Code changes, there were structural and operational adjustments that were required to keep the ship in regulation.

Coupled with the SPS changes has been the increased inspections and the administrative seizure of SAR vessels. The administrative seizure of the ships is largely “based on technical irregularities relating to maritime security. The most common issues detected by the port authorities included transporting too many passengers, having assets not properly working, having too many life jackets on board, having sewage systems not designed for the number of possible rescued persons, as well as causing environmental pollution)” (FRA 2020b). In one example of these inspections, the *Sea-Watch 3* was under investigation in Catania following a rescue in 2019. Despite there being little to no material deficiencies to the ship, several deficiencies were found. During one investigation by the

Italian authorities, an Italian journalist on board the ship overheard a conversation taking place with the inspectors. In it, they identified the lengths the state was willing to go in order to find some form of administrative violation that could be used to stop the ship from going to sea. In recalling this particular inspection, one activist stated that,

We had the...it was an Italian journalist, he was hanging around the bridge because the port authorities were all Italian, they were speaking to people on the phone and he was like, I want to hear what's going on. And he was overhearing one of the conversations. And he could hear the guy on the other end who is obviously the guy's boss and the guy who is on the bridge was saying, 'there's nothing here. We're looking through everything. They are over and above where they need to be on all their safety standards. There's literally nothing here.' He heard the boss saying, 'you keep looking until you find something and you just stay there until you find something. It has to be big. And your job might be on the line.' That's really extreme. You have to find something huge and if you don't your job, you could get fired. This poor guy sitting there going, 'but everything's fine.' (21 Sea-Watch 2019)

What resulted from this inspection was a list of 32 violations on what were ostensibly minor issues that became weaponised in the effort to keep the ship from returning to sea and thereby justifying the administrative detention on regulatory grounds. They state,

[W]hen we were in Catania, they came up with 32 points. And that was...there was some stuff there wasn't, you know we had a planned...this is a planned maintenance scheduled, so we were just about to go in and we had some bits that we need to do like any ship. And there was some weirdness with that area particularly, you had to have a better sewage system than we had. It's not that we were putting out the sewage or anything like that, not ever pumping raw sewage into the harbour or anything like that. There were certain holding tanks that had to be on the ship and all this kind of stuff. And it's an old ship, it didn't have it. And we said, no, we don't have that. Well, if you're in this port, you have to have it. Forget the fact that they brought us to Catania specifically. Forget that. That's irrelevant we're here now, you know. But also, you know, some of those 32 points were things like there's not enough glow in the dark exit stickers in the accommodation. Not that there isn't any. There was. Just in their opinion, there wasn't enough. It's ridiculous. They didn't like the phrasing of some of us stickers. We had to change the wording. Like a sprinkler system, should have been called drench something or other. It's the same damn thing.... And so they just took every tiny, little tiny thing [...] And all you hear about in the news is, 'ah there was 32 things,' Yeah right? Within twelve hours of those 32 things there wasn't 32 things anymore. There was a



hell of a lot less. It's a charade. You know, it's still just all theatre. (21 Sea-Watch 2019)

A medic with Sea-Watch pointed to the absurdity of some of these changes. In speaking to the inventiveness of the constant imposition of new regulations for SAR ships, they noted the requirement for the number of condoms a ship must have before going to sea. They explain this by saying,

I mean, there is a regulation on how many condoms we have to have onboard. So I had to go and buy, well not me personally, but the medical department, now possesses condoms for inspectors basically...we expect everybody to, you know, bring their own...The only way to stop us is to really, really, really stop us. You really have to make us stop. So far we have always found a way around. And honestly, if I have to buy 50 condoms...if a medical inspector wants to see them, I will show them. (03 Sea-Watch 2019)

While NGOs were originally relatively unimpeded in their operations, states have shifted to keeping ships from going to sea by utilizing bureaucratic mechanisms to bar them from their work. While couched in the need to have safe ships at sea, administrative seizure has the practical impact of keeping SAR boats from the Mediterranean for extended periods of time. In effect, it becomes a seemingly never-ending series of hoops that NGOs must navigate in order to return to sea. One activist identified the excessiveness of the inspection process stating that “We’re super nice with 15th inspector by [sic] Holland and we...like always smile and nod nicely, but knowing that we’re the only fucking ship in the central Med that has to do 15 inspections in a row, of course, we’re fucking pissed, but we play along as good as we can because we want to go to our job and not being chained down in Europe...Yeah, we don’t have a choice, they give us one hoop after another and we jump” (18 Sea-Watch 2019).

While ships are forced to navigate the ever-evolving regulation changes in order to return to sea, it is apparent that states are utilizing these legal-bureaucratic mechanisms in a sustained effort to block ships in port.<sup>36</sup> As one activist states,

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<sup>36</sup> In another example, the *Aquarius* (MSF/SOS) was detained on the grounds that they were disposing “HIV infected clothing.” As one activist speaking to this suggests, “It’s a public secret that it’s not about doing anything criminal, but it’s about stopping NGO ships, any way possible. I mean they will literally do basically

[T]he authorities want to want to keep us from sailing on in any manner and every level, like with Port State control and Flag State control on a pleasure craft. We are registered as a pleasure craft where Port State controls do not apply and they've still done it. And when you're like in the commercial shipping, Port State controls the end port like when there is Port State control, everybody's not sleeping for 48 hours and everything's fucked up. And because you might lose your ship, you read every day that has to be spent more in a port costs millions of dollars and they can, they can do that just like that. So it's a super, it's absolutely inappropriate. But it also shows that they realize that they've gone too far in the *Luventa* case. They wouldn't do it again. And so they tried to stop us other levels. (16 *Sea-Watch* 2019)

Conversely, European hypocrisy is also apparent in the justification for some of the regulatory changes occurring. For example, the Dutch government, as the flag-state of the *Sea-Watch 3*, brazenly alleged that part of their opposition to the work of these organizations is that keeping people onboard for extended periods of time creates inhumane conditions for the migrant populations (*Sea-Watch* 2019). The perverse logic offered by states points to the harmful situation created by standoffs is supposedly predicated on the care and concern for people on the move. As one activist states,

When the Dutch government imposed these new regulations on us, which we're now appealing and courts are waiting for a verdict by the first of August, saying the reality is now, that we've created, is that you have these long standoffs, some people end up being on board for a long period of time. That is not safe enough for the people that you have on board and their safety is our utmost priority. So that means you need to stop sailing and stop rescuing them because drowning in the sea is safer than being on board for 19 days. Isn't that just wonderful? (34 *Sea-Watch* 2019)

In doing so, the Dutch state is effectively suggesting that the conditions on board during a long standoff are not safe for migrants stuck at sea for extended periods of time. Yet, this is a stunning failure to acknowledge that the harmful conditions created to ensure people on the move are kept at sea for extended lengths of time is the direct result of the calculated effort by states to impede SAR operations. In this logic, drowning at sea is effectively positioned as a safer alternative to being stuck on the ship during a standoff.

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everything to try and stop" (41 *Sea-Watch* 2019). While seemingly benign efforts, these targeted attempts to keep NGOs from the sea has actually materialized in removing NGOs from operation, at least temporarily in the case of MSF, and this has clearly demonstrable impacts on people on the move.

As they identify, the operationalization of this logic is almost humorous with the blatant ridiculousness of the argument. Migrants trapped on board are not willingly kept at sea of their own volition. Rather, it is a clear state effort to keep migrants in place which creates potentially dangerous conditions for those on board. Indeed, it is inhumane to keep people at sea for extended periods of time, but it is not due to the work of the NGOs that people find themselves in this position. It is precisely because of the political manoeuvres of European states which transforms NGO ships into carceral spaces of indefinite detention. This is not indifference; this is a calculated political effort to utilize the inhospitable conditions of the sea as a mechanism to justify removing NGOs from providing lifesaving assistance. Not only is the sea used as a physical border space of geographical separation but the environment is employed as a means of punishing bodies at sea. Adopting a ‘moral alibi’ (Doty 2011) absolves states of the responsibility for the prolonged suffering at sea. In doing so, it is not the enactment of nefarious and violent policies of exclusion manifesting in the European border regime that creates the harsh and deadly conditions for people on the move, but the unfortunate reality of life at sea.

*“Smash one to educate the rest” – The Case of the *luventa**

One of the most clear and direct attempts to criminalize SAR operations occurred in August 2017 with the seizure of the *luventa*, operated by the German NGO, Jugend Rettet. In the developing the case against the *luventa* crew, Italian prosecutors falsely allege that over the course of three SAR operations occurring in in 2016 and 2017, the crew directly coordinated with Libyan smugglers to transfer migrants to the SAR vessel and then returned the empty migrant vessel to those same smugglers to be used in future Mediterranean crossings. Given the small size of the ship, the *luventa* would most commonly take shipwrecked people onboard and then wait to transfer the survivors to a larger ship, to then be disembarked in Europe. Due to the nature of the operations, Italian officials again falsely claimed that the *luventa* and other civil fleet vessels were operating as ‘migrant’s sea taxi’; a common refrain of far-right Italian politicians. Jugend Rettet was one of the NGOs that had not agreed to sign the Code of Conduct, which activists have suggested placed the *luventa* in the cross-hairs of the Italian authorities and led to the

seizure of the ship and the criminal charges in retaliation for their refusal (Amnesty International 2020b, 61).

