



Viewpoint

Egypt: Europe's other north African border

Paolo Cuttitta (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

April 2017

This year, there has not been any migrant boat arriving from Egypt so far. Is this an effect of the new Egyptian anti-smuggling law? In the meantime, migrants in the north African country experience arbitrary detentions for indefinite periods, deportations which violate international law and scarce or non-existent protection for those who supposedly have a right to it. Asylum is a taboo for the authorities in Cairo, and the UN agency for refugees does what it can (but also - according to accusations by several workers - a lot less than that), while the work of humanitarian organisations in this sector is limited by the Egyptian regime's repressive actions. In the meantime, the IOM, Italy and other EU countries renew their programmes to support Egyptian border guards, and the EU has agreed a five-fold increase in its budget for Egypt from the Africa Trust Fund.

Author's note: *In this article, the names of the people I spoke with, as well as those of many of the organisations they represent, have been left out. This is for reasons of security and privacy, and it was almost always done after an explicit request to do so by the interested parties.*

A quiet season

"I think there will be no more boats leaving Egypt. It doesn't depend on increased sea border patrols: they never patrolled the North Coast systematically, they are not going to do it now either. It's the Ministry of Interior that controls smuggling: they are directly involved! Now they have decided to stop it, so there will be no more departures".

The person speaking is a representative of one of the many non-governmental organisations that is working to provide assistance to migrants in Egypt. In the two months (February and March) that I spent in the north African country, between Cairo and Alexandria, I met around thirty people, representatives of international organisations and NGOs, European diplomats, representatives of the Egyptian government and other experts. Many of them were convinced that the Egyptian authorities are involved in the smuggling activities. *"Sometimes they arrest many people, other times they don't arrest anybody. They make agreements with money"*, a worker from another NGO told me. However, not everyone is convinced that the departures are destined to cease: it will depend on the government's actual political will, and it is yet to be ascertained whether it exists.

What is certain, is that there have not been any more departures after the ill-fated shipwreck off the port city of Rosetta on the past 21 September 2016, which resulted in hundreds of victims and

placed Egypt in the media spotlight and that of European political actors (Martin Schulz called for an EU-Egypt agreement inspired by the one with Turkey). Since then, no other boats have arrived in Italy from Egypt, and there have only been around ten arrests on the northern coast of the north African country: all of them were Syrians, stopped not at sea but on land, in Marsa Matrouh, on a single occasion (moreover, they are believed to have been heading for Libya to embark and attempt the crossing from there).

In 2016, the deteriorating living conditions in Libya pushed a growing number of people to attempt the longer crossing from Egypt, as long as they could avoid the violence and abuses they would have been subjected to in the neighbouring country. Apart from the hundreds of deaths and disappearances caused by shipwrecks (from the deadly disaster on 9 April to the one on 21 September), 12,000 of the people who embarked in Egypt last year had managed to reach Italy, whereas a similar number had been stopped by the Egyptian authorities just before or just after their departure. Of the latter group, the majority were Egyptians, while around 5,000 were foreign citizens, 1,500 of whom were arrested just in June. While all these figures represented records in comparison with previous years, in this year the counting for each of the categories has not shifted from zero. The interruption of departures may have simply been due to a winter break (the crossing from Egypt is much longer than that from Libya, and it is impossible to try one's luck in the winter). However, last year the first boat arrived when it was just February. Now, it is mid-April and we are still waiting.

Detentions, deportations and the new law against smuggling

This year the wait for the “season” to begin is felt more strongly as a result of the new law against migrant smuggling that was approved last November. It was praised by Naela Gabr, the former Egyptian ambassador to the UN, recently appointed director of the interministerial “committee on combating and preventing illegal migration and human trafficking” that was created in January of this year to unite the two previously existing committees: the one against illegal migration (established in 2014) and that against human trafficking (founded four years earlier). Gabr, who was formerly the director of the old committee against illegal migration, explained to me that:

“before the new law, smugglers could not be sanctioned at all, unless they were involved in other crimes (e.g. document falsification, murder etc.). Now, everything has changed”.

