

Autonomous Migrant Mobilisations in Libya and (Counter-)Externalisation: Transnational Spatial Configurations of Solidarity

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Abstract

The restrictive, violent evolution of the Libyan migration and border regime has been strongly determined by the externalisation efforts of European policymakers. Yet self-organised initiatives of migrants in Libya, and the more-than-local solidarity spaces they establish, generate counter-externalisation dynamics aimed at transforming such a regime and steering it in the opposite direction. To shed light on these dynamics, the paper provides an overview of self-organised forms of protest and mobilisation of people on the move in Libya in the last two decades. While these migrant initiatives result from endogenous forms of solidarity, they also inspire and trigger different forms of exogenous, pro-migrant solidarity from different categories of actors across places. Thus, solidarity follows multiple directions and creates specific solidarity spaces at different scales. Spatialities and directionalities produced by the interplay between solidarity and more-than-local migrant or pro-migrant mobilisations can be conceptualised as acts of counter-externalisation, reacting to the externalised regime of migration containment that has been established in Libya since the early 2000s. The paper first introduces the Libyan migration regime from the perspective of European border externalisation. Then, it reconstructs the history of migrant mobilisations in Libya from the Gaddafi period to the present day, including more recent developments such as the establishment of the movement “Refugees in Libya” and its international support network “Alliance with Refugees in Libya.” The concluding section analyses the spatial configurations of solidarity emerging from migrant mobilisations in Libya against the background of European border externalisation.

Keywords

Libya, migration, mobilisations, solidarity, externalisation

Introduction

This paper provides an overview of self-organised forms of protest and mobilisation of people on the move in Libya in the last two decades. While these initiatives result from endogenous forms of solidarity (emerging from within a given group of migrants in a given place), they also inspire and trigger different forms of exogenous, pro-migrant solidarity from different categories of actors in Libya and beyond. Thus, solidarity follows multiple directions – it can be circular, in the case of mutual solidarity among migrants in specific spatial settings, or directed to Libya from different places across the continents – and creates specific solidarity spaces at different scales.

The paper has two main aims. The first is to re-centre the agency of migrants in solidarity studies by showing that people on the move can mobilise even in contexts as difficult as the Libyan one, and that exogenous solidarity towards migrants is itself a result of migrant mobilisation, and thus of endogenous migrant solidarity. By endogenous solidarity I mean solidarity emerging between people sharing the same condition in a given place, e.g., a group of irregularised migrants who are held in the same detention centre or live in the same neighbourhood, town or country. Exogenous solidarity is directed towards people with whom the solidarity actor(s) do not share the same condition (including the spatial aspect of being in the same place).

The second aim of this paper is to intervene in externalisation studies by engaging with the concept of counter-externalisation. In migration and border studies, externalisation is “the process through which states directly or indirectly operate activities related to border control outside their sovereign territories, namely in other countries or on the high seas” (Cobarrubias et al. 2023, 1). States operate directly, for example, when patrolling the high seas to spot migrants’ vessels before they reach the border of their national waters. States operate indirectly when they ask other countries’ governments to step up migration management and border control within the latter’s territories or when they engage civil society actors to carry out migration-related activities in other countries’ territories, e.g. through development schemes. Elsewhere (Cuttitta 2022, 3) I have defined counter-externalisation as “an equal and opposite reaction to externalisation [...] that resorts to the same specificities of the spatial context of which externalisation policies take advantage.” ‘Equal’ here does not refer to the power relationship, which is clearly unbalanced, but to the operational mimicry. For example, Mann and Mourão Permoser (2022, 444), referring to search and rescue at sea, argue that non-governmental organisations (NGOs), by utilising “legal gray zones to the benefit of migrants, [...] effectively turn extraterritorial zones from spaces of lawlessness into spaces of resistance,” and that this “amounts to a strategy of counter-externalization” insofar as “states have moved enforcement activities to extraterritorial zones,” precisely because “human rights law ostensibly does not apply” there.

This paper shows that migrant mobilisations in Libya may generate “equal and opposite” reactions to externalisation. More broadly, counter-externalisation is here understood also in the terms used in migration research to define “counter-cartographies”

(Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias 2018) and “counter-mapping” (Tazzioli 2015): migrants’ initiatives and struggles are taken as an analytical standpoint to illuminate “the spatial reshaping they engender” (Tazzioli 2015, 3). A further useful reference is the concept of “countervisuality” (Bayramoğlu 2022). By autonomously circulating videos and photos through digital media, migrants “challenge the state’s visuality regime” (Osso and van Houtum 2024, 9), generating “counter-narratives” (Creta 2023) and making their struggles visible. Indeed, this paper shows that countervisuality can be instrumental in processes of counter-externalisation.

Transnational Solidarity Spaces and the Agency of People on the Move

Literature on migrant protests and mobilisations, which, to a large extent, analyses these initiatives through the lens of citizenship (Ataç et al. 2016; Tyler and Marciniak 2013), has mostly focused on wealthy destination countries of the Global North (Swerts and Nicholls 2021) but is also paying increasing attention to so-called transit countries (Creta 2021). Similarly, a growing body of work has analysed exogenous forms of solidarity towards migrants, focusing on Europe (Cuttitta et al. 2023; Della Porta 2018; Feischmidt et al. 2019) and North America (Johnson 2015), as well as their immediate neighbourhoods. Notably, increasing attention is also being paid to the transnational and transborder dimension of migrant activism and migration-related solidarity initiatives (Ashutosh 2013; Ataç et al. 2024, 733-736; Stierl 2019), which often straddle “the frontier of physical and virtual space” (Feixa et al. 2009, 246), following the global trend of contemporary social movements. Indeed, not only are “protests staged in one physical place [...] transmitted across borders so that even smaller scale protests [...] have the potential to resonate internationally” (Tyler and Marciniak 2013, 144), but they can also turn to transnational mobilisations. The spatial base of these movements “is no longer local or national, but is situated in globally networked space” (Feixa et al. 2009, 247).

