

Arab Revolts and the Crisis of the European Border Regime.
Manufacturing the emergency in the Lampedusa Crisis
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25th May 2011

Discussion paper

Starting from January 2011 around 28.000 migrants landed on Italian shores, many of them arriving on the little Lampedusa island; since years one of the most symbolic place of the fight against irregular migration fought by Europe and Italian government in the Mediterranean region. The overwhelming majority of these migrants are Tunisian nationals, with some minor numbers of other nationals fleeing the burning Libya. These are relevant numbers if we consider that during the whole 2008, when Italy had its peak of landing migrants, around 36.900 arrived on Italian shores. These numbers mark also a turning point in comparison with the situation of the two previous years, when, as both the Italian government and the FRONTEX agency argued, the European border regime closed the central-Mediterranean route diverting the flow of irregular migrants to the Greek-Turkish border (Frontex 2009: 5). These numbers are also extremely relevant for Lampedusa considering that the little island, with its 5000 inhabitants, hosted for weeks more than 5000 migrants in a highly overcrowded first-aid centre and many other makeshift camps without sanitary and running water.

The so called Arab Revolts destroyed the precarious equilibrium on which the Euro-Mediterranean border control regime was build and which, as even the less critical observers are now forced to admit, was grounded on the dirty job of a bunch of police states ruled under a regime of permanent emergency. The crisis of the European border regime is thus mainly a political, not a migratory crisis. It was triggered by the collapse of the political structures in Northern-African countries and the widening of the net of bilateral agreements and diplomatic relations which allowed for years a strict policing of the migratory routes in the Mediterranean region. This crisis is also reverberating on the complex institutional structure build over years for the governance of the European internal and external borders. We may be forced to consider this crisis as another breaking point in the history of European migratory policy, similar to those others which marked last ten years: the 2001 and 2004 terrorist attacks, the enlargement process. All these events accelerated the reform process, increasing over the years the securitarian dimension of the European migratory policy (Huysmans 2000; 2006; van Munster 2009).

The Lampedusa crisis is thus a perfect case study for analyzing how the securitization process is changing the European border regime. It is also an interesting case for analyzing the interplay between the norm and the exception which is at stake in the securitization process. During last months we witnessed a bitter struggle among the different actors playing in the field of migratory policy, a struggle whose stake was the control over the political and legal frame by which to define and govern the emergency; to the point that the whole set-up of Schengen acquis and the European free movement space are now questioned. The outcome of the Lampedusa crisis could be a new configuration of the power of defining and governing the emergency in the framework of the European migratory policy, with the most powerful member states advocating the

extension of their sovereign prerogative to suspend the Schengen ordinary rule, and the Commission trying to take upon itself the crucial power of ruling over the exception.

Defining the emergency

During the Lampedusa crisis the Italian government was of course the key actor in the struggle over the definition of the emergency. Notwithstanding its sovereign power in the field, it was forced to confront its perspectives with other important political and institutional actors, which in some ways structured its field of actions and its discursive strategy. What we can notice analyzing the official documents and the press releases is that Roberto Maroni, the Italian Minister of Home Affairs, hesitated in choosing the right role to play: some times he acted as the “Minister of Civil Protection” speaking the language of the “humanitarian emergency”; some other times he played the role of the “Minister of Police”, speaking the language of the “securitarian emergency”. These fluctuations were clearly due to the bitter confrontation he had with other institutional actors involved in the crisis management, both at supra-national and sub-national level, and with other politicians (mainly from the political majority supporting the government) which played a main role in framing the crisis by their public speaking.

The Italian government’s discursive strategy was quite clear. When it was confronting itself with supranational institutional actors such as the European Union, the emphasis was put over the idea of an imminent “humanitarian emergency”, evoking a forthcoming “epochal”, or “biblical” migration with hundred of thousands of potential displaced persons ready to land European shores. The aim was of course to attract more technical and financial aid from European institutions, but also to gain the needed political consensus among other Member States in order to suspend the ordinary rule by activating the exceptional instrument of temporary protection set by the European directive 2008/115/EC, with its burden sharing mechanism (Avvenire 15th February 2001). When it was confronting itself with sub-national institutional actors, trying to involve local governments in the management of the crisis and to legitimate the partial violation of ordinary political procedures implied by the appointment of a special commissioner entrusted with full power for dealing with the emergency, the government’s discursive strategy was to speak the language of “humanitarian catastrophe”, explicitly recalling the images of natural disasters.

