

SOLROUTES

Self-organised forms of protest and mobilisation of migrants in Libya

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Introduction

The research aimed to analyse different forms of self-organised protest and mobilisation of migrants in Libya, both in and outside detention centres, over the last two decades, to see what solidarities are at play, and how they try to facilitate route-making.

The research starts from the assumption that protests and mobilisations of people on the move are generated and nourished by solidarity among the individuals involved, who share the same condition of being illegalised migrants in a given place or environment (endogenous solidarity). However, protests and mobilisations of people on the move are also generative of solidarity sentiments and initiatives from other actors who do not share the same personal condition as the protestors and/or do not find themselves in the same place or environment (exogenous solidarity). Exogenous solidarity actors may include non-governmental organisations (NGOs), activists or fellow migrants (also including diaspora organisations) based in a different place in Libya or abroad. Both forms of solidarity – the endogenous and the exogenous – facilitate the travel trajectories of people on the move against the constraints of the externalised European border regime.

Like migrants, solidarity travels along different trajectories, following different directionalities and connecting different actors. In doing this, both endogenous and exogenous forms of solidarity also generate specific solidarity spaces at different scales. Indeed, solidarity is a spatialised and relational practice that constitutes relational spaces and is constituted by (social relations in and across) space (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019).

Research on solidarity in the migration field has focused chiefly on support provided to migrants by other actors, such as NGOs and activist groups (Cuttitta, Pécoud and Phillips 2023; Della Porta 2018; Feischmidt, Pries and Cantat 2019). Little attention has been paid to forms of (mutual) support among migrants themselves or to the fact that exogenous solidarity is often triggered by autonomous initiatives of people on the move. This research aims to shed light on these dynamics, especially the latter.

Data collection

Libya is not easily accessible for ethnographic fieldwork. Especially the migration issue has become increasingly sensitive in recent years, making independent activities in this field impossible. When the Solroutes project started in February 2023, the Libyan authorities no longer granted entry visas even to humanitarian organisations' staff. In this context, it was clear that no fieldwork in Libya could be planned and that research for this node would be carried out remotely.

Data collection consisted of:

- document analysis, including materials produced by international organisations (IOs), NGOs, migrants and other civil society actors, i.e. information provided by the relevant websites or social media profiles, as well as printed materials distributed during activist initiatives.

- participant observation of two activist initiatives supporting migrant mobilisations in Libya. The first was the initiative 'From Tripoli to Brussels: Amplifying the Voices of Refugees in Libya', organised in Brussels by 'Solidarity with Refugees in Libya', an international network of associations and individual activists, from 30 June to 1 July 2023. It consisted, on the first day, of a counter-summit that took place in parallel to the European Council of 29-30 June and, on the second day, of a demonstration in which requests were addressed to the UNHCR, the IOM, Frontex and the European Parliament. These requests included the end of EU funding for the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy, the release and evacuation of 221 people who had been detained in the Ain Zara detention centre in Libya since January 2022 because they had demonstrated for their rights in Tripoli, the evacuation of refugees from Libya and Tunisia to safe countries, etc. The second initiative, 'Evacuate human rights defenders from Libya', was organised in Bologna by the same network, now renamed 'Alliance with Refugees in Libya', on 26-27 January 2024. It included a press conference, workshops, assemblies and a film screening. This initiative was the kick-off event of a campaign asking for the evacuation of the people who had been released from the Ain Zara detention centre in July 2023, only a few weeks after the Brussels demonstration.
- twenty-five semi-structured interviews that were carried out in the six-month period from 29 November 2023 to 28 May 2024. Six of the interview partners are nationals of sub-Saharan countries (Eritrea, South Sudan and Sudan) who spent one or more periods of their life in Libya as illegalised migrants, took part in self-organised protests and/or mobilisations there, and then reached Europe either by crossing the sea on an unauthorised journey or through a UN relocation mechanism for vulnerable people. Five of them were still providing some form of organised support to people on the move in Libya as members of associations or loose networks of activists at the time of the interview. Nineteen interviewees, including those five, are activists or representatives of Libyan NGOs or international NGOs (I-NGOs). Four of them are also researchers, a category that counts a total of six interviewees, also including a freelance journalist. Journalists, in turn, had a total of three interview partners. Three of these twenty-five interviews were carried out in presence and twenty-two remotely, including one in the written form of an open-ended questionnaire. Annex 1 provides the complete list of interviews, also including information on how the interviews were carried out.

While the open-ended questions informing the semi-structured interviews changed depending on the interviewee's identity and role, the list in Annex 2 includes some of the most frequently asked ones.