This paper positions itself within this context by looking at Libya, the main country of embarkation to Europe and, thus, a major transit space. It points out the transnational spatialities and directionalities of self-organised migrant mobilisations and the solidarity dynamics they trigger, as opposed to the spatialities and directionalities of European border externalisation.

Thus, the paper also contributes to shedding light on how “initiatives in the field of migration develop multiscale strategies and create translocal and transnational relations” (Ataç et al. 2024, 716), switching (Fischer and Jørgensen 2021) or shifting (Alcalde and Portos 2018) scale depending on the changing circumstances. While this strand of research (see also Alagna 2024) and the above-cited literature on exogenous solidarity have analysed pro-migrant initiatives from the perspective of civil society actors, this paper takes autonomous, collective migrant initiatives as its starting point of observation. It shows how these expressions of endogenous solidarity articulate in space by establishing relations with (potential) exogenous solidarity actors in Libya and across the continents, thus creating transnational networks of solidarity flows that challenge the externalised European border regime. The paper thus stresses the active role played by those affected by border violence (Jones 2016) in resisting and generating solidarity. Solidarity towards migrants does not simply come from the benevolent initiatives of other subjects, but is actively inspired and directly fueled by migrants themselves.

By doing this, the paper also speaks to the literature on the autonomy of migration (Mezzadra 2001). This paper, while acknowledging the need to adopt the migrants' perspective and stress their agency, sees the forces of migration and those of control as mutually constitutive (Scheel 2013). If control actors can appropriate people's mobility, people on the move can perform (spatial) tactics to react to and appropriate governmental strategies of control (Minca and Collins 2021).

Methodology

The research draws on document analysis of online and printed materials produced by international organisations (IOs), NGOs, migrants and other civil society actors. It is informed by participant-observation of two Europe-based activist initiatives supporting migrant mobilisations in Libya,¹ which allowed me to get insight into the current developments of a network of Europe-based activists supporting migrant activists in Libya. Moreover, twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted between November 2023 and May 2024. Twenty-two interviewees are activists or representatives of Libyan or international NGOs (I-NGOs), six are researchers, three are journalists and six are people from Eritrea, Sudan, and South Sudan who spent one or more periods of their life in Libya, took part in self-organised protests and/or mobilisations there, and then reached Europe either without authorisation or through a UN relocation mechanism for vulnerable people. Five of the latter six were still providing some form of support to migrants in Libya as members of associations or loose networks of activists at the time of the interview. The open-ended questions changed depending on the interlocutor, but all interviewees were asked to talk about self-organised mobilisations and protests in Libya and to provide information on the causes, initiators, supporters, and outcomes of the mobilisations, and on interviewees' own contributions. In this article, interview partners are anonymised, except those who gave explicit consent for them and their organisations to be identified.

Spaces of (Counter-)Externalisation

EU border policies create externalised spaces of migration management at different scales, from small spaces of immobilisation in and outside detention² to larger spaces of forced movement, such as the purported Libyan search and rescue region, from which people intercepted by the Libyan authorities are forcibly returned to Libya (Santer 2019). Externalisation is also based on the mobility of funding, equipment and know-how, that travel from North to South to contain migration. Such mobility presupposes and perpetuates the existence of transnational spaces of encounter – both material and immaterial – where conditions for externalisation are negotiated between various governmental and non-

¹ The first initiative was "From Tripoli to Brussels: Amplifying the Voices of Refugees in Libya," organised in Brussels by "Solidarity with Refugees in Libya," an international network of associations and individual activists, from 30 June to 1 July 2023. It consisted of a counter-summit that took place in parallel to the European Council meeting and a demonstration. The second initiative, "Evacuate Human Rights Defenders from Libya," was organised in Bologna by the same network, now renamed "Alliance with Refugees in Libya," on 26-27 January 2024. It included a press conference, workshops, assemblies and a film screening.

² Libyan detention centres include: 1) official detention centres, formally under government control but in fact often managed by militias; 2) unofficial detention centres, run by militias and inaccessible to IOs and NGOs; 3) investigation centres, formally government-managed but inaccessible to IOs and NGOs.

governmental actors, also including IOs, as part of broader fora of multidirectional policy transfers (Cobarrubias et al. 2023, 6-8).

Similarly, solidarity is a spatialised and relational practice (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019) that generates diverse webs of relations and alliances at local and transnational scales. In doing this, it stretches over territories and moves in multiple directions, creating mobile spaces of both endogenous and exogenous solidarity. Solidarity generates and fosters practices that support the freedom of movement against the externalised border regime and, to some extent, resort to the same strategies used by externalisation actors. Insofar as they mirror the externalisation practices they are acting against, initiatives of migrants and solidarity actors can be considered instances of counter-externalisation.