The law envisages some very high economic sanctions and a range of prison sentences up to life imprisonment for the people responsible for smuggling activities, but it aims to involve the population at large by introducing a duty to inform for anyone who becomes aware of smuggling-related activities: people who fail to report them risk spending at least six months in prison and a substantial fine. A fundamental role in pushing and shepherding the Egyptian authorities along the path towards the law's adoption was played by both the IOM (International Organization for Migrations) and UNODC (the UN office on drugs and crime). These two UN agencies first convinced the government of the desirability of adopting a law in this field, and they then offered assistance to draft its text.

Now, all that's left is for the enactment regulations to be approved. Then, if there will be any departures and hence arrests of smugglers or suspected smugglers, it will be possible to observe how the law will be applied in practice. Europe is already getting busy: in March the French agency *Expertise France* went to Egypt to study the Egyptian judicial system and evaluate its capability to enact the new provisions. The United Kingdom has financed an IOM-managed project with two million euros whose objectives include that of supporting implementation of the law against smuggling.

Gabr is very keen to stress that the law does not criminalise migrants, but just smugglers. The former are portrayed as victims of the latter and, as a result, they are not liable to incur in sentences or fines. Even in Egypt, increasingly often, in order to safeguard migration policies from

criticism about their restrictive, inequitable and violent character, what is stressed is their adherence to human rights standards and the goal of protecting migrants – not just from smugglers. “*We respect international human rights standards*”, Gabr continued. “*For example, we don’t return people if they don’t want to be returned*”.

The reality is very different, as all the people from non-governmental organisations I talked to observed, and it consists of countless and systematic detentions of migrants for indefinite periods which are only resolved once a detainee accepts to pay to buy themselves an aeroplane ticket or when they are removed by force. Some repatriations are enacted in cooperation with IOM (which, however, does not cooperate in repatriations towards countries that are not deemed safe, like Syria, Eritrea, Yemen, South Sudan and a large part of Somalia). The IOM’s *assisted voluntary return* (AVR) projects are supported with conviction by European countries, which are its main funders. The IOM representatives I spoke with assured me that:

“*we always check that the migrants have been effectively informed about the current situation in their countries of origin, and that they really have a will to return there*”.

However, they too are conscious that the difference between a voluntary and a forced repatriation is ephemeral, when the alternative is to stay and waste away for an indefinite period in an Egyptian jail.

However, the accounts I have collected talk of frequent repatriations and returns which go well beyond the so-called “voluntary” repatriations enacted with support from IOM (and from the European countries that finance the corresponding projects). Detention centres, in Egypt like in Europe, are the pillar carrying the burden of this system. They are divided into three different typologies. The first includes small-sized facilities in the police stations of several inhabited centres. Most people (including the many people who are arrested on the mainland before embarking) are detained in these places at first. The second category includes military camps, where the people (a minority) who are caught at sea by the Egyptian navy end up. Ordinary prisons represent the third and final category. It is where the people who do not swiftly accept the option of repatriation are transferred. There are not any formal agreements between the Egyptian authorities and the various organisations that offer their services to detainees (IOM, UNHCR – the United Nations agency for refugees, which also acts through its contractual partners, among which are *Caritas* and several local and international NGOs – and very few independent organisations). By and large, in police stations and military camps access is allowed to people providing food, basic necessities and medical and psychological assistance, but this happens on the basis of relationships of trust which the organisations build up over time with the individuals who are in charge of running the centres. In fact, it is these actors who decide everything: “*In detention centres, the law is made by the directors*”, I was told by a humanitarian organisation. And various agencies, including UNHCR itself, have often been denied access in more than one centre. “*Sometimes we succeed in having people registered with UNHCR while they are in detention, but in many cases we don’t even know who is detained*”, claimed a lawyer from an association that provides legal assistance. After all, even when the identity of those who are detained is known, it is often impossible to do anything to get them released: this was the case of an Eritrean woman, who had never registered with UNHCR and was detained for nineteen months in the north of Egypt with her two children, five and six years old, and who was only allowed to leave the detention centre when she accepted to take an aeroplane to Ethiopia less than two months ago; this is also true for several unaccompanied minors. While this is the situation in police stations and military camps, that in ordinary prisons – the third category of detention centres for foreigners – is even more alarming. Nobody gets in there. Even when a few detainees give in and accept IOM-assisted returns, the preliminary meetings with the organisation’s representatives take place in neutral facilities outside of the prison. “*Hundreds of potential refugees are held in prisons and deported*”, is how the local representative of an international religious organisation summed the situation up. Moreover, in the backdrop to this general picture there are some local peculiarities. For example, the entire Upper Egypt region, towards the border with Sudan, “*is a black hole: the arrests carried out there are not even included in the official statistics*”, an NGO worker claimed. What is certain, is