The contacts established during my previous work on the role of NGOs in migration management in Libya (Cuttitta 2022; Cuttitta 2023) helped me identify several interview partners. Other interviewees were identified through snowballing. Given

the sensitiveness of the research object and the high degree of political instability in Libya, representatives of organisations working with migrants in Libya, as well as migrants themselves, could become vulnerable subjects because of the information provided and/or the opinions expressed during the interviews. This is why interview partners have been anonymised in this report.

All people who have passed through Libya as 'migrants' have experienced some trauma. Therefore, identifying interview partners within this category of people required much attention to avoid the risk of re-traumatisation. Before approaching potential interviewees to request their informed consent, a careful selection of the interview partners had to be made. In the selection process, I relied on the expertise of third parties (e.g. NGOs or activists) who already knew the potential interviewees personally and could guarantee that they could emotionally manage the task they were invited to perform.

The context

Libya has been a major country of embarkation for Mediterranean sea-crossings to Italy for over two decades. Accordingly, it has also been targeted by Italian and European policies of externalisation of migration and border control (Bialasiewicz 2012; Paoletti 2010), which are still ongoing (Baldwin-Edwards and Lutterbeck 2019; Morone 2024; Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022) despite their failure (Phillips 2020).

Libya has long been a 'black hole' in which people on the move may disappear, be abused and even killed without anyone noticing or reacting – neither in Libya nor abroad. This was the case during the Gaddafi regime, but things did not change significantly after its fall. Abuses include arbitrary detention, arbitrary killing, extortion, sexual violence, forced labour, forced conscription in armed groups, interceptions and forced returns from international waters, unlawful deportations etc. (HRC 2023).

As a result of limitations imposed by the local formal and informal authorities on pro-migrant activities, migration-related international agencies, ranging from IOs, such as IOM and UNHCR, to I-NGOs operating in Libya, cannot provide appropriate support to the migrant population, regardless of the migrants' status (refugees, asylum seekers, undocumented people etc.) and their living in or outside detention. Libyan civil society is hampered in its pro-migrant activities, too. In Libya, civil society organisations – the local as well as the international – are generally disliked by both formal and informal authorities. The first reason is that they are suspected of acting on behalf of foreign or domestic enemy powers (Altai Consulting 2015). Indeed, independent NGOs did not exist until the fall of the Gaddafi regime, and they are still perceived as an 'imported product'. In recent years, European donors have funded projects to support the Libyan civil society, whereby the aim of these schemes is the 'professionalisation' of small NGOs, that is, their co-optation into the global marketplace of international cooperation (Cuttitta 2023). The second reason for the

general mistrust towards NGOs in Libya is the fear that they may disagree with and try to actively oppose the unwritten rules of the flourishing business of migrant exploitation that is jointly run by governmental authorities, militias and other criminal actors. Only few NGOs, such as Libaid and STACO, that are said to be loyal to the system¹ have exponentially grown in size and power, and have become the main partners of IOM and UNHCR.

Despite such context, which makes any self-organised form of migrant protest or initiative particularly difficult, people on the move have always found ways to mobilise for their rights, both during the Gaddafi period and after the end of the dictatorship. Moreover, they have found ways to reach out to various local and international actors in Libya and abroad, to let the world know about their plight, ask for material and political support, and thus establish networks of solidarity and support at different scales.

First mobilisations in Gaddafi's Libya

In Gaddafi's Libya, thousands of people were forcibly returned to Eritrea, sometimes with the direct complicity and support of Italian authorities (European Commission 2005, 59-61). This practice was in breach of international law, because deportees had well-founded fears of being persecuted, arrested and subjected to inhuman treatment, also including arbitrary killing and enforced disappearance, in their home country. Sometimes, however, the initiative of deportees managed to change the course of events. In August 2004, for example, Libyan authorities organised a deportation flight to Asmara for 76 Eritreans. During the flight, some of the forced passengers managed to hijack the plane and forced it to land in Khartoum, Sudan. There, they all asked for asylum (Amnesty International 2004). Fear of forced repatriation, and of the resulting consequences, possibly explains why Eritreans in Libya were the first to mobilise for their rights collectively. Not only were they particularly active in organising their mobilisations, protests, strikes and escape attempts. Eritreans also counted on the support of a strong and united diaspora that was and still is always responsive towards requests from fellow nationals in Libya. A diaspora Eritrean journalist and activist explains: "The Eritrean community, [...] we are a very tight, close community. [...] No matter how awful we can be towards each other. When it comes to someone's hardships, we can talk. So whenever, you know, you would hear a refugee in Libya, who says, you know, I just paid someone, and they played me, now I don't have anywhere to go [...], everyone can chip in \$100 each and cover the trip of that refugee. So there was a lot of solidarity among the Eritrean diaspora when it comes to other refugees, which still is until today" (Interviewee No. 23).