Months after refusing to adhere to the implementation of the Italian government's Code of Conduct, the *luventa* was directed to the port of Lampedusa by MRCC Rome. While unaware of the reason for the order, the ship sailed for port. Upon arrival in Lampedusa, the ship was seized by the Italian state and a criminal investigation commenced immediately. On 02 August 2017, Italian prosecutors in Trapani seized the *luventa* as part of their investigation into their supposed collusion with Libyan smugglers (Amnesty International 2020b, 60). Following the seizure of the ship, the Italian government began investigating the NGO and ten of the crew members on suspicion of 'aiding illegal immigration' and collusion with Libyan trafficking operations (Dearden 2017). The charges if successful, carry a maximum of twenty years in prison. As one activist with the crew at the time of seizure indicates,

We didn't expect it in the moment. You know, it was the time of the Code of Conduct and Jugend Rettet didn't sign, together with Sea-Watch. Sea-Watch wasn't at sea, so we were the easy example. You know, you smash one to educate the rest. So, you know, the day after we saw, like, a lot of police coming with a piece of paper saying that they have to search for guns and drugs and then developed into the confiscation of the vessel in the afternoon. And then we were told you have to leave the ship in 30 minutes. You have to pack your stuff and you can never come back on the ship [...] Like we arrived in Lampedusa in the night. We disembarked the people that we had on board and then they say, like, you have to stay here overnight. Tomorrow, we're going to do hearings with some of the crew. (44 Sea-Watch 2019)

The seizure of the boat was justified by the Italian state as they suggested it was an effort to prevent 'further' criminal conduct by the NGO as part of their investigation. In a confusing and evidently contradictory statement, Italian officials simultaneously acknowledged that they believed the crew of the *luventa* were, in fact, genuine humanitarians, despite launching an investigation into their conduct at sea (Amnesty International 2020b, 61). It is worth noting that the seizure of the *luventa* under Italian law was not an indication of their guilt. Instead, the detention was justified as a preventative measure to seize "crime related items" (Amnesty International 2020b, 62). For over two

years, the colloquially termed, *Iuventa 10*, were left waiting to see if the Italian authorities would formally indict the crew on the heavy charges. Formal charges against ten members of the *Iuventa* crew were eventually levelled in June 2018 by the Italian Justice Department.<sup>37</sup> Part of the intelligence gathered for this investigation came as the result of a listening device being secretly placed on the bridge of the ship by Italian police months earlier during an inspection of the ship (Gostoli 2018). Once again, the work of the academic research group, *Forensic Architecture*, created a computerized reconstruction of the three SAR operations in question, and unequivocally indicated that the *Iuventa* and its crew were, in fact, saving lives at sea (Pezanni and Heller 2018).

In January 2021, the some members of the *Iuventa* crew were granted a small victory against the targeted criminalization campaign. Here, six of the ten crew members had their charges dropped by Italian prosecutors. Despite this admittedly positive development, four crew members still faces charges in the Italian court system and face the potential for up to 20 years in prison. In response, Amnesty welcomed the dropped charges for the *Iuventa* crew, but expressed their indignation at the states willingness to continue pursuing charges against the remaining crew. As they state, “Sadly, this isn’t an isolated case. Across Europe, people and NGOs have been threatened, harassed and dragged through the courts simply for helping refugees and migrants in need – at sea and on land.” (Amnesty International 2021).

### *Impacts of Criminalization on Civil Fleet SAR Operations*

While the criminalization of rescue occurs through the more overt criminal investigations into SAR NGO operations, it also functions in more benign and bureaucratic ways that seek to bleed NGOs of time, money and resources to stall, hamper and impede their operations at sea. In pointing to this idea, one activist argues that the criminalization is less about actually putting people in jail and more about the slow and calculated strain

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<sup>37</sup> While Jugend Rettet were the primary focus of the expansive criminal investigation, there were also similar investigations were launched and targeted, among others “12 members of the crews of MSF and Save the Children’s ships, and Father Mussie Zerai, a Catholic priest of Eritrean origin who assisted refugees at sea for over a decade” (Amnesty International 2020b, 61).

on SAR missions and the NGOs and an effort to slowly push them from the sea. They state that,

I think the idea behind suing the captain of the *luventa*, is not to put her in prison because I'm pretty sure everyone is aware they didn't do anything wrong, but what it does for the next couple of years, how[ever] long this court case will go, it will prevent others from volunteering, and others from doing that work, it will, of course, it took ships through the change, so there is less personnel, less ships and it frightens everyone who is actually supportive in our work and actually, join or, I don't know, donate or something, but by criminalizing our work, I think the motivation behind that was to make sure that there won't be more volunteers coming, more ships coming, so there's kind of a fear within us...And then again, I'm 100% sure nothing will ever come of these court cases, but they will be so long and so fucking expensive that they do the job anyway. (18 Sea-Watch 2019)

Not only does this lead to significant financial strain for the NGOs, but it also produces a chilling effect for activists looking to get involved in SAR operations at sea. As one activist states that it occurs,

because obviously all the authorities we deal with, all the governments that we deal with are more powerful than us. And like in Italy, all you have to do is, you have to accuse 10 people of really, really horrible crimes, with really long prison sentences and it doesn't even matter in the end if you will convict them. Simply the act of accusing them makes the work we do incredibly hard because it makes it incredibly dangerous. None of us want to go to prison for 20 years. And it also makes it very expensive, because we have to adhere to lots of these regulations that magically appear every time an inspector comes. (03 Sea-Watch 2019)

The potential for criminalization is a common and pervasive threat that all crews must acknowledge and understand prior to the missions. Once activist clearly identifies this potential criminal sanction for their involvement in the SAR process by saying "Every captain who steps on board knows it. Every volunteer knows that we can face jail. And with the *luventa* case, it's not just the captain who is being involved. The RHIB crews and the Head of Missions and the Captain's, they're all involved. There are 10 people in the *luventa* case" (37 Sea-Watch 2019).

The criminalized recasting of rescue efforts is enabled in the environment of the rise of right-wing populism (Mainwaring and DeBono 2021). When positioned within the highly volatile environment of the rise of right-wing populism and nationalist rhetoric, there is a growing narrative of criminality able to take hold with a wider audience as solidarity efforts become re-assigned as criminal acts through a concerted effort to delegitimise the presence of certain actors in the space of the sea. The criminalization of SAR has become painfully apparent, both in the overt manifestations of the process as seen with the case of the *Iuventa 10*, but also in more benign ways. The effect of lengthy criminal investigations has the effect of not only causing a slow bleed in the financial sustainability of the NGOs as the criminal proceedings slowly make their way through the court system, but it also has a chilling effect on those wanting to be involved in the civil fleet. While the investigations may not be effective in terms of securing a conviction, they hold SAR boats in port.

### **Conclusion: Disrupting Exclusion, Defending Solidarity and Challenging State Authority**

Attempts to stop the civil fleet from enacting solidarity with people on the move has become ubiquitous in the Mediterranean SAR context. We can understand what is taking place in the Mediterranean as a form of blockading. This exists in two inter-related ways. First, at sea, standoffs are used to keep NGO ships from entering port that also serves multiple purposes. This functions as a form of spectacle that makes migrant bodies and the NGOs acting in solidarity with people on the move visible to the wider public. This is used as an overt and highly political attempt to reassert state claims to authority over the space of the sea and to signal that they retain control over the gates of the state in a time of supposed crisis. Moreover, the use of the standoff becomes a means of creating carceral space in the Mediterranean. It allows for the capture and detention of people on the move and NGOs while keeping them at a distance in the process. This emergent carcerality at sea also functions to punish bodies by using the sea's violence in this process. While the rise of Salvini and his far-right political ideology has led to standoffs as a now commonplace occurrence in the civil fleet SAR process, this process has a lineage that both predates his ascension and has continued after he has been deposed.

Secondly, the blockade is manifest through the actions in ports and the criminalization of SAR that works to keep NGOs from going to sea. The criminalization of SAR and the removal of the civil fleet from the sea essentially uses death as a mechanism to govern mobility as the ability effectively or hinder rescue operations very directly means people departing from North Africa will continue to die, making the sea a more violent and dangerous place. As one activist directly notes,

Clearly, there's been a movement toward criminalization. I think, obviously, it's had a meaningful impact. And at the end of the day, it kills, right. It kills people, right. So, like, when I was on a mission and we were at sea...when I was on mission, we were stuck in a harbour, there were deaths at sea. And there was this overwhelming feeling that we could have been there, you know? [...] So, criminalizing NGOs, holding their boats hostage, creating these long standoff situations. They are policies that kill. And I think that somewhere in the minds of the elite, that they must be aware of that. And they must be conscious. And as I suggest, they kind of at the beginning, I think it's like...considered like acceptable collateral damage to trying to stop a migration flow. (33 Sea-Watch 2019)

Occurring through the use of legal-bureaucratic mechanisms that are operationalized to keep ships in port it has the effect of removing them from the space of the sea. This functions similarly to both the spectacle and carceral aspects of the standoff. The criminalization of SAR has become a central emerging in the Central Mediterranean. It is directly tied to broader global trends in the necropolitical governance of migration control and border enforcement that I will return to in the conclusion of the dissertation.



## **Conclusion**

### **Towards No Borders Politics**

#### **Introduction**

The Mediterranean Sea has become a visible reminder of the violent and deadly consequences of exclusionary border policies of the European Union (EU). Observing how state and non-state actors respond to irregularized migration in the Mediterranean Sea provides a window into broader trends of mobility, state security, border control, and citizenship. The project has examined the practice of civil fleet SAR operations in the Mediterranean Sea. It represents a modest effort to highlight how the border 'works' to produce violent outcomes in the interstitial spaces between the Global North and South. The porousness of the border and the continuation of irregular arrivals to European shores via the Mediterranean appears to indicate that current efforts to stop irregular migration at sea are not 'working'. Despite now-routinized state efforts to suppress irregularized mobility through the development and material expansion of the global border security industry, the constant presence of death at the frontiers of the Global North, however, presents another story. The continuation of restrictive border policies that do not provide space for safe and accessible migration options to Europe ensures that people will continue to be ushered towards the sea. All too often, they will join the list of those lost to the open graveyard of the sea. States utilize the physical environment of the Mediterranean as a violent and indiscriminate tool in the governance of that space. The reluctance, inability and failure of the liberal, rights-fearing European political leadership to make any meaningful change to the governance of the Mediterranean means that those same states are directly responsible for ensuring death and suffering continue to be inextricably linked to irregular migrant journeys.

