

# EU intensifies anti-refugee military operations in the Mediterranean

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The European Union is stepping up its military operations in the Mediterranean to prevent refugees from the Middle East and North Africa from seeking asylum in Europe. On Wednesday, the second phase of operation “European Union Naval Force—Mediterranean” (EUNAVFOR Med) officially began. The operation will from now on be called “Sophia.”

The renaming of the operation is a cynical attempt to disguise its true nature. Sophia is the name of a Somali refugee girl who was born August 24 on the German frigate “Schleswig-Holstein.” Since then, this event has been exploited for propaganda purposes.

The initiative for the new name came directly from Federica Mogherini, who, as EU foreign policy chief, personifies the increasingly militaristic intervention by the EU against refugees in the Mediterranean. The operation has two core objectives: the strengthening of fortress Europe to ward off refugees, and the preparation of a new, much broader military intervention in North Africa under the guise of fighting the “causes” of refugee flight.

Since June, in the first phase of the EU operation, warships have been allowed to stop refugee boats in the Mediterranean and detain alleged traffickers. In this phase, the operation has been limited to collecting information about the networks of people smugglers. Wednesday initiated the second phase. In the upcoming third phase, “all necessary measures” are to be taken “to eliminate and destroy the boats and equipment of the traffickers,” declares the web site of the German Bundeswehr (armed forces).

In mid-September, the European Council decided on the second phase. While military operations, at least officially, are supposed to take place only in international waters between Italy and Libya, the EU is seeking a mandate from the UN Security Council and the consent of Libya to expand its intervention into Libyan territorial waters.

Italian Rear Admiral Enrico Credendino, who gave the official go-ahead for the second phase of the mission in Rome on Wednesday, made it clear that military operations against refugee boats were already on the agenda. The aim was “to make ships inoperable, even before they can be used by the smugglers,” said Credendino.

The admiral knows what he is talking about. Before he took over coordination of “EUNAVFOR Med,” or “Sophia,” as it is now called, he was in command of operation “Atalanta,” the EU’s military operation off the coast of Somalia. There, warships from EU member states hunted alleged pirates. They attacked not only ships, but also alleged pirate camps on land. Clearly, the same methods are now to be taken against refugee boats.

The sheer scale of operation “Sophia” gives some idea of the military character of the mission. Fourteen European countries are participating with warships, submarines, aircraft, helicopter gunships and drones, including Germany, Italy, Spain, France, Britain, Greece, the Netherlands and Sweden. The headquarters of the mission is located at a military airport in Rome.

The official propaganda from politicians and the media has sought to portray the operation as a “humanitarian” mission to rescue refugees who embark on the deadly trip across the Mediterranean. In reality, it is the spearhead of the systematic persecution of people whose lives were destroyed by the same militaries that turned them into refugees in the first place.

The brutal character of the mission has become so evident that even some bourgeois newspapers have had to admit that it was never designed for search and rescue, but would inevitably raise the death toll even further.

At the weekend, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published an editorial, entitled “Gunboat policy,” by Ingo Werth, former captain of “Sea-Watch,” a private initiative to rescue refugees from the Mediterranean. The article is a

revealing indictment of the entire European refugee policy.

Werth writes that since the warships became part of “the EU mission EUNAVFOR Med... barely anyone has been rescued” and the active search for distress cases has virtually ceased. He relates his own dramatic experiences.

For example, on August 28, he and his crew identified “five inflatable boats in distress at the same time” and requested help from headquarters in Rome. Nevertheless, the Italian coast guard appeared only after eight hours, and there were “no ships from the EUNAVFOR Med mission.”

Werth’s conclusions are clear. He “regards statements, such as that by the (German) defence minister (Ursula von der Leyen) that search and rescue has an absolute priority in the context of the EUNAVFOR Med mission... as incomprehensible.” Not only on 28 August, “but also in many other missions... obviously the opposite is true.”

Overall, the proclaimed “fight against smuggling is primarily a battle on the backs of those fleeing,” according to Werth. “The more the smuggling networks are fought, the more deaths there will be on Europe’s borders.” That was shown “not only by the repeated boat disasters in the Mediterranean, but also by the tragedy of the trucks (containing dozens of suffocated refugees) in Austria.”

In this supposed “fight against smuggling,” which, in reality, is a struggle against refugees, Germany plays a leading role.

Whereas the German armed forces have thus far participated on the mission with the frigate “Schleswig-Holstein,” the supply ship “Werra” and 320 soldiers, the cabinet already decided in late September to significantly expand the deployment of German troops. According to the Defence Ministry, up to 950 German soldiers will participate in the second phase.



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