The supranational actors involved were partially ambiguous in defining the emergency. The Commission, speaking through the EU commissioner for Home Affairs Cecilia Malmström, at first proved itself open to compromise regarding the eventuality to activate the temporary protection, while granting some financial and technical aid to Italian government. Italy’s insistence lead then the Commission to minimize the crisis’ significance, underlying the appropriateness of the already provided European support. This favoured the framing of the Lampedusa crisis as an ordinary afflux of irregular migration which Italy had the institutional means to govern. The EU Council shared since the beginning this view, speaking through national JHA representatives the language of ordinary external border policing to which Italy was called, even if with the due EU technical and financial support.

The rejection of the “humanitarian emergency” frame was even stronger by Italian government’s interlocutors playing at the sub-national level, which exerted a pressure toward a complete securitarian framing of the ongoing crisis. Local governments, echoed by the political majority supporting the national government, called for a complete securitization of the crisis, inviting the Minister of Home Affairs to enact extraordinary measures intended at stemming the flow of irregular migrants and at limiting the threat to public security the landed *clandestini* are supposed to represent. Naval blockade, mass forced repatriations and generalized administrative detention were ordinary currency in public speaking and press release, while local governments’

representatives very often raised the issue of the dangerousness of the arriving “bogus asylum seekers” to oppose the installations of new reception centres in their communities.

Governing the emergency

The Italian law is characterized for a weak regulation of emergency powers. The Constitutional Law rules the declaration of the *state of war* (art. 11 and 78 Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana), declared by the Parliament in the act of conferring full powers to the Government for the duration of the armed confrontation; and the issuing in extraordinary cases of “need and urgency” of *governmental emergency decree* having “force of law” (art. 77 Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana). Differently from the full powers accorded in case of war, the emergency decree do not allow the Government to derogate constitutional principles and need to be confirmed by the Parliament within six months. Besides these instruments of *constitutional emergency* (Ferejohn and Pasquino 2004), Italian ordinary law knows a wide assortment of emergency powers, the most important of which are those set by the art. 5 of the Law n. 225/1992 on Civil Protection. This is the legal umbrella under which the Italian government is allowed to delegate emergency powers to *special commissioners* (commissari straordinari) charged with the duty of governing a specific critical situation. According to the Civil Protection Law the government rules in these cases by means of a Prime Minister’s decree (Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio, hereafter: Dpcm), appointing a special commissioners provided with full powers to act above ordinary laws (see Fioritto 2008).

Managing the Lampedusa crisis, the Italian Government used immediately its emergency powers. The 12th February 2011 a Decree was issued declaring the whole national territory under the state of *humanitarian emergency* and appointing with the subsequent Prime Minister Order (Ordinanza del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri, hereafter: Opcm) n. 3924/18th February 2011 a special commissioner entrusted with full powers. But, just as the discursive strategy of government’s ministers, the decree also in some way fluctuates between a humanitarian and a securitarian frame, merging migrants’ protection needs with public order issues. Given the high probability of a worsening of the situation, states the Decree, the government underlines “the need to adopt extraordinary measures intended at the installation of appropriate structures for providing humanitarian assistance, while assuring the effective fight against clandestine immigration (*sic*) by identifying those dangerous for national public order and security.” (Dpcm 12th February 2012)

