

Counting migrants' deaths at the border:

From civil society counter-statistics to (inter)governmental recuperation

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Abstract

Migrant deaths in border-zones have become a major social and political issue, especially in the euro-Mediterranean region and in the context of the refugee/migrant crisis. While media, activists and policymakers often mention precise figures regarding the number of deaths, little is known about the production of statistical data on this topic. This paper explores the politics of counting migrant deaths in Europe. This statistical activity was initiated in the nineties by civil society organizations; the purpose was to shed light on the deadly consequences of ‘Fortress Europe’ and to challenge states’ control-oriented policies. In 2013, the International Organization for Migration also started to count migrants’ deaths, yet with a different political objective: humanitarian and life-saving activities become integrated in border management and the control of borders is expected to both monitor human mobility and save migrants’ lives. IOM thus depoliticises these statistics, while at the same time imitating an activity first associated with political contestation by civil society actors. Finally, the paper explores ways in which statistics on border deaths can be re-politicised to challenge states’ immigration policies in Europe.

Non-technical summary: The deaths of migrants in the euro-Mediterranean region constitute a major issue in the context of the migration crisis. Media regularly report of shipwrecks or of dead bodies found on Southern European shores, while European governments and the EU are under pressure, by civil society groups in particular, to find ways of ending a tragedy that is at odds with the continent’s commitment to peace and human rights. This paper explores the ways in which statistics on migrants’ deaths are collected. The first data on this topic came from NGOs in the nineties; their objective was to denounce the deadly consequences of European policies and to challenge control-oriented policies. Today, however, statistics on border deaths are collected by an intergovernmental actor, the International Organization for Migration: rather than criticizing states, this organization aims at conciliating the control of human mobility with the prevention of deaths – thus moving towards a ‘humanitarian border’.

Keywords: *Border control, deaths at the border, migration crisis, International Organization for Migration, humanitarian border.*

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Contents

	The IMI Working Paper Series.....	2
	Abstract.....	2
1.	Introduction	4
2.	States, migration and (counter-)statistics.....	5
3.	‘Deaths at the border’: the production of non-governmental counter-statistics.....	7
4.	Humanitarian borders and the (inter)governmental recuperation of the counting of deaths.....	10
5.	(Re)counting to demand state accountability.....	14
6.	Conclusion	17
7.	References	18

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Arab uprisings and the conflicts that have shaken the Middle East and North Africa, shipwrecks of migrants' precarious and overloaded boats have become part of everyday reality in the Mediterranean Sea. They constitute a key element in the so-called "migrant crisis" (or "refugee crisis") and are the object of heightened media and political attention. This has increased the visibility of a phenomenon that has been ongoing for years. Indeed, 'deaths at the borders' have long been one of the tragic consequences of the mobility conflict born out of the opposition between exclusionary policies in the Global North and peoples' desire to migrate in the Global South. Faced with the impossibility of securing a legal access to foreign countries, many migrants are forced to resort to smugglers and precarious means of transport. Governments regularly blame smugglers and traffickers for these deaths, but usually fail to acknowledge their own responsibilities.

It is in this context that, in the beginning of the 1990s, deaths at the borders started to be counted by several civil society organisations in Europe. The purpose was to make visible the human cost of "Fortress Europe", to demand accountability from European states, and to call for a reorientation of European policies to avoid their deadly consequences. In recent years, civil society initiatives have inspired other actors: the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in particular, launched the *Missing Migrant Project* (MMP)¹ in 2013, with the objective of providing data on migrants' deaths worldwide. Through a dedicated website, IOM provides 'real-time' information, including the number of deaths, their location, the reasons (hypothermia, drowning, accidents, etc.), dead migrants' country of origin, age and sex, along with the migration road they were following. While it covers all world regions, this initiative is primarily a response to the situation in the Euro-Mediterranean region.²

The appropriation of the activity of counting migrant deaths by an intergovernmental organisation such as the IOM – which after sixty-five years of existence became part of the United Nations in 2016 – transforms the political dimension of this practice. Civil society started counting migrant deaths to contest the policies that lead migrants to undertake risky journeys to access European territories. But while it also counts these deaths, IOM is itself part of the migration control apparatus: it plays an important role in border surveillance, particularly when it comes to enabling Western states to develop distant control through strategies that operate far beyond their borders. Although IOM claims to promote 'humane' and 'orderly' migration 'for the benefit of all',³ empirical research has made clear that this organization is above all a central actor in the globalisation of migration control. By participating in the introduction of new technologies (like biometrics) and practices of control in origin and transit countries, by operating the deportation of irregular migrants (through so-called 'voluntary return programs'), or by implementing information campaigns to dissuade would-be migrants from leaving their country, IOM aligns itself with states' security-focused policies and reinforces their capacity to control migration.⁴ It thus contributes to the creation of the very conditions that lead to migrant deaths – while at the same time documenting this reality and deploring these deaths through its *Missing Migrant Project*.

¹ See <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

² <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/latest-global-figures>

³ <https://www.iom.int/about-iom>

⁴ See for example Andrijasevic and Walters (2010), Georgi (2010) and Pécoud (2018).