Diaspora support is not limited to the provision of money for people in need. It also includes organising demonstrations and campaigns for the rights of fellow nationals on the move:

¹ Source: interviews with researchers and Libyan civil society actors conducted between June 2019 and December 2020 for a previous research project (European Union's research and innovation programme 'Horizon 2020', Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement n. 846320).

“Often what they ask is for [diaspora] Eritreans to go out and do demonstrations on their behalf, for Eritreans to reach out to their MPs and [...] policymakers [...]. They asked us to protest, and so we [...] used to do the protest on the same day throughout the world [...] from Israel to Los Angeles, like all over Europe [...]. We would just protest on their behalf because they asked us to do so. We would write petitions to the European Union. [...] So they engaged us to do the things that they couldn't do” (Interviewee No. 23).

Another instance of mobilisation of Eritreans based on national belonging dates back to 2010, when 245 people managed to avoid deportation. First, while they were held in a Misrata detention centre, they refused to sign documents in the Tigrinya language, as they understood that signing them would be the first step towards their forced repatriation. Some of them also tried to flee. They were all beaten and then transferred to the Al Biraq detention centre to prepare for deportation from the nearby Sebha airport. Some of them, however, had a hidden phone and managed to send an sms to the president of the Italy-based Eritrean NGO Agenzia Habeshia (Ciavoni 2010). The resulting mobilisation of international agencies, from the Italian Refugee Council CIR (Zingoni and Carlini 2010) to Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch 2010), succeeded in stopping the deportation and obtaining the release of all detainees.

Sadly, deportations from Libya to Eritrea did not stop even after Gaddafi's fall (Erena 2016).

Solidarity and national belonging

While the high degree of cohesion of Eritreans may have facilitated this national group in taking collective initiatives, such as protests and escape attempts, against detention, deportation and other manifestations of border violence, people from other nationalities have also engaged in various forms of mobilisation. Moreover, many mobilisations have been made possible only by the joint initiative of different national groups. This is the case of more recent, large-scale initiatives, such as the Tajoura protests in 2019 or the establishment of the 'Refugees in Libya' (RIL) movement in October 2021, which will both be addressed in detail below. However, this is also the case of previous, smaller mobilisations that date back to the Gaddafi period.

In August 2009, for example, around 300 Nigerian and Somali detainees of the Ganfuda detention centre in Tripoli joined forces and tried to escape collectively. Only 30 to 50 of them succeeded, while twenty were shot dead by the guards, many more were injured, and the others were caught, brought back and subjected to violent repression (Human Rights Watch 2009). They reacted with a hunger strike and managed to contact Europe-based journalists through hidden phones. Following reports from international media, they were transferred to another detention centre in Gatrun. There, a group of sixty eventually managed to escape (Del Grande 2010, 75-84).

In sum, national belonging (and arguably other ethnic, religious or language bonds) can significantly facilitate the establishment of endogenous, active solidarity against the

constraints of the Libyan border regime. However, the shared condition of being limited in one's freedom of movement, irregularised and indiscriminately exposed to abuses as a migrant in Libya, regardless of other conditions, can be more than enough to trigger endogenous solidarity dynamics and inspire collective initiatives.

Reaching out

The above examples from the Gaddafi era show that mobilisations heavily rely on the opportunity to connect with the outside world. Indeed, mobile phones and, more recently, smartphones have long been crucial tools for migrants' agency in Libyan detention centres. Detainees (especially males) are typically prohibited from keeping electronic devices in their cells. Phones are 'confiscated' by the detention centre managers or guards whenever new inmates arrive. Guards then regularly search detainees in their cells to look for hidden phones.

Detention centre staff know that there are two possibilities for phones to be smuggled into detention centres. One is for detainees to bribe a guard: "If you pay a guard, they smuggle a phone like, you know, those old type phones into a prison. So they always have, like... maybe 200 people use one phone. Because someone managed to smuggle in a phone. So, this was a way for them to contact their family members, to send money, to reach out to the outside world" (Interviewee No. 23). The other way to have a phone smuggled into a detention centre is to deceive guards. This is the testimony of a former prisoner: "my sister have buy a telephone and [...] three juices, you know? So, two juices are full, the third juice is [...] empty. So she put the telephone in the third juice in a package in one plastic, and she gave to the police [...]: give to my brother, he is sick, so he must [...] drink [...]! He believed her. He gave me. But after two weeks, three weeks, they [...] check everywhere. They took the telephone, and we [had to] buy again" (Interviewee No. 19).