#### **Conceptualising the Spatial Politics of Solidarity and Control in the Mediterranean Borderscape: Project Contributions**

The expansion of European bordering practices in the Mediterranean ensures the interstitial space of the sea remains a dangerous and violent space for those unable to secure the 'right' documentation for passage, and then subsequently ushered into

irregular migration channels. I seek to expand on the understanding that process to illuminate the complex relationship and assemblage that characterizes the bordering process within migrant rescue in the Mediterranean Sea. Utilizing this framework, the project investigates how the border is (re)made and performed through state and non-state actors as a contested borderscape.

So what does it all mean? In surveying the intersections of space, solidarity and state security efforts at sea, this dissertation provides a critical understanding of the politics of SAR within in civil fleet. In the dissertation, I ask:

- How is the Mediterranean Sea weaponized as a violent borderscape?
- How does the civil fleet disrupt state claims to sovereign authority over the Mediterranean borderscape?
- How has EUrope responded to the contentious politics of solidarity enacted by the civil fleet?

The Mediterranean holds rich opportunities for nuanced insights into state bordering practices as a site of violence and solidarity. The project makes a novel contribution toward understanding the spatial politics of the Mediterranean and the role of non-state actors in the practice and performance of state sovereignty at sea. Examining how activist SAR groups like Sea-Watch engage in both performing and resisting the violence perpetrated by state bordering practices at sea provides a valuable insight into how we understand interactions with space. Moreover, it sees the work of these groups not primarily as a form of humanitarian care, but rather, as a means of enacting a contentious politics of solidarity with people on the move as an active resistance to the violence of state bordering practices. Finally, by looking at the state response to civil fleet interventions in the Mediterranean borderscape, the project also highlights how states utilize the space of sea as a carceral space of detention and invisibility as the criminalization of both migration and solidarity are evidenced through the emergence of standoff politics and blockading at sea. In this concluding chapter, I provide a brief synopsis of the dissertation while also addressing the implications and contributions of the

project. In addition, I discuss the limits of the dissertation and highlight several future areas of research emerging from this project.

*Investigating Solidarity, Spatial Politics, and the Civil Fleet in the Mediterranean – Methodological Considerations and Contributions* [[Chapter 1](#)]

The nature of borders is changing. This reality presents an important challenge to understanding disciplinarity within International Relations (IR). The changing nature of the border ironically challenges the ability to establish clear boundaries around the scope of the discipline. My project is an interdisciplinary effort to examine the intersections of irregular migration, security, humanitarianism and borders while remaining within the established scope of IR. The study of migration and borders is a highly interdisciplinary field with critical interventions being made across the academic spectrum. As a result, I draw primarily on scholars from critical IR, sociology and geography in my contribution to the critical migration and border studies literature.

My argument remains that the study of migration, and more specifically, the experience and invocation of solidarity at sea by the civil fleet is directly related to the study of the state. Within academic sphere, mainstream IR has traditionally focused on power relations between states with a more general interest in the role of state actors. Examining the intersections of security, solidarity and sea rescue within the field of IR provides an opportunity to gain deeper insight into how state borders operate and more directly, provides insight into the power relations inextricably tied to the state's existence. Ultimately, understanding the violence of the border and the implications of these exclusionary efforts is a necessary move in the attempt to dismantle the border and these exclusionary state structures. There must be a greater understanding of how and in what ways borders operate and (re)produce violence in order to question their sanctity and challenge their continuation. Understanding the implications of state bordering practices on irregular migrants while examining how they circumvent, challenge and contest bordering practices is crucial to our understanding of IR.

The first chapter makes three primary contributions to the overall project. First, I situate the dissertation as an interdisciplinary undertaking within International Relations. In doing so, it is an effort to join with the scholarship looking to break the boundaries of academic scholarship. Challenging existing disciplinarity and global bordering practices is a conscious move to contest the persistence of bordering in both fields. In effect, it serves as another call to embrace interdisciplinarity in social research, particularly within IR, to provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the politics of borders and state security. In doing so, I argue that moving away from antiquated methodological and disciplinary nationalism is an essential step in academic inquiry. More importantly, it also allows us to question the very existence of ‘the border’ and ‘the state’, which enables and ensures their continuation. If IR is about power, then this project is about the expression, navigation and negotiation of power between state and non-state actors. It is a challenge to the authority, territoriality and sovereignty of the state. It speaks very directly to the ability of the state to assert control, influence and power in those spaces while seeing how that is challenged and subverted by those who are not typically seen as authority figures in the international state system. In situating my project within IR, I am not only wanting to push the disciplinary boundaries of the field, but also question their existence in the first place. Broadening the scope of IR and challenging the disciplinary boundaries that have been placed around the production of knowledge is central to understanding the various expressions of state power.

The second contribution of this particular chapter is to critically interrogate the methodological commitments of the project. While not a traditional methods chapter, it is an effort to situate my project within the broader scope of IR and push the boundaries of disciplinarity in social research. In situating the project as an activist-oriented ethnographic intervention, I aim to contribute to the critical border studies and migration literature. Approaching the spatial politics of borders and solidarity in the Mediterranean is aided by this particular methodological approach. The activist-oriented ethnographic methodology provides several benefits in that it allows for greater attentiveness to the messiness of social processes. It helps to reveal how power functions in the minor politics of SAR, while the closeness and corporeality of this scholarship is an effort to not only write about these

experiences and actions being undertaken by the civil fleet, with an intimate opportunity to work alongside in this resistance to the violence of state borders at sea.

Third, and more importantly, this chapter pushes back against the notion of objectivity in social research. In doing so, I situate the project as an activist ethnography that works to actively challenge and resist the continuation of the state bordering system. In doing so, I have sought to make a case for not only centring the politics of the work we are engaged with, both in how we write but also in how we engage with our research subjects. This has involved maintaining transparency with the activists I worked alongside, as well as being continually reflexive as I engaged in the fieldwork and as I went through the process of writing the dissertation. My commitments to reflexivity and transparency in the fieldwork process specifically and academic scholarship more broadly are essential to me as an effort to live and engage with the politics of the work. This process is vital in gaining access to the research community and in making clear the stakes of this work with the participants. In effect, I view this as an ethical and responsible approach to social research that is honest and transparent about how we situate ourselves within the study. Indeed, approaching research in this way is often more uncomfortable, but I argue that it is an imperative for producing ethically engaged and responsible research.

*Mapping the Landscape of the Civil Fleet: A Brief Overview of Non-State SAR Operations in the Central Mediterranean* [[Chapter 2](#)]

In this chapter, I provide a brief activist history of the civil fleet to map the emergence and growth of Mediterranean SAR operations. Primarily, I trace the evolution of the NGO, Sea-Watch, while also sketching out some of the various actors in the activist SAR community. The dissertation is more keenly interested in the more radical groups within the SAR community. My choice to focus the dissertation in this manner is two-fold. First, having spent the majority of my fieldwork with more radically oriented NGOs, it made logical and pragmatic sense to focus the research here. Second, and arguably, more importantly, I have chosen to focus my analysis on the more radical elements of the civil fleet as it is more politically aligned with my own convictions about the work. As discussed in Chapter 2, centring the politics of the research in my work is one of the primary concerns

in the knowledge production process. In surveying the civil fleet's more active and prominent actors, I locate some of the political divergences amongst the groups from an organization and individual level. However, I caution this should not be approached as a typology but instead as a mechanism to view the diversity and heterogeneity within the activist SAR field.

The civil fleet exists on loose spectrum that ranges from more altruistic humanitarian motivations, to more radical, anarchist interventions that view the work as a crucial part of creating a truly borderless world and challenging the exclusionary politics of Europe. Organizationally, there are similarities between NGOs on the spectrum of orientation towards the humanitarian and political visions and understandings of the work of the SAR organizations. The divergence occurs to varying degrees stemming primarily from the political orientation of the NGO, which also contributes to shaping the demographics of the activist involved. On the individual level, I also look at the activist motivations for involvement in the civil fleet. There is a myriad of reasons that have brought people to the work of the civil fleet, including more altruistic notions of humanitarianism, a pragmatic response to injustice, and more a critical notion of no border politics. More interestingly, however, the chapter highlights how this has routinely shifted over time despite these ranging motivations.

Though the overwhelming majority of people I engaged with acknowledged that even if they wanted to separate the politics from the work they were involved in, it has evolved when confronted with the realities of the work. In part, the chapter highlights a greater willingness amongst a broad range of volunteers to recognize the politics of the field they are engaging in, even if they have arrived with less radical visions of the work. The ongoing violence occurring in the Mediterranean often leads to greater politicization and racialization of those involved. Though many activists came to the civil fleet with more radical, political visions of their involvement in the Mediterranean, many others have grown into it. Moreover, this evolution has led to a noticeable shift in the broader politics of the civil fleet. Increasingly, even less radical or combative NGOs have taken increasingly clear and vocal stances against the continuing violence occurring in the

Central Mediterranean. While I suggest there is notable divergence and heterogeneity within the NGOs and activists of the civil fleet, I also argue that these differences in operational and political approaches to SAR can actually serve as a strength to the work of the SAR community.

*Care, Control or Cracks?: Enacting Contentious Politics of Solidarity* [[Chapter 3](#)]

Having mapped the landscape of civil fleet SAR interventions in the Mediterranean, I transition towards looking at how to understand the work of the civil fleet. Building upon some of the motivations discussed in the previous chapters, I argue that the work of these groups should be viewed more as enacting a contentious politics of solidarity rather than a humanitarian intervention. The primary difference is situated in where the politics of the work are located. I suggest that while more humanitarian framings of SAR eschew the politics of the civil fleet intervention, situating the SAR operations as form of enacting a contentious politics of solidarity centres the politics of the work as a form of resistance to the violence of the European border regime. Still, more importantly, viewing the work in this manner contributes to an emancipatory vision of the work itself. The discussion revolves around the notion of humanitarian reason (Fassin 2011), through addressing how this particular humanitarian orientation can contribute towards a greater focus on migration management and the governmentality of care, as well as potentially blurring the violence of borders at sea. While not ignoring or diminishing the well-founded concerns around the politics and practice of humanitarianism, I suggest the discourse of solidarity more effectively captures the work of many activists within the civil fleet.