For example, on June 10, 2016, IOM launched a project, funded by the Dutch government, which aimed at ‘saving lives’ at sea by reinforcing the Libyan coastguards’ capacities, through training and the distribution of new material.⁵ Yet, a few days after this project was announced, Amnesty International denounced, on June 14, Libyan coastguards’ practices, revealing that migrants were shot at while being intercepted at sea, before being detained and tortured in detention centres.⁶ Since then, numerous other acts of violence against migrants have been reported in Libya. As Brachet (2016) documents, IOM projects, with the financial support of the EU or of EU states, are justified in the language of humanitarianism, but actually contribute to prevent migrants from leaving the Libyan shores.

There is therefore a tension within IOM’s activities, as this organisation counts and laments deaths at the borders while at the same time contributing to the very conditions that lead to these deaths. The purpose of this paper is however not solely to highlight the ambivalences and contradictions of IOM’s rhetoric and practices, or to denounce its hypocrisy or cynicism. Rather, we wish to understand why IOM counts border deaths, how this counting activity fits into its strategies, and what this implies for the civil society groups and NGOs that, until recently, were the only actors in this field.

The paper is structured in the following way. We first propose a theoretical framework to understand the relationship between statistics, states, migration and civil society. We then document the ‘deaths at the border’ phenomenon and the initiatives taken by NGOs on that matter. The third section analyses IOM’s activities in this field and argues that these fit into a broader trend, which can be captured by the concept of the ‘humanitarian border’ (Walters, 2011), which posits that border control is not only justified by security imperatives, but also by humanitarian considerations. Finally, we look at the implications of IOM’s involvement in counting migrant deaths for civil society actors, and how NGOs and researchers can maintain a critical stance in this new context.

States, migration and (counter-)statistics

In his 1978 lecture at the Collège de France, entitled *Security, Territory, Population*, Michel Foucault regularly refers to statistics and to their role in the transformation of power that occurred in the 17th century, particularly as far as what he calls ‘governmentality’ is concerned. Governmentality is described as “a power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument” (Foucault 2007: 144). It presupposes a change in the production of knowledge, as it relies on a constant assessment of states’ resources. The main tool to generate this knowledge is *statistics*, which, etymologically, as Foucault notes, means the *knowledge of the state* (ibid.: 354) and leads governments to become preoccupied with their population, with the quality of this population, its composition, mortality, birth rate, wealth, etc.

⁵ <https://www.iom.int/news/netherlands-iom-build-libyan-coast-guard-capacity-save-lives-sea> (accessed 28 November 2017).

⁶<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/refugees-shot-libyan-coastguard-being-detained-shocking-conditions-back-libya#.V1-YY71NHQU.twitter> (accessed 28 November 2017).

Scott (1998) draws upon Foucault’s work to demonstrate the link between states and statistics. Through statistics, states ‘see’ their population and territory - and thereby acquire the capacity to govern them. Statistics introduce a circular and performative relationship between states, population and knowledge. In a constructivist perspective, they ‘create’ a country by producing a coherent and homogeneous territory and population. In the absence of statistics, populations and territories would not be perceived as a whole, but rather as a set of discrete, heteroclitic and discontinuous elements, with no coherence. Moreover, the production of statistical knowledge is inextricably tied to states’ governing of their population, as data is produced through a state apparatus that, in return, operates upon and through this knowledge. Statistics are thus inherently political, and deeply embedded in the exercise of power.

Migration is no exception and provides a clear illustration of this argument. Migration statistics do not merely ‘describe’, in an ‘objective’ manner, a pre-existing social reality. They rather contribute to the very existence of “migration”, by making the phenomenon visible and countable by governments. They are the product of immigration policies, as well as the condition for these policies to exist, and the privileged tool through which they operate. For example, in the 19th century, it is states’ census and statistical practices that have shaped the ‘migrant’ category and the distinction between nationals and foreigners. This still holds true today: governments in Europe rely heavily upon statistics to construct migration flows as a threat to be combated; one of the actors that aspire at both counting and governing migrants is Frontex, an agency that produces ‘risk analyses’ to (statistically) document migrant flows – and to justify its own activities (Stenum 2012; Tazzioli, 2013).

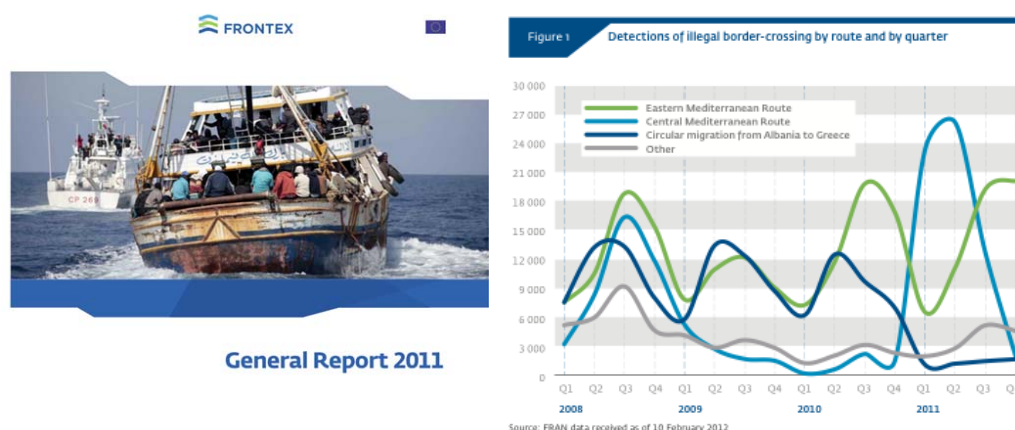


Figure 1: (left) Front page of a 2011 Frontex report, displaying the picture of a boat being intercepted. (right) Statistics produced by Frontex on the interceptions along three different migration ‘routes’ in the Mediterranean. Frontex Annual Risk Analysis 2012.