In this paper, counter-externalisation is exemplified, first, by migrants in Libya, both in and outside detention, who reach out to journalists, activists, NGOs, and diaspora groups in Europe and North America. Migrants externalise their action outside Libya to ask for support against the externalised regime of migration containment established in Libya since the turn of the century. Secondly, counter-externalisation is exemplified by the support activities of solidarity actors responding to the migrants' calls: solidarity, then, is externalised from "North" to "South" following the same direction as European border externalisation but opposing it. While the literature has only illuminated counter-externalisation practices of civil society actors, this paper adopts the perspective of people on the move to show that counter-externalisation is often a direct or indirect effect of migrant agency. The paper further shows that migrants can mobilise and trigger dynamics of counter-externalisation even on land and even in a country that is known for being particularly inhospitable towards people on the move – not just on the high seas, where both governmental and non-governmental actors are granted more leeway to act according to their intentions (Mainwaring and DeBono 2021).

The reference to the concept of externalisation requires a caveat. Recent literature (Cobarrubias et al. 2023; Gazzotti et al. 2023; Savio Vammen et al. 2022) increasingly points to the need to abandon univocal views of externalisation, which – in the case of the European border regime – cast the EU and its member states as the only powerful actors in the field of migration management. From such Eurocentric perspectives, European policymakers (including governments of European countries within and outside the EU as well as EU decision-makers) fully determine the policies and practices of the other actors involved, including governments of countries of origin and transit, as well as IOs and NGOs, which passively accept the role of executors. Such a perspective overlooks the nuances of the relationship between externalising countries and their interlocutors and partners, and the risks of seeing externalisation even where there is none. To correct Eurocentric (and state-centric) biases we should rather see externalisation as one of the many drivers that contribute to shaping migration and border regimes at different scales. However, while the study of state-led externalisation in migration and border management should not overshadow the other logics, interests, and actors at play, the importance of externalisation should not be downplayed either. The role of European governments and the EU in the radical transformation of the Mediterranean migration and border regime since the turn of the century is impressive. Thus, once Eurocentric and state-centric biases are corrected or minimised, externalisation remains an important lens through which to understand the developments of the EU border regime.

Libya as an Arena of European Border Externalisation

Since the turn of the century, Libya has been the main country of departure for people attempting to cross the Mediterranean from North Africa to Europe. European policymakers' first attempts to externalise migration and border control to Libya date back to the late 1990s (Paoletti 2010, 116-119), when Italy and its former colony prepared the ground for the first bilateral agreement on police cooperation, which was signed in 2000.

Despite the failure in both reducing the number of sea-crossings and improving conditions for migrants in Libya (Phillips 2020), European externalisation policies have continued unabated until today (Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022). Funding, equipment and know-how related to migration and border management have been made available from both the EU and its member states to governmental and non-governmental actors alike. Italy, as the main country of arrival for people attempting the sea-crossing from Libya, played a pioneering role at the turn of the century and is still the main externalising country after over two decades.³ Other European countries support activities related to migration and border management in Libya through their national schemes. The EU's contribution to the externalisation process started in 2004 and culminated in the funding made available within the Trust Fund for Africa (2015-2021) and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (2021-2027).

While the flow of funding, equipment, and know-how aimed at externalising control policies may be unidirectional, processes of externalisation open up polycentric relational spaces in which governmental and non-governmental policies are conceived and negotiated between different actors, and relevant power relations can be questioned in a continuous process of de-balancing and re-balancing. Externalisation then allows for the insertion of issue linkages and the establishment of multidirectional policy transfers (Cobarrubias et al. 2023, 6-8) within flexible and variable relational spaces at a transnational scale. This is very well visible in the case of Libya, which was an immigration country attracting an African workforce long before it became a transit country for people heading for Europe. Libya already used migration as a bargaining chip with African countries, e.g. during periods of tension with Tunisia and Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s (Pliez 2004, 141), before it started doing so with European ones. At the turn of the century, Gaddafi imposed conditions (the end of the EU embargo and Libya's international rehabilitation) for cooperating with Italy and Europe. Then the dictator tried to raise the price by threatening to turn Europe 'black' (Traynor 2010). After his fall, Libyan militias, smugglers and tribes were involved in the negotiations on and implementation of European border externalisation (Raineri and Strazzari 2019), while the UN launched a humanitarian response plan for Libya (2016-2022), which resulted in the increasing involvement of UN agencies and international NGOs (Cuttitta 2023) in migration-related activities. All this speaks to the complexity of the context in which European border externalisation to Libya is embedded and that European border externalisation contributes to shape.

³ The two countries concluded seven cooperation agreements between 2000 and 2017. Since the early 2000s, Italy has provided training for Libyan officers, financed deportation flights from Libya to third countries, donated patrol boats and land vehicles, dispatched police liaison officers to Tripoli, and deployed navy ships to support the Libyan coast guard in intercepting and returning migrants.

Foreign migrants have long been subject to systematic abuses in Libya, mostly by state authorities and smugglers (Hamood 2006), including in Gaddafi's Libya, a dictatorship with a very poor human rights record. The regime's fall in 2011 has not improved the situation. Since then, Libya has been torn by political instability and domestic conflict, also resulting in long-lasting territorial division (Romanet Perroux 2019), with civil war reaching its highest peaks of violence between 2014 and 2020. Migrants in Libya are still exposed to gross human rights violations both in and outside detention, from both state and non-state actors. Abuses include, but are not limited to, arbitrary detention, kidnapping, extortion, sexual violence, forced labour, forced recruitment in armed groups, killing, and more (HRC 2023). Extortion and forced labour are the main expressions of a flourishing business model that is mainly run by smugglers and armed groups but also includes other state and non-state actors (Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022). The business thrives through the immobilisation and exploitation of migrants in detention centres and beyond (Achnich 2022) and is *de facto* supported by European funding and the work of IOs and NGOs (Cuttitta 2023).

