

Migrants and Refugees: The Greek Boat Disaster Was Caused by the EU

The former colonial powers are feeding the very causes of regional, social and economic instability that create these refugee flows

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Grotesque though it may seem, what happened last week when anything up to 500 men women and children [drowned](#) off the coast of Pylos in Greece was just another day in the life of the Mediterranean Sea.

Mass drownings of refugees, who set out in overcrowded boats from [Libya](#), [Tunisia](#) and [Egypt](#), have become so commonplace that this sea deserves to be stripped of its title as the cradle of civilisation.

More than [1,200 people](#) drowned in the Mediterranean last year, and almost [25,000](#) since 2014. It should be now known as the cruel sea.

The cruelty, however, is entirely man-made.

To the south, you have dictators who spend untold sums on armaments, vanity projects or just themselves. Not only are they dragging their own countries into destitution, sending each year ever more of their poor into the boats, they actively engage in military adventures abroad, sowing war and chaos wherever their forces go.

To the north, you have a [Europe](#) that has all but abandoned search and rescue, and will do anything, including paying the dictators, to stop the migrant flow. Both mouth platitudes about the deaths.

The international media follows suit.

Just compare and contrast the coverage that [the five men trapped](#) on the lost Titan submarine is getting and [the efforts](#) the US Navy and Coast Guard are making to reach them

with the following account of what happened off the coast of Pylos last week and will continue to happen every other week this year.

A horribly familiar story

The tragedy took place slowly and in plain sight of a stationary Greek coastguard ship. Four survivors interviewed by The Sunday Times [said](#) the Greek coastguard did not send help for at least three hours after the boat capsized.

A BBC investigation [revealed](#) that the boat itself had not moved for at least seven hours before it capsized. Alarm Phone, which monitors the seas for vessels in distress, [says](#) the ship called for help on Tuesday evening, a full day before it sank.

The Greek coastguard, on the other hand, [claimed](#) the ship had refused help and was on its way to Italy.

This is a horribly familiar story.

On 26 February, the same thing happened to a ship off the coast of Crotona in Italy. Nearly 200 refugees, mostly Afghans, were on board, and [94 died](#) including 35 children.

Almost identical to the latest story the Greek coastguard has attempted [to fabricate](#), the official Italian account is that the wooden Turkish leisure boat, the Summer Love, sank in rough seas six hours after being sighted by a Frontex plane, which [reported](#) that the vessel “showed no signs of distress”.

[Lighthouse Reports](#) got hold of the Frontex (EU border agency) flight records which revealed that the aircraft encountered strong winds two hours before it spotted the boat, and had detected a “significant thermal response” below deck indicating an unusual number of people onboard.

Both of these details were dropped from the official record.

“It was heavily overloaded and that would have been visible to Frontex,” Lighthouse spokesperson Klaas van Dijken [told](#) MEE. “Everybody was aware and they did not send a rescue ship and that decision had huge consequences for the people on board.”

Frontex is not making these life-and-death decisions in a political vacuum.

Greece, which is being chastised by the European Commission for its policy of “violent pushbacks”, spends just €600,000 (\$654,000) or [0.07 percent](#) of the total budget allocated for border management on search and rescue capacity.

Funding the traffickers

From 2021 to 2027, Greece has been allocated more than [€819m](#) (\$894m) from the current EU budget, most of which is spent, according to Catherine Woollard, director of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, on keeping refugees out of Europe.

Greece’s immediate neighbour Italy is even more explicit in its actions.

The far-right Italian premier Giorgia Meloni has gone out of her way to reset Italy’s relations

with the dictators of the southern Mediterranean.

She met [Khalifa Haftar](#), whose stronghold in the Cyrenaica region of Libya is the prime point of departure for migrants attempting to reach Italy. Apart from launching a civil war against the internationally recognised Libyan national unity government in Tripoli, thus crippling any chance of a revival of the country after [Muammar Gaddafi](#), Haftar has backed [Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo](#), otherwise known as Hemeti, in his attempt to seize power in [Sudan](#), and has ties with [Wagner mercenaries](#).

The EU knows it is financing the trade that is going on between the Libyan Coast Guard and the smugglers. A UN fact-finding mission to Libya [accused](#) officials in the Libyan Coast Guard and its Department of Combatting Illegal Migration of working with traffickers and smugglers.

Earlier this year, the EU Neighbourhood Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi [handed over](#) patrol vessels to the Libyan Coast Guard and [announced](#) an €800m (\$873m) package to stem migration from Africa.

All in all, Haftar has been responsible for creating more refugees than anyone else I can think of on the North African coast, with the possible exception of his one-time backer President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

It has been ten years since Sisi seized power through the military coup overthrowing Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first democratically elected president.