Frontex statistics on interceptions, which visually echo the ‘waves’ metaphor so frequently used to designate migrants’ arrival on European shores, participate in what de Genova (2013) calls the ‘border spectacle’. Such graphs are the statistical equivalent of the well-known pictures of overcrowded boats. These statistics quantify a ‘threat’ that is measured (and measurable) only when neutralized by border patrols. Through them, it is thus simultaneously the threat of illegalized migration and the securitisation work of Frontex that are made visible. Migrant illegality is thus produced as an objective “reality” that migration policies must respond to. However, by focusing on the scene of the border, the conditions that lie before

(namely the state production of illegality through policies of exclusion) and after (the exploitation of illegalised migrant labour) remain hidden and unthinkable.

Foucault-inspired research also brings to light what is at stake when statistics are re-appropriated by actors that want to contest government practices. Foucault indeed stresses the role of resistance in shaping the exercise of power, or how *power* and *resistance to power* are mutually constitutive. Nikolas Rose (1999) thus shows that, in democratic societies, states have progressively divulged large parts of the data they collect and use to monitor their population. This has in turn enabled citizens to become what he calls ‘calculating citizens’, who use this information to critically assess and evaluate their government’s action. Statistics that are initially produced to support the exercise of state power are then appropriated to serve its denunciation. Bruno *et al.* (2014) have coined the term *statactivism* to refer to this critical use of data: they argue that statistics enable citizens to challenge state authority, precisely because state authority is largely based on the same data; this is all the more the case in the context of what they call ‘neoliberal governmentality’, which is characterized by the constant concern with evaluation backed by figures – and thus exposed to criticisms grounded on these very figures.

We propose to refer to statistics on migrant deaths as *counter-statistics*, echoing Foucault’s concept of “counter-conducts”.⁷ In the field of migration, the counting of border deaths has long been the critical counterpart of the data collected and publicised by state agencies on (illegalised) border crossings. In seeking not to produce governable subjects but to make visible the lethal human effect of the migration policies imposed by states and which, until recently, remained almost entirely outside their spectrum of attention, they constitute an example of counter-statistical practice.

‘Deaths at the border’: the production of non-governmental counter-statistics

Border deaths are reported throughout the world, wherever governments aim to stop the mobility of those people they deem ‘undesirable’ (Agier 2011). They therefore constitute a long-standing, structural and global phenomenon – and also a deeply political reality, as migrants embark on clandestine and dangerous journeys to overcome the impossibility of securing a legal access to countries abroad (Weber and Pickering 2011).

Although formal and public means of transportation are today more abundant than ever, migrants who refuse their assignment to immobility are trapped in illegalized forms of mobility, which include the reliance on smugglers and risky and precarious journeys. Unauthorized border crossings expose migrant bodies to all kinds of perils, ranging from deprivation of liberty by smugglers to border guards’ shootings, often in inhospitable natural environments such as deserts or oceans. The most dangerous zones include the US-Mexico border-zone, the coasts off Australia, the Horn of Africa, South-East Asia, Southern Africa or the Sahara. Yet, it is the Euro-Mediterranean region that has become by far the biggest migrant cemetery on earth (Albahari 2015, Clochard and Lambert, 2015).

Borders and border-zones are not the only places where violence occurs. Increasingly, and in line with what the advocates of ‘integrated border management’ recommend, control takes

⁷ We have also referred to these statistics as ‘tactical statistics’ (see Heller, 2015).

place along a spatial and chronological continuum, which starts well before the border is crossed and lasts well after migrants have reached destination countries. Such encompassing ‘bordering practices’ (Newman, 2006) thus make for enlarged patterns of vulnerability and of exclusion, which, even if they materialise far away from the territorial border of states, are related to state strategies of inclusion and exclusion. Border deaths may thus occur far away from borders, for example inside transit countries (like in the Sahara), in the middle of international waters, or in detention centres and airports. They can take place following expulsions, anti-migrants or racist violence, migrants’ suicides, lack of protection and exploitation on the workplace – namely wherever the control of migrants proves to have lethal effects.

Yet, border deaths often go unnoticed. Migrants die in remote places (at sea or in deserts for instance) or in closed places, situated at the margins of society (like detention centres). Many of them travel clandestinely - and die just as clandestinely. Indeed, while rich states carefully document the mortality of their own population, as well as the inflows of foreigners, they hardly pay attention to those migrants who die on their way. As Kobelinsky (2015) ethnographically documents, European states spend billions of euros to check their borders, but no budget is available for migrants’ deaths: in Southern Europe, corpses are taken care of by local communities, small municipalities, churches and civil society groups. This is the practical corollary of the absence of statistics: phenomena that are not documented do not exist in the eyes of governments; states only ‘see’ what is countable, and counted. Certain issues may therefore remain neglected, not because they do not exist or are not problematic, but because they are (sometimes deliberately) condemned to invisibility.

It is in this context that counter-statistics by civil society groups have emerged. In 1993, the NGO *United for Intercultural Action* (hereafter *United*) started to publish a *List of deaths*⁸, the latest version of which (June 2017) identifies ‘33.305 documented deaths of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants due to the restrictive policies of Fortress Europe’.⁹ The definition of border deaths is broad: it encompasses all the casualties that can, in a one way or another, be associated with migration policies – including pre- and post-border deaths (in Libya or Calais, for example), as well as cases of suicide in detention centres, police violence, deaths during expulsions or because of a lack of health services. The list is based on media reports and civil society group reporting.

