



Analysis

Spain-Morocco

“Migration control, not rescue”: squeezing search and rescue in the Mediterranean

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As the EU's member states continue to discuss half-hearted plans for search and rescue and the disembarkation of migrants, they are also putting in place measures to prevent their own maritime safety authorities from carrying out rescues. At the same time, they are pressuring under-resourced and unwilling non-EU states to take on rescue tasks. As reports from Spain show, the results are deadly.

With the new Finnish Presidency of the Council in place and talks in Helsinki and Paris underway on means to improve the disembarkation of people rescued at sea, it seemed like good news was on its way. On 18 July, a Franco-German initiative proposed a “predictable temporary disembarkation scheme” based on the need to “ensure the swift and dignified disembarkation of migrants rescued at sea by private rescue vessels in the closest safe harbour.” The plans were received with interest by just over half of the EU’s 28 member states but are bitterly opposed by Italy and Malta, who would prefer the systematic criminalisation of civilian search and rescue operations.

However, even if the Franco-German initiative is the best option currently on offer from the governments of the EU, it has clear limitations. Its humanitarianism is a veneer for a continued insistence on the type of security measures that have done little to alleviate the ongoing tragedy in the Mediterranean, and the draft paper includes a notable emphasis on the need to maintain cooperation with countries of origin and to enhance “the capacities of coast guards of southern Mediterranean countries,” whilst “encouraging UNHCR and IOM to support disembarkation modalities in full respect of human rights in those countries.”

As has been seen with the cooperation between the EU, Italy and Libya, what this means in practice is ‘pull-backs’ by the Libyan coastguard or the simple abandonment of people to their deaths. Italy, however, is not the only Mediterranean state attempting to hinder the work of search and rescue operations. Reports from Spain detail a worrying trend of neglecting life-saving search and rescue (SAR) duties through recent bilateral agreements with Morocco and domestic policy changes.

The hobbling of *Salvamento Marítimo*

As detailed in *Político*, changes being made to Spain's *Salvamento Marítimo*, under far-right pressure, are “quietly gutting [the] civilian search-and-rescue agency credited with saving thousands of lives”.

Salvamento Marítimo is a public organisation under the responsibility of the Spanish Ministry of Development. Its purpose is to protect lives at sea in Spain's search and rescue zone, but in practice it has often operated outside of it. Recently, in an attempt to limit the number of migrants arriving on Spain's coasts, the Spanish Ministry of Interior has been taking steps towards increasing the number of rescues carried out by Morocco and decreasing those by *Salvamento Marítimo*. Last August, the Spanish government (at the time run by the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, PSOE, with Pedro Sánchez as Prime Minister) created an office in charge of coordinating actions against irregular migration in the Strait of Gibraltar, to which *Salvamento Marítimo* has been subordinated.

That decision came at the peak of summer during a year in which a record number of migrants would arrive in Spain by sea, with the country becoming the main EU port of irregular entry in the Mediterranean. At one point more than 1,200 people were rescued in the Strait of Gibraltar and the Alborán Sea, leading to a genuine collapse of the reception system – sports centres and Andalusian police stations were overcrowded with recently-rescued people.

At the same time as establishing the centralised command structure, the government ceded to the demands of *Salvamento Marítimo* workers to reinforce rescue crews. However, the organisation's rescue protocols were changed in order to reduce the number of migrants disembarked in Spanish ports. In parallel, Spain redoubled efforts to make Morocco more active in intercepting boats leaving its coasts, and has successfully pressured the EU to give €140 million to Morocco to step up border controls.

Ismael Furió, the president of the CGT, the main union of *Salvamento Marítimo* workers, condemned the changes in structure: “Now nothing is done without the orders of the Single Command, which is a military body directed by the Guardia Civil,” he said to Spanish news site *Público* in June 2019. “We are a public body charged with providing help at sea, regardless of who is in danger, but now not a single boat or ship moves without the authorisation from this authority.”

The negation of responsibility for boats in Moroccan waters is also significant. As recently revealed by the newspaper *El País*, one third of migrants rescued by *Salvamento Marítimo* in 2018 were in the Moroccan rescue zone –16,618 people out of almost 50,000 rescued and disembarked at Spanish ports. As Furió further explained to *Público*: “The orders now are to first alert Morocco and then the *Guardia Civil*. We now only go out if the boat is in Spanish waters... this has become a topic of migration control, not of rescue”. However, the Spanish interior minister, Fernando Grande-Marlaska, has insisted that the rescue process has not changed.

22 people dead at sea

A recent incident makes clear the deadly consequences of these policy changes. Towards the end of June, 49 people making their way to the Spanish coast by boat were left to “disappear” despite their distress signal being heard, because their shipwreck occurred in the Moroccan SAR zone. The NGO *Caminando Fronteras* became aware of an inflatable boat with 49 people

on board, including an 11-year-old girl, which had already been adrift for several hours in the Alborán Sea, and alerted both *Salvamento Marítimo* and the Moroccan authorities to the situation.

The boat was eventually found by a ferry, 22 miles from Cape Three Forks, in Morocco's so-called SAR zone – but by this time only 27 people were on board. The other 22 are officially unaccounted for. Survivors confirmed that they died on the journey and described to the authorities how they had to throw the bodies overboard. All the survivors eventually arrived in Andalusia – six were transferred to hospital by a *Salvamento Marítimo* helicopter, while the rest arrived on the same ferry that had rescued them.

