



Analysis

Italy: Fire and loathing in Lampedusa

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During a revolt on the afternoon of 20 September 2011, a group of Tunisians detained in the overcrowded Contrada Imbriacola *centro di prima soccorso e accoglienza* (CPSA, early assistance and reception centre) in Lampedusa set fire to the structure, destroying one of its wings. Over half of the people (1,247 on 13 September, according to a blog by ARCI volunteers on the island, but there were subsequent arrivals) held there escaped. In fact, as the flames soared, the doors of the detention centre were opened and detainees fled towards the island's town centre where, for example, around 300 Tunisians slept in the open in a sports field, while others did so on a pier. The next day, clashes began between Tunisians and citizens of Lampedusa who threw rocks at them, and the police and carabinieri (members of a police force with military status) intervened. Violent scenes were broadcast on the evening's television news programmes of officers advancing as they used their truncheons to strike migrants who had no escape route other than jumping off a high wall. Several of them were injured. A group of Tunisians had allegedly stolen gas canisters from a restaurant and threatened to make them explode. There were reports of citizen patrols on the streets and clashes between officers and migrants in the functioning wing of the CPSA.

The island's mayor, Bernardino De Rubeis, helped to stoke the flames, warning of a "war scenario in which Lampedusans are ready to react". De Rubeis worked with a baseball bat in his office accusing the government of "failing to protect" them, explaining that citizens do not want migrants roaming freely around the island. He called on the government to move them. Speaking of his failed attempts to contact Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and interior

minister Roberto Maroni, De Rubeis said that "the time for chatting and well-meaning argument is over. The Viminale [seat of the interior ministry] must move everyone out".

Within three days, the island was cleared of migrants using C-130 air force aircraft to transfer 100 of them on the first night, 300 on the second night and a further 500 over the next 24 hours. They are set to be repatriated from Palermo, where they will briefly appear before staff from the Tunisian consulate before boarding their return flights. Boats arriving with migrants on board were no longer taken directly to Lampedusa, as had become customary, but were escorted to Porto Empedocle on the Sicilian mainland. Mayor De Rubeis asked for the nearby island of Linosa to be cleared of migrants as well, after the arrival of a boat carrying 26 Tunisians who joined the 72 who were already on the island.

The crisis also led to the development of "new" practices that take us back to the times of Charles Dickens or Victor Hugo's novels. Seven hundred men are being held on three ferryboats, the *Moby Fantasy*, *Audacia* and *Moby Vincent*, effectively prison-ships (termed "floating collection points") on the sea outside the port at Palermo as they await their turn to be repatriated. Later reports noted that they were handcuffed with plastic cuffs and kept below deck, without any external associations, lawyers or doctors allowed access to them. Their mobile telephones were confiscated to stop them communicating with people outside. On 28 September 2011 a complaint was submitted to the Palermo public prosecutors' office by members of several organisations, including the CGIL trade union, ARCI and Borderline Sicilia. They asked it to investigate whether any crimes had been

committed, including: the unlawful limiting of personal freedom, personal violence, a failure to issue the orders for detention that are required by law against individuals, falsehood in public documents, unlawful detention of minors, violation of the right to defence and offences stemming from the violence against two Tunisians who were injured on Lampedusa in the days following the fire.

Eleven migrants were arrested and taken to Agrigento prison on the Sicilian mainland. Four Tunisians were accused in connection with the fire, as ringleaders responsible for arson, causing criminal damage and resisting public officers. Four people (two Nigerians, one Sudanese and one Tunisian) were arrested for violating immigration law, as they are suspected of being smugglers, and three people had pending expulsion orders.* Agrigento public prosecutor Renato Di Natale confirmed that there would be an investigation into the fire which may result in charges of arson and causing criminal damage. He added "if the law enforcement agencies' inquiries ascertain that, in effect, many people's lives were seriously endangered charges of [attempted] mass murder may be brought".

There had apparently been a disagreement in the centre between a group of migrants who wanted to set mattresses alight and a smaller group that opposed the action. One Tunisian told *Il Manifesto* newspaper "I am sorry about what happened, I am sorry about what my friends have done, but it is the only way we have to make ourselves heard". One key effect of this revolt was that the detained Tunisians are now considered "criminals" and "violent people", first at a local level by Lampedusans and their authorities, and later in the national political debate. After the migrants were moved out, De Rubeis was relieved, noting that "we will continue to receive refugees, but we don't want Tunisians anymore after what has happened". This followed earlier claims that they had shown themselves to be "people who commit misdeeds. Lampedusa welcomed them and they have very seriously damaged the territory". It is interesting to note how attitudes have changed. The island's population, many of whom had taken part in rescue operations, had initially welcomed the migrants and the local authorities, including De Rubeis, had offered solidarity to those fleeing from north Africa - in contrast to the government's discourse.