Yet, in my engagement with the concepts of humanitarianism and solidarity, the chapter also seeks to blur the seemingly dichotomous relationship between the two. While there is a marked difference between solidarity and humanitarianism, they do not automatically stand in contrast to one another, nor are they mutually exclusive terms. As Tazzioli and Walters note (2019), the provision of food, for example, is often understood as a form of humanitarian action. However, they question what happens when that provision of food is organized and identified as a form of solidarity? There is an element

of humanitarian care in acts of solidarity, while solidarity can also exist in acts of humanitarianism and assistance for people on the move.

I caution that while existing as seemingly distinct political orientations towards the work of the civil fleet, there are elements of humanitarian care present within a politics of solidarity. Similarly, elements of solidarity emerge within the humanitarian framing of the work. Indeed, humanitarianism can operate to create a hierarchy of humanity (Fassin 2010b) that produces distinctions of ‘who counts’, where some lives become worthy of recognition while others are only granted that recognition upon death. Moreover, there is often a recognition of the social and political dimensions embedded in the supposedly apolitical conceptualization of humanitarianism (Barnett and Weiss 2008; Fassin 2007b; Esperti 2020). For example, though MSF identifies as a humanitarian organization, it does not associate the traditional principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence as being devoid of politics. Instead, the NGO sees those principles as strategic positions that “facilitate actions”, seeing the practice of humanitarianism emerging due to the failure of politics (Pallister-Wilkins 2017b, 23). The adherence to humanitarian principles does not automatically facilitate a depoliticized understanding of humanitarianism in the context of SAR but rather provides an entry point to examine the politics underwriting their operations.

One key differentiation between solidarity and humanitarianism is predicated on the employment of paternalism, victimization and the depoliticization of the context of the work. Certainly, while I point to some of the problematic aspects of the humanitarian positioning towards the work, yet these same elements are not inescapable in more radically oriented SAR organizations. In part, this can be tied to notions of strategic essentialism that emerge as people on the move need to ‘be the victim’ to elicit sympathy from a wider population (Aradau 2004; Anderson 2008). On the contrary, other scholars suggest that solidarity is, in fact, “conceptually and politically quite far from the field of humanitarianism, at least if we understand the latter as the main discourse legitimizing the operations of NGOs under the aegis of the state” (Mezzadra 2020, 425). Caution remains, however, because even when the acts of solidarity with people on the move do



occur as a form of activist citizenship, there remains potential for the reproduction of various forms of paternalism, victimization and hierarchical relationships to occur.

Locating civil fleet SAR operations in the Mediterranean as a means of enacting solidarity with people on the move situates the work as a form of contentious politics. Reading solidarity in this context can also be seen through the operationalization of citizenship, which “In effect, this turns into leveraging the power and weight of citizenship to incorporate or include a broader range of people and create a more ‘inclusive counting’” (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020b, 8). Viewing NGO SAR operations as a form of enacting solidarity “shows how, through practices and relations of solidarity, a political community and thus citizenship can be enacted beyond established contexts by those who already belong to them and have a relatively legitimate position” (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020b, 412). The work of activists in support of people on the move, regardless of their legal status, motivations, or means of mobility, their involvement challenges and shifts the boundaries of societal belonging (H. L. Johnson 2012). By doing so, they present an alternative politics that is not bound by institutionalized relationships with the state but by the everydayness of their acts of solidarity with people on the move. As Vandevordt notes, “From these citizens’ perspective, migrants who do not apply for asylum in Belgium are not in “transit”, “undocumented” or “illegal”, but continue to be “forced migrants”, “refugees” or simply “human beings” with a project of their own” (Vandevordt 2019, 5). Enacting solidarity with migrants regardless of status serves as a form of political action that shifts the boundaries of inclusion in the social order, which can be read in everyday acts of assistance for people on the move.

In the final section of the chapter, I argue that the continued presence of the civil fleet at sea fills the gaps of state and actively contributes to creating cracks in the façade of the EUropean border regime. The sea is a space of politics and a canvas on which the politics of solidarity are played out. While filling gaps left by state inaction at sea is a vital role in the current context of Mediterranean boat migration, it does not address the root causes behind irregularized migration. Gaps in state protection emerge as very directly tied to the reproduction of restrictive border regimes. Indeed, the continued presence of

irregularized migration routes at sea serves as a poignant reminder of the limits on mobility that exist outside the Global North. This is not to reduce an individual's agency or deny the right to autonomous forms of mobility. Instead, it suggests that the persistence of an exclusionary border regime produces the conditions under which irregularized journeys occur, as states feign indignation at the mounting number of migrant deaths along now well-established routes. In response, the work of the civil fleet is part of a broader movement fighting for safe, legal alternative routes that largely remain an apparition for those in need.

*Zoning the Mediterranean: Legibility, Governability and Erasure at Sea* [[Chapter 4](#)]

Having sketched out the civil fleet's landscape and examined the relationship between solidarity and humanitarianism, the chapter shifts to explore the Mediterranean Sea's active and dynamic spatial politics. Here, I situate the Mediterranean as a contested borderscape. Viewing the Mediterranean as a borderscape broadens the understanding of the border as an interrelated social, political and economic space, rather than seeing it as a void space, or as a discrete point on a map. The political dynamics visible in the Central Mediterranean are a critical aspect of understanding sovereign performances of authority over the non-state space of the sea. In effect, the sea becomes claimed as an extension of the state's territorial authority and attempts to exert the state's sovereign prerogative in that space. I use the concept of *mare nullius* to explore how these erasure politics are manifest at sea. In effect, the sea is framed as an empty, anarchic space that needs to be 'settled' by state presence. Through the erasure of Mediterranean history, Europe ignores not only the historical presence of the Global South at sea but, in effect, denies the rightful presence of certain non-state actors from the Mediterranean. In developing this argument, I draw inspiration from Aihwa Ong's (2006) seminal work on the concept of 'zoning' to highlight how the practice occurs in the interstitial spaces between the Global North and South. Moreover, I interrogate how the practice contributes to producing the Mediterranean as a contested borderscape.

For Ong, zoning represents a process through which states relinquish or diminish sovereign territorial authority in service of neoliberal capitalist expansion. Though

articulated as a process of graduated sovereignty, the reorganization of national space into one conducive to the growth and pervasiveness of neoliberal economic structures, this process can also be understood to have broader implications for the practice of bordering and the preservation of the state system. As an inversion to Ong's theory, I argue that rather than seeing zoning as a process of relinquishing sovereign authority over state space, it is, in fact, an effort to extend its presence into the sea as a mechanism to claim the commons in the name of border security. In effect, I suggest zoning in the Mediterranean can be understood as an attempt to extend state authority into the 'unclaimed' space of the sea through operationalizing the discourse of 'crisis' to leverage an increasingly hostile state security narrative in justifying the continuation of state bordering practices at sea.

In asserting state presence and authority at sea, the so-called crisis narrative reaffirms the state's role and capacity as a gatekeeper. The seemingly lawless environment of the sea and the 'crisis' framing around irregularized migration, becomes an important justification for state action, whether at sea, in port or on land. Indeed, what is being witnessed in the Mediterranean is not merely a process of border externalization; extending sovereign presence and reach beyond the state's territorial borders. In this process, however, state security forces extend the administrative and security capacity of the state into a third country to stop migrant journeys before they begin. Though what is witnessed in the Mediterranean differs in the state's relationship to the space of the sea. Rather than simply pushing the material capacity of the state beyond its borders, what is occurring in the Mediterranean is an active effort to redefine sovereign authority at sea and make active claims to the space of the sea.

In many ways, security narrative when situated in an environment of 'crisis' enables the injection of state presence in the 'ungoverned' spaces of the sea. This process is facilitated through narratives of 'crisis,' which frame the policy as a form of anti-politics (Walters 2008) without questioning why those services must exist in the first place. These acts of policing, however, are also direct efforts to make populations both legible and governable to the state (Pallister-Wilkins 2017b; Scott 1998). The persistence of

exclusionary state bordering practices is utilized to frame the intervention in those spaces in a positive, humanitarian light to save ‘the helpless other’ from suffering. In effect, keeping people ‘in place’ becomes a means of saving would-be migrants from undertaking such journeys. Utilizing the presence of smugglers, who are, at times, exploitative, serves as a means of simultaneously depoliticizing border control efforts. Vilifying smugglers in the border narrative enables the state to blur responsibility in producing increasingly restrictive and militarized borders. Paradoxically, smugglers become a necessity to circumvent state-led border control efforts. Viewing this narrative of both care and control (Agier 2011; Aradau 2004; Pallister-Wilkins 2015) within the broader trends of migration governance, anti-migration policies have coincided with increasingly restrictive and violent border regimes, limiting the ability for individuals to move across borders while reaffirming and ontologizing borders in modern statecraft.

SAR operations challenge the spatial understanding of the sea in which the Mediterranean is effectively claimed as European space. Acts of solidarity undertaken by the civil fleet illuminate the fallacy that the border is a finite point that can be clearly defined and controlled and therefore produce clear exclusions. Reterritorializing the Mediterranean through zoning the sea is about claiming authority over that space. Rather than relinquishing state authority, this is an effort to reclaim the space of the sea and position the state as the sole arbiter of the sea. The production of flexible sovereignty is less in service of protecting capital mobility (Ong 2006; Brenner 1999), though important, and more about the establishment of sovereign control. Reterritorialization is understood as an evolution in globalization that also moves away from the state-centric conceptualization of the ordering of space by highlighting the other actors and social dynamics that are encompassed within this process (Brenner 1999).

Through the active propagation of security discourses, states leverage the supposed threat of ‘uncontrolled migration’ to the territorial sovereignty of Europe as a means of justifying their response in the Mediterranean (Frontex 2018). The sea is enlisted as a passive form of border control, providing a ‘moral alibi’ (Doty 2011) not only in affording state officials the ability to explain away the deaths of irregular migrants but also

in the characterization of intervention in the sea as a benevolent act. Through this dissociative logic, it is not the violent practice of bordering that has killed thousands of migrants seeking entry into Europe; it is the sea. For Europe, the sea is effectively positioned as the primary explanation for migrant deaths and a justification for an increasingly security-focused response to the neglected spaces of state reach.