For those who manage to set off for Europe against all odds, abuses may continue during the sea-crossing and start all over again if people are intercepted at sea and turned back to Libyan shores by the Libyan authorities, whose patrol boats are donated by Italy and whose officers are trained by the EU.

Throughout the years, such context made any self-organised form of mobilisation by people on the move to claim their rights particularly difficult. Because of severe limitations imposed by the local formal and informal authorities, migrants mostly cannot even receive appropriate support from IOs, such as IOM (International Organization for Migration) and UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), or I-NGOs, despite the increase in migration-related funding received by both categories of actors. Opportunities for local civil society to freely engage in pro-migrant activities, including purely humanitarian service provision, are also limited. While the fall of the Gaddafi regime has granted Libyans the freedom of association and allowed for the establishment of numerous civil society organisations, these groups are still seen with suspicion by the Libyan formal and informal authorities as potential agents of foreign or enemy powers (Altai Consulting 2015; Infomigrants 2025). In sum, there is now some more space for non-governmental pro-migrant activities, but this space is still very limited and must be constantly defended and negotiated (Cuttitta 2023).

If migrants in detention stage protests, try to escape, instigate other prisoners to do so, communicate with the outside world, or otherwise disobey orders, they are beaten, put in underground isolation cells, or even killed, as testified by many of my interviewees (see also Del Grande 2010, 82-83; Hayden 2022, 54; 91; 200; 269-270; Hamood 2006, 45; MSF 2023, 6-10). Those who are not detained can be beaten and arrested if they demonstrate in public space: this was the case when the protest camp in front of the UNHCR Tripoli headquarters was stormed by Libyan police and "unidentified militias" (RIL 2022) on 10 January 2022. If NGOs or IOs are too active or vocal, they risk experiencing intimidation, losing access to

detention facilities, or being otherwise impeded in their activities (ECCHR et al. 2021; MSF 2023, 11).⁴

In sum, migrants in Libya may disappear, be abused, and even killed without anyone noticing or reacting. If borders are “spaces of debilitation designed to erode the resistive capacity of people on the move” (Davies et al. 2024, 23), Libya is a prime example thereof.

Yet, migrants have always found ways to mobilise for their rights, both before and after the fall of the Gaddafi regime. Moreover, they have found ways to overcome the “informational black hole” (Reporters Without Borders n.d.) and connect with diverse actors in Libya and abroad to let the world know about their plight and establish and nurture networks of solidarity and support. While the restrictive and violent evolution of the Libyan migration and border regime has been strongly determined by the externalisation efforts of European policymakers, the following sections show how self-organised initiatives of migrants in Libya challenge these trends. The more-than-local solidarity spaces they establish generate counter-externalisation dynamics that try to steer the border regime in a less restrictive and violent direction.

Self-Organised Forms of Mobilisation in Libya Before and After 2011

In 2008, a lot of refugees were calling me [from Libyan detention centres] because [...] people did not have anyone that was talking about them. Somehow they found out about our radio and reached out to me, and wanted me to talk about their issue.⁵

This is how Meron Estefanos, a Sweden-based Eritrean journalist, became an activist for refugees in Libya. “My phone number was written on the walls of Libyan detention centres: ‘In case you have any problem, call this person,’” she adds.

Estefanos is not alone. My findings indicate that journalists sometimes can and do help migrants detained in Libya, whether by directly providing advice or simply by spreading information about the hardships migrants face there. This dissemination, in turn, may activate other channels that positively impact the freedom of movement – and broader human rights protections – of the persons involved.

Around 2009, the phone number of Italian journalist Gabriele Del Grande circulated within the Eritrean and Somali communities in Tripoli. “I received information from Libyan detention centres that I sometimes passed on to UNHCR officers who could then try to access those facilities,” Del Grande remembers.⁶ On other occasions, journalists were able to indirectly help by turning the spotlight on grave abuses. On 9 August 2009, around 300 Somali and Nigerian prisoners attempted a mass escape from the Ganfuda detention centre. Guards’ reaction was immediate and violent. Only “around thirty to fifty” detainees managed to escape, some of whom were caught and brought back (HRW 2009). Twenty people were shot dead, and many more were injured. From that moment, failed escapees were regularly beaten and no longer allowed to leave their cells. As a response, they started a collective

⁴ Just days before the final version of this paper was submitted, ten NGOs had to suspend their activities in Libya (Infomigrants 2025).

⁵ Interview 23, online, 7 March 2024.

⁶ Interview 22, in-person, Palermo, 25 February 2024.

hunger strike, using hidden phones to send text and video documentation to Del Grande and other journalists. Reports by international media resulted in the evacuation of the Ganfuda detention centre. Detainees were transferred to another centre, in Gatrún, from which around sixty eventually escaped (Del Grande 2010, 78).