In 2006, the blog *Fortress Europe* was launched with the same objective and results in a count of 27,382 deaths between 1988 and February 2016.¹⁰ In 2012, Thomas Spijkerboer and his colleagues at the Vrije Universiteit started building a database entitled *Border Deaths* in which they count only those casualties of migrants “attempting to reach southern EU countries” in key border crossing areas, and whose bodies were found in or brought to Europe and were registered by national authorities. As a result, this data base reaches lower figures than the above-mentioned initiatives, namely 3188 death between 1990 and 2013.¹¹ Finally, between 2013 and 2016, a network of journalists conducted the *Migrant Files* project, which was based on data collected by both *Fortress Europe* and *United*, and thus reached a higher overall number of deaths (30.000 since 2000).¹²

⁸ <http://unitedagainstrefugeedeaths.eu/> (accessed 28 November 2017).

⁹ www.unitedagainstracism.org/pdfs/listofdeaths.pdf (accessed 28 November 2017).

¹⁰ <http://fortresseurope.blogspot.fr/> (accessed 28 November 2017).

¹¹ <http://www.borderdeaths.org/> (accessed 28 November 2017).

¹² <http://www.themigrantsfiles.com/> (accessed 28 November 2017).

There are therefore significant variations in the number of migrant deaths registered in these different databases. They have to do with the way data is collected, but also with the definition of the phenomenon: indeed, there is no single definition of what a border death is and estimates may therefore include (or exclude) very different types of casualties, ranging from drowning to suicides. These different conceptions of ‘border’ deaths have implications in terms of the geographical understanding of the phenomenon. Civil society initiatives have adopted a rather extensive understanding: while the majority of deaths are located in the extended border-zone of the EU’s Mediterranean frontier (that is to say, precisely *at* the border), other deaths are recorded *within* states (in the Saharan desert, for instance, or within detention centres inside Europe). Border deaths in this understand are not reduced to thus occurring at the border understood as a territorial-legal division, but rather as an effect of the existence of borders and the disseminated bordering practices they give rise to.

These counting initiatives have gained some public visibility. In 2004, the French leftist newspaper *Le Monde Diplomatique* published the first map of border deaths in the Euro-Mediterranean region. It was established by Olivier Clochard and Philippe Rekacewicz and has since then regularly been updated, in partnership with the *Migreurop* network (Migreurop, 2012: 134-137).¹³ These maps have circulated quite widely, in newspapers, websites and exhibitions in particular. They enable an easy and directly visible understanding of border deaths, which can potentially target a wide audience. In the same way, the *United* list has gained a strong symbolic dimension, as it has been used by activists and demonstrators.

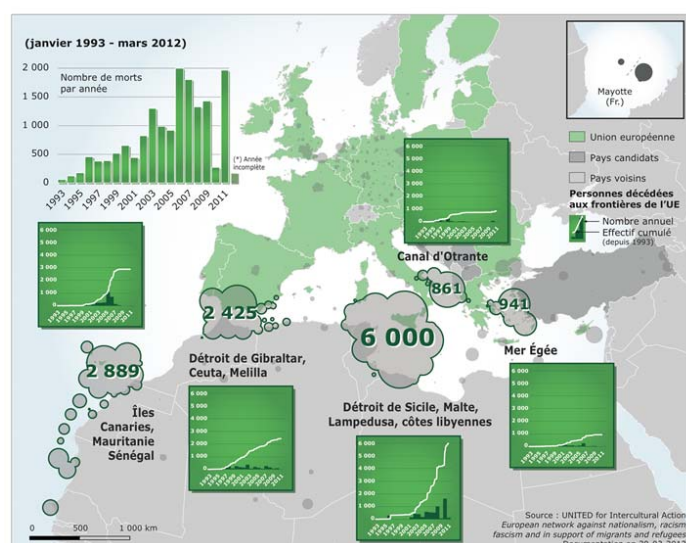


Figure 2 : Map of migrants’ deaths at the maritime frontier of the EU, Olivier Clochard and Nicolas Lambert, Migreurop 2012.

¹³ <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/cartes/mortsauxfrontieres> (accessed 28 November 2017).

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Year / Age / Gender	Name	Country of origin	Cause of death	Source
2011 / 18 / M	Abdullah	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 20 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 22 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 23 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 24 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 25 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 26 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 27 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 28 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 29 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 30 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 31 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 32 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
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2011 / 95 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 96 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 97 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 98 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 99 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR
2011 / 100 / M	Adnan	Libya	Shot by border guards	UNHCR



Figure 3 : (left) The United list of deaths; (right) the United list displayed in Strasbourg in front of the European Parliament during an event organised by the Collective for another migration policy, 28 April 2015.

In sum, statistics on border deaths testify to the existence of a dual perspective on migration control, by governments and civil society groups respectively, which nevertheless both rely on data and numbers. States’ control-oriented perspective, which focuses on detecting (irregular) border crossings, has generated the emergence of an alternative counter-perspective and use of statistics, which instead sheds lights on the deadly outcomes of control that governments wish to keep invisible (Heller and Pezzani, 2014). But while this binary model has long been relevant, it is currently being challenged by recent changes in the production of statistics on migrant deaths. As IOM’s initiative indicates, counting deaths at the border is no longer only a practice mobilised by actors who are critical of migration policies and can easily be situated on one side of the government/civil society confrontation. Statistics on this matter are therefore acquiring a more ambivalent political signification and, to understand this development, we now turn to the humanitarianisation of borders.

