

Section 4 Module 2

This article discusses the role of NGOs that are rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Europe. The article examines three NGOs in particular and the motivations and consequences of those motivations as well.

Mediterranean Sea rescues are quite common and usually have a similar set up. Boats that originate from countries in the Middle East are dangerously overcapacity and do not have enough supplies to get the boat to the coast of Europe. The boat sets sail in hopes that the coastguard of a country will come rescue them.

Originally, the border zones in the Mediterranean were mostly patrolled by the coastguard from the EU but now there are NGOs which have the main purpose of safely rescuing migrants from the boats. The author refers to these organizations as the 'humanitarian fleet' and states that the NGOs should be examined given their important presence. Additionally, the definition of 'border' is changing making the situation more complex.

The number of people who are crossing the Mediterranean and who are dying while crossing has drastically increased since 2014. The EU has tried to govern the border humanitarily but the involvement of the EU makes the situation more complicated. In particular, the EU appears to perform rescues only in certain areas and in areas that have become dangerous or have experienced bad events. For example, the EU only started providing humanitarian rescues after a massive shipwreck occurred. When the EU started providing humanitarian missions it also tightened the restrictions on current migrants already in Europe. In summary, the EU selectively chooses who to save.

The three NGOs of the article, MOAS, MSF and Sea-Watch were some of the first NGOs to work for humanitarianism in the region. All three have similar goals, but have different 'humanitarian imaginations' when it comes to their own role in the migrant rescues.

Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) was started by a wealthy couple that wanted to help migrants after they have a jacket of a drowned migrant. The couple is religious and had mass on their first ship before it left. They have an experienced crew with military backgrounds. They had rescued thousands of people safely.

MOAS tried to frame the problem of the mass migration of migrants as a non-political one. The founders believe that with enough resources, enough people can be rescued at sea. The NGO sees their mission as to safely rescue people from the sea.

Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) started helping at sea in 2015. Originally, the motivation was the same as MOAS since they wanted to 'assist people who are dying in the Mediterranean.' They also stated their goal to be 'prevention of loss of life, not to provide transport.' Some members of MSF felt that they should not intervene in the situation while others felt the opposite. MSF's view was a bit more political than MOAS, especially when they called upon politicians to help solve the problem. They criticized the EU for 'actively creating' the 'space of mass dying.'

Sea-Watch was started by four German families. The goal of the organization is to conduct Search and Rescue Missions. Unlike the other two NGOs, Sea-Watch saw the issue as a political one immediately and criticized the EU for not creating a rescue group. The group, like the others, rescued thousands of people. Sea-Watch continued its criticism of the EU, especially by 'denouncing Europe's maritime absence.'

The three groups see themselves filling different roles as they perform the same physical tasks. MOAS takes a simple perspective on the issue and the author argues that the narrowness

of the MOAS is consistent with the couple having money from the Iraq War. MOAS originally partnered with MSF, but ended since MSF wanted to call the border problems ‘politically orchestrated.’ However, MSF struggled with criticizing the EU while trying to remain unpolitical as a group.

Sea-Watch was the most political of the group and was not afraid to publicly call out the EU for causing the border crisis. They themselves as a political organization and that part of their job is to ‘monitor and hold accountable European naval forces.’

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu/>

21A.506 The Anthropology of Politics: Persuasion and Power
Spring 2019

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.