The Minister of Home Affairs governed the emergency according to two different plans. During a first stage, which lasted until the end of March, it tried to confine the emergency on the Sicilian territory, mainly of the Lampedusa Island; during a second stage, when the situation in the little pelagic island become unsustainable, the government was forced to plan the distribution of landed migrants over the whole national territory. Distinctive traits of this model for managing the emergency was the wide resort to the administrative detention of migrants in places or spaces which, following Giorgio Agamben, we could define as *spaces of legal indistinction*. These places could be considered a typical example of the *camp form* because they are institutional settings functioning above the legal framework ruling the ordinary detention of migrants and ruled under a state of permanent exception (Agamben 1995: 188; 1996: 38, 39). According the Dpcm and Opcm mentioned above, the special commissioner for the emergency was entrusted with the power to set “structures” or “spaces” where to *keep* or *detain* (the Italian word *trattenere* is an euphemism for detention) the landed migrants. But, while these decree and orders were not ruling any explicit derogation to the Italian and European law regarding detention centres for migrants, their generic reference to the need to act above the law for dealing with the emergency, legitimized an institutional practice which made a breach in the legal framework, creating spaces of detention where the police acted as sovereign filling with its full powers the legal void.

According to the Italian ordinary law, there are three different kinds of centres for migrants: (a) the reception centres (Centri di accoglienza – CDA), two of them defined reception and first-aid centres for their particular position near the most southern Italian shores (Centri di primo soccorso ed accoglienza - CPSA), set by the Law n. 563/1995 and intended at providing the first aid to irregular immigrants found in distress within the Italian territory. Reception in this kind of centres is limited in time, lasting normally for the time needed in order to provide first-aid, identification and defining the legal status of the intercepted migrants. (b) The reception centres for asylum seekers (Centri di accoglienza per richiedenti asilo - CARA) set by the Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica n. 303/ 2004 and by the Decreto Legislativo n. 25/2008, where the asylum seekers who had escaped border control are hosted in an “open door regime”, and generally speaking for no more than 35 days, while their protection request is processed. (c) The detention centres for irregular migrants (Centri di Identificazione ed Espulsione – CIE) set by the art. 14 of the Immigration Law (the so called Testo Unico sull’Immigrazione), where immigrants to be returned in their countries of origin/transit are detained following a police order confirmed by a judge in order to prepare the return and/or carry out the removal process. According to the new regulation set by the Law n. 94/2009, the maximum detention time is now 180 days.

The spaces and places of detention created under the umbrella of the emergency powers were ruled under a situation of complete uncertainty regarding their nature and the legal status of their “hosts”. The Italian government voluntarily produced this situation in order to avoid that the landed migrants were managed according to the legal status of proper asylum seeker, or according to the legal status of illegal immigrants. In these two cases, right after their short stay in a CDA or CPSA, immigrants should have been sent to a CARA in order to define their request of international protection, or to a CIE in order to prepare the return and/or carry out the removal process. In both cases the risk Italian government was trying to avoid was to be forced to release the third country nationals on Italian territory. On the one hand, indeed, when a request of international protection is forwarded, the third country national is registered in the EURODAC system and set partially free to circulate within the Italian territory, without the right to leave to another member states; on the other hand, according to the directive 2008/115/EC, by now directly enforceable in the Italian domestic jurisdiction, the return decision should “provide for an appropriate period for voluntary departure” (art. 7), leaving removal and administrative detention as last resort. Unless police was able to prove that the landed migrants were trying to abscond themselves, or were posing a threat to public order (art. 7.4), the Italian government would have been forced to release these migrants with an order to voluntarily leave the country.

The situation of legal uncertainty was thus consciously protracted for weeks, confining the landed migrants within the *spaces indistinction* created by zones of internment, temporary camps and institutional settings whose legal status was not clarified. This with the clear aim to extend over time the arbitrary detention of immigrants, while the diplomatic negotiations with other member states and the Tunisian government were trying to find a solution which would have avoided the permanence of the third country nationals on Italian territory. More specifically, during the first stage of the crisis the Italian government arbitrarily protracted the internment of the landed migrants on Lampedusa, transforming the little island in a real *open air camp* kept above the law and without allowing any judge to confirm the protracted deprivation of liberty as the art. 13 of Italian Constitution would require. During the second stage, a new system of *temporary camps* was set up placing some tent-city intended to host up to 720 migrants in abandoned military sites. Even in this case, given the uncertainty regarding the legal status of the hosted third country nationals, no judicial confirmation of the detention according to the art. 13 of Italian Constitution was ruled. On the contrary, the temporary camps were set under a regime of permanent emergency that escaped not only judicial review, but also civil society oversight, with Police forces responsible for camps management repeatedly denying the right of access also to the Members of the Italian Parliament (who according to the Italian Constitution can visit all places of detention). Moreover, the internal rule of these camps was defined by police forces alone,