With their smartphones, migrants address different interlocutors through different media such as Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, etc. They create their own discussion groups, chat rooms and voice rooms. They contact family members back home, mostly to ask them for the money necessary for detainees to bribe themselves out of detention, or they contact "families and friends in other detention centres" (Hayden 2022, 93). Smartphones may also be used to keep in touch with fellow travellers in Libya or along different migration routes. Finally, they are used to reach out to potential exogenous solidarity actors such as journalists, activists, diaspora groups, NGOs and IOs. Again, when migrants contact exogenous solidarity actors, one of the main issues is raising funds to get out of detention, continue the journey or address other urgent needs. According to the Eritrean diaspora journalist and activist, "they would tell you their hardship, and we would just collect money and help out. And so we paid for many refugees in Libya that do not have family that would pay for them, or that family paid but they got detained, and then the family cannot pay again" (Interviewee No. 23). However, there are at least two further reasons for reaching

out to potential exogenous solidarity actors. One is to look for a way to continue the journey and leave the country: “Detainees or [...] community leaders in the detention centres [...] used to ask us advice [...] on how they could get out of Libya”, says an I-NGO representative (Interviewee No. 18). The other is to try to spread information about their situation and denounce the abuses suffered, as demonstrated by the examples in the previous sections. People share pictures, video and audio documentation, as well as written testimonies, hoping that this may result in an improvement in their condition. Journalists can make information available to larger audiences; activists, human rights organisations and NGOs can do the same to some extent, but they can also directly pressure IOs and governmental authorities, for example in bilateral and multilateral formal and informal meetings between aid agencies and international donors (Cuttitta 2023).

In sum, the use of smartphones and social media shows “how people on the move in Libya develop their own strategies for protection, form their own support networks and advocate for international assistance” (Creta 2021, 368). According to Stavinoha (2019), smartphones and social media are also instrumental in migrants’ creation of autonomous narratives about themselves, their aims and their needs. This may counter dominant narratives and hegemonic discourses shaped by both governmental and non-governmental actors, which often depict people on the move as either villains who do not deserve to be heard or passive victims who need someone to speak on their behalf. Thus, migrants can “challenge mediated refugee narratives and engage in self-represented witnessing” (Creta 2023, 779). Opening up their own channels of communication also allows for people on the move to develop counter-narratives (Creta and Denaro 2022) about the extant border regime and the EU policies and practices of border externalisation.

Having and using smartphones in detention, however, is not easy, and migrants often have to pay a high price. If detention centre guards find out that someone has revealed sensitive information by reaching out to external actors, they do not limit themselves to searching and seizing phones, but they also impose arbitrary penalties on those held responsible. Punishment mainly involves holding detainees in underground isolation cells for an undetermined period. Moreover, people are often subjected to beatings, food deprivation and other human rights violations.

Repressing autonomous mobilisations and exogenous solidarity

Isolation and other forms of punishment are also used against those who protest or try to escape: “Over the years, we have noticed that peaks of violence in detention centres always occur as a response to escapes, attempts to escape or protests against detention conditions”, says an I-NGO representative (Interviewee No. 12). Isolation is meant not just as a punishment but also as a preventive measure to ‘protect’ other detainees from the protest ‘virus’: “isolation comes if [...] you are empowering people inside prison and they realise that you are [...] diffusing bad ideas, so for this reason people are put in isolation”

(Interviewee No. 13). The case of the hundreds of people arrested for demonstrating in front of the UNHCR in January 2022 (see section 'Refugees in Libya (RIL) and the Alliance with Refugees in Libya (ARIL)' below) is exemplary: according to an I-NGO representative, they were, first, arrested, and, second, all "detained in separate cells in Ain Zara [...] to prevent 'contaminations'" (Interviewee No. 12).

Additional measures may go beyond physical violence and deprivation in detention to include forced repatriation: in 2019, "when we did the protests one day in Tariq al Sikka, they get underground [...] the main leader of the protest... so they get underground and they decided to deport [twenty-two people to] their country, to Eritrea", says a former prisoner (Interviewee No. 19). While this case shows the threats migrants in Libya are subjected to, it also indicates that solidarity among and towards migrants can successfully counter this kind of border violence. Indeed, once the detainees in Tariq al Sikka heard about the deportation plans, they managed to contact journalists abroad who "announced it in different channels and mass media, and the UNHCR have listened, so they came finally [...]. The boss of Tariq al Sikka have decided [the deportation], but finally, the UNHCR boss came, and they get agreement between them [...], and they have promised [the detention centre manager] will never do again like that", the former prisoner recalls (Interviewee No. 19).

Exogenous solidarity actors may be impeded in their activities if they are too vocal or try to support migrants' rights beyond the limit imposed by the local formal and informal authorities. For example, "[i]n December 2022, MSF lost access to Abu Salim detention centre (and other detention centres) for a period of two weeks, apparently in retaliation for sharing its concerns on the situation in detention centres with the DCIM[, the Ministry of Interior's Department to Combat Illegal Migration]" (MSF 2023, 11).