that none of the centres there are accessible: “*that is a veritable no-go area*”, a UNHCR worker confirmed.

Regardless of where people are detained, in any case, many repatriations take place in blatant breach of the *non-refoulement* principle, as happened to three Syrians sent back to Damascus last January or to Ethiopian citizens of the Oromo ethnic group, who are systematically persecuted in their country. Moreover, various people from different nationalities are pushed back into neighbouring Sudan, a transit country on the route to Egypt, not just for a large part of African migrants but also for Syrians, since the moment when Egypt and the other countries in the region alike, - except for Sudan – imposed a visa requirement on them. “*When Syrians are deported to Sudan, the government doesn’t give any formal reasons for this*”, I was told at the UNHCR offices.

Asylum in Egypt: the role played by UNHCR

After all, asylum is not an issue which the Egyptian authorities enjoy discussing. The tone of the director of the inter-ministerial committee on combating and preventing illegal migration and human trafficking was relaxed while I left her to praise the progress made by Egypt in activities to fight irregular migrations (which are – she explained – “*simply an organised crime problem*”). Yet, in no time at all, her glance became more sombre and her voice hardened as soon as I asked her why Egypt does not just not have an asylum law yet, but it is not even working with a view to introducing one. “*We don’t need an asylum law!*”, she answered in a temper, “*we already ratified the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol!*”. However, Egypt has introduced some reservations to the Convention which do not guarantee access to essential public services such as education and the health system and which allow discrimination in the employment market. Without an asylum law (and hence of services and facilities made available by the state), responsibility for anything that concerns asylum seekers is borne by UNHCR.

Nonetheless, the agency for refugees has to deal with numerous and very serious limits which are partly caused by the scant available resources and in part by the Egyptian state authorities. In the first place, people wishing to apply for asylum do not immediately receive a residence permit: the first document that they are issued simply certifies that they have requested an appointment with UNHCR, but it is not recognised in any way by the Egyptian authorities. From that moment on, between one and four months pass (two months on average) before they are received by the UN agency (and hence officially registered as asylum seekers), and during this time of uncertainty they are left entirely at the mercy of the governmental authorities’ arbitrary actions. “*By doing so*”, a worker from an international NGO complained:

“UNHCR is creating a protection gap. They do this because they were pressured by the Egyptian government”.

UNHCR sources admitted that “*The authorities are afraid that we could become a pull factor, attracting more people*”, but they mainly blamed the gaps in protection on the scarce resources which are available. Although its staffing levels have constantly grown over the last few years, UNHCR struggles to manage a population of refugees and asylum seekers which the Syrian crisis has increased in the past years, and which an increase in arrivals from the Horn of Africa and other sub-Saharan countries maintain high even after the evident decrease in arrivals from Syria. If we add 34,000 Sudanese nationals, 12,000 Ethiopians, 8,000 Iraqis, 7,000 Eritreans and 18,000 citizens from 61 other countries to the 118,000 Syrians who are present, we reach a total of 197,000 people who were under UNHCR protection in Egypt during the past month of January (the figures do not include Palestinians, which UNHCR is not allowed to deal with). As a result, even the waiting times for the interviews that will determine the decision on asylum applications amount, overall, to around two years from the moment when they registered as asylum seekers, and UNHCR does not envisage that they may be shortened before 2019. In cases where refugee status is granted a blue-coloured document is issued: the *blue card*, which is valid for three years and may be renewed.

