



Analysis

Manufacturing consent, EU style: The EU's anti-smuggling military operation

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A EU military planning document reiterates that the EU's new anti-smuggling operation could result in a ground conflict in Libya that leads to the loss of life of soldiers, refugees and smugglers, and destabilise Libya in the process. The document makes clear that most of the key details of the plan have not been worked out yet, and there is no political end point. But this is all fine, because the document plans a media strategy designed to brush these problems under the carpet.

Risks of the operation

The risks of the operation are clearly spelled out in the document. In particular:

Force Protection is paramount in all phases, but will have particular significance when confronted by hostile smugglers and for any engagement within the Libyan sovereign area....the threat to the force should be acknowledged, especially during activities such as boarding and when operating on land or in proximity to an unsecured coastline, or during interaction with non-seaworthy vessels. The potential presence of hostile forces, extremists or terrorists such as Da'esh should also be taken into consideration. The threat emanating from the mere handling of large volumes of mixed migrants flow need also to be considered

Rules of Engagement (ROE), including for 'hostage rescue', will be necessary, but don't exist yet:

USE OF FORCE: *the EUMC considers that the operation will require a set of validated and robust ROE, in particular for the seizure of vessels in a non-compliant situation, for the neutralisation of smugglers' vessels and assets, for specific situations such as hostage rescue and for the temporary detention of those posing a threat to the force or suspected of crimes. In addition, the operation will also need appropriate ROE for the handling of migrants and smugglers.*

The document also acknowledges a possible knock-on risk to the operations coordinated by Frontex, further back in the Mediterranean, which could be:

in danger due to armed smugglers.

The military officials are possibly expecting that the smugglers will become more heavily armed in response to the EU military mission. If correct, the EU military operation would increase the risk of casualties for Member States' civilian personnel coordinated by Frontex, who are mostly not full-time soldiers.

As regards the political risk, the document states:

The IMD should also emphasise the need to calibrate military activity with great care, particularly within Libyan internal waters or ashore, in order to avoid destabilising the political process by causing collateral damage, disrupting legitimate economic activity or creating a perception of having chosen sides

A separate leaked document containing political and military advice even suggests that the EU's operation could lead to *more* smuggling activity:

a visible EU naval presence in the vicinity of the embarkation areas could have a counterproductive effect in preventing human smuggling due to the possible increase in smuggling activity that could be drawn to the EU presence

Military planning?

The document explicitly acknowledges that the operation has no clear end point:

the political End State is not clearly defined

This should disturb anyone who has studied previous military operations that have gone wrong or spun out of control due to lack of clarity on what the final objectives are.

Indeed, the document makes clear that most of the details of the ongoing operation have yet to be worked out:

additional political and military directives and guidance need to be given at a later stage.... there is insufficient time to develop and obtain Council approval of Military Strategic Options.

In this context, it must be noted that the planners contemplate 'backhand' ways to increase the military forces dedicated to the operation:

a potential force multiplier could be to utilise MS naval assets transiting through the Southern Med en-route to other areas of operation

An increase in forces devoted to the operation will be 'necessary' later on (Phase 3 concerns the destruction of vessels), although no one has thought through the details yet:

generation of additional resources, not identified or deployed at the time the operation is launched, will be necessary especially before Phase 3

Unleash the spin doctors

The officials are clearly contemplating embarrassing problems, since they have a 'spin' strategy designed to deal with them:

INFORMATION STRATEGY: *the EUMC identifies a risk to EU reputation linked to any perceived transgressions by the EU force through any public misinterpretation of its tasks and objectives, or the potential negative impact should loss of life be attributed, correctly or incorrectly, to action or inaction by the EU force. Therefore, the EUMC considers that an EU information strategy from the outset, is essential in order to emphasize the purpose of the EU*

operation and to facilitate expectation management. Military information operations should be an integral part of this EU strategy.

These 'military information operations' should emphasise the military operations' focus on disrupting smugglers' 'business model':

...information strategy should avoid suggesting that the focus is to rescue migrants at sea but emphasise that the aim of the operation is to disrupt the migrants smuggling business model. By doing so the operation will indirectly contribute to reduce loss of life at sea. The target audience should include Libya and North African regional neighbours.

Leaving aside the use of armed force and a significant risk of loss of life, the obvious alternative of disrupting that 'business model' by offering the same services for free (ie greater resettlement, a bigger focus on stabilising the countries of origin and transit) does not seem to have occurred to the EU.

The military officials are particularly concerned that migrants do not find out about the operation:

Rescue operations led during this operation should not be publicised in order to avoid providing an incentive to migrants.

The risk of this approach is that a vessel in distress which is carrying refugees might not be aware that an EU military vessel is close enough nearby to rescue the lives of the people on board.

Documents:

Military committee advice:

<http://www.statewatch.org/news/2015/may/eu-military-refugee-plan-EUMC.pdf>

Politico-military advice:

<http://www.statewatch.org/news/2015/may/eu-military-refugee-plan-PMG-8824-15.pdf>

Statewatch analysis of anti-smuggling operation

<http://www.statewatch.org/analyses/no-268-eu-war-on-smugglers.pdf>

Details of planned anti-smuggling operation

<http://www.statewatch.org/news/2015/may/eu-med-military-op.pdf>

May 2015

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