A practice that is developing internationally involves the channelling of arrivals through specific areas (which turn into "laboratories") in order to heighten tensions between newcomers and test repressive policies. On the US/Mexican border, for instance, the state of Arizona is becoming the testing ground for new laws that has led to a proliferation of vigilante groups and activities of overtly racist groups. In a similar vein, events in Lampedusa belied claims by the government about the treatment of "guests" (as detainees in Italy's centres are termed) and about plans to disperse migrants arriving from north Africa on the basis of regional populations, so that the locations where they are placed may have

the ability to deal with the influx. A *Plan for the reception of immigrants* unveiled by the civil protection department (in charge of managing the "emergency") on 12 April 2011 had their "even" distribution across Italy on the basis of their population as one of its key features. Under this plan Italy's most populated region (Lombardy, with over 10,800,000 residents) would receive 8,557 migrants and Valle d'Aosta, with a population of 136,073, would receive 108. Keeping over a thousand migrants on Lampedusa (whose population is 6,304) runs contrary to this rationale, and the extension of the period during which migrants can be detained to 18 months, as well as an increase in deportations to Tunisia and the scant likelihood of people being granted access to asylum procedures following a repatriation agreement with the Tunisian authorities struck on 5 April 2011, only served to increase tensions. It is also worth noting that the Contrada Imbriacola centre was set on fire by detainees two years ago, on 18 February 2009.

In the meantime, the government has been stressing that the reason for the revolt was an intensification of returns to Tunisia, with which "cooperation is working". Interior ministry undersecretary Sonia Viale condemned the "acts of vandalism" and "revolts" by Tunisians, arguing that they arise from "awareness that they will be repatriated" but "these instances of unacceptable violence will not modify the plan for repatriations". In fact, interior minister Maroni's visit to Tunis on 12 September 2011 marked a speeding up of repatriations, setting a period of three weeks during which the north African country would take back more migrants than was previously agreed, leading to 841 Tunisians being repatriated since it began, as Viale noted on 28 September. Nonetheless, it is worth recalling that there have been revolts in detention centres and nationwide mass escapes all year long as a result of the length and conditions of detention, factors that the government underemphasises. There was a revolt in Turin's Brunelleschi *centro di identificazione ed espulsione* (CIE, identification and expulsion centre) on the day after the fire in Lampedusa. A telephone call from a detainee in Rome's CIE in Ponte Galeria to the Radio Onda Rossa radio station on 25 September asked activists for support after a revolt broke out and dozens of detainees managed to escape. Conditions in the centre and the fact they were being served food on plates on the floor "like animals" had sparked the protest, which was violently put down. The caller also described the centre as being "worse than a prison".

Speaking of events in Lampedusa, Professor Alessandro Dal Lago of Genoa University noted that "You cannot cram human beings in these conditions and then be surprised because they rebel". Other organisations also issued statements on events in Lampedusa, including ARCI, whose immigration spokesman, Filippo Miraglia, noted that: "It was notorious that there was a tense atmosphere that was ready to explode, yet nobody intervened", while Mayor De Rubeis stressed that "We had warned everyone about what could have happened and it has

come to pass”. In their report on 14 September 2011, ARCI volunteers who are monitoring the situation on the island spoke of various protests by detainees, including hunger strikes, self-inflicted injuries, protests when repatriations were about to be enacted and at least three occasions in which there were mass escapes after 29 August 2011. The main claim voiced by the detainees during these actions was a request to be transferred from Lampedusa. The escapes, short-lived as a result of Lampedusa being an island, at least had the effect of “lowering tensions among the people in the centre” by allowing them to feel “normal” for a few hours by “drinking a coffee in a bar, or eating a piece of pizza [or]

managing to bathe in the sea”. A revolt the day before the report was written was ended by a “police charge, the firing of smoke canisters and injured people on both sides”.

Thus, after the violent clashes between locals and exploited migrant workers in Rosarno in January 2010 that led to the evacuation of black Africans from the town in Calabria, we have another case in which events that were predictable, predicted and made inevitable by the government’s actions, resulted in the scapegoating as “violent criminals” of migrants whose rights are routinely violated.

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