under the legal umbrella of the emergency powers accorded by the above mentioned Dpcm and Opcm, thereby creating a situation where police forces were the absolute sovereign over the rights and the living condition of hundreds of people kept under a regime of arbitrary administrative detention.

Close the tap, flush the tank

The 5th of April was a crucial day for the management of the emergency. This was the day when the new agreement with Tunisia was signed and the Prime Minister enacted its decree according to the temporary protection ruled by the art. 20 of Italian Immigration Law to all the landed migrants. The Italian government sealed a strategy which Umberto Bossi, leader of the xenophobic Lega Nord party, with his taste for strong images aptly synthesized saying: “we must close the tap and flush the tank!” (Quotidiano Nazionale 6th of April). The aim was to encourage the departure of the migrants landed on Italian shores since January 2011, while rebuilding the bilateral collaboration in the field of migration control with the temporary Tunisian government in order to prevent further inflows.

Since the very beginning, the system of temporary camps and installations created for detaining the migrants landed in Lampedusa showed many cracks. Reports say that disorders and escapes were uninterrupted in the centres where migrants were progressively displaced from Lampedusa. According to the words of some operators working at the detention centres, there was a *physiologic dispersion rate*, which increased sharply when the Italian government created the system of temporary camps. The tent-city were improvised installations impossible to keep under strict surveillance, while the police forces called to manage them often described the tense situation inside, suggesting they were forced to allow a certain degree of *dispersion* in order to keep good order and security.

This situation lasted until the moment the Italian government decided to define the legal status of landed migrants, finally opting for a clear humanitarian framing of the crisis against the opinion of its political majority, which was pushing for a more securitarian framing, and that of the European partners, which were advocating a more ordinary model of migration control. Being unable of managing the temporary camps under an emergency rule by further protracting the arbitrary detention, the Italian Government opted for the activation of the procedure of temporary protection ruled by the art. 20 of Italian Immigration Law, providing all the migrants landed on Italian shores from January 2011 to 5th April 2011 with a temporary residence permit for humanitarian reason. This was a way to enact unilaterally the instrument of temporary protection that European institutions were reluctant to activate, but of course this was done not without consequences, as we shall see. Nevertheless, the first and closer problem the Italian government had to solve was to convince its political allies and especially the Lega Nord party, which saw the temporary protection as a more or less masked amnesty. The winning argument was that this solution would have alleviated the migratory pressure over Italy, allowing the landed migrants to reach their relatives and friends in France and Germany. It was the same Umberto Bossi who explained the reasons of his approval: “I agree with this solution as long as they go to France and Germany” (Quotidiano Nazionale 6th April 2011).

The Dpcm was thus finally signed declaring all the Tunisian arrived until 5th april 2011 in need of temporary protection, while at the same time implicitly closing the humanitarian emergency and opening the stage for a pure securitarian management of those who would have landed from now onward. The newly arrived Tunisian would have been treated as illegal immigrants and returned to their country of origin according to the rules set in the agreement signed with Tunisia. According to the first estimation, the Italian Government talked of about 14.500 potential beneficiaries of the temporary protection. Considering that, since January 2011 to the 5th of April 2011, around 25.000 migrant landed on the Italian shores and that around 2.300 of them were

coming from Libya, being thus eligible for international protection, while some other 2.200 Tunisian formally asked for a form of international protection, it can be easily sensed how many missing person there were: some around 5000 (Il Sole 24 ore 7th April). These are the numbers of the *physiologic dispersion*.

