

The UK's plans to prevent migration from Libya show a dangerous unwillingness to learn from the past

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Although much of the attention concerning the migration crisis has recently focused on Greece and Turkey, dangerous boat crossings from Libya continue to present a significant problem. **Simon McMahon** writes on a proposal by David Cameron to intercept boats in the Mediterranean and return them to the Libyan shore. He argues that the proposal could prove extremely dangerous in practice, noting that previous attempts to implement such a policy in Libya in 2009 created more problems than they solved.



As the European Union invests increasing energy in controlling the movement of refugees from Turkey to Greece, the attention of political leaders and the press seems to have moved away from the other sea crossing to Europe, through the Central Mediterranean to Italy.

David Cameron has been one of the few to [buck this trend](#), with the British Prime Minister recently calling for an increased naval presence in the region and stating that boats smuggling people should be turned back to the Libyan shore for destruction. But by advocating pushbacks to Libya, the UK Government is engaging in decidedly wishful thinking about the security situation in the country. It is also acting on false assumptions about the dynamics of migration. The proposal as it stands is highly dangerous and fails to learn from past experiences.

A flawed model for addressing migration

Back in October 2014, the British Foreign Office [stated](#) that it would not be involved in rescue operations for migrants in the Central Mediterranean area, considering that these acted as a 'pull factor' encouraging more people to make the dangerous journey. But since then people have [continued](#) to attempt the crossing, with over 153,000 arriving in Italy in 2015 and nearly 3,000 deaths recorded in the same stretch of sea.

More recent efforts to stop people from coming to Europe have concentrated on 'breaking the business model' of smuggling networks. In particular, in June 2015 the EU launched the [EUNAVFOR MED mission](#) in the Southern Central Mediterranean – phase one of which focused on surveillance of smuggling networks in the region. In October this moved into phase two: searching for and diverting 'suspicious vessels' in international waters. Phase three would involve action in Libyan territory to 'dispose of vessels and related assets' before use.

Worryingly, a [UK Government source](#) is reported to have stated that the mission can already be further extended because it has 'achieved a lot in terms of bringing the numbers down'. There is no evidence for this. In fact, the number of people arriving by boat in Italy was higher for the first 3 months of 2016 than the same period in 2015.



Demonstrations in Libya, 2011. Credits: [ليبيا صور](#)

Pushing migrants back to Libya is a dangerous strategy and it is unlikely to deter them from making the journey because it fails to address the situation that they are trying to escape. As part of the [MEDMIG research project](#) I have been interviewing people who made the journey to Italy across the Mediterranean in 2015. Most of them came through Libya and they describe a country in chaos, where violence and kidnappings are commonplace. Even the newly-formed and UN-backed Libyan government thinks it isn't safe enough to physically be there – they are [currently based](#) in Tunisia.

For many of the people I met, getting on a boat was the only way to get out of Libya; going back was not seen as an option. Elsewhere, the threat of dying in the country's borderlands with Niger, Chad, Egypt and Sudan [has been widely reported](#). Pushing people back at sea would be contrary to [international law](#), which states that no one shall expel or return a refugee against his or her will, in any manner whatsoever, to a territory where he or she fears threats to life or freedom.

Ignoring the past

This isn't the first time that pushbacks to Libya have been proposed as a way of stopping migration across the Mediterranean. It is [estimated that](#) more than 1,000 migrants were intercepted and forcibly returned to Libya by the Italian coastguard in 2009 as part of [a multi-billion euro agreement](#) signed with the Gaddafi government in 2008, which had 'the fight against illegal immigration and organised crime that manages human trafficking' as a primary objective. This involved towing boats back to Libyan waters, rescuing people in distress and taking them back to Libyan ports, or stopping migrants' boats and handing them over to the Libyan forces at sea.

Italy's pushbacks were roundly discredited as a legitimate way to manage migration. In the Italian parliament [it was stated that](#) 'in all cases of pushbacks that have taken place from May 2009 to the end of October, there has been no process of identification of the migrants nor a review of their health nor verification of the requirements for being granted international protection'. Then, in 2012, [the European Court of Human Rights declared](#) Italy's pushbacks to be unlawful. The court found that Somali and Eritrean nationals who had been rescued at sea by the Italian Coastguard and taken back to Tripoli had their right to seek political asylum violated and were exposed to potential torture and degrading treatment in detention camps in Libya, or to expulsion back to home countries where they risked further persecution.

Looking forward

As the Italian experience shows, pushbacks are highly problematic. It is difficult, if not impossible, to provide appropriate protection for those making the journey whilst they are still at sea and to ensure that their lives are not at risk in the place they are taken back to. Italy's pushbacks took place before the Arab Spring and the eruption of conflict in Libya. It is unlikely that Libya is a safer place to turn people back to today than it was then. So why is the UK Government suggesting that pushbacks should be renewed?

David Cameron [has said](#) that he wants to break the link between getting in a boat and settling in Europe. But this principle should not come at the expense of an understanding of the situations that people are living in before making the journey.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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