A further, serious, limitation of asylum applicants' rights consists in the fact that people who do not possess a passport or another identity document when they register with UNHCR receive discriminatory treatment. While people who can prove their identity receive a yellow-coloured temporary document (the *yellow card*, which is valid for a year and may be renewed), the others receive a white one (the *white card*, valid for six months and renewable as well) that does not protect them from arrest and deportation. While it is true that Egyptian authorities, when they wish to do so, do not have any scruples about arresting and deporting people who possess a *yellow card* as well, the insecurity of the conditions experienced by *white card* holders is far greater.

The person from UNHCR who I spoke with about this was unable to cite any other country in the world where the people who do not possess documents are subjected to this kind of discrimination by the body which is tasked with protecting them, and admitted it was an unusual way of proceeding:

"We don't normally expect people to have documents, generally, but here in Egypt we have people who come for reasons other than asylum, and sometimes they have documents but conceal them, so we try to regularize asylum in Egypt".

This means that UNHCR makes the arguments normally used by state authorities (that of security, that of false asylum seekers) its own and ends up reducing the number of beneficiaries and, at least in part, it abdicates from its mandate. Another measure adopted for the purpose of "*making asylum more regular*", is that of scanning the irises of all those who register with UNHCR. "*So we are sure we are advocating for the right people, and we can check that they don't sell their yellow or blue cards!*", they told me at UNHCR. A very unique circumstance is represented by the fact that when UNHCR has permission to go to register asylum seekers in the detention centres, the UN agency also scans the irises of the other foreign detainees: this activity makes UNHCR resemble an agency for the control of people's mobility, prior to its role for the protection of refugees.

Contradictions and hierarchies

The problem is that UNHCR, in Egypt like and even more than elsewhere, is trapped by the intersecting contradictions between its mandate (the protection of refugees), the objectives of the European destination countries which are among UNHCR's main contributors (to block migrants and refugees in north African countries and stop them attempting the Mediterranean crossing; establishing reliable national asylum systems in those countries so that third country nationals who have travelled through them may be returned there in the future), and the objectives of the Egyptian state authorities (reducing the number of migrants and refugees in Egyptian territory to a minimum, deporting the largest possible number of them without setting up a reliable national asylum system, both in order to avoid attracting refugees from countries in crisis and to avoid being sent back those who do manage to reach Europe). The outcome of these tensions is an attitude which appears to be excessively prudent, in the view of several other operators. "*Just like IOM, UNHCR is a sub-governmental agency, their mentality is that of diplomats*", the representative of an Egyptian NGO noted. Members of another NGO claimed that: "*The people from UNHCR avoid complaining about the violations they witness, they prefer to close their eyes even when the people subjected to them are the weakest, as in the case of unaccompanied minors who are detained. They are too afraid of the Egyptian authorities*". When, in February of this year, a Somali man who was a *white card* holder died from a disease in a detention centre, the comment from a representative of another association was: "*UNHCR knew about it but didn't do anything*". From UNHCR, they assured that they always do their best to free and assist people, not just those who have a white card, but also the others, who are often potential asylum seekers as well. Nonetheless, they admit that whereas *yellow card* holders are usually released, sooner or later, for the others "*it's difficult, and we are very cautious*".

Another criticism which is levelled against UNHCR from various quarters concerns the considerable shortening of the times for individual interviews to determine the status of asylum seekers. *“UNHCR interviews used to last three to four hours, sometimes even six hours (over two days) until 2015. Now their duration has been reduced to 1.5 hours”*, a specialist lawyer told me. From an NGO, they specified that:

“Not only is the duration of interviews less than half of what it used to be, but they make no preliminary preparation to the interview, they don’t explain anymore how the interview will work, which was meant to help the asylum seekers present their situation”.