Regarding the control of external border, it was immediately clear that the inflow of migrants from northern-African shores was due to the collapse of Tunisian political structures. Tunisia was explicitly defined a *failed state*, so that with a peculiar exemplification of the doctrine of the right to humanitarian intervention (De Larrinaga and Doucet 2008), the Italian government raised the idea of supplementing the Tunisian police's inability of patrolling its borders. The proposal was immediately refused with indignation by the Tunisian government. Started with the wrong foot, the negotiation with Tunisia lasted very long. Italian Ministers' official visits in Tunisia were recurrent from February onward, with a sharp fluctuation in the public declarations' tone. Italy was clearly using carrot and stick in order to wring an agreement that should cover the field of police cooperation and the readmission of illegal migrants. At some stages of the negotiations, the Italian Foreign Affairs Minister was at the point to offer, beside substantial financial aids, 2000 Euros for each migrant readmitted; at some other stages, Italy explicitly threatened unilateral actions above international law such as naval blockage and forced mass repatriations of illegal immigrants. The Tunisian government, on its part, dictated its own conditions: no agreement on police cooperation would include joint patrol in Tunisian or international waters; readmission were to be done for small group of migrants, 50 at most, in order to avoid hurting public opinion susceptibility regarding the issue and putting at risk the legitimacy of a temporary government put in place to drive the country transition to democracy.

Finally, after more than nine ours of talks between Roberto Maroni and its Tunisian counterpart, Habib Essid, and other long preparatory talks among JHA bureaucrats, Italy and Tunisia signed what the report define a "memorandum of understanding". This was basically a working agreement on the issue of police cooperation and readmission of illegally staying migrants according to which Tunisian liaison officers will be displaced in Italy in order to carry out accelerated repatriation procedure, while Italy will provide on its own part 10 patrol boat, 100 off-road vehicles and economic aid to Tunisian government. As already happened with many other *informalized* international agreements in the field of border control (Cassarino 2007), this working agreement was not ratified by the Italian Parliament, nor published in the Official Journal. At time of writing, its text has still not made public.

Repatriations started the 8th of April, with many special flight boarding 30 migrants at a time escorted by a large contingent of police officers. The return procedure used is highly problematic from a legal point of view. Firstly because the Italian government is abusing of the so called *delayed refusal of entry* (*respingimento differito*) ruled by the art. 10 of Italian Immigration Law. According to the Italian law, a refusal of entry could be issued also when the illegal migrants has already crossed the border but the police has intercepted him/her in the so called "frontier zone" right after the crossing. It is quite problematic to use such delayed refusal of entry in order to ground legally the forced return of someone who has crossed the border since weeks and, very often, was already displaced in some of the many Italian temporary camps. By using this procedure the Italian government is equating the whole Lampedusa and the other temporary camps to an *extraterritorial frontier zone* where the immigrant, despite being well inside the Italian territory, has never reached its "legal border" (Basaran 2008). The aim is, again, to avoid the need to use the ordinary return procedure which, according the directive 2008/115/EC, implies the use of forced removal and administrative detention only as last resort and after issuing an order of voluntary departure. The same directive states, indeed, that Member States may decide not to apply its provisions to illegal immigrants subject to a refusal of entry in accordance of art. 13 of Schengen Border Code (art. 2.2(a)). Moreover, due to the violent disorders roused by each return flight, the police do avoid to handle the return decision to the migrants, keeping them

in the dark about the final destination of their trip and thereby denying the right of appeal against the refusal of entry decision accorded by articles 13 and 15 of the Schengen Border Code.

