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Lampedusa's Migrant Tragedy, and Ours

by Sarah Stillman



At first, the drowning men and women were mistaken for seagulls. Early Thursday morning, local yachters off the southern Italian island of Lampedusa still had no idea that a ship carrying some five hundred African asylum seekers had just gone down in the water nearby. Hearing high-pitched cries, they looked out to sea to find that the source of the noise wasn't birds (as they'd first assumed) but Eritrean migrants shouting for help, their bodies thrashing. A large portion were women and children fleeing conflict and poverty by way of Libya, only to be hastily drowning, within eyesight of the Italian shoreline, in the same waters they'd hoped would rescript their lives.

The capsizing began simply enough. (That's true, anyway, if you're content with easy explanations; we'll let the plotline thicken in a moment.) The captain, a thirty-five-year-old Tunisian man, left Misrata last week in a rinky-dink fishing boat overstuffed with

migrants. Less than a mile from the journey's end, he reportedly set a blanket afire. The ship's engine had stalled, some five hundred metres from Lampedusa's shoreline, and the captain, passengers say, was hoping to attract some helpful attention with the flames. Instead, he ignited an explosion, as well as a wave of panic, that brought the ship down. Few of the migrants knew how to swim; it was 4 A.M., and dark. And so the drowning began, on a historic scale.

“For five hours we were floating, using the dead bodies of our companions,” a survivor named Germani Nagassi, age thirty, told CNN this week. “There is nothing worse than this. There were many children. There was a mother with her four children, a mother with an infant, all lost at sea. My mind is scarred and in a terrible condition.” In the days since Nagassi made it to shore, the death toll has piled steadily higher, reaching three hundred and two yesterday, and counting.

But alongside this cartoon-simple narrative—a lit match, a fire, and then, one of the single deadliest migrant-ship disasters on record—there is also a messier hypothesis for what's behind Lampedusa's tragedy: not a burning blanket but an incendiary debate about European immigration policy.

Up until last week, if you searched the Web for “Lampedusa,” you'd have found tourist sites touting a small Sicilian island with “the best bays and beaches.... Welcome to Paradise!” Or else, you'd have spotted reviews of the Italian aristocrat Lampedusa's best-selling 1958 novel, “The Leopard,” a well-known line of which reads, “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.” But dig further, and you'd have noticed that, with tick-tock regularity, migrants have been dying along its coast for quite some time. The same is true across Southern Europe's shores, in what Italian President Giorgio Napolitano recently called “a succession of true slaughters of innocents,” but what countless other political voices call “an invasion”—one they believe demands stricter “push-back” strategies.

Step back for the longitudinal view, and the numbers are numbing: last year, according to human-rights groups, some fifteen hundred migrants—often North Africans—perished in the Mediterranean Sea. Over the past twenty years, more than twenty thousand migrants lost their lives in those same waters, by the International Organization for Migration's tally. With the Syrian refugee crisis only spinning darker and deeper, more boats full of desperate families are expected soon. Just this Tuesday, a vessel carrying two hundred and sixty-three Syrians and Palestinians was rescued off Italy's coast, as was another ship crammed with Iraqi and Afghan refugees.

Over the past several years, the response to a volatile influx of African and Middle Eastern asylum seekers has often been to up the ante on a Manichean vision of border security: more patrols, heavier surveillance, taller walls. (Greece, for its part, just completed a nearly eight-mile anti-migrant fence along the Turkish border.) The corollary raised too infrequently is whether militarized “push-backs” actually fuel, rather than curtail, the lucrative market for smuggling human cargo; the harder it becomes to flee war and poverty, the more likely you'll pay someone nefarious to help you get across.

Last week, it was a captain who hadn't invested in a solid boat or other safety measures. Reinhard Marx, an attorney who advocates for reforms to the European asylum system, put it in even simpler terms for *Der Spiegel*: the E.U.'s current policy functions, he said, as "a job-creation scheme for human traffickers."

This ought to sound familiar. If the U.S. debate over domestic immigration reform hadn't gone the same way as the rest of Washington's glum business, Congress might currently be arguing about a hot-topic bill with two main strands: first, to create a pathway to citizenship for millions of undocumented people living in the shadows; and second, to pour money into the construction of seven hundred miles of new border fencing while doubling the number of Border Patrol agents to keep new migrants out.

In light of the latter half of this proposal, a growing body of scholarship, as recently documented by the Stanford historian Ana Raquel Minian, shows how past efforts at border militarization "did not reduce migration but instead made it more dangerous." Here, again, the question becomes: Will fences, drones, and enhanced sensors make us safer? When do such measures actually serve to empower organized crime—by choking off migration routes and thus lending extraordinary power to cartels like the Zetas and their migrant-smuggling franchisees, men who funnel desperate people through increasingly specialized routes with paramilitary tactics of their own?

What we know for sure is that border militarization will—and already has—made crossing more lethal for Mexicans and Central Americans endeavoring the journey. Our Lampedusas come in smaller batches, on sand and pavement rather than at sea. Astonishingly, while the number of migrants trying to slip past the U.S.–Mexico border is at a record low, the number dying in the desert has reached a record high.

"The evidence suggests an immigrant attempting to cross illegally into the United States today is eight times more likely to die in the attempt than approximately a decade ago," according to a recent [report](#) by the **National Foundation for American Policy**, which made use of Border Patrol data. Another study, by the University of Arizona's Binational Migration Institute, argues much the same, noting that, when migrant deaths are compared with the rate of Border Patrol apprehensions in the Tucson Sector, "migrants were five times as likely to die last year as in 2004."

What's more, these policies haven't come cheap. Last fiscal year, the Obama Administration spent nearly eighteen billion dollars on immigration enforcement, according to a study by the Migration Policy Institute; this reportedly amounts to more, by a significant margin, than government spending on all other major federal law-enforcement agencies combined. How comfortably Americans can live with the apparent side effects—including record migrant deaths—is uncertain.

In Europe, similar cultural calculations have gained a particular urgency. Crisis made it so. This week, the Pope came to Lampedusa, asking, "Who wept for these people who were aboard the boat?" Earlier, when asked about the tragedy, he told a crowd, "The word disgrace comes to me. It is a disgrace!"

In Lampedusa, Mayor Giusi Nicolini wants more support from wealthier countries in the E.U., feeling Italy's southern region has shouldered more than its fair share of asylum seekers—no easy thing. Nicolini wept at the scene of the sea, and wrote an open letter, pressing for more resources from E.U. countries that don't have to cope with such daunting numbers. "Municipalities like ours cannot be left alone on the frontline," she wrote. In a world of unrest, the stress is real.

"These bodies are all speaking," she told the BBC, of the corpses in lacquered green and blue body bags. If that's true, it's a troubling sort of ventriloquism. What if next time, such voices weren't invited to the table only as corpses—if their complexities were heard, say, before their callings-out could be taken for the cries of seagulls?