Humanitarian borders and the (inter)governmental recuperation of the counting of deaths

As argued above, while migrant deaths have long constituted the dark side of migration regimes, they were hardly noticed, as the success of control policies were tied to the number of interceptions and expulsions. This is changing as, over the past years, border control has become increasingly cloaked in the language of humanitarianism. In this process, migrant deaths have become a measure of the success or failure of EU’s bordering practices, even in the eyes of EU states and agencies. For example, Ilkka Laitinen, former Frontex director, speaks of the Hera operation in the following terms:

Operation Hera stands out. By implementing preventive measures off the West African coast, Hera has almost completely stemmed the flow of irregular migration to the Canary Islands via this particularly hazardous route. As a result, hundreds if not

thousands of lives have been saved. I think this has to be considered one of our most important achievements.¹⁴

Such a quote describes control as a humanitarian endeavour and, in so doing, completely obscures the role of immigration policies in migrant deaths. Indeed, it is precisely because the Strait of Gibraltar had become increasingly scrutinized that migrants turned to the more dangerous Atlantic road (Carling, 2007). The humanitarian border, according to William Walters, emerges “once it becomes established that border crossing has become, for thousands of migrants seeking, for a variety of reasons, to access the territories of the global North, a matter of life and death. It crystallizes as a way of governing this novel and disturbing situation, and compensating for the social violence embodied in the regime of migration control” (2011a: 138). While rescue at sea has long been the humanitarian counterpart of the prior illegalisation of migrants, what is striking in this new phase of humanitarianisation of the border is that it is border control operations themselves that are framed as *acts of saving*. In this respect, the humanitarian border echoes the inextricable connection between violence and care that characterizes colonial power (Mbembe, 2001).

This humanitarian justification of border control has become particularly visible after the shipwreck of October, 3 in 2013, when 366 migrants died just a few hundreds of meters off the coast of the small Italian island of Lampedusa. This tragedy was abundantly commented and prompted countless initiatives, ranging from Pope Francis’ visit to Lampedusa (and later, in 2016, to the Greek island of Lesbos) to the interest of influential institutions (see for example Amnesty International, 2014; Council of Europe, 2012). This shipwreck also inspired many political speeches, including Jose Manuel Barroso’s, then President of the European Commission, after his visit to Lampedusa on October 8 2013: ‘We in the European Commission, myself and Commissioner Malmström, we believe that the European Union cannot accept that thousands of people die at its borders’, he declared, before announcing an increase in Frontex’ budget and the launch of the Eurosur initiative, whose objective is to improve the surveillance of European borders – that is, the continuation of a predominantly security approach, and exactly the kind of measures that prompt migrants to take deadly risks.¹⁵

A few days later, Italy launched the military and humanitarian *Mare Nostrum* operation, whose scope and ambition were unprecedented in recent history. The fight against smugglers was a key component, but the objective was also to save migrants’ lives: *Mare Nostrum* was thus an archetype of the humanitarianisation of the border. It did not change the key control-oriented position of European policies, and could therefore merely attenuate their deadly consequences; but it nevertheless enabled the proactive saving of lives, at least until the operation was stopped in 2014.

IOM’s *Missing Migrants* project fits into this context. As its web site indicates, ‘the research behind this project began with the October 2013 tragedies’.¹⁶ Media and political attention was at their height and IOM decided to position itself on this issue, by constituting its own list

¹⁴ Operation Hera was coordinated by Frontex in 2006, with a focus on irregular migration from West Africa to the Canary Islands (<http://frontex.europa.eu/news/longest-frontex-coordinated-operation-hera-the-canary-islands-WpQlsc>, last consulted 28 November 2017).

¹⁵ Statement by President Barroso following his visit to Lampedusa, 9 October 2013 (http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-13-792_en.htm, last consulted 28 November 2017).

¹⁶ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/about> (last consulted 28 November 2017).

of deaths.¹⁷ IOM is not a non-governmental organization, but an intergovernmental one: by starting to count migrants deaths, it changes the nature of this statistical activity. It presents itself as a source of reliable data, as well as an intermediary between different actors. Through its field presence, it has an access to local information, which it can subsequently bring together to produce global figures. IOM is also in relation with a wide range of stakeholders, including governments and many NGOs, and can thereby function as a platform that centralizes information of different origin. This also includes contact with the media, both to obtain information and to provide them with accurate data. IOM further claims that it is in contact with the relatives of missing migrants, who are in search of information; the web site provides email contacts for those who are worried about the fate of a family member, or who want to share information with IOM. This is in line with a well-known function of IOs, namely that of an ‘honest broker’, trusted by all parties because of its reliability and impartiality, and thereby capable of interacting with all of them (states, civil society, medias, victims and families, etc.).

While statistics on migrant deaths were used by NGOs to ground their criticism of European migration policies, IOM’s practice is embedded in a different logic. Its position is made explicit in a 2014 report entitled *Fatal Journeys. Tracking Lives Lost During Migration* (IOM, 2014). In the preface, IOM’s General Director begins by recognising that migrants who risk their lives are fleeing “desperate situations” (p. 5) and that migration policies offering ‘limited opportunities for safe and regular migration’ drive “would-be migrants into the hands of smugglers” (p. 5). But IOM’s argument is then quite timid, as it addresses only the question of how to count migrant deaths, not of how to prevent them: “While views may differ on how best to limit the number of migrant deaths, there is a broad agreement on the need for better data” (p. 17). The organisation identifies divergent interpretations of the mechanisms leading to these deaths without really taking position, underling the need for “better data” – the objective thus being for the IOM to occupy a central position in this respect.