The Schengen spirit

The unilateral issuing of temporary protection by Italian government stirred up a bitter political and legal confrontation about its compatibility with the Schengen acquis. At the JHA Council of 11th of April 2011 Italy was explicitly accused of violating the “Schengen spirit”. “We cannot accept – remarked the German Home Affair Minister Hans Peter Friederich – that economic migrants arrive in Europe in big numbers through Italy. We took note that Italians are issuing temporary residence permit *de facto* allowing illegal immigrants to travel into Europe. The French are strengthening their border controls, Austria is thinking about it. It is not in the Europe’s interest that Member States are forced to reactivate internal border controls; we hope Italians will comply with their duties” (Corriere della Sera 12th April 2011)

It was by then some time that French-Italian diplomatic relationships were not animated by the Schengen spirit. The prefecture of the Alpes-Maritimes was “fencing” its border since January, denouncing the illegal crossing of some 3000 Tunisian citizens without legal status coming from Italy. While Ventimiglia, the last Italian town before the French border, was filled of migrants camping in the area around the train station and waiting the right moment to avoid the Gendarmerie’s patrols on the other side. According to the bilateral readmission agreements of Chambéry (1997), Italy and France are allowed to return the illegal immigrants found in their territory when it could be proved objectively that he/her transited through the other country. There have been, needless to say, many accusations from the Italian side on how the French police used to prove *objectively* the transit of Tunisian citizen from Italy.

Once Italy accorded the temporary protection to Tunisians, besides questioning the compatibility of the residence permit issued *ex art.* 20 of Italian Immigration Law with the Schengen acquis, France announced a strengthening of border checks. Its Minister of Interior Claude Guénant issued a *circulaire* directed to police officers in order to stimulate a more strict enactment of the entry conditions set by art. 5 of the Schengen Border code, while assuring that border checks would have been carried out *non systematically* according to art. 21.a(iii) of the same code. Belgium, Austria, Germany and Denmark announced similar measures at land and air borders, triggering the Italian reaction, with government high representatives denouncing an explicitly hostile attitude and a clear violation of the Schengen rules on internal border checks. Once the days of the hottest confrontation passed by, all Member States were forced to admit the legitimacy of the measures taken by the others, as the same Commission often remarked, declaring the legality of both the “non systematic” border check and the temporary protection issued by Italy.

Although legitimate from a strictly legal point of view, these measures raised many political tensions that clearly made the Schengen system showing some cracks, as was forced to admit also the president of the European Council Herman van Rompuy: “neither Italy, nor France did until now something illegal. This said, there is the risk to violate the spirit of the Schengen agreements” (Avvenire 18th of April). At the eve of the decision about the accession to Schengen of Romania and Bulgaria, with the Greece considered as the weak link in the European border regime, so that Frontex is in full force at the Greek-Turkish border since October 2010, the tensions among Italy and the others Member States (manly France) triggered by the Lampedusa crisis provided the opportunity for an official proposal of revision of the Schengen agreements.

The 20th of April the Commission issued a draft communication on migration, finally approved the 4th of May, then presented at the JHA Council of 12th May and to be fully discussed at the next European Council the 24th of June. The communication, which stresses how “weaknesses at some sections of the external border undermine confidence in the credibility of the Union’s ability

to control access to its territory, and undermine mutual trust”, contains the proposal to review the Schengen agreements with the aim of further developing “a shared culture among national authorities”. To this end a “clear system for Schengen governance is needed”. The Commission envisages a mechanism “to allow the Union to handle situations where either a Member State is not fulfilling its obligations to control its section of the external border, or where a particular portion of the external border comes under unexpected and heavy pressure due to external events” (COM(2011) 248 final). This new mechanism for the Schengen governance is presented as a tool to avoid new tensions among Member States acting unilaterally. The idea is basically to attract the prerogative to define the situation of emergency which would legitimate any derogations to the Schengen ordinary rule in the hand of European institutions, although it is hard to see how Member States will give up their sovereign prerogatives in the field of national and public security. They will more likely agree on a mechanism of *mobile external frontier* which could move back and forth as circumstances will require. Such a mechanism will allow to transform the southern and eastern Member States, some of them explicitly considered as the weak link of external border control regime, into a truly buffer zone partially outside the Schengen system. Countries like Italy and Greece seem now candidates to replace the security sanitary cordon against illegal immigration created at the European southern periphery by northern-African countries before the Arab revolts, thereby protecting the safe area of freedom, security and justice of core European countries.

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