*Standoffs Politics, Blockading and the Criminalization Solidarity* [[Chapter 5](#)]

In the final chapter, I discuss the emergence of what I term, ‘standoff politics’ in furthering the development of the sea as a hyper-political and contested borderscape. In doing so, I provide a conceptual overview of this emergent form of bordering taking place at sea by discussing standoffs as representing the production of bureaucratic blockades, a form of political theatre, and a mechanism for controlling time and space through a broader criminalization of solidarity at sea. Beyond state efforts to contain, disrupt, and slow migrant journeys at sea, standoff politics also represent a re-emergent form of blockading. There are two elements to the blockade production in the Mediterranean that I focus on in this chapter. While not manifesting in the traditionally understood physical blockade, the development of legal-bureaucratic blockades to mobility are employed by barring both the entry to, and exit from European ports. At sea, NGOs are now routinely prevented from entering ports following rescues, illuminating the emergence of the standoff process. Conversely, in port, NGO vessels are also routinely precluded from returning to sea due to criminal and administrative investigations that effectively detain NGO ships. Moreover, I suggest that through standoff politics and blockade production, states make active sovereign territorial claims to the international space, or the commons of the sea. In effect, NGOs represent a very direct challenge state authority and claim to this space. Through their persistent presence at sea, the civil fleet actively works to make border violence visible, which challenges the liberal European imaginary of the region. This dogged determination to remain active in the Mediterranean borderscape has resulted in very direct forms of criminalization and repression against civil society actors at sea.

The production of blockades at sea deny port entry by utilizing legal-bureaucratic mechanisms to justify their exclusion. Bureaucratic blockades are positioned seemingly benign, everyday practices of port state control, but are indicative of a growing trend in the criminalization of solidarity occurring in the Mediterranean borderscape. Standoffs produce uncertainty around various temporal aspects of the event, which at an elementary level, creates logistical challenges for NGOs in the planning and preparation for missions. For NGOs, the arbitrary, random, unexpected aspects of temporal control in standoffs have necessitated a shift in how NGOs plan for rescue missions. In previous years, standoffs have not been part of the consideration for NGOs operating in the Mediterranean. As is now clear, this is an almost inevitable part of the rescue process.

While previously, planning entailed missions lasting approximately three weeks, with slight variation depending on the SAR operations they were involved in. NGOs are now, in some cases having to alter their planning process to accommodate for upwards of 40 days at sea, given the highly variable nature of the missions, which are dependent on when and where a rescue may take place as well as how many people are involved. It becomes another means of keeping in place and also using time as a means to control. The production of blockades through the standoff and criminalization of SAR is, in effect, working to keep both migrants and NGOs in place, further slowing down time. The detention of rescue vessels produces a form of structural violence, in part, as detaining NGOs through that practice ensures that more people will die at sea or be subject to increased precarity in their journeys. The sea is made a more violent space as states weaponize bureaucratic modes of restriction for NGOs.

I also reflect the role of time in producing immobility at sea as an integral part of the Mediterranean SAR standoff process. This re-emergent bordering practice enables the capture and detention of migrant bodies at mobile offshore detention sites. Standoff politics and the operationalization of the blockade serve to keep people from claiming asylum but are also used to punish bodies at sea. The temporal indeterminacy is challenging for all involved as it injects further uncertainty into the migration process while holding people in an interstitial space of waiting. Containing migrants on civil fleet SAR

boats moves beyond the territorial confinement experienced by people on the move and becomes manifest in these rescue boats as mobile border sites. SAR vessels then become spaces that provide both respite from the harshness of the sea but also enables socio-spatial isolation. The standoff process represents yet another attempt by European actors to manage migrant mobility, criminalize migration and extend European borders.

The shift toward employing standoffs and blockading as a border control mechanism is indicative of the trend toward criminalization of solidarity in the Mediterranean, and indeed, across Europe. To illustrate this phenomenon, I drew on the case of Sea-Watch Captain, Carola Rackete, to highlight the material ramifications of this process. Practically speaking, *Sea Watch* entering the port of Lampedusa represented a very direct challenge state bordering practices. The legal and political retribution that followed was evident. However, this is not necessarily solely confined to the legal processes that the NGO now finds themselves in, which partly stems from the reality that there is not a substantiated case for criminal indictment.

The blockade becomes a means of enacting retribution for challenging state authority, as people on the move and the civil fleet become the canvas on which states project sovereign power. More subtly, however, the legal and administrative process that uses time to keep them from rescue is arguably more valuable. Keeping ships of the civil fleet from returning to rescue operations at sea, very directly and overtly contributes to the violence and suffering occurring as a result of calculated political maneuvers. Bureaucratic blockading further contributes to the development of the Mediterranean as a hyper-political and highly contested borderscape as both state and non-state actors make claim to rightful presence at sea.

## **Curious Omissions and Future Possibilities – Project Limits and Future Research**

### *Limits of the Project*

In concluding the dissertation, it is also valuable to consider what was omitted in the process of writing as well as future research possibilities emerging from this project. What is provided in this dissertation is a limited, situational experience and representation

of what is occurring in the Mediterranean. There are near-daily evolutions in what is taking place in the Mediterranean. Whether it be in terms of who is at sea and who is not, constantly shifting European bordering policies in the region, who is under investigation, who is in a standoff, who is under investigation, and how their court cases are evolving or not, it presents a real challenge to having the research remain current. As a result, the dissertation captures a mere snapshot of the Mediterranean borderscape. Despite the constant evolution of the Mediterranean SAR context, I have made a concerted effort to monitor the ongoing developments within the civil fleet in an attempt to have these shifts in the borderscape reflected as I wrote the dissertation.

Methodologically, the ethnography I conducted was not necessarily the ethnography that I had initially intended on producing. Initially, I began fieldwork with the intent of doing interviews, and ultimately hoping to expand the ethnographic component of the work by eventually going to sea. Despite not going to sea, my time with Sea-Watch became an opportunity to directly engage in the work and struggle of the organizations I came to research. Being able to “do the work” rather than be relegated to the role of the academic observer was a welcomed and valuable development in the project. Seeing and experiencing the sea is, I would argue, a valuable part of understanding the politics embedded in the movement of people across that space. Studying the spatial politics of European bordering practices in the Mediterranean without actually going to sea means that, in part, my understanding of that space only exists in relation to the perception and imaginary of it, having never actually encountered it. My understanding of the sea and the border at sea is mediated through this imaginary of what I assume occurs in that space. While the project functions to challenge some of these imaginaries of the sea, I, too, am building an imaginary of the sea that derives from the encounters of others. Instead, my understanding of the sea, standoffs, and borders at sea is primarily mediated by activists with firsthand experience in the field. My knowledge becomes, in this case, a distillation or derivative of their experiences, while my understanding of the sea is premised on the imaginary of the sea. As a result, the project attempts to consider the relationship between the civil fleet and the state at sea when I have never been there.



I have been working on getting on a SAR rescue mission with one of these organizations, but for several reasons, mainly due to the limited opportunity as the space for rescue is shrinking. However, this is something that I am still working to make happen. Despite the inability to get on a SAR mission, I have spent a significant amount of time living and working alongside the Sea-Watch crew, primarily in Marseille, France and Licata, Italy, through different legal and bureaucratic detention periods spanning from March to September 2019. In some ways, going to sea would have changed the project. It would have allowed for seeing and experiencing the sea to understand what takes place during these operations, including the micro politics on the ship and how the state apparatus confronts these organizations through a situated experiential observation of what takes place. It would have allowed me to experience the emotion of being at sea involved in this work. It also would have allowed me to contribute to enacting solidarity with people on the move and defying the deadly border politics of the EU, more directly.

The absence of migrant voices in the project may come as a curious omission given the context of this project. There are, however, several reasons for this omission. Not focusing on migrant populations in this research is an intentional effort that should not be seen as an effort to exclude marginalized voices of subaltern populations. Ethically, I have some reservations around conducting this type of research. In part, this is due to potentially contributing to further violence associated with the migration process for an already marginalized population by directly exposing their journey process or through the representation of their experiences. While those contributions are integral to the broader discussions on migration and bordering, it may not be my place to engage with it, especially recognizing my positionality and, more importantly, the context in which I am working.

The voices of migrant populations are being brought onto the agenda in other spaces and making significant contributions to our understanding of the border and the violence enmeshed within that context. This can be included later as an avenue for further inquiry or a later project, but not right now. In conducting ethnographic research, we must

remain committed to avoiding what Gusterson (1993) suggests may reinforce the marginality of these groups through orientalising groups of study and exoticizing their existence and understanding. The ethnographic portion of my research should be seen as an intentional effort to avoid those very issues of orientalising, appropriation and misrepresentation commonly associated with ethnographic studies. The use of ethnography in my research becomes an opportunity to work through existing power structures to highlight the marginalization occurring at the periphery of the state.

### *Future Research*

In many ways a further response to some of the limits and omissions of the project, I want to take a brief moment to talk about where this research program moves from here. There are several projects that I either will be or currently am working on to fill some of the gaps that remain and build upon the work to examine different facets of the spatio-political dynamics of the borderscapes of the Global North.

#### Activist Interventions in the US-Mexico Borderscape

Principally, my future research moves forward from my dissertation project unpacking the intersections of migration control, solidarity, and irregular migration in developing my first book manuscript. Here, I aim to shift the geographical context of my research to analyze the spatio-political relationship between NGO acts of solidarity and state border control practices in North America. Developing this project will allow me to explore the nuances that emerge in the acts of solidarity and resistance in relation to violent state border systems with NGOs operating in the US-Mexico borderlands. While my doctoral research focuses on this relationship's intricacy, fluidity, and spatial politics at sea, the new project will examine how this occurs in the Sonoran Desert.