Another exogenous solidarity actor based abroad told me: "[In] October 2021, [...] using bulldozer, they destroyed my shelter. Since that day, [...] the service has been disconnected. The house has been destroyed completely" (Interviewee No. 20). The Libyan partners of this small NGO were also threatened by local criminal gangs devoted to the exploitation of migrants: "they said: hands off from Libya!" (Interviewee No. 20).

This does not mean that there is no space for solidarity towards migrants in Libya, but this space must be constantly negotiated, conquered and defended. Among Libyan NGOs, only the boldest, such as Belaady for Human Rights and Aman Against Discrimination, dare to do this. According to a migrant activist, Belaady "were always training us to tell us what are our rights within the jurisdiction of Libya. This was a great way [...] to bring our consciousness to light and say this is what you deserve, this is what the right and the law of Libya says" (Interviewee No. 13). Not only do Libyan activists provide aid for people in need or try to prevent unlawful deportations across the desert (Sheikh 2023), but they also challenge local and international authorities, including the UN: "Today we went in front of UNHCR because some people from Sudan arrived to Libya three months ago, and they don't have a place to stay, so they are trying to raise their voices, and call different organisations to bring them help, medicines, etc. [We] went to bring food and medicines to these people

camping in front of UNHCR today. UNHCR is not doing anything except that they are giving some food. Our mission is to engage with the UNSMIL to put pressure on UNHCR to do what they are supposed to do". (Interviewee No. 7).

The same critical attitude towards UNHCR can be observed among foreign-based exogenous solidarity actors: "I use social media a lot. And for me, in my activism, it has helped me a lot, especially [...] when it comes to UNHCR, because their presence on social media is lying, saying, today we deliver this much food to this prison, and there's no one that can argue with them but me, because I know every refugee, I would call that prison and talk to that person and say, did you guys get help? And they would say, no, the last time they were here was six months ago. And I would go back to their social media" (Interviewee No. 23).

Mobilisations in the post-Gaddafi period

As life conditions in and outside detention did not improve after the fall of the Gaddafi regime, migrants in Libya continued to mobilise for their rights, if only within the narrow limits imposed by the difficult context.

This section focuses on the years of the civil war (2014-2020), during which people start demonstrating even in public spaces (something inconceivable under Gaddafi). However, most mobilisations still occur in detention centres such as Ain Zara, Qasr Ben Ghashir, Tariq al Sikka, Salah ed-Din, Janzour, Tajoura, Gharyan, Zintan, Khoms and Misrata.

Protests consist of hunger strikes (refusal of food or water), refusal of healthcare, concerted noises or shouting, and violence against guards – "if one of the guards, for example, comes to open the door to give us something, we hold him hostage" (Interviewee No. 13). Sometimes protests are organised simultaneously in different detention centres: "because there was already coordination, there were people, for example, they managed to have phone calls to different detention centres because their brothers are held there, and then there is a planned protest, simultaneous, that is happening in Tariq al Sikka in Tripoli, there is another one happening in Zintan, there is another one happening in Misrata and Khoms or Tariq al Matar, for example... simultaneous protests, at the same time!" (Interviewee No. 13).

The aim of the protests can be improvements in detention conditions (better healthcare, better food, end of isolation), opportunities to leave Libya (access to humanitarian evacuation schemes or voluntary repatriation mechanisms), registration with UNHCR, cancellation of deportation schemes etc.

Sometimes, protestors only ask to be transferred to other detention centres where they know they can join fellow nationals or have more chances to be assisted by UN agencies and humanitarian NGOs, making detention conditions less unbearable and possibly opening up opportunities to leave Libya. "[In July 2019] we coordinated together with some friends a simultaneous protest [...]. In October, Kararim prison was closed, and the people

inside this detention centre were relocated and joined the group in Khoms. A few months later, in early 2020, these people were again transferred to Tariq al Sikka, either for the process of repatriation or for the process of the UNHCR taking charge of us" (Interviewee No. 13). Another protest followed a more complicated trajectory. In 2018, "in Janzour, we had also done strikes. [...] That was aimed to move us to rejoin with other Eritreans [in Tajoura]. We hear it, there is a lot of Eritreans there, and also UNHCR is working there. So we want to join them. We had a strike, protest, in Janzour. [...] And the police was too cruel, and they punished us so many times", says a former detainee (Interviewee No. 19). Since collective protests proved useless, there were some suicide attempts. In the end, the detention centre manager deceived the group of protestors, making them believe they would be transferred to Tajoura to join their fellow nationals. Instead, they were transferred to the Salah ed-Din detention centre, where, again, there were no other Eritreans. There, my interviewee and other detainees started protesting again because they wanted at least to be registered with UNHCR. They decided to refuse food and healthcare: "We don't want your treatment, we don't want your medicine. [...] We want to go to UNHCR. We have to register with UNHCR. [...] we don't want to eat, we don't want to drink [...] because we don't know where we are. Our families don't know where we are. [...] So we have to be registered in UNHCR to get [a] guarantee for responsibility. [...] Finally, when we [...] started the strike, they [...] listened [to] us. [...] Finally, after two days, we have seen, for the first time, UNHCR with their uniform, with their computer. They came on June 12th" (Interviewee No. 19). While UNHCR registration did not mean the end of detention, the protestors were eventually able to escape from Salah ed-Din after the guards abandoned the centre because of the bombing during the civil war.

