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# **POLICY BRIEF N°3**



**ADDRESSING MIGRATORY CRISIS THROUGH  
MILITARY AND COERCIVE APPROACHES: LESSONS  
FROM THE FAILURE OF OPERATION SOPHIA, THE EU  
NAVAL MISSION TO TACKLE IRREGULAR MIGRATION  
IN SOUTHERN CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN**

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**In this policy brief which is an appraisal of Operation Sophia and the lessons to be learnt from it, the Global Emergency and Counterterrorism Institute provides clear and sustainable suggestions to curb the irregular migration. We hope that our insights will be useful to officials, policy and decision-makers, law enforcement agencies, civil societies and other organisations engaging in immigration issues.**

On 12 July 2017, the Authority of the House of Lords of European Union Committee published its second report 2017-19 entitled “Operation Sophia: a failed mission.” According to the UK House of Lords’ EU Committee, Operation Sophia failed to achieve its goal.

What is it about?

## **OVERVIEW OF OPERATION SOPHIA TO COUNTER THE SURGE OF MIGRANTS CROSSING THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA FROM LIBYA**

EUNAVFORMED or operation SOPHIA was defined as:

A military crisis management operation contributing to the disruption of the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean achieved by undertaking systematic efforts to identify, capture and dispose of vessels and



assets used or suspected of being used by smugglers and traffickers.

On 18 May 2015 the Foreign Affairs Council approved Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/778, establishing a military CSDP operation aiming at disrupting the operations of people smugglers in Libya. This operation was originally named EUNAVFOR MED but was later renamed Operation Sophia. The initiative resulted from the fact that a month earlier that year on 19 April, a boat that capsized off the Coast of Libya led to the death of more than 800 migrants who drowned.

**Libya, an apocalyptic no man's land operating beyond the realm of law and order**

The Killing of Mohammad Khadhafi in 2011 left a serious power vacuum in Libya. This resulted in an escalation of the number of refugees and migrants crossing from Libya to Europe on overcrowded and unsafe boats through the Mediterranean Sea. These perilous trips have been organised by an illegal people smuggling industry which since then found itself submerged in an apocalyptic no man's land operating beyond the realm



of law and order. The European Union grew concern regarding the chaotic situation in Libya, not only because of the increasing number of migrants arriving on its soil but also because of the number of casualties among candidates to irregular migrations. This led to the establishment of Operation Sophia by the EU on 18 May 2015 with the mandate of sending a fleet of warships to seize the people smugglers' boats and crush human smuggling in the Southern Central Mediterranean and to prevent the further loss of life at sea. Federica Mogherini coined that Operation Sophia is an operation against people smugglers, and not against refugees and migrants.

## THE MANDATE OF OPERATION SOPHIA

Operation Sophia is divided into the following phases:

- Phase 1 involved the detection and monitoring of migration networks through information gathering and patrolling on the high seas;



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- In Phase 2A, which commenced in October 2015, the mission can board, search, seize and divert vessels suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking on the high seas;
- Phase 2B would see the mission move into the territorial and internal waters of Libya; and
- In Phase 3, the mission would operate in Libyan territory.

Both Phases 2B and 3 would require a Resolution of the UN Security Council or consent by the Libyan government.

## **OPERATION SOPHIA AND THE ARSENAL FOR COMBATING ILLEGAL MIGRATION**

Operation Sophia currently has access to three helicopters, four aircraft and six ships including one landing platform dock, one auxiliary ship, one survey ship, and three frigates.

Operation Sophia is currently on its second phase of the total of four stages, which plans “boarding, search, seizure and diversion of smugglers' vessels,” as well as training of the Libyan coastguards and navy. The latter task is vital to proceed to further stages of the operation, but it is “not currently possible” according to one of the witnesses cited in



the report. The common costs of Operation Sophia from 28 July 2016 to 27 July 2017 is €6.7 million. The mission's military assets and personnel are provided by contributing Member States (25 in total) and both running and personnel costs are met on a national basis.

## THE BALANCE SHEET OF OPERATION SOPHIA

### Operation Sophia: a failed mission

A report regarding the assessment of Operation Sophia released on 12 July 2017 considered it to be “a failed mission.” The followings are its main findings:

- The committee found that the migrant flows have only increased since the beginning of the operation, with a spike by 19 percent in the first half of 2017 compared to 2016.