Conducting an ethnographic study to interrogate this geographically distinct yet similarly violent borderscape will enable me to uncover the various manifestations of sovereign power in the borderlands across these regions. There are clear parallels between these vast environments being utilized as a tool for state border control while simultaneously being transformed into spaces of resistance by NGOs and migrants alike.

Centring the work of grassroots organizations and the environment in this analysis offers valuable and much-needed insight into how non-state actors contest the violence of the state border apparatus in the Global North. Observing grassroots responses to the violence of the global border regime, coupled with state reactions to irregular migration, is essential to understanding the broader trends in mobility, state security, and border control. This work reveals emergent migration control techniques designed to subject migrant bodies to increasingly perilous journeys and the targeted repression of solidarity. My research will continue to explore the spatial politics of the borderland environments in the Global North as I interrogate bordering practices and the contestation of state space through NGO solidarity work with people on the move.

### Micro Politics of SAR

The second area of inquiry that I hope to move into explores the micro-politics of life on a SAR vessel. Had I been able to go to sea during my fieldwork, this would have been something that could have been included in the dissertation. Several interesting socio-political interactions take place in the Mediterranean, from the point of rescue to the increasingly extended periods of detention at sea. Occurring on multiple levels, the socio-political relationships between survivors, the crew and survivors, the state and the crew, and the state and the survivors, there are numerous dynamics worth interrogating here. I want to provide a more critical reflection on the work of the civil fleet and also the political economy of SAR. While people like Andersson have looked at the migrant and state-led border economies, exploring how this manifests in the context of SAR is also essential. There is a need for further critical reflection on the role and implications of SAR operations, particularly in the reproduction of paternalistic, infantilizing narratives of SAR

### Vertical Borders of SAR

The third line of inquiry stemming from the project will explore the vertical borders of SAR. Building on some of the work by Elden (2013), Walters (2016; 2018; Dijkstra and Walters 2021) and others (Jones and Johnson 2016) on vertical borders, the focus here is to provide a more in-depth at the work of the Sea-Watch Airborne operations. The primary focus of the dissertation project was boat-based interventions at sea. Yet,

Airborne operations play an integral role in the SAR process, especially with the growing trend toward criminalizing SAR. Originally attempting to operate from Tunisia, they were forced to relocate their operations to Malta and began flying from the island in 2017 (Cuttitta 2018b). Eventually, the Maltese government grounded the Airborne operations prompting another relocation to Lampedusa, Italy. The ability to remain more consistently operational than the ships of the civil fleet is greatly beneficial as they have largely, to this point, evaded the same sort of legal and bureaucratic barriers that NGOs at sea have faced. In light of the growing criminalization of solidarity occurring at sea, Airborne operations provide a 'disobedient gaze' that makes the violence of the border visible to global audiences. Exploring the vertical dynamics of bordering will provide a greater understanding the spatial politics of the border itself, and highlight the important work being done by this aerial wing of the civil fleet.

#### Global Apartheid and the Sea

Although, in many ways, the global community has experienced greater interconnectivity between states economically, culturally and diplomatically, a growing disconnect between the Global North and South in relation to access to migration has evolved in parallel to this process. There is growing friction (Sassen 2014) among states confronted with rising numbers of increasingly irregular migrants resisting bureaucratic processes of control that seek to manage their mobility despite their irregularized status. Irregular migration challenges the geographic divide between the North and South, which has remained largely well-ordered and intact for many years. The project speaks to the notion of gated globalism (Cunningham 2001) in an era of supposed global interconnectivity. More pointedly, the development and evolution of a global apartheid system is fostered through exclusionary state bordering practices that seek to limit the mobility of those from the Global South (Duffield 2006; Richmond 1994; Sharma 2005; Spener 2011). Highlighting this exclusion in a supposedly globalized system points to the differentiated access to the Global North base on race and class.

Globalization becomes viewed as a process through which certain forms of mobility are deemed acceptable while others are not. This is directly linked to the general notions

of inequality within a neoliberal economic system that serves to both exploit and marginalize the Global South. At the same time, wealth and power remain centrally located in the Global North (Prashad 2008; Sajed 2020). The history of marginalization serves as a driver and motivator for migration, as migrants look to states who have benefited directly or indirectly from the historical exploitative colonial process (Mountz and Loyd 2014). Mobility and uncontrolled migration are understood as a threat to the western way of life, and decolonization launched the new containment strategy (Duffield 2010). Economic asymmetry is, for many, inextricably tied to colonial legacies in the home state.

There are several curious omissions in the discussion of responsibility in relation to SAR operations at sea. We are not talking about the responsibility of the state in (re)producing exclusionary border practices that ensure the production of violent borders and violent exclusion. These omissions speak clearly to the inequality of the international system. While violence and conflict are noted factors associated with irregular migration on the frontiers of Europe, economic disparity is integrally linked to this process. The deferral of responsibility extends beyond the exploitative practices of smugglers or the inhospitable environment but to the structures of the international state system. More broadly, however, I want to examine the persistence of a divided global system that continues to exploit former colonial regions of the Global South while disassociating the connection to the continued movement of migrant populations for various reasons (Amin 2011). In doing so, I see this new line of inquiry building on some of the work started in the dissertation looking at the solidarity work of the civil fleet.

Enacting solidarity as a contentious politics foregrounds the relationships between border violence, colonial practices, and capitalism in producing the current situation, rather than a mere apparition of crisis in an exceptional moment. The causality behind their movement, in some ways, is irrelevant to the discussion. Whether people are moving due to political instability or persecution, a right supposedly guaranteed under the Refugee Convention, or if they are moving in search of better economic opportunities for themselves or their families. The inability to move freely is a reflection of a global border system that continually seeks to euphemistically 'manage migration'. At the same time,

the reality remains that the current system ensures the continuation of violent borders for people on the move who are deemed less 'valuable' than their comrades in the Global North.

### **Conclusion: (Re)Moving the Border – Towards No Borders Politics**

So what? Why does it matter to study the enactment of a contentious politics of solidarity within civil fleet SAR operations in the Mediterranean? More importantly, what does this mean moving forward in interrogating the spatial politics of the borderlands and the state operationalization of those same spaces as sites of violence in the reproduction of the state? The dissertation is both an ethnographic engagement with the work of the civil fleet and the interrelated spatial politics of the Mediterranean borderscape. Examining the persistent presence of NGOs in the space of the sea allows for a nuanced understanding of the politics of bordering, mobility and solidarity at sea, drawing out the politics of the bordering at sea. Finally, examining the evolution of NGO SAR operations, it also captures the evolution of the Mediterranean borderscape and explores the emergent criminalization of SAR, solidarity and mobility.

The border operates to regulate mobility while justifying the intervention into the non-space (H. L. Johnson 2013) of the sea to police those not adhering to the modern conventions of intra-state mobility. Forcing migrants through the (non-existent) 'proper' channels for mobility is justified to ensure that 'legitimate' asylum seekers will not have to take dangerous trips across the Mediterranean and risk exploitation from smugglers. Perversely, the policies prohibiting mobility become framed as a means of saving migrants from themselves. Walters (2006) argues that borders operate as a sorting function that serves to exclude those not deemed acceptable to 'the state'. When situated in this way, border officials are understood as merely policing the 'bad things' such as smuggling and exploitation while saving helpless victims, which is enabled through 'crisis' narratives that frame policy responses as a form of anti-politics (Walters 2008).

The irony of these bordering efforts remains that it is precisely due to state bordering practices and the militarized approach to securing EUrope, which represents

one of the key sources of precarity in their journey. This callous rationale, where the legal means to mobility are drastically restricted or reduced, ensures that migrants will need to continue to use irregular means of mobility to cross arbitrarily defined state boundaries. Where this fails to suffice in dissuading irregular crossings, a justification for state involvement in rescuing helpless victims is then enabled. While there remains a concerted effort to promote a broader rights regime as a defining characteristic of the liberal paradigm, the lack of congruence in the Global North's promotion of a rights regime remains unequally realized by the Global South. In response to this exclusion and unequal access to the supposed benefits of the neoliberal system, while also in many cases fleeing danger and persecution as a result of instability within the state, migrants undertake dangerous journeys both out of need but also to circumvent, challenge and resist exclusionary bordering practices of the Global North.

Particularly in the state-led discourse on migration, the governance of borders and migration is produced as responsible (IOM 2017; EU 2017; UN 2018). Orderly migration is articulated as a prudent and necessary step to prevent migrant deaths at sea. The argument hinges on the rationale that it is not the exclusionary state policies that kill; it is the realities of a dangerous and harsh environment where people attempt to circumvent the state efforts that ensure orderly migration that leads to their deaths. For example, in the aftermath of a boat sinking off the coast of Lampedusa in 2015, then Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi penned an op-ed in the New York Times where he emphatically pleaded for collective action in response to migrants at sea by insisting that, "We must stop this carnage". In this statement, he alludes to the supposed moral imperative and responsibility to intervene by suggesting that "Helping migrants is everyone's duty" (Renzi 2015). While praising the action of the Italian Coast Guard, his call for a moral, duty-bound responsibility to migrants, however, makes no mention of the restrictive Italian and European immigration policies which make it exceedingly difficult to reach the continent by legal means.

Once again, there is no mention of the role of the border in producing the violent exclusion that ensures the continuation of migrant deaths. The governance of the border

is framed as a mechanism for protecting the individual, whereby it is deemed a 'responsible' state action to ensure orderly and well-governed migration because it is only through legal migration that migrants will not die in their effort to cross international borders. Through these efforts, states can ensure the commitment to the biopolitical control of the border remains intact as the normative understanding ensures the continuation of borders as mechanisms of exclusion.

Amenability to the notion of the sea as a humanitarian space appears to have expired for EUrope. There is now increasingly a shift towards a securitized understanding of that space. Where it was once allowable for compassion to exist, the criminalization of such acts directly undermines that possibility for non-state actors. For example, the Italian government's *Mare Nostrum* SAR operation was billed as a humanitarian operation where then-Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, declared there is a "moral obligation" for EUrope and its citizens to save people at sea (Renzi 2015). Even the 'Code of Conduct' developed by the Italian Government recognized that there was a role for NGOs in SAR operations in the Mediterranean [[see Chapter 5](#)]. Yet, despite this acknowledgement, there have been overt, sustained efforts to subvert their operations through restrictions in a failed attempt to regulate and undermine their work (Cusumano 2017b).