By the way, the conflict triggered new forms of mutual solidarity among migrants. This is exemplified by how information on how to avoid forced conscription in armed groups was circulated during the civil war: "In 2019, [...] there was already very strong solidarity [among] migrants and refugees [who] started to send information among themselves in social networks, on WhatsApp groups, on Facebook pages, and different ways of communicating that during this war this is what to do! During this war, there is this group of militias, for example, who are conscripting mostly [...] young [people], and the idea of passing out this information was [...] how to act as if you are physically not fit. Because in this scenario, they look for people who are physically fit, who are strong, who can carry arms, who can lift things from one place to the other..." (Interviewee No. 13).

Some detention centres were directly attacked during the conflict. "Qasr Ben Ghashir detention centre was attacked by Haftar in April 2019. There were several injured. People protested, made some videos, and asked to be transferred. Thanks to those videos, they were transferred away from this detention centre. They were transferred to Zawiya on 24 April. They were in touch with international lawyers" (Interviewee No. 4).

The bombing of the Tajoura detention centre was a landmark tragedy. On 2 July 2019, two airstrikes hit the Daman complex of Tajoura, a town in the Tripoli district. The target was the

headquarters of the Daman Brigade, an armed group loyal to the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA). The Daman complex also hosted a detention centre for migrants where over 600 people were being held in different facilities despite calls for the government to close it after a previous airstrike in May of that year. Of the two airstrikes that took place on 2 July, the first hit a vehicle repair workshop and maintenance facility just 105 metres away from the detention centre. Detainees immediately asked for permission to leave but were forced to remain. The second airstrike directly hit a wing of the detention centre. Fifty-three people from Algeria, Chad, Bangladesh, Morocco, Niger and Tunisia were killed, another 87 were injured (UNSMIL and OHCHR 2020). Protests mounted, and the survivors called on the UN to intervene. First, the UNHCR proposed a deal to evacuate only the 70 most vulnerable people. The detainees rejected the deal unanimously and kept protesting until they were allowed to leave. Because of the presence of UN staff, guards did not prevent the survivors from leaving Tajoura and walking towards the GDF (Gathering and Departure Facility), a UNHCR facility for people eligible for evacuation from Libya to other countries.

“I was [...] in Tajoura. [...] we tried to organise ourselves and speak out that we need to be evacuated [...] At that time, when they bombed the camp, [...] everybody went outside the room, and [...] we organised ourselves to stand together and talk to the UN because they used to come to our camp. So we talked to the UN [...], telling them that this is the situation. [...] We were outside the room because some rooms were destroyed by the bomb. [...] We went outside, the UN came and said you have to leave this place, this place is not safe, because there was fighting going on in Tripoli. And then we left [...] and we went back to the city [...] from Tajoura to GDF [...] we went by ourselves going by foot! [...] There were like 600 migrants, and then everybody took his bag, anything that you have, you would take it with your hand, and then you'd go” (Interviewee No. 14).

Despite the selective nature of the GDF, which was supposed to host specific categories of people only, the UNHCR found itself obliged by the circumstances to open the doors of the building to all demonstrators, in what can be defined as an act of ‘forced solidarity’.

A few months later, another group from the Abu Salim detention centre followed the example and obtained ‘forced solidarity’ from UNHCR: “They were finally allowed into the outer, militia-controlled perimeter of the GDF on Halloween, 2019” (Hayden 2022, 309).