Salvamento Marítimo confirmed that it “offered our support to the Moroccan authorities but it was not taken up”. Two planes were mobilised (one part of a Frontex operation, one belonging to the Spanish air force), but only to search Spanish waters. Previously, when aware of disappearances or deaths in the Mediterranean, the organisation kept searching for possible survivors or to recover bodies. In this case, the next piece of information received by *Salvamento Marítimo* was that the boat had been recovered by a passenger ferry. No Spanish rescue operation was deployed because, according to sources from the Ministry of Development, the dinghy was in the Moroccan SAR zone.

Deadly changes

Helena Maleno of *Caminando Fronteras* and workers from *Salvamento Marítimo* have condemned the fact that the current situation would have been unthinkable just a year ago. Maleno, who receives calls for help every day from migrants drifting at sea and alerts both Spain and Morocco, said to *eldiario.es* that “if there had been better coordination, these people could have survived. If... they had been European, the planes would have continued searching even in Moroccan waters and if the plane had done so, they would certainly not have died.”

She has always criticised the bad coordination between Spanish and Moroccan authorities in finding boats, but now “there are political guidelines around migration control that are communicated to *Salvamento Marítimo* staff... *Salvamento Marítimo* is being instrumentalised”. The new protocol “creates a bias towards migration control over protecting the right to life” she added. According to the activist and expert in migration journalism, the Moroccan rescue teams “do not have sufficient resources for sea or air operations... these tragedies arise when we delegate migration control to third countries rather than supporting them in rescue operations.”

The 22 deaths in this case raised the number of missing and dead on the Spanish Mediterranean route to 203 between January and June 2019, according to IOM figures (current figures say that there have now been 208 deaths on the route). They were “a direct result of the protocol”, said a union representative. Just a few months before the June tragedy took place, *Salvamento Marítimo* was carrying out rescues in both the Spanish and Moroccan SAR zones.

Manuel Capa of the CGT has explained to the Andalusian Association for Human Rights that a rescue now takes three hours more to complete than previously, increasing the risk of shipwreck and consequently the number of deaths. According to Capa, there are communication links between Spain and Morocco through which Spain informs the ‘partner’ state of the existence of a boat in its waters. This allows Morocco to take whatever measures it thinks necessary, but Spain makes no checks on the final outcome. The Spanish

coordination centre does not enter into Moroccan practices: “if they do not act, no one will know,” said Capa.

Sources from within another union confirmed to the magazine *La Marea* that the directors of *Salvamento Marítimo* have communicated to workers that they will not always be able to save lives. Sometimes, when they find people travelling towards Andalusian shores, they will have to limit their activities to “guarding” the boats until the Moroccan coastguard arrives. The sea rescue team in Tarifa has had to do this on various occasions: “play cat and mouse” for hours with boats found in the Strait until Morocco takes charge.

Stretching resources

From 1 January to 30 June this year 10,475 people arrived on the Spanish coasts through 319 journeys by boat, compared to 14,426 who arrived in 606 vessels in the same period in 2018, according to the Spanish Ministry of the Interior.¹ This decrease has been put forward by the Spanish government as a justification for removing the reinforcements previously provided to *Salvamento Marítimo*, a move heavily criticised by the organisation’s employees.

“In one month we have had one third fewer workers, but they were needed before last year’s crisis. Now there are no crews to relieve people who have spent 16 or 20 hours at sea. A lot of the time we have inoperative rescue boats just because they can’t be staffed”, explained Ismael Furió of the CGT to *Público*. The situation is making a “physical and psychological” dent in the team, he said.

Furió also underlined that an information blackout is imposed by the single command. “Now there is no information on the network about migrant rescues and it is difficult to find figures. The workers are also pressured not to speak to the press. I myself have been strictly rebuked for my public declarations, but I don’t mind. It is necessary to denounce what is going on because we’re talking about people drowning”.

For migration expert Blanca Garcés, the government has seen that “it is easier to stop migrants leaving than to stop them arriving”, and this has created the pressure to financially support Morocco. At the same time, she said to *Público*, “it is the externalisation of recovery, involving a *de facto* transfer of responsibility to the coastguards of global south countries joined with a folding of rescue services from the north”. It seems that Spain is doing with Morocco “what we have seen with Libya and Italy”.

However, Garcés argued that the reduction in arrivals will only be temporary. In the short term, new means of border control have led to a reduction in arrivals, “but in the medium term this leads to an increase in arrivals elsewhere”. As an example she offered the installation of the integrated external monitoring system (SIVE) in the Strait of Gibraltar in 2002 and “the consequent increase of arrivals of migrants to the Canary Islands soon afterwards”. The Spanish interior ministry’s own figures suggest her argument is correct – while irregular arrivals by sea and land have decreased overall this year, arrivals on the Canary Islands increased by over 17% from 2018 to 2019 (comparing the period 1 January to 13 August). The number of vessels used to travel to the Canary Islands increased by almost 159%, comparing the same period.

¹ The IOM provides slightly different figures, estimating the number for 2019 as the same but that for 2018 at 15,076.

The decline in arrivals has not reassured workers from *Salvamento Marítimo*. Summer is the season with the most attempts to travel by boat due to the good weather, but the organisation is working with fewer vessels and smaller crews. “This situation [of the 22 missing people], disgracefully, will repeat itself unless changes are made” predicted Furió. 208 people are known to have died attempting the Western Mediterranean crossing to Spain so far this year – 37 in June, four in July and one in August (so far).

With discussions ongoing among Member States over how to respond to the perilous situation in the Mediterranean and no sign of Italy and Malta’s hard line relenting, these changes in Spain’s approach to search and rescue are worrying. Calling on other states to take on more responsibility and subsequently using the argument of state sovereignty as a reason not to intervene in deadly situations is not a solution.

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