Tied to the externalization of the border, EUrope has also committed to exporting the notion of migration control as a fundamental element of good governance to the European neighbourhood. EUrope has sought to externalize the scope of the border through tied aid with 'transit' states on the periphery of Europe. For example, in 2008, Italy invested \$5 billion in an Italy-Libya "Friendship Pact" with the expressed intent of increasing the capability of the Libyan government to manage migration. Similar agreements have taken place between Malta and Libya, Spain and Morocco, and more recently with Greece and Turkey (Andersson 2014b; 2016b). Expanding the 'good governance' narrative is an effort to create a buffer around EUrope to reduce the number of people making their way to the Mediterranean and attempting sea crossings. To be viewed as developed, states must be able to control the border and the mobility of their citizens (Hyndman 2009; Duffield 2006). Moreover, in order to attract aid and assistance,



there must be a commitment to ensuring the good governance of orderly migration and border control. Funding for European counter-migration operations included with this provision of aid and support for 'transit' states is tied to their willingness and ability to take concrete steps to control irregular migration and points to the externalization of borders as part of the re-bordering process (Andersson 2016a; Rygiel 2011).

Similarly, Salter (2004) has noted that the delocalization of the border is manifest through 'upstream surveillance' whereby the physical limits of the state are not the sole focus of security and control. Instead, the border has simultaneously been pushed outwards in the process of externalization while also becoming internalized within state boundaries. Securing the state is a central narrative embodied in the development of border policy regimes, in part, through the registration and documentation of asylum seekers to render them legible to the state (Scott 1998). From the state perspective, this is a process whereby the control of the individual is enabled through cooptation and bureaucratizing the forms of governance for migrant populations (Bigo 2002). This violent border system has been enabled through increasingly restrictive visa regimes, externalization programs which push the European border further into the surrounding neighbourhood through investment in peripheral states, and increasingly beyond, to make migrant journeys as difficult, violent, and precarious as possible in an ill-conceived attempt to stop migration; one of the most pervasive and yet incredibly daft border control myths.

Despite the persistent investment in migration controls, Europe remains largely 'unsuccessful' in stemming irregularized migration into the region, especially given the increasing number of refugees seeking protection in Europe (Andersson 2016a). The efforts in Europe's 'fight against illegal migration' has drawn parallels to the ineffective nature of the 'War on Drugs', which is largely viewed as a costly and abject failure on both the human and political fronts (Andersson 2016b). However, the implications of the European border industry failure and the embedded notions of responsibility associated with the justification for this action have dire consequences for migrant populations seeking irregular entry into the region.

When few legal options exist, it is galling to suggest that orderly migration should be adhered to as it is precisely that practice which has excluded migrant populations through moving. The conscious effort to limit legal channels of migration means that alternatives become necessary. Then to suggest that migrants need to follow orderly, legal migration routes when none exists is an active move to distance the responsibility of the state in the resultant violence that occurs as a result of this effort to produce orderly migration; particularly for those departing from North Africa into the Central Mediterranean. Cloaking this violent exclusion in the rhetoric of orderly migration and good governance is, in fact, irresponsible as the sea becomes a weaponized arm of the EUropean border regime. Effectively, this is how the border ‘works’ to ensure the continued precarity for people on the move undertaking autonomous forms of migration. However, the question remains: What are the alternatives for migrants who have had their legal means of mobility bureaucratically limited, reduced, or completely removed?

There is a clear and urgent need to rethink how we understand and approach borders as a tool of political exclusion. Indeed, the notion of a world with no borders or even open borders is often chastised for the supposedly utopic visions of the future or not grounded in reality (N. King 2016; Anderson, Sharma, and Wright 2009). Despite these assertions, there is a growing need to challenge the immutability and ubiquity of borders in all spaces, not just at sea. Migration is routinely a safe and often ubiquitous experience for many, yet when millions are denied entry through the “safe, legal, and orderly” (UN 2018) channels, the ability to migrate remains wholly unsafe for those with arguably the greatest need. Disorderly migration is an unintended outcome of unsafe migration. On the contrary, the notion that stopping migration through creating violent spaces of transit is, in fact, a dystopian vision.

The commitment to using borders as an exclusionary mechanism reaffirms the Global North-South divide by reproducing hegemonic colonial relations and ensuring free, equitable access to mobility remains the purview of wealthy citizens. The state is projected as the victim of the supposed criminality foisted upon them, yet the very presence of borders creates a market for exploitation. In effect, the efforts to stop, slow and impede

migrant mobility create the conditions where irregular migration remains one of the limited tools available to people on the move. The practice and performance of bordering currently operationalized in the Mediterranean Sea exist as a project of governing mobile populations and serve as an appalling, ongoing reminder of the violence of state power. The persistent presence of people on the move at sea and the civil fleets enactment of a contentious politics of solidarity is, in effect, a direct challenge to the performance of sovereignty, citizenship and authority as autonomous mobility is operationalized as a mechanism to contest state borders.

Crossing borders without authorization is simultaneously a refusal of borders and an opposition to the state in that particular moment and serves to produce a “no borders politics” (N. King 2016, 4). People on the move and the NGOs that support their journeys challenge the sanctity and impermeability of the border while also resisting the state-centric notions of belonging as operationalized through the reproduction of citizenship. Migrant mobility at sea and the work of SAR NGOs in facilitating those journeys are also integral to creating a process of (re)negotiation between the state and the other. As King (2016) argues, this offers an entry point into how we are to both refuse the practice of borders and resist the approach where borders are constantly proliferating to produce a transformational practice that alters the state's organizing logic. Because of the fetishized commitment to the il/legal binary, states ensure the continuation of death, vulnerability and precarious journeys for irregular migrant populations as the persistent violent exclusion is maintained through the reproduction of those binary categories. To recognize the role of the state and present border policy as a causal factor associated with the death of irregular migrants undermines the legitimacy of supposedly liberal, rights-fearing states of the Global North.

Despite the global system being characterized as an increasingly interconnected process of exchange between states and non-state actors, for many in the Global South, this reality remains to be realized in an equally beneficial manner, preserving hegemonic dominance within the global system. Increasing inequality tied to growing irregular migration highlights a failure to create appropriate migration regimes to deal with the

issues associated with inequality, as cross border flows of migrants and labour are integral to the process of globalization (Castles 2011; Joppke 1998). The development of strict border controls hurts the ability to reduce inequality between states (Castles et al. 2012). Paradoxically, migrants are viewed as both workers and villains in the conceptualization of the state economy. Migrants both contribute to the state's success while representing a failure of the ability to secure the border (Mountz and Loyd 2014). There are contradictions in the desirability of labour's increased fluidity as characterized by the globalized system. Yet, there are barriers and impediments to this becoming actualized for many. Ensuring irregular migrants remain perpetually marginalized allows for the continuation of their exploitation, with little opportunity for recourse. Despite the notable economic contributions to the economy, the reality remains that irregular migrants represent an easily visible group to place the blame for the failure of neoliberal policies (Hiemstra 2010).

The continued existence and operation of organizations like *Sea Watch* is a political act. In the face of a growing wave of right-wing populist movements and state governments which seek to push the civil fleet from the sea and hamper their work, assisting people in distress at sea who might otherwise die as a result of a violent European border regime, the interventions of the civil fleet stand against this ongoing injustice. Indeed, the act of filling gaps of state protection is a crucially important role that NGOs have taken up in response to the persistence of suffering at sea. The acts of solidarity as a form of flight or escape aid, as noted above, are an essential part of supporting autonomous forms of migration while also providing care to people in situations of distress. Illegalizing migration makes the journey process more precarious. Doing so ensures that these journeys take place underground and out of view, enabling the continuation of abuse, exploitation and violence while disassociating state responsibility from these processes. The prohibitive practice around migration and the ability to cross borders increases the precarious nature of migration. As Andersson (2016b) suggests, migrants who have travelled hundreds if not thousands of miles in search of Europe will not be dissuaded in their efforts to reach that goal; not even the sea or the prospect of death will stop that from taking place.

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## **APPENDICES & TABLES**

**Appendix 1: List of Interviews**

ID	Date	Nationality	NGO	Role	Location	Interview Venue	Time
1	23-Jan-19	French	MSF	Medic (Nurse)	N/A	WhatsApp	1:09:54
2	05-Feb-19	Swiss	SOS; AlarmPhone	Case Manager (AP); Research & Evidence Officer (SOS)	N/A	Skype	1:12:54
3	04-Mar-19	German	Sea-Watch	Medic (Doctor); Medical Coordinator	Marseille, France	In-Person	1:36:31
4	04-Mar-19	German	Sea-Watch	Deck Hand	Marseille, France	In-Person	1:10:31
5	04-Mar-19	German	Sea-Watch; luventa	Captain; 1st Officer	Marseille, France	In-Person	N/A
6	04-Mar-19	French	Sea-Watch	2nd Engineer	Marseille, France	In-Person	0:44:10
7	04-Mar-19	German	Sea-Watch; Sea Eye; Lifeline; luventa	1st Officer	Marseille, France	In-Person	N/A
8	04-Mar-19	German	Sea-Watch	Guest Coordinator	Marseille, France	In-Person	1:08:34
9	05-Mar-19	German	Sea-Watch	Deck Hand	Marseille, France	In-Person	1:21:42
10	05-Mar-19	Belgian	Sea-Watch	Deck Hand; Bosun	Marseille, France	In-Person	1:38:29
11	05-Mar-19	German	Sea-Watch	Deck Hand	Marseille, France	In-Person	1:22:28
12	05-Mar-19	German	Sea-Watch	Deck Hand	Marseille, France	In-Person	0:42:04
13	05-Mar-19	UK	Sea-Watch	Bosun; RHIB Driver	Marseille, France	In-Person	0:57:37
14	14-Mar-19	UK	Sea-Watch	Chief Engineer	Marseille, France	In-Person	1:05:56
15	14-Mar-19	German	Sea-Watch	Cultural Mediator	Marseille, France	In-Person	1:20:26
16	15-Mar-19	German	Sea-Watch	2nd Engineer	Marseille, France	In-Person	0:41:40
17	16-Mar-19	German	Sea-Watch	Medic (Paramedic)	Marseille, France	In-Person	1:01:44