Another landmark tragedy in the years of the civil war was the tuberculosis outbreak in the Zintan detention centre, which caused the death of twenty-two people between September 2018 and May 2019. Protests began when the first detainees got infected, but instead of providing treatment for the sick and healthcare for all, local authorities decided to transfer the infected to another facility and let them die there. Zintan detainees managed to reach out to journalists and civil society actors, who alerted UNHCR, IOM and the international community. Only in April 2019 was the medical NGO MSF allowed access to the detention centre. Again, access to social media was crucial for reaching a solution: detainees posted

pictures of their protests and slogans, and eventually, “their efforts did attract some attention. On June 3, the UNHCR evacuated 96 asylum-seekers to Tripoli” (Tubiana 2019). After their release from Zintan, the survivors “continued to be a well-organised group [...], and we all tried to spread the voice that money was needed, money was collected and sent to the ‘Zintan board’ [a committee created by the migrants themselves], which made sure each one would receive some money. [...] They had a clear structure, they were really well-organised” (Interviewee No. 6). However, the group dissolved once they were evacuated from Libya to other countries.

Instead, some people who participate in protests and mobilisations continue to support migrant struggles in Libya even after they manage to leave the country, thus turning from endogenous to exogenous solidarity actors, from solidarity recipients to solidarity providers. While these people used to reach out to journalists and civil society actors across the continents on social media to ask for help when they were held in Libyan detention centres, now they are themselves those civil society actors based abroad who receive video and audio messages on Whatsapp and Facebook from Libya-based migrants, and activate networks of exogenous solidarity to provide support.

Some have already done this for many years, some have just begun, as they only recently arrived in Europe. The latter is the case of some RIL members. Together with ARIL (Alliance with Refugees in Libya) activists, they are setting up a hotline based on the work of volunteers that should secure 24/7 answers to phone calls and Whatsapp messages. “The hotline is not there yet... but many already receive calls [...]. The hotline will be inspired by the Alarm Phone, with different people answering in different countries” (Interviewee No. 2).

Refugees in Libya (RIL) and the Alliance with Refugees in Libya (ARIL)

The march from Tajoura to the GDF was the first large-scale demonstration of migrants in Libya’s public space. Still, it was not the last: further “protests took place in front of the UNHCR headquarters in 2020, and in 2021 even twice before the big one in October” (Interviewee No. 13). The latter was by far the largest and longest lasting. Thousands of people organised a permanent sit-in before the Tripoli UNHCR offices. The protest went on for 100 days, from 1 October 2021 to 10 January 2022, when a police raid evicted the informal camp, and hundreds of people were arrested. While the leaders of this protest were Sudanese, the protestors included eleven different nationalities.

The decision to gather in front of the UNHCR came after a massive police raid in the Tripoli neighbourhood of Gargaresh on 1 October. Hundreds of private houses were stormed, and thousands of migrants were arrested. Those who escaped arrest joined forces with people from other neighbourhoods who feared the same could happen to them soon. In several detention centres, people heard about the mass mobilisation: many managed to escape and joined the protest camp. The protestors encouraged them, “because there was already

this communication strategy that we can reach into the people and tell them: listen, we are already outside here, we are not very safe, but it is still much safer than to be inside the prison. So [...] people escaped from Tariq al Sikka, [...] Al Mabani...". (Interviewee No. 13)

Protestors gave themselves a name ('Refugees in Libya', acronym: RIL) and set up a website as well as a Facebook and a Twitter account. Thus, they immediately attracted the attention of Libyan and European civil society groups that provided material and immaterial support in terms of know-how, connections, services and funding. With the aim to "amplify the voices" of RIL (rather than speaking on their behalf and "interpret their voices"), several formal and informal actors created an international support network that was first called 'Solidarity with Refugees in Libya' (SRIL), and in the summer of 2023 renamed 'Alliance with Refugees in Libya' (ARIL). All this gave RIL (and its spokesperson David Yambio) an international visibility that was unprecedented in the history of Libya's migrant mobilisations. ARIL and RIL work together but stress their difference: "We, ARIL, are Europeans, we are the supporting movement. We, white privileged Europeans, cannot say we are RIL. It's a matter of avoiding appropriation, it's simply a matter of respect, of political correctness [...]. RIL are still in Libya, [...] so we in Europe, we cannot be RIL" (Interviewee No. 5).

RIL's first request was the evacuation of all recognised refugees from Libya. Then, RIL expanded the scope of its activities to the entire migrant population in Libya, denouncing any form of border violence and calling for the freedom of movement for every human being regardless of their status. Later, RIL and ARIL launched a campaign for the release of the 221 persons who were arrested and sent to the Ain Zara detention centre when the protest camp in front of the UNHCR was evicted on 10 January 2022. In December 2022, they organised protest actions and a demonstration in Geneva. Only a few months earlier, they had obtained the release of Mazin, a 15-year-old boy who was a victim of judicial harassment in Libya. At the end of June 2023, another collective action and a demonstration were organised in Brussels, demanding the release of the 221 Ain Zara detainees. The prisoners were released only two weeks later, a significant success for RIL/ARIL. A new campaign was soon launched demanding the evacuation from Libya of the 221 released, based on their recognition as human rights defenders and on the argument that precisely because they are human rights defenders, they run the risk of being specifically persecuted and exposed to systematic abuse in Libya.