And they voice another charge against UNHCR: *“Up until 2015, the recognition rate for Oromo Ethiopians (who suffer persecution in Ethiopia) was over 60%, then it dropped to 10-20%, because UNHCR does not want to antagonise the Egyptian authorities”*. Moreover, the waiting times for interviews in the case of Oromos are allegedly longer than average. The very friendly person who I met in UNHCR’s Cairo office managed to keep her composure when I asked her, in general, about the duration of interviews, which she claimed *“changes from case to case depending on the individual situation”*, but her breathing suddenly became laboured as soon as I mentioned the word “Oromo”. When I went so far as to ask her for statistics on the recognition rate of their asylum claims, the answer was blunt: *“no specific information is available”*. The Oromo community has even organised demonstrations in front of UNHCR’s Cairo offices to protest against the way in which their asylum applications are managed. One demonstrator even set himself alight last summer, dragging a friend who was trying to rescue him to death with him. Nothing appears to have changed since then.

Some of the NGOs which spoke to me of UNHCR in a critical way are independent organisations, while others are themselves part of the reception system that is controlled by the UN agency. The number of organisations that participate to an extent in the provision of services to refugees has considerably increased over the last few years, following the Syrian crisis. Most of them offer their services, entirely or in part, on behalf of UNHCR, within the context of contracts agreed on an annual basis. *“UNHCR is the most powerful player, because it’s distributing money”*, I was told by the spokesman of an organisation which has never received any money from the refugee agency.

UNHCR organises meetings every month, divided into thematic working groups, between the different agencies providing assistance. The participants are not just the international organisations involved (IOM, UNHCR and possibly other UN agencies like, for example, UNICEF) and UNHCR’s numerous contracted partners, but also all the other NGOs operating in this sector and which, despite not having any contractual relations with UNHCR, are its *de facto* informal partners. The meetings are useful occasions to avoid overlaps and duplication of activities by different actors, to share views about the methodologies to be employed, to exchange information and impressions, to discuss problems and seek shared solutions for the most difficult cases. Concerning certain problems and specific situations, however, it is best to keep a low profile. UNHCR issues the invitations, and there are people and groups which have been struck off the list of invitations due to the excessive insistence with which they stressed the need to safeguard the rights of migrants.

Therefore NGOs depend on UNHCR, especially its contractual partners, and they are careful not to antagonise it, because the UN agency for refugees may decide not to renew their contracts. At the same time, the organisations must take care to avoid appearing suspect to the Egyptian authorities, because the list of UNHCR partners must be approved every year by the government, which subjects the various agencies involved to security checks by the intelligence services. Thus, a relationship is created between UNHCR and the NGOs which is similar to that which exists between UNHCR and the Egyptian authorities: this considerable dependence strongly limits freedom of action and of criticism. This sense of subordination towards UNHCR is such, that on more than one occasion the representatives of the NGOs which I asked for an interview told me, at first, that:

“We are not allowed to be interviewed because we are an implementing partner of UNHCR. You should talk directly to them”, before accepting to talk after being promised anonymity (“but, please, don’t even mention the name of the association!”).

After all, NGOs which are not contracted by UNHCR have to submit to the Egyptian authorities’ censorship as well. Freedom of association in Egypt had never been smothered before, in the way it is at present. A new law approved last autumn imposed some further restrictions in addition to those which already existed, and there are new ones coming. An extremely large number of associations have been compelled to close since Al Sisi took power in 2013. The last one, in February, was *Nadeem*, which was running a centre for the rehabilitation of victims of violence and torture, and also worked with migrants. The most frequent allegations are of undertaking different activities from those for which their authorisation was granted and having received funding from abroad. Foreign funding is only admitted if funds have been supplied through the accredited foreign diplomatic seats in Egypt, but in this case it is necessary to ask the Egyptian authorities for an authorisation, and then to wait for as much as longer than a year for an answer which may end up being negative anyways. Registering new associations is difficult as well: the procedure, again, may last longer than a year, and if its outcome is negative the authorities do not even give you the reasons for the refusal. The double form of conditioning which many NGOs suffer – fear of acts of censorship by the Egyptian authorities and that of losing financing supplied by UNHCR – may also have a negative effect on the beneficiaries of the services they provide. Some of UNHCR’s executive partners, for instance, *“talk to people in detention centres and tell them: why don’t you go back home? They use exactly this phrase...”*, as an eyewitness of what happens in the detention centres told me.