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18	17-Mar-19	German	Sea-Watch	RHIB Crew; Medic (Doctor)	Marseille, France	In-Person	0:45:37
19	18-Mar-19	UK	Sea-Watch	Captain	Marseille, France	In-Person	0:41:05
20	18-Mar-19	German	Sea-Watch	Medic (Doctor)	Marseille, France	In-Person	1:24:40
21	18-Mar-19	UK	Sea-Watch	Head of Mission; Bosun	Marseille, France	In-Person	1:34:26
22	24-Apr-19	Swiss	SOS	Media Coordinator	N/A	WhatsApp	0:53:24
23	24-Apr-19	German	Lifeline	Co-founder; Media Coordinator	N/A	WhatsApp	1:02:10
24	25-Apr-19	UK	Sea-Watch	RHIB Driver	N/A	WhatsApp	1:19:14
25	27-Apr-19	Italian	Lifeline; Sea-Watch	Cook	N/A	WhatsApp	0:44:50
26	27-Apr-19	UK	Lifeline; MOAS	Media Coordinator	Valletta, Malta	In-Person	3:13:27
27	01-May-19	German	Sea-Watch	Cook; RHIB Crew; Guest Coordinator	Marseille, France	In-Person	1:19:31
28	05-May-19	German	Sea-Watch	Bosun; Guest Coordinator; Machinist	Marseille, France	In-Person	0:52:44
29	08-May-19	Italian	Sea-Watch	Captain; 1st Officer	Marseille, France	In-Person	0:34:05
30	09-May-19	German	Sea-Watch; Mare Liberum; Lifeline	Head of Mission	Marseille, France	In-Person	0:57:42
31	22-May-19	Portuguese	Iuventa	RHIB Crew	N/A	Skype	1:30:11
32	28-May-19	German	Lifeline	Deck Hand	Valletta, Malta	In-Person	1:13:42
33	05-Jul-19	Maltese	Sea-Watch	Guest Coordinator	Tarixen, Malta	In-Person	1:35:51
34	19-Jul-19	German	Sea-Watch; Save the Children	Cultural Mediator	N/A	Skype	1:46:14
35	24-Jul-19	Austrian	Sea-Watch	AB	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:13:21
36	25-Jul-19	German	Sea Eye	Media Coordinator	N/A	Phone	2:09:30

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37	25-Jul-19	Italian	Sea-Watch; ProActiva; Sea Eye; Lifeline	Medic (Doctor)	Licata, Italy	In-Person	2:06:00
38	25-Jul-19	German	Sea-Watch	Medic (Doctor)	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:03:05
39	29-Jul-19	German	Sea-Watch	Field Media Coordinator	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:14:15
40	30-Jul-19	Dutch	Sea-Watch; MSF	Medic (Doctor)	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:02:54
41	30-Jul-19	Dutch	Sea-Watch	Cook	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:43:26
42	02-Aug-19	Italian	Sea-Watch; luventa; Mare Liberum	Medic (Nurse); Guest Coordinator; Cultural Mediator	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:26:12
43	04-Aug-19	German	Sea-Watch	Medic (Doctor)	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:14:22
44	11-Aug-19	Italian	Sea-Watch; luventa	Engineer	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:32:36
45	18-Aug-19	German	Sea-Watch	Head of Mission	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:03:09
46	19-Aug-19	Australian	Sea-Watch; MSF	Captain	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:36:30
47	20-Aug-19	Italian	Mediterranea	RHIB Driver	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:07:31
48	21-Aug-19	German	Sea-Watch; Lifeline	HOM Airborne	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:03:22
49	25-Aug-19	Irish	Sea-Watch	RHIB Driver	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:39:29
50	26-Aug-19	German	Sea-Watch	Medic (Paramedic); Head of Fundraising	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:22:32
51	27-Aug-19	German	Sea-Watch	2nd Engineer	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:42:22
52	02-Sep-19	French	Sea-Watch	Medic (Nurse); Logistics	Licata, Italy	In-Person	1:22:32
53	06-Sep-19	German	Sea Eye	Medic (Paramedic)	N/A	Skype	1:27:28
54	26-Sep-19	Austrian	Sea Eye	RHIB Crew	N/A	WhatsApp	1:37:48

## Appendix 2: The Civil Fleet

NGO	Asset	Length	Type	Country	Flag	Operational
Sea-Watch						
	Sea-Watch 1	21m	Fishing Cutter	Germany	Germany	2015-2016
	Sea-Watch 2	32m	Research	Germany	Germany	2016-2017
	Sea-Watch 3	50m	Offshore Supply	Germany	Germany	2017-Present
	Sea-Watch 4	61m	Research	Germany	Germany	2020-Present
	<u>Airplanes</u>					
	Colibri		Dyn'Aero MCR4S	Germany	N/A	2018-Present
	Moonbird		Cirrus SR22	Germany	N/A	2017-Present
	Seabird		Beechcraft Baron 58 type	Germany	N/A	2020-Present
Sea-Eye						
	Sea-Eye	26m	Fishing Trawler	Germany	Netherlands	2015-2018
	Seefuchs	26m	Fishing Trawler	Germany	Netherlands	2017-2018
	Alan Kurdi	38m	Research	Germany	Germany	2019-2020
	Sea-Eye 4	53m	Offshore Supply	Germany	Germany	2021-Present
MSF						
	Dignity I	50m	Offshore Supply	Spain	France	2015-2016
	Bourbon Argos	69m	Offshore Supply	Belgium	Luxembourg	2015-2016
	Prudence	77m	Offshore Supply	Belgium	Italy	2016-2017
	Aquarius	77m	Fishery Protection	Netherlands	Gibraltar	2016-2018
	Ocean Viking	69m	Cargo	Netherlands	Norway	2019-2020
	Geo Barents	77m	Research	Netherlands	Norway	2021-Present
ProActiva						
	Astral	30m	Sailing Yacht	Spain	Spain	2016-Present
	Golfo Azzuro	42m	Fishing Trawler	Spain	Panama	2016-2017
	Open Arms	37m	Tugboat	Spain	Spain	2018-Present
SOS Méditerranée						
	Aquarius	77m	Fishery Protection	France	Gibraltar	2016-2018
	Ocean Viking	69m	Cargo	France	Norway	2019-Present
Mission Lifeline						
	Lifeline	32m	Research	Germany	Netherlands	2017-2020
	Eleonore	20m	Fishing Trawler	Germany	Germany	2019
	Matteo S	15m	Sailing Yacht	Germany	Germany	2019
	Sebastian K	15m	Sailing Yacht	Germany	Germany	2019
	Rise Above	25m	Torpedo Recovery	Germany	Germany	2021-Present
Mediterranea						
	Mare Jonio	37m	Tugboat	Italy	Italy	2019-Present
	Alex	18m	Sailing Yacht	Italy	Italy	2019-Present
RESQSHIP						
	Josefa	14m	Sailing Yacht	Germany	Germany	2019
	Nadir	18m	Sailing Yacht	Germany	Germany	2021-Present
Louise Michel						
	Louise Michel	30m	Coast Guard	Germany	Germany	2020-Present
Maydayterraneo						
	Aita Mari	32m	Fishing Trawler	Spain	Spain	2019-Present
RESQ PEOPLE						
	RESQ PEOPLE	38m	Research	Italy	Italy	2021-Present
Proem-Aid						
	Life	26m	Fishing Trawler	Spain	Spain	2021-Present

NGO	Asset	Length	Not Presently Active		Country	Flag	Operational
				Type			
Save the Children	Vos Hestia	57m		Offshore Supply	UK	Italy	2016-2017
Boat Refugee Foundation	Golfo Azzuro	42m		Fishing Trawler	Spain	Panama	2016
MOAS	Phoenix	40m		Research	Malta	Marshall Is.	2014-2017
	Responder	51m		Emerg. Response	Malta	Marshall Is.	2015-2017
LifeBoat Project	Minden	23m		Lifeboat	Germany	Germany	2016-2017
Jugend Rettet	Iuventa	33m		Fishing Trawler	Germany	Netherlands	2016-2017

Appendix 3: Civil Fleet Search and Rescue Operations – 2014-2021

2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
	Phoenix (MOAS)						
	Sea-Watch 1 (Sea-Watch)						
	Dignity I (MSF)						
	Bourbon Argos (MSF)						
	Responder (MOAS)						
	Sea-Eye (Sea-Eye)						
		Golfo Azzuro (BRF)					
		Sea-Watch 2 (Sea-Watch)					
		Prudence (MSF)					
		Golfo Azzuro (ProActiva)					
		Vos Hestia (Save The Children)					
		Minden (Life Boat Project)					
		Iuventa (Jugend Rettet)					
		Aquarius (MSF/SOS)					
			Seefuchs (Sea-Eye)				
				Astral (ProActiva)			
				Lifeline (Lifeline)			
					Sea-Watch 3 (Sea-Watch)		
					Open Arms (ProActiva)		
					Eleonore (Lifeline)		
					Sebastian K (Lifeline)		
					Mattéo S (Lifeline)		
					Josefa (RESOSHIP)		
					Alan Kurdi (Sea-Eye)		
					Ocean Viking (MSF)		
					Ocean Viking (SOS)		
					Alex (Mediterranea)		
					Mare Jonio (Mediterranea)		
					Atta Mari (Atta Mari)		
					Louise Michel (Louise Michel)		
					Sea-Watch 4 (Sea-Watch)		
					Life (Proem-Ald)		
					Rise Above (Lifeline)		
					Nadir (RESOSHIP)		
					Geo Barrents (MSF)		