IOM mentions three main motivations behind its *Missing Migrants Project* (pp. 34-36). First, it hopes that better data will incite states to address this situation, without specifying how or in what direction. This is consistent with its position as an intergovernmental actor mindful of its member-states sovereignty. Then, better data should enable to define a “profile” for people at risk, so as to help prevent deaths, but also to sensitise potential migrants before they depart: “The information provided by survivors and the families of those who die can also help to persuade others not to embark on such risky journeys” (p. 35). This is a well-known preoccupation of IOM, which has long implemented “information campaigns” to dissuade migrants from leaving their country (Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud, 2007; Heller, 2014). Finally, IOM argues that it is morally important to provide families of dead and missing migrants with all the information possible so as to uphold the dignity of the deceased.

In IOM’s view, the politically sensitive nature of the data on migrant deaths should strengthen its own role. States are reluctant to consider data that would fuel a criticism of their own policies and are therefore not inclined to cooperate with NGOs, which undermines the quality of the data: “National authorities have not given priority to collecting this data, given that the migrant death count is often perceived by civil society groups as an indication of the consequences of tougher border control” (p. 36). The defiance between states and civil society

¹⁷ The UNHCR also counts migrant deaths since 2005, but its database is not published and this is not one of its main and most-publicized activity.

thus justifies the intervention of IOM, which aspires to position itself above these conflicts, and become the authoritative source of data without taking a political position that would position it in either camp. This is a broad tendency among IOs, which seek to produce knowledge while remaining politically prudent and avoid taking a position on sensitive subjects (Pécoud, 2015).

IOM has greater resources than NGOs and produces data of high quality. This is apparent in the frequent update of data, as well as in the numerous visualisations and maps that are made available on the web site. One can find data by day/month/year, by country of origin, or by location; interactive maps refer to distinct countries or geographic areas, and focus on migrants' routes at the four corners of the globe. Access to information is easy and users can also download the raw data.

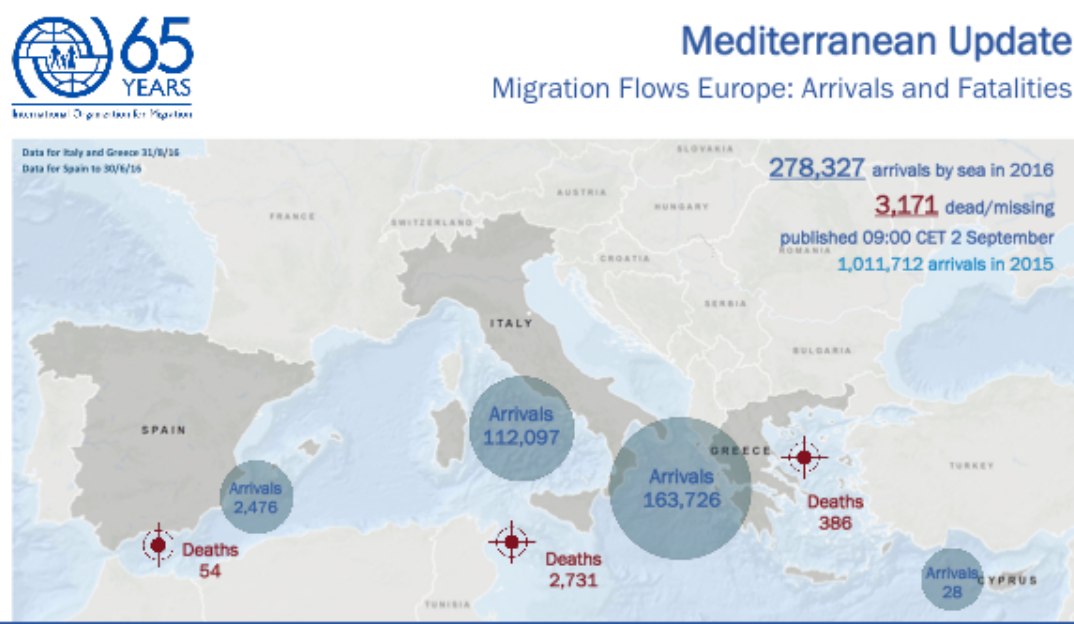


Figure 4 : IOM map representing the data collected by the IOM concerning arrivals and deaths for 2016 (2nd September 2016).

IOM has thus taken up a practice initiated by civil society and has also imitated the way NGOs initially presented the data. IOM's list closely resembles the *United's* list, while its maps are visually close to the ones first produced by *Migreurop* and the *Monde Diplomatique*. From this perspective, civil society invented a practice that has become a reference, which IOM draws upon.

