The Reconfiguration of Mediterranean migratory Routes since the war in Syria. A focus on the “Egyptian route” to Italy

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1 Since March 2011, the civil war in Syria caused the departure of among 3.2 million people, and the presence of over 7 million Internally Displaced Persons in the country. Egypt is the fifth receptor country in the MENA region, after Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq, hosting more than 138,000 Syrian refugees.1

2 This situation has contributed to re-drawing the escape and movement paths through these countries and across the Mediterranean Sea, which has been configured as a fundamental corridor to reach Europe, crossed by several migratory routes. The Fortress Europe, as underlined by Castles,2 is today “virtually impossible” to reach, due to the process of strengthening borders, implemented since the 1990s through the conception and use of multiple normative instruments, such as bilateral agreements with neighbouring southern-shore Mediterranean countries, and technical tools, such as the creation of the Frontex Agency, or the edification of border fences to impede movements.  

3 One of the fundamental results of this process has been the transformation of a huge number of asylum seekers into “irregular migrants”, who are forced to entrust smugglers and risk their life at sea.4 The Mediterranean Sea, which for centuries has been a “key space” and a “point of connection” between countries and cultures, characterized by movements of people in continuous evolution, has been currently identified as the most dangerous border in the world, where since 2000 more than 23,000 people have lost their lives, of which more than 3,300 only in 2014.5

3 Three fundamental routes, whose opening and closure dynamics are strictly interconnected, compose the central Mediterranean migratory axis: the Tunisian route, which is almost closed, the prevalent Libyan one, still active, and the Egyptian route to Italy. The latter is the longest and most dangerous route because, besides the 1,500 km
that it crosses, it includes 2 or 3 transhipments in high sea and these characteristics have primarily determined this argument’s choice. Another interesting aspect is the re-opening process of this route, which after the Syrian crisis has been travelled by more than 9,000 people in 2013 and more than 4,000 in only 2 months of 2014, determining a growing trend. Moreover, I have found it useful to focus on this route in order to bring some insights on current EU politics aimed at externalizing the asylum issue. An interesting case study to analyse, on the one hand, is the border patrol’s mechanisms and the dissuasive praxis of “irregular” migration by sea and, on the other hand, the rescue and reception practices implemented by Italy.

Thus, starting with an historical analysis of the route during the decade 2004-2014, I have attempted to individuate some environmental characteristics, which could have determined its re-opening process: primarily the large presence of Syrians and Palestinians from Syria in Egypt, and the sudden worsening of their life conditions after Al-Sisi’s coup and election; secondly the process of reconfiguration of the main Egyptian borders, such as the Libyan and Palestinian ones, but also the “Alexandria airport”, which have already caused some fluctuations in route dynamics in 2004, 2007 and 2009. In fact, it seems that the Egyptian route has been most travelled in conjunction with the crackdowns on border controls realized by Libyan governments, as a repercussion of bilateral agreements with Italy.

Moreover, coherently with Sassen’s conceptualization of migrations as “patterned” phenomena, which need to be defined and understood in a specific context determined by space and time, I have explored the two routes’ extremities, namely Egypt and Italy, by focusing on their socio-political contexts and on their multiple configurations as departure, destination and transit spaces. On the one hand Egypt, whose path toward democracy is being strongly challenged by the consequences of the military coup; on the other hand Italy, which is characterized by “diminishing welfare”, which inevitably has repercussions on refugees’ rights, a “permanent state of emergency” concerning migration issues and a very problematic hosting system for migrants.

One of the main useful characteristics of contemporary Egypt, in order to interpret its changes, seems to be the multi-dimensionality of its migratory context, which is determined by the presence of incoming, transit (in particular asylum seekers), as well as outgoing movements of people. Moreover, some socio-political features of Egypt have been taken into account, such as some restrictions concerning society’s essential freedoms, which led to the detention of some lawyers and journalists, and the growing power of the Government to control NGO’s actions.

The migratory pressure of Syrians, accentuated by Palestinians, also caused the reopening of a channel to Italy for unaccompanied minors. Egyptian unaccompanied minors’ migration has not been analysed enough by scholars, although it is quite an old phenomenon, which increased after the bilateral agreements between Italy and Egypt, when the condition of unexpellibility of minors according to International Law was implemented while at the same time the expulsion of Egyptian adults grew. Starting with the “driven nature” of unaccompanied minors’ migration, where the family has a fundamental role, I have focused also on the “central role” of minors themselves in the departure’s decision process, which could sometimes constitute a form of empowerment and re-definition of their identity in an autonomous way, and also an instrument for seeking new life opportunities, which can also be interpreted as an emancipation from the family.
One of the fundamental answers given by the Italian Government to the seaborne migration phenomenon has been the Mission *Mare Nostrum*: it has been operating for one year, starting at the end of October 2013, as a “humanitarian-military” mission, which goes to rescue migrants as far as 90 miles from the Italian coasts. One of its innovative characteristics has been “massive disembarking” and the operation of more than one rescue by every ship: it has probably generated a kind of domino effect on the Italian reception system, which was already affected by the consequences of the well-known “North Africa Emergency” (2011-2013). It has permitted the standardization of an extraordinary praxis and the naturalization of a “state of exception” concerning the reception and hosting system that in some cases was in open contradiction with both Italian and International Law. One indicator of this “detachment” has been the succession of ECHR’s decisions, concerning the suspension of some Dublin II & III regulation transfers to Italy: they were strongly questioning the Italian configuration as a “safe country”, and were denouncing the “systemic inadequacy” of the Italian reception and hosting system for asylum seekers.

At the moment, the old right to asylum seems to be uncomfortable, inconvenient and high-priced, because it threatens some basic characteristics of Western countries: first, the harsh limitation imposed on freedom of circulation; second, the strong connection between welfare services and citizenship; and third, the “diminishing welfare process”, due to the economic crisis. Especially in Southern European countries, the externalization of the process of asylum that aims at keeping asylum seekers far from the places where they could find protection is flanked by the progressive “emptying” of the content of asylum, and the asylum seekers’ “second escape” toward Northern countries could be interpreted as a struggle to fill it up. On the other hand, even the escape of unaccompanied minors could be interpreted as a struggle to re-conquer the autonomy, which they gained at their departure and was deeply called into question by the extraordinary hosting system.

Perhaps the main connection that can be made between asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors is precisely the “inconvenient” nature of their movements, which are strongly challenging the contemporary logic of border controls, clashing against both “asylum right” and “child protection right”, and revealing itself in all its ambiguity.

NOTES

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