Besides journalists, other individuals and groups may also turn to exogenous solidarity actors. On 29 June 2010, 245 Eritreans in a Misrata detention centre were asked to sign identification forms in Tigrinya. They refused, fearing this would be the first step towards repatriation. Some also tried to escape. They were all punished with severe beatings. Additionally, they were transferred to another detention centre in Al-Biraq and deprived of food and healthcare. Al-Biraq is close to Sebha airport, a well-known departure point for deportation flights. One of the detainees could send an SMS from his hidden phone to Father Zerai, an Eritrean priest based in Italy and president of the NGO Agenzia Habeshia (Ciavoni 2010). The Italian NGO CIR (Zingoni and Carlini 2010) and I-NGOs such as Human Rights Watch (HRW 2010) also denounced the abuses, and members of both the Italian and European Parliaments called on the Italian government to take diplomatic steps with Gaddafi to curtail abuses.⁷ The coordinated effort of those different actors eventually managed not only to prevent deportations but also to obtain the release of the prisoners. All this, however, was only made possible by the detainees' initiative to contact civil society actors on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean, denounce their condition, make their claims, and thus activate solidarity alliances and flows.

While the above cases date back to the Gaddafi period, similar dynamics can be observed after 2011 and, more frequently, after 2017. Reaching out to potential solidarity actors such as journalists, activists, and diaspora groups remains key among migrants' political strategies (Creta 2021; 2023; Hayden 2022), with SMS and MMS gradually replaced by WhatsApp messages and social media. Since 2017, there have been protests in many Libyan detention centres, such as Ain Zara, Triq al Sikka, Triq al Matar, Salah ed-Din, Qasr Bin Ghashir, Gharyan, Zintan, Tajoura, Janzour, Misrata, and Khoms. According to several of my interviewees, mobilisations have included hunger strikes, refusal of healthcare, concerted noises or shouting, seizure of guards, and more. In some cases, detainees could organise simultaneous protests in different centres. Their demands ranged from improvements in food provision to the end of punishments such as isolation, from the provision of healthcare in detention to medical evacuations, from registration with UNHCR to evacuation from Libya, from the cancellation of deportation schemes to voluntary repatriation, and from transfer to safer detention centres to full release. Some mobilisations were (at least partly) successful, with the protestors' requests being met due to their ability to reach out to external actors and trigger exogenous solidarity initiatives.

Italian researcher and journalist Sara Creta recalls that in this period "Eritreans were very active with WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages [...]. There was a doctor in Khoms who was the owner of the only hidden phone in the detention centre. He [...] put in touch Eritreans

⁷ Both parliamentary assemblies had repeatedly criticised the Italian government for its direct involvement in unlawful deportations from and to Libya in previous years. In 2003, Italy funded deportation flights from Libya to Eritrea. In 2009, Italian navy ships pushed back hundreds of people from international waters to Libya, including 105 of those who now feared deportation.

in the detention centre with diaspora Eritreans [...] who launched campaigns for the detainees.”⁸

According to an Eritrean Europe-based activist and former migrant in Libya, detained Eritreans “published stuff online or sent news and videos to us, who were outside [in Europe] and wanted to help them spread information about their plight.”⁹ Having once been a migrant activist in Libya, building alliances with fellow migrants to try to attract solidarity from outside, this informant remained active for several years after arriving in Europe, converting from an endogenous solidarity actor (in the Libyan context) to an exogenous one. He is not alone. As Estefanos observes, “These refugees, once they make it to Europe, these are the people that are also donating [...] when refugees are kidnapped, and we have to pay ransom. They are the ones that call you first and say, [...] ‘I would like to donate.’”¹⁰ Some such actors limit themselves to offering some form of support when they are occasionally invited to do so. Others, like the Eritrean activist mentioned above, become focal points abroad for their fellow nationals in need in Libya. A Sudanese man who arrived in Europe through Libya in 2017 receives phone calls “every day. I have a list with the telephone numbers,” he says. They call him from Libya, Chad, Egypt and other African countries, asking for help. “I give them advice. [...] I try to do something. [...] If someone asks for money, I can send €5, €50 to help them.”¹¹ He is currently creating an association to facilitate fundraising.

A rich and diverse network of international individual and collective actors (NGOs, activists, diaspora groups, journalists, IOs, politicians, and others) has mobilised to provide remote support to migrant protestors in Libya over the years. The small US-based NGO *Surbana Vision Media*, founded by a diaspora Eritrean who received calls for help from Libya, “was able to assist 230 refugees at a time for over two years” through a shelter funded by the Eritrean diaspora in the Tripoli neighbourhood of Gargaresh. *Surbana* also spread information about specific cases of people in need and pressured IOs in Libya to intervene, says executive director George Ghebresslassie.¹²

Diaspora Eritreans also organised demonstrations and protests in different countries on behalf of their fellow nationals in Libya: “When they couldn’t protest, they asked us to protest, and we used to do the protest on the same day throughout the world.”¹³ In 2019, “Eritrean refugee activists from all over Europe arrived on bicycles at the European Parliament in Brussels to raise awareness of the situation of asylum seekers [...] trapped in Libya” (Creta 2023, 776) – a situation that they observed was “an immediate result of the EU’s politics of containment” (Creta 2023, 776-777). This analysis directly echoed protest slogans from prisoners in Libyan detention centres, such as “We condemn EU policy on innocent detainee refugees in Libya” (Tubiana 2019). Another demonstration was organised “in front of the United Nations in Geneva by diaspora Eritreans carrying pictures made in Libyan detention centres by their fellow nationals,” says Creta.¹⁴

⁸ Interview 4, online, 19 December 2023.

⁹ Interview 3, online, 16 December 2023.

¹⁰ Interview 23, online, 7 March 2024.

¹¹ Interview 8, online, 3 January 2024.