According to the Italian interior ministry, about [20,000 Egyptians](#) have arrived in Italy via Libya in 2022, almost three times the number who crossed by the same time in 2021. Egyptians are now thought to comprise [the bulk of refugees](#) arriving in Italy.

Soha Gendi, the Egyptian minister of immigration, unwisely admitted in a phone-in on Sunday to an obvious truth: that the Egyptians who survived the disaster off the Greek coast would do anything to avoid having to return home. Forty three of them are in a refugee camp in Greece.

Following closely behind Haftar and Sisi, Tunisia's dictator [Kais Saied](#) hosted the leaders of Italy, Netherlands and the EU for an aid package, after a short period in office where he has succeeded in bankrupting his country to the point where it is about to [default on its foreign debt](#).

The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, [declared](#) that "since 2011, the European Union has been supporting Tunisia's journey of democracy. It is long, sometimes a difficult road. But these difficulties can be overcome."

She was talking as Saied, the principal obstacle to restoring parliamentary democracy, was standing right next to her.

Helping the autocrats

The EU's approach to the shutting down of democracy in Tunisia mirrors Meloni's. If anything, it is even more cynical than the Italian premier.

On Monday, the EU Foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, [told](#) his Egyptian counterpart that the

EU would give Cairo €20m to cope with 200,000 refugees from Sudan. He called for the release of €80m pledged to Egypt last year for border management.

These figures are peanuts compared to the money EU states have [earned in arms exports to Egypt](#). In the ten years since Sisi's military coup, EU countries – [including the UK](#) – exported or licensed [\\$12.4bn](#) worth of arms to Egypt, according to the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT).

But even if you take the sums Borrell announced on Monday at face value, there are no formal mechanisms within these agreements to monitor how these sums are spent. It just goes down a big black hole, like any other money given to Sisi.

While impoverishing Egyptians, Sisi's spending on arms has placed Egypt among [the top ten](#) importers of arms worldwide. Between 2010 and 2020, it bought [\\$22bn](#) worth of weapons.

Why shed any tears for democracy, when autocracy is so good for business?

And, trust me, the EU has abandoned the democracy agenda it touts so loudly in Ukraine for North Africa and the desperately poor states lying in its backyard.

When Tunisians boycotted Saied's move to inaugurate a rubber-stamp parliament, having shut down the judicial council, Borrell [called for](#) "institutional stability to be restored as quickly as possible".

Saied was only too keen to oblige by [arresting](#) Rached Ghannouchi, the head of Ennahda, the largest party in the old parliament. With each move, Saied was given the green light to proceed by the absence of any meaningful action by the EU.

And so too has Britain.

Europe has abandoned everything it claims to stand for in its Mediterranean backyard.

When challenged in a recent meeting of the UK Foreign Affairs Committee about what Britain was doing to secure Ghannouchi's release, the British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly did not even know who was the minister in charge of Tunisia, let alone what he had said.

"Tunisia looked like it might be the good news story from the Arab Spring. It is disappointing to see the progress they have been making set backwards. We have engaged. I will double check when the most recent engagement is. It will have been done. It's not something that I personally have done. It is something we feel strongly about," Cleverly [told](#) the committee.

A disastrous policy

The disaster of Britain's policy on Tunisia, from the minister responsible, Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, down to the UK ambassador to Tunisia, Helen Winterton, is that it has gone native.

Lord Ahmad is the longest-serving minister in the FCO, a minister under David Cameron, Theresa May, Liz Truss, Boris Johnson and now Rishi Sunak. He is the minister for [India](#), [Pakistan](#), [Israel](#), Egypt, Tunisia, and for religious freedom.

He has the deepest corporate knowledge in that department, having served the last five prime ministers. If anyone should know what happened in Egypt, Libya or Tunisia it is Lord Ahmad, because he lived through it. And he is doing nothing with his knowledge.

He is truly asleep at the wheel.

As long as Britain and the EU refuse to call military coups what they are, continue to back venal and vicious dictators, the flood of migrants will increase.

Because just as when France, Britain, Spain and Portugal were colonial powers, today they are feeding the very causes of regional social and economic instability that create these refugee flows.

The Egyptian army is the prime cause of the country's [economic downfall](#) because so much of the economy is in its hands. It makes the Soviet military-industrial complex's grip over the failing economy in the last decades of the Soviet empire look modest in comparison.

And yet France, Britain and Germany are only boosting the corrupt military by selling it arms.

This is a conscious policy, not an accident of history.

If EU leaders think they can save Europe by pandering to dictators, and by letting boats sink, they have a surprise in store for them.

The migrant flows from Egypt and Tunisia have only just started. There are literally millions more Egyptians, Tunisians, Sudanese and Afghans planning and saving for the same journey.

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Featured image: Fishing boat involved in the 2023 Peloponnese migrant boat disaster, taken by the Greek coastguard hours before the capsizing. (Licensed under Fair Use)

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