EU, member state and IOM cooperation with Egypt (but don’t mention human rights!)

Trying to keep the refugees in Egypt rather than letting them advance towards Europe is, instead, the declared objective of several employment projects which UNHCR subcontracts to its partners. Such initiatives attempt to provide professional training to refugees and facilitate their entry into the labour market (also through microcredit programmes), but they clash with the great difficulties encountered by refugees to obtain a work permit, including its excessive cost and the obligation for the Egyptian employer to demonstrate that there is not any Egyptian citizen who could be employed instead of the refugee.

Other factors contribute to making the insertion of refugees into society harder and to make the idea of staying in Egypt unattractive for them. One of these is the impossibility of having access to the public health system, which makes them dependent on the assistance provided by humanitarian organisations. Another one is the difficulty of attending schools. The government, by way of decrees, allows enrolment also for people who have registered with UNHCR, but the growing number of aggressions and expressions of racism by schoolmates and teachers leads to a very high drop-out rate, especially among Syrians, who – moreover - are used to a school system whose quality is superior. The efforts by some NGOs to offer alternative free training and educational paths do not manage to satisfy requirements entirely, which leaves many children excluded from any kind of education.

Finally, the refugees are not offered any kind of accommodation. The Egyptian government continues to reject the idea of camps, as the foreign secretary was able to reiterate once again in March during a visit to Brussels, but the conditions for alternative solutions still do not exist. With the available funds, UNHCR manages to offer (minimal) economic contributions only to the most needy, grading them and sorting them on the basis of the conditions in which the different family units live.

Some of the activities to assist refugees are financed by the development aid programmes managed by the foreign ministries of various European countries. The interior ministries of those same countries, instead, have been busy for years in supporting the authorities in Cairo’s efforts to

control the Egyptian borders. Leading the way in this field is Italy, which has a decades-old experience. Already in 2000, Italy and Egypt signed an agreement for police cooperation and, in 2002, a liaison officer for cooperation with the Egyptian authorities was deployed for the first time to the Italian embassy in Cairo. At that time, ships that had set off from the Indian Ocean carrying migrants (coming primarily from Sri Lanka) who were heading for Italy were transiting through the Suez Canal. Italy managed to impose checks in the Suez Canal that enabled the definitive closure of that route already in 2004, also thanks to charter flights offered by the Italian interior ministry to enact the forced returns of intercepted people directly from Egypt. From that moment on, the different Italian governments have offered training activities for the benefit of the Egyptian authorities tasked with border controls on a regular basis. In 2007 the signing of a readmission agreement was achieved which, from that moment on, enabled continued return activities using a simplified procedure for Egyptian citizens stopped in the moment when they disembark irregularly in Italy. In that same year, Italy donated the first patrol vessel (Squalo P50 model) to the Egyptian authorities. From then until 2010, other donations were to ensue: instruments to identify false documentation and to obtain fingerprints (within the framework of a project to develop AFIS, the *Automatic Fingerprint Identification System*, in Egypt), off-road vehicles and other equipment, and finally another two 500 class patrol boats. “*After the 2011 revolution*”, according to sources at the Italian interior ministry:

“we have been more cautious, as we did not know our counterparts well and did not know how things would have developed. This is why we stopped donating vehicles and equipment. But overall, police cooperation between Italy and Egypt in the field of immigration has always grown, regardless of external factors, even in these last years”.