¹² Interview 20, online, 17 February 2024.

¹³ Interview 23, online, 7 March 2024.

¹⁴ Interview 4, online, 19 December 2023.

The above examples show that migrant activists, when reaching out for support, generate transnational solidarity spaces, whereby solidarity is externalised through dynamics that operationally mimic and critically respond to those characterising the externalisation of migration management and control. When solidarity actors provide remote support in the form of advice, they do something comparable to what European authorities do when they provide training for the Libyan Coast Guard. When solidarity actors send money for migrants in Libya to continue their journey, they mirror and seek to reverse what European authorities do when they launch funding schemes to improve Libya's migration and border management system. When journalists or human rights activists spread information worldwide about people at risk of deportation or other abuses, pressuring the international community to intervene in support of migrants, they mimic and counter what European authorities do when they pressure countries of origin and transit to step up border control. Importantly, these exogenous solidarity actors are often activated by migrants themselves. In reaching out to ask for support, people on the move generate multidirectional solidarity transfers and open up solidarity spaces at different scales.

While initiatives of loose groups and networks have mostly clear and univocal aims, Libyan and international NGOs operating in Libya often play a more ambiguous role, as they can also serve, just like IOs, the interests of state-led externalisation (Cuttitta 2023). However, some small Libyan NGOs, such as Belaady for Human Rights and Aman Against Discrimination, despite the limits imposed on their activities by the national context, also play a role in providing direct support to migrant mobilisations in Libya or establishing international solidarity networks. I-NGOs – at least those that do not depend on state funding – may also contribute to making migrant initiatives at least partly successful. *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) operational adviser Jérôme Tubiana explains that detainees “ask us advice generally [...], [but] they knew we would also try to speak on their behalf outside, in the media or in closed-door advocacy meetings.”¹⁵ This sometimes resulted in pressure on the international community or Libyan formal and informal authorities, and in some requests being met, as the case of the Zintan (Dhar-el-Jebel) detention centre demonstrates.

The “self-organised Zintan committee,”¹⁶ as London-based Italian asylum lawyer Giulia Tranchina calls it, provides another example of how endogenous solidarity initiatives in Libya can spark exogenous solidarity initiatives abroad. Between September 2018 and May 2019, at least twenty-two detainees died in Zintan, mostly of tuberculosis. These deaths were met by authorities and the UNHCR-contracted international non-governmental healthcare providers with complete inaction. It was only because some detainees managed to alert international solidarity actors, such as activists and journalists, that the international community learned of the epidemic. Journalist Sally Hayden “began emailing both UNHCR and IOM about the mounting number of deaths in Zintan in October 2018” (Hayden 2022, 247). MSF eventually obtained access to the detention centre in April. Meanwhile, detainees had started protesting, using tomato paste and red pepper to write slogans on their sponge mattresses “such as ‘We are victim [sic] by UNHCR in Libya.’ Using smartphones, they posted photos on social media, posing in front with their arms crossed to show they were prisoners. A week later, their efforts did attract some attention. On June 3, the UNHCR evacuated 96

¹⁵ Interview 18, online, 1 February 2024.

¹⁶ Interview 6, online, 22 December 2023.

asylum-seekers to Tripoli" (Tubiana 2019), where they were set free thanks to the mobilisation of international solidarity actors. Counter-externalisation was thus supported by countervisuality.

Tranchina adds that "when Zintan was eventually closed, hundreds of Zintan survivors created a self-organised committee, and we organised a fundraising campaign and sent them money." This support allowed the Zintan committee "to resist as a group until they were gradually evacuated to Rwanda and then resettled."¹⁷ The Zintan committee showed a high level of endogenous solidarity, which allowed for exogenous solidarity actors to be involved. Once its members were evacuated, however, the group dissolved.

The Tajoura detention centre gave rise to another instance of migrant mobilisation in an extremely challenging environment. This centre was located within a military complex hosting the headquarters of the Daman Brigade, an armed group loyal to the Libyan government. In May 2019, during the civil war, an airstrike hit a facility in the complex. Migrants asked for evacuation, but their calls remained unheard until another airstrike killed fifty-three and injured eighty-seven of them on 2 July (UNSMIL and OHCHR 2020). UNHCR then proposed the transfer of only seventy of the 500-600 detainees, but "survivors en masse rejected the deal" (Hayden 2022, 281) and went on a hunger strike. In the end, as one survivor explains, "We agreed that [...] the solution is only to move outside these military barracks. [...] If they want to shoot us, let them shoot."¹⁸ Fortunately, UNHCR was there, and the guards did not dare to shoot. My interviewee recounts that he and his comrades "went directly to the GDF," a selective "gathering and departure facility" managed by UNHCR. Despite its reluctance to do so, the UN agency had no choice but to admit those hundreds of people. Solidarity among the detainees resulted first in a "tolerated mass escape," then in an act of 'forced solidarity' successfully demanded of UNHCR. The march from Tajoura to the GDF was at the time the largest migrant mobilisation crossing public space in Libyan history. Importantly, it was also among the first times such a large migrant mobilisation brought together people from different nationalities, with previous initiatives mostly rooted in national or ethnic belonging save for a few notable exceptions, such as the attempted mass escape from Ganfuda.

While other mobilisations were not successful, like in the Nivin case (Forensic Oceanography 2019), at least three conclusions can be drawn from the (more or less successful) examples presented above.