- Irregular migration into Europe on the central Mediterranean route increased by 18 percent in 2016, and by another 19 percent in the first six months of 2017 compared to 2016.
- The committee further stated that “a naval Mission is the wrong tool to tackle irregular migration” as the latter starts onshore because “once the boats have set sail, it is too late to undermine the business of people smuggling.”
- Despite “valuable search and rescue work at sea,” the operation “had not in any meaningful way deterred the flow of migrants, disrupted the smugglers’ networks, or impeded the business of people smuggling on the central Mediterranean route.”
- Operation Sophia responds to symptoms, not causes of the European refugee crisis, while the huge flow of irregular migration stems from “the weakness of the Libyan state.”
- So far, Operation Sophia, managed to arrest 110 suspected migrant smugglers, destroyed 452 smuggler vessels and rescue a total of 33,830 migrants, according to the report. The mission has been extended until 27 July 2017 and is expected to cost up to €18.5 million (\$21.2 million).



- The destruction of vessels led to “an unintended consequence” – the smugglers started to send those willing to reach European coast aboard “unseaworthy vessels.” This has increased the risk for migrants, for “70 percent of all boats leaving the Libyan coast contributes to making journeys increasingly dangerous” leading to “a tragic increase in deaths.” 2,150 deaths as of 2 July 2017. In 2016 alone, the number of recorded deaths at sea reached 4,581, which is almost double as many as in 2015.

**Table 1: Migrant arrivals and deaths at sea 2015–2017**

Year	Migrants arriving in Italy via central Mediterranean route	Deaths at sea (as recorded)
2017	84,879 (as of 3 July)	2,150 (as of 2 July)
2016	181,436	4,581
2015	153,842	2,876



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## RECOMMENDATIONS

Supporting economic development and good governance across Sub-Saharan Africa is the only way to tackle mass migration in the long term

Despite the failure of Operation Sophia, the report has the merit to contain the key solution to the surge of migrants. As stated by the lawmakers:

“supporting economic development and good governance” across Sub-Saharan Africa is the only way to tackle mass migration in the long term

In our view, this solution is the most sustainable approach to the current migratory crisis across the Southern Central Mediterranean. Having



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suggested such a brilliant idea, it is hardly understandable why EU officials persist in putting so much energy and focus on military arsenal and coercive approaches.

Firstly, depriving migrants from boats might not be helpful in curbing their attempts to reach Europe. In such a situation, the most accurate solution would be to give priority not on coercive methods but on preventive measures. These are indeed conditioned by the promotion of economic development, education, human rights, compliance with the rule of law, anticorruption campaigns and an extended awareness campaigns towards some of the Sub Saharan African leaders and their local and international acolytes who do not spare any means in depriving masses from their basic needs, services delivery and human rights. These are according to us key issues at the origin of the current migratory crisis and if nothing is done in this sense the situation might last for quite some time.

Operation Sophia, by focusing its mandate and activities on smuggling industry in Libya instead attempts to curb such industry from a “post production” stage



Secondly it is important to keep in mind that focusing exclusively on Libya might not be enough and sustainable to resolve the crucial issue of irregular migration in the Southern Central Mediterranean. Though spatially and geographically located on the African continent and in some part of the Sahara Desert, the reality is that Libya is nonetheless at the door steps of Europe. In such a context, the Libya territory need to be perceived as what it really is, that is a “gathering point”, a “transit area” and a “waiting room” for “passengers” to a clandestine European journey. The rationale behind this is that fighting the surge of migrants with Libya as the sole focal point might be counterproductive in the long term. This is in our sense part of the reasons why Operation Sophia end up being “a failed mission.” This operation by focusing its mandate and activities on smuggling industry in Libya instead attempts to curb such industry from a “post production” stage. Officials, policy makers and other decision-makers should understand that preventing people from the mere idea of initiating the initial trip from their land towards Libya remains the prerequisite and the most efficient antimigration remedy. Preventing various sort of conflicts, curbing imperialist policies and other



transnational crimes will be a promising starting point. Prior to the death of Mohammad Khaddaffi, there was already a migration issue in Libya, but what is certain today is that his killing has been a serious factor contributing to the worsening of the situation. The respect of human dignity wherever they are, fairness, justice, fair (re)distribution of resources, compliance with law and human rights can no longer be ignored if one has the desire to successfully tackle the irregular migration.



**About the author:**

Gerard Emmanuel Kamdem Kamga was trained in law and political science, human rights, critical theory, security and gender analysis. Holding a doctoral degree in laws with focus on emergency regimes from the University of Pretoria, he has over the years, developed a sound expertise in emergency and security issues. Gerard is the Executive Director of the Global Emergency and Counterterrorism Institute.