Even the [Giulio] Regeni incident did not have a negative influence. The diplomatic crisis between the Italian and Egyptian governments caused by the murder of the young researcher led to the recalling of the Italian ambassador, a year ago. The seat in Cairo remains vacant, but the absence of an ambassador is the only tangible difference with the past. The Italian programme to provide assistance to the Egyptian authorities in the field of border controls is more alive than ever. In 2016, while ten representatives of the Egyptian committee against illegal migration and human trafficking were travelling in Italy to study the best practices for the protection of vulnerable subjects, the training activities offered by the Italian interior ministry continued on other fronts as well, just like joint investigative activities aiming to oppose the smugglers continued, starting from information exchanges concerning the owners of telephone lines involved in investigations.

These investigations also concern activities that are well beyond the mere facilitation of irregular migration. In Egypt, such activities can take on some particularly brutal characteristics. While some migrants are kidnapped and only released once a ransom is paid by their families, others are killed after having their organs removed, which are sold on the international black market. In April 2016, there was a sensation about the case of nine corpses of Somali citizens that were found on a beach in Alexandria. Vital organs had been removed from all their bodies, as can also be understood from the enormous scars which can be seen in the bloodcurdling images which can be viewed online.

Italy is not the only European country which has developed a line of cooperation with the Egyptian police authorities insofar as the control of borders and migration movements are concerned. In July 2016, Germany struck a police cooperation agreement with the Al Sisi government whose ratification is underway in the parliament in Berlin. The agreement is in the fields of terrorism and organised crime, and migrant smuggling is entirely treated as part of the latter category, which was also the object of specific discussions during the German chancellor Angela Merkel’s visit to Cairo last March. Moreover, a liaison officer from the *Bundeskriminalamt* had already taken up an office in Cairo in April of last year. Since then the German police has organised numerous training courses in both Egypt and Germany for the Egyptian authorities in fields which included, among others, border control, airport security and document recognition. Also the United Kingdom, Spain and France have commenced or are preparing to commence training activities for the benefit of the

Egyptian authorities in similar sectors. Finally, there are other countries which have only begun to interact with the Egyptian police authorities in the last few years following the crisis in 2015, and although their cooperation which is still informal does not go beyond that of information exchanges on smuggling, the intention is to further develop (and possibly formalise) these relationships in the field of irregular migrations.

In turn, Egypt – a country which is at the cutting edge compared with others in the region – offers training courses in its own police academy for the authorities of neighbouring countries, also thanks to the economic contribution by international organisations. A project which was developed by Italy within the framework of the Khartoum Process and which has not been realised yet, envisaged the financing by the EU of training activities for the authorities of the countries in the Horn of Africa to be held at the Egyptian police academy.

The goal of strengthening the Egyptian authorities' competencies is also pursued by the IOM. First of all, IOM supports the Egyptian government in developing a national strategy and a plan of action against illegal migration and human trafficking. Furthermore, the UN agency offers training activities for border guards deployed for checks at the official entry points, for which the interior ministry is responsible (instead, the armed forces are tasked with tracking and catching migrants who attempt to cross the borders avoiding the official entry points). More generally, the IOM tries to push the Egyptian government towards adopting the concept of *integrated border management* as its own. Finally, the organisation has opened a dialogue with the Egyptian government to improve the search and rescue capabilities of its coast guard. *"In the past, there was a discussion and there was an opening. We would like to do it"*, they assured me at the IOM, *"and we are waiting for the situation to unblock"*. In the meantime, the Egyptian defence ministry – under whose authority the coast guard operates – has made contact with the Italian armed forces' representatives to ask, as they told me at the Italian embassy, for:

"an in-depth analysis on the organisation of our coast guard in the area of best practices: an exchange of updates on the respective modes of organisational, professional training and field training".