First, exogenous solidarity towards migrants in Libya is not self-generated but largely prompted by the initiatives of migrants who reach out for support not just in Libya but across the continents. They thus generate networked solidarity spaces at different scales, shifting from the local to the transnational.

Second, some of those who manage to leave Libya and settle in a safe country turn from solidarity recipients to solidarity providers, from beneficiaries to benefactors. Solidarity is transformed while travelling along migrants' routes from global South to global North. It turns from endogenous to exogenous and also changes scale and direction. While

¹⁷ Interview 6, online, 22 December 2023.

¹⁸ Interview 14, online, 15 January 2024.

endogenous solidarity among migrant activists in Libya is circular and local, exogenous solidarity towards them is transnational and unidirectional.

Third, solidarity-based initiatives aimed at facilitating the freedom of movement of migrants in Libya can be considered a form of counter-externalisation. When migrants reach out to external actors abroad, their action follows directionalities that both mimic and counter those of externalisation, producing similar transnational networked spaces with exogenous solidarity actors. Whatever shape exogenous solidarity takes – sending money to people in need in Libya, providing advice (e.g. through informal hotlines), protesting on their behalf, trying to sensibilise Libyan authorities and IOs – the transnational spatialities and directionalities it generates are in some respects comparable to those generated by externalisation drivers. The goal, however, is the opposite: to disrupt or at least circumvent the externalised border regime.

Stabilisation Through RIL and SRIL/ARIL?

The above dynamics become all the more evident with the establishment, first, of the movement called 'Refugees in Libya' (RIL) in October 2021 and, then, of a transnational support network, initially called 'Solidarity with Refugees in Libya' (SRIL), in late 2021, which was renamed 'Alliance with Refugees in Libya' (ARIL) in August 2023. This section shows that RIL and SRIL/ARIL aim to provide the ground for stabilising migrant mobilisations in Libya, transforming isolated, ephemeral initiatives into a stable movement.

Previous migrant initiatives were more informal, had less international visibility, and did not last long. Endogenous solidarity coalitions dissolved at the end of each mobilisation, with each protestor going their own way. Not only was there no continuity in the groups in Libya, but individuals who managed to reach a safe haven abroad only occasionally turned to exogenous solidarity actors, doing so on their own or in rather loose networks.¹⁹ Since October 2021, the RIL and SRIL/ARIL movements have sought to offer stable, durable and multinational options in Libya and beyond to people who aim to mobilise by protesting and seeking support and to potential exogenous solidarity actors.

The origins of RIL can be traced back to 1 October 2021, when Libyan authorities carried out an unprecedented mass raid in the Tripoli neighbourhood of Gargaresh, one with a high migrant population density. Hundreds of private houses were stormed, and over 4,000 people were randomly arrested (Al Jazeera 2021). In response, thousands of others gathered before the UNHCR community day centre in Tripoli, organising a permanent sit-in. The protestors included people from other neighbourhoods, who feared the same thing would happen to them, as well as those from Gargaresh who had avoided arrest. Many had taken part in the Tajoura and Zintan mobilisations. Eleven nationalities were represented, furthering the process of de-nationalisation exemplified by the Tajoura initiative. In just a few days, the protestors gave themselves a name, creating Twitter and Facebook accounts and a website²⁰ and receiving strong support from Libyan civil society actors. RIL asked UNHCR to take steps for the arrested to be released and for all refugees and asylum seekers (the detained as well as the protestors) to be evacuated to safe countries. RIL also published an open letter to the

¹⁹ As several of my interviewees pointed out, those who make it to Europe have other priorities as they need to focus on their new life there. Many also do not want to look back to traumatic events.

²⁰ <https://www.refugeesinlibya.org>.

African Union, and another addressing Italian authorities, the EU member states, and IOs, calling for evacuation to safe countries (RIL 2021). Despite these efforts, a meeting with the UNHCR Libya chief of mission failed to find a solution.

Initially, RIL's demands only included refugees and officially registered asylum seekers, leaving out the entire migrant population in Libya and indirectly replicating the dichotomies (e.g. "forced/deserving" vs. "voluntary/undeserving" migrants) that sustain the externalised border regime. The same can be said of some later RIL campaigns. On its website, however, RIL soon redefined itself as "an organization that includes refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, regardless of their 'official' status," and has since come to denounce border violence against any person and call for the freedom of movement of all.

The permanent sit-in in front of the UNHCR premises was the largest and longest-lasting migrant protest in Libyan public space. On 10 January 2022, after over three months, the protest camp was stormed and hundreds were arrested. During the demonstrations, RIL activists contacted European and international activists from different organisations and movements (with the NGO *Mediterranea Saving Humans* and the activist project *Alarm Phone* remaining among the most active), which generated the informal solidarity network SRIL (later ARIL). SRIL collected money, sending it to RIL to help protestors to meet their most basic needs. SRIL also sought to amplify RIL's voice, making it heard among wider international audiences and pressure relevant authorities worldwide to respond to RIL's requests.

RIL thus acted against European border externalisation both directly and indirectly: directly, insofar as their practices aimed at setting migrants in Libya free from the yoke of immobilisation and circular exploitation generated by externalisation policies, and indirectly, insofar as RIL generated SRIL/ARIL, which in turn provided RIL with the solidarity and support necessary to reinvigorate its action. In sum, SRIL/ARIL and RIL produce a transnational solidarity space in which information, know-how, funding, and other kinds of support travel from Europe to Libya to facilitate movement, as opposed to the transnational spaces of negotiation generated by European border externalisation and the resulting flow of information, know-how, funding, and support that travels from Europe to Libya to contain migration.