But there are also differences between IOM's and NGOs' data. This concerns in particular the definition of the phenomenon. IOM is more restrictive than civil society concerning the cases of deaths it considers, since it focuses on "migrants who have died or gone missing at the external borders of states, or in the process of migration towards an international destination", but does not count deaths that occur "in immigration detention facilities, during deportation, or after forced return to a migrant's homeland, as well as deaths more loosely connected with migrants' irregular status, such as those resulting from labour exploitation", despite these

deaths being attributable to effects of border control and exclusionary migration policies.¹⁸ As a result, only few deaths are counted in Europe,¹⁹ while the vast majority of deaths are reported for the Mediterranean region²⁰ and Africa²¹. Furthermore, this distinction entails that the IOM mostly refrains from counting migrant deaths which occur while migrants are under the direct control of states, thus avoiding a source of criticism of states. This is line with IOM's reluctance to criticize its member states, which distinguishes it from other UN agencies such as the UNHCR, which regularly blame states for the non-respect of certain key principles.

IOM's statistics are thus cleaned of the elements that could challenge Western states' practices most directly. In some cases, states are even congratulated: in June 2016, IOM announced that more than 2,900 migrants had died while trying to cross the Mediterranean during the first semester of the year – and also declared to the press that “Europe is doing a remarkable job, thousands of lives have been saved only this year. But close to 3000 people have died, which means that Europe is not doing everything that can be done”.²²

In other words, IOM's intervention leads to the professionalization and centralisation of the collection of data on migrant deaths, but also to the depoliticisation of this data. What are the implications of IOM's arrival in “their” area of expertise for the civil society actors and what may be their position towards this intergovernmental recuperation? On the one hand, such recuperation constitutes a success for NGOs: after years of independent, often unpaid work, it has succeeded in imposing the reality of migrant deaths to a broad public, to the extent that an IO has taken up this activity. But on the other hand, IOM is depriving civil society of the monopoly over a key tool in its critical discourse on European immigration policies.

This movement from NGOs to IOs is not an isolated case. Boli and Thomas (1999) have shown that many social and political issues were brought to the fore by civil society groups, before being taken up by IOs, and eventually by governments. Civil society thus invents what they call “scripts”, understood as ways of approaching reality and of treating social and political problems. These scripts are recuperated by IOs in the framework of their cooperation with civil society. In turn, IOs are able to incite states to take them up. If we follow this reasoning, statistics on borders deaths would be in the middle of this process: initiated by civil society, they have recently been taken up by IOs and may, in the future, become a norm adopted by states themselves.

While it is too early to assess the plausibility of this scenario, the key issue now faced by civil society regards the way in which migrant deaths data can be re-politicised. With IOM's intervention, these statistics have lost part of their transgressive edge and even risk being used to justify border control. The next section examines one possible way of reinterpreting data in a way that would support a critical perception of contemporary orientations in migration politics.

¹⁸ <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/methodology> (last consulted 28 November 2017).

¹⁹ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/europe> (accessed 28 November 2017)

²⁰ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean> (accessed 28 November 2017)

²¹ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/africa> (accessed 28 November 2017)

²² This statement was reported by Reuters (‘Le nombre de migrants morts en Méditerranée atteint un record’, 1 July 2016, <http://fr.reuters.com/article/topNews/idFRKCN0ZH4UQ> (accessed 28 November 2017)).

(Re)counting to demand state accountability

In the eyes of civil society, statistics on border deaths grounded the demand to make states accountable for the lethal effects of their policies. But the relation between *counting* and *accountability* is threatened by IOM's intervention and the issue, for both civil society and critical researchers, is thus how to re-establish this connection. To do so, this section describes a recent attempt, namely the report *Death by Rescue - The Lethal Effects of the EU's Policies of Non-Assistance* produced by a group of researchers (which include one of the authors of this paper).²³

This report analyses the impact of decisions taken by the EU and its member states and, more specifically, the ending of the Italian *Mare Nostrum* operation and its (non-)replacement by the more limited and Frontex-led *Triton* operation in autumn 2014, on the danger of crossing the Mediterranean sea. It first reconstructs the policy shifts that were implemented between 2014 and the beginning of 2015: while the military and humanitarian *Mare Nostrum* operation had been deployed proactively and close to Libyans coast since October 2013, it was increasingly criticised for constituting a “pull-factor” which would allegedly lead more migrants to undertake the journey. EU policymakers thus decided not to support its continuation and refused to ‘europeanise’ this Italian operation; they replaced it by the Frontex-led *Triton* operation. *Triton* would however prove much more limited, both in terms of available means and operational zone; it would have border control (rather than rescue) as its main operational aim. The report demonstrates that EU member states took the decision to end *Mare Nostrum* in full knowledge of the increased danger for migrants that this decision would lead to, as they had been informed through NGOs and IOs, but also through Frontex.

Based on the analysis of a number of shipwrecks as well as of the mortality peaks recorded after this policy change, the report shows that the danger of crossing increased as a result of this decision. Mortality is measured on the basis of statistical data concerning arrivals (compiled by the UNHCR) and deaths at sea (produced by IOM): the mortality rate then consists in the relation between the number of people who attempted to cross and the number of people who eventually arrived safely. For the same period, between January and April in 2014 and 2015 respectively, the number of crossings remained almost the same (26'644 in 2014, 26'228 in 2015), while the number of deaths rose from 60 to 1687. The mortality rate thus increased 27 folds. It dropped following two large shipwrecks in April 2015, which led to a redeployment of rescue means both by states and NGOs. Because other factors that might have affected mortality remained stable during this period, the report concludes that the rise in the danger of crossing is mainly attributable to the policy decisions implemented by the EU and its member states.

²³ See <https://deathbyrescue.org/> (accessed 27 September 2016).