However, the issue of search and rescue continues to be a taboo, especially insofar as what happens to the people who die at sea is concerned. In particular, while those who are identified as Egyptian are returned to their families, it is unclear how the bodies of foreigners who are not immediately identifiable are managed. The representative of a small local organisation, when I asked him about this point, involuntarily showed a degree of embarrassment and asked me if I did not have any other questions to ask him. None of the other people I talked with – not even the main international organisations like UNHCR, IOM and ICRC (the International Committee of the Red Cross) – were able to tell me with any certainty who is responsible for the identification and burial of people who have died at sea, and according to which criteria and modalities. From time to time, according to the partial (and sometimes contradictory) testimonies that I have managed to collect, the government authorities have called upon one or another of the international organisations and a few local NGOs to cooperate, but there certainly is not any coordinating body, nor any official protocols that must be followed.

Moreover, it is possible that search and rescue activities may fall within future European cooperation projects with the Egyptian authorities: what is being attempted by the EU with Serraj's Libya (training for the navy and the coast guard also for the sake of search and rescue aimed at intercepting migrants before they leave the territorial waters of the north African country) may be repeated with Al Sisi's Egypt if Euro-Egyptian relations improve. What is certain is that there are two current objectives: the opening of formal relations with Frontex (the European agency for border and coast guard activities) and the deployment to Cairo of an EU liaison officer. The prospects envisaged by the diplomatic representations of various European countries are divergent. One member state's liaison officer stated that:

"I don't think that an Egypt-Frontex agreement may be imminent, and the deployment of an EU liaison officer appears unlikely. Egypt is too skeptical regarding the European Union and prefers to maintain bilateral relations with individual countries, which guarantee a greater possibility of manoeuvre and negotiation".

One of his colleagues seconded to another embassy views such a development as possible: *"Frontex's visit here to Cairo last autumn was a novelty, it had never happened before. I do not rule out that it may lead to a cooperation between Frontex and the Egyptian authorities, although the relations between Egypt and the EU, which are not ideal, will need to be improved before that".* Instead, a third liaison officer from an EU country is certain that:

"Frontex will establish formal relations with Egypt sooner or later, and the EU will be successful in sending a EU liaison officer, in the end, because the EU needs Egypt and Egypt needs the EU".

One of the ways in which the EU is trying to convince Egypt that it *"needs Europe"* is the investment of financial resources for development projects, particularly through the trust fund which was launched at the La Valletta summit in November 2015. The fund had earmarked 11.5 million euros for Egypt and four countries (Italy, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands) had expressed an interest in undertaking projects in the north African country. Germany and Italy were meant to have engaged in professional training activities and the development of infrastructures in the areas which are more at risk of migration, whereas Spain and the Netherlands were meant to strengthen the Egyptian authorities' capabilities. The projects were meant to have started in January 2017 but then, according to the cooperation office of the embassy of an EU country *"Egypt pulled the brake, both because the budget was deemed insufficient and because it has a scant interest in cooperating in any case"*. Hence, in the past January, the EU sent a technical mission to Egypt to review the terms of the agreement. In February, at the time of a second mission, the amount of European funding for Egypt was increased more than five-fold, reaching a total of 60 million euros. However, the question concerning the content of the projects remains open. The negotiating process is long and complex. An operative meeting of the trust fund has been scheduled for May in Brussels. At that time, there should be a discussion on the new programmatic document for Egypt, including the budget increase, but – as I was told at another embassy:

"the problem is about the activities: the specific activities still have to be negotiated. And if you mention 'human rights' to the Egyptian authorities they immediately close the door".

If the agreement will be reached, these activities will start in January 2018 and end in December 2020.

In the meantime, everything is quiet on the Mediterranean coast: is someone awaiting the outcome of the negotiations with the EU?

[Translated by Statewatch]

This article was first published in Italian in the Associazione Diritti e Frontiere website at: <http://www.a-dif.org/2017/04/18/egitto-laltra-frontiera-nordaficana-delleuropa/> "

Statewatch does not have a corporate view, nor does it seek to create one, the views expressed are those of the author. Statewatch is not responsible for the content of external websites and inclusion of a link does not constitute an endorsement.