Compared to previous, ephemeral initiatives in Libya, RIL aims to be durable. Many of the participants in the 2021 protest have since left Libya, but many remain. Some newcomers turn to them to join forces: "We are the first people that they call," says RIL spokesperson Yambio.²¹ In late 2023, there were, again, informal, multinational permanent sit-ins near the UNHCR premises: a legacy of the October 2021 protest.

Similarly, ARIL aims to encourage - and provide support to - those arriving in Europe from Libya who would like to keep (or start) contributing to the cause. One of ARIL's goals is to establish a large-scale, collective hotline based on volunteer work. This project builds on a multilingual WhatsApp support line established at the beginning of the October 2021 RIL mobilisation, which allowed more people to connect with the demonstrators and join the protest camp, including thousands of detainees who "escaped and came to our protest."²² The telephone number moved to Europe with the SIM card holder and continues working

²¹ Interview 13, online, 14 January 2024.

²² Interview 13, online, 14 January 2024.

from there, providing advice to people calling from Libya and neighbouring countries. In its first two years, it received more than 8,000 requests (Civil MRCC 2023). ARIL now aims to involve more people in answering calls and text messages in additional languages.

ARIL has also organised demonstrations across different European countries, including simultaneous protests in seventeen cities against the renewal of the Italy-Libya memorandum of understanding (Abolish Frontex 2022), and launched specific campaigns for the release and evacuation of individuals and groups in Libya. In February 2023, it obtained the release of a fifteen-year-old boy who was subjected to judicial harassment in Libya (Infomigrants 2023a) and, in July, that of the 220 people who had been arrested in January 2022 when the protest camp in Tripoli was stormed by the police (Infomigrants 2023b). In January 2024, with a press conference in Bologna, ARIL and RIL launched a campaign for the evacuation from Libya of the 220 released, arguing that they are now at risk of being abused in Libya for their work as human rights defenders.

Conclusions

Journalists, diaspora and religious groups, individual activists, and civil society organisations large and small: a wide range of solidarity actors can provide support both material (funding, food, other basic items, etc.) and immaterial (knowledge, advice, liaison with state authorities, international bodies, and the media, etc.) to migrants in Libya. Such exogenous solidarity supports migrants in challenging the externalised European border regime. Crucially, exogenous solidarity does not fall from the sky, but is generated by endogenous solidarity actors: the migrants themselves. Migrants manifest their agency by mobilising on their own for their freedom of movement and their rights and by reaching out to more-than-local and international potential allies, asking for their support.

Based on a notion of solidarity as a spatialised and relational practice that constitutes relational spaces and is constituted by (social relations in and across) space, the paper has shed light on migrant mobilisations in Libya to show that “[b]y creating connections precisely in spaces where EUropean borders implement deadly divisions, [...] solidarity constitutes a form of resistance that counter-performs and prefigures the Mediterranean space as one not of abjection but of encounter and exchange” (Stierl 2019, 120).

Indeed, the paper has shown that different forms of solidarity are generated precisely as a response to the multiplication of borders resulting from externalisation. First, spatialities of confinement and segregation (from detention centres to urban ghettos) foster endogenous solidarities within the affected groups. Then, by triggering exogenous solidarity from across the continents, endogenous solidarity groups generate transnational solidarity spaces that challenge European border externalisation. This confirms that spaces of immobilisation – both carceral and non-carceral – do not necessarily preclude forms of political membership (Sigona 2014) and may “also function as junctions, as steppingstones, towards onward movement” (Turner and Whyte 2022, 6).

Moreover, the history of autonomous migrant mobilisations in Libya retraced in this paper illuminates the network of contemporary “underground railroads” (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2022; Stierl 2020) generated by solidarity. It also shows how the movement of people and the movement of solidarity articulate in space by co-determining one another, e.g., when migrants turn from endogenous to exogenous solidarity actors after the sea-

crossing. Solidarity both within and towards migrant groups may succeed in facilitating (and end up co-determining) travel trajectories to Europe. Solidarity itself may develop by stretching over territories, thus creating transnational solidarity spaces in which solidarity can be mobile, just like the externalised EU borders and the people trying to cross them. Depending on the circumstances, solidarity can also shift from the local to the international and transnational scale to facilitate people's movement across externalised borders.

The paper, in sum, has shown how solidarity and human mobility are articulated in and across space, supporting and feeding into each other, running in parallel and in opposition to externalisation efforts. Specific solidarity configurations may result in counter-externalisation when they generate a reaction that mimics and counters the externalised European border, producing externalised spaces and flows of resistance against the externalised regime of migration containment.

In doing so, the paper has sought to: a) re-centre migrant agency in solidarity studies; b) engage from a new perspective with the concept of counter-externalisation. Indeed, the growing body of work on solidarity in migration and border studies almost exclusively adopts the point of view of exogenous civil society actors, mostly from the Global North, while counter-externalisation has only been examined in the maritime context of the Mediterranean. This paper advances the literature on solidarity by adopting the perspective of people on the move and the literature on counter-externalisation by shifting the focus from sea to land.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank ACME editor David Seitz and three anonymous reviewers for their feedback. Research for this article has been funded by the European Research Council, SOLROUTES, grant number 101053836. The views expressed are the author's only and do not reflect those of the EU or ERC, which cannot be held responsible for them.

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