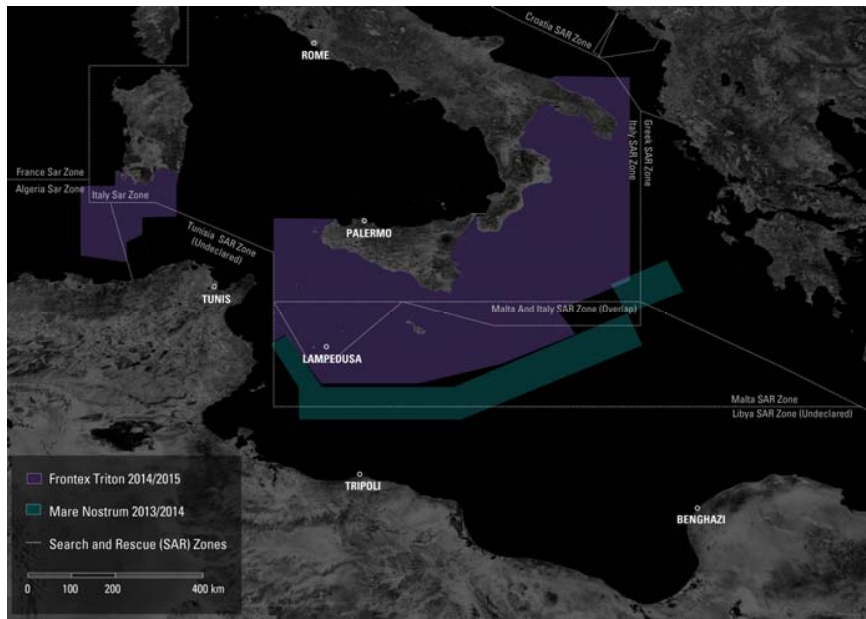


Figure 5: The operational zones of Mare Nostrum and Triton compared. “Death by Rescue” report, Heller and Pezzani 2016.

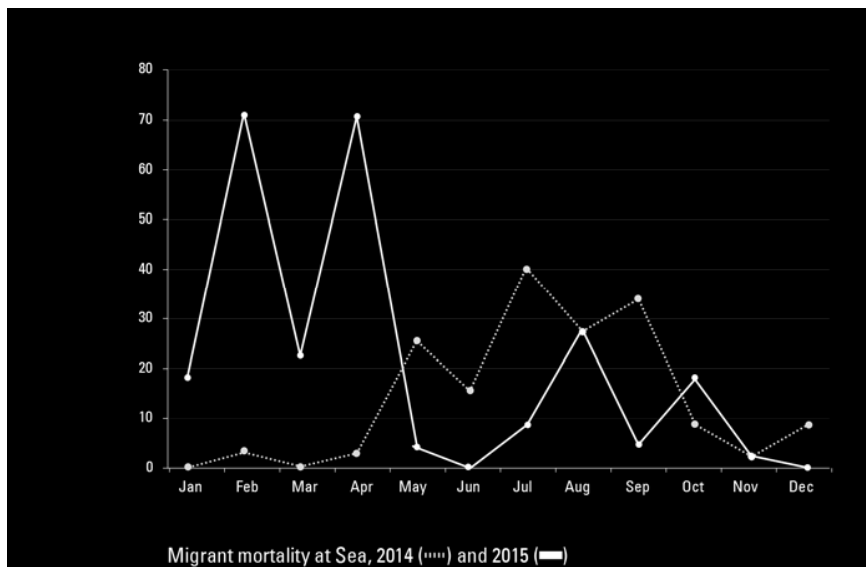


Figure 6: The measure of migrant mortality for the central Mediterranean during 2014 and 2015 compared, relying on UNHCR data for arrivals and IOM data for deaths. “Death by Rescue” report, Heller and Pezzani 2016.

The purpose of the *Death by Rescue* report is thus not to produce its own data. Rather, it appropriates statistics compiled by two IOs (UNHCR and IOM), with the aim of repoliticising them. The quality and credibility of these statistics are thus turned into an asset that strengthens the conclusions of the report. The counter-statistical strategy described here is thus quite different from those described above: while NGOs counted to contest migration

policies, this report seeks to achieve the same aim by using migration statistics produced by IOs “against the grain” and countering the depoliticisation of statistics by IOs.

Conclusion

Statistics on border deaths have become a frontline in the battle over migration policies. This new terrain of struggle illustrates two important tendencies: on the one hand, the humanitarianisation of borders sees the counting of migrant deaths taken up by actors who are involved in border control, and that seek to justify their mission in the name of saving migrants’ lives; on the other hand, because of the ambivalence of the discourse and images on migrant suffering, the discourses and practices of civil society, states and IOs circulate between these actors and become difficult to differentiate.

Whereas, for civil society, counting border deaths is justified by the objective of politically challenging governments, denunciation is absent in IOM’s discourse, which positions itself as a neutral actor that would “simply” produce data to allow policymakers to better respond to the phenomenon. IOM’s recommendations are thus limited to improved data collection, and eventually to the demand that legal norms be upheld and minimal humanitarian measures be implemented. However, they fail to demand the fundamental reorientation of the exclusionary and discriminatory logic of migration policies. In this sense, IOM’s statistics appear as a neutralisation of the politics of counting, or even as a recuperation of this politics to reinforce the order states seek to impose upon migration. But if IOM has appropriated a practice initiated by civil society, nothing prevents civil society and researchers from appropriating this data in their own turn and give them a renewed meaning that reconnects the act of counting and the demand for accountability.

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