Aside from Mazin's release, an activist summarises the main achievements of the RIL-ARIL cooperation as follows: "First, the release of the 221 from Ain Zara [...]. Second, [the fact that] finally, in Europe, [...] European movements and institutions directly invite RIL representatives rather than white people speaking about or on behalf of refugees in Libya" (Interviewee No. 5). Indeed, RIL's spokesperson was invited to speak at the Italian Chamber of Deputies, at the European Parliament and with officials of the International Criminal Court "in order to bring the concerns of the community that he represents [...] and make them aware of the situation" (Interviewee No. 17).

Despite several successful initiatives, some activists see the glass half empty: “I would say it [RIL] was not successful because if it was successful, a lot of people should be evacuated outside Libya now, because a lot of people who stand at the UN are still in Libya now. So I would just say, yeah, the world has known that there was something going on in Libya, but they can’t do anything. So if the UN [...] started working on that, on serving life, yes, I would say it was successful. But if these people are in need or need to be evacuated, a lot of people are very sick people, they can’t go anywhere, they’re in Libya. Some of them, we don’t know where they are...! I would say that it’s not successful” (Interviewee No. 14).

While solidarity among and towards migrants in Libya has made significant steps forward and allowed for the release and departure of many, these words remind us that Libya is still a hell on earth for people on the move.

Conclusions

The first conclusion that can be drawn from this report is that exogenous solidarity towards migrants in Libya does not fall from the sky. Instead, it is actively solicited by people on the move, who manage to reach out to potential solidarity actors despite the difficult context of the Libyan border regime. Research on exogenous solidarity mostly takes the perspective of exogenous civil society actors. This report suggests that adopting the point of view of people on the move and of their autonomous, collective initiatives is necessary to provide a clearer picture of solidarity dynamics.

The report further shows that migrants establish relations with solidarity actors not just in Libya but across the continents, thus creating transnational networks of solidarity flows that challenge the externalised European border regime and support the freedom of movement. Thus, solidarity develops by stretching over territories and becoming transnational and multi-directional.

Interestingly, movement across space may transform solidarity actors. This is the case of those migrants who turn from solidarity recipients to solidarity providers after leaving Libya and reaching a safe country.

Further research is needed to shed more light on how the movement of people and the movement of (endogenous and exogenous) solidarity articulate in and across space, feed into each other in different directions, and generate solidarity spaces at different scales.

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ANNEX 1: LIST OF INTERVIEWS

N.	Date	Interviewee	Method
1	29 November 2023	Italian researcher and activist	Whatsapp video call
2	2 December 2023	I-NGO representative	Whatsapp video call
3	16 December 2023 and 25 May 2024	Migrant activist	Telephone call
4	19 December 2023	Italian journalist and researcher	Whatsapp audio call
5	22 December 2023	I-NGO representative	Telephone call
6	22 December 2023	I-NGO representative	Whatsapp audio call
7	28 December 2023	Libyan NGO representative	Whatsapp video call
8	3 January 2024	Migrant activist	Telephone call
9	3 January 2024	I-NGO representative	Telephone call
10	5 January 2024	Italian researcher and activist	Whatsapp audio call
11	5 January 2024	I-NGO representative	Teams meeting
12	9 January 2024	I-NGO representative	Telephone call
13	14 January 2024	Migrant activist	Whatsapp video call
14	15 January 2024	Migrant activist	Whatsapp audio call
15	26 January 2024	Migrant activist	in presence interview
16	27 January 2024	I-NGO representative	in presence interview
17	1 February 2024	I-NGO representative	Zoom meeting
18	1 February 2024	I-NGO representative	E-mail interview (written answers to written questions)
19	4 and 11 February 2024	Migrant activist	Whatsapp audio call
20	17 February 2024	NGO representative	Zoom meeting
21	22 February 2024	NGO representative	Whatsapp video call
22	25 February 2024	Italian journalist	in presence interview
23	7 March 2024	Eritrean diaspora journalist and activist	Zoom meeting
24	28 April 2024	French researcher and activist	Zoom meeting
25	28 May 2024	Italian activist	Telephone call

ANNEX 2: PARTIAL LIST OF QUESTIONS

- When did the first acts of self-organised protest and mobilisation of migrants in Libya begin?
- Who initiated those protests and mobilisations?
- Who supported them from Libya and/or from abroad?
- Do you see a link between these first acts of protest and more recent mobilisations?
- Are any migrant mobilisations currently going on in Libya? If yes, in what do they consist?
- What kind of support do migrant initiatives in Libya receive from the Libyan civil society, from international actors who are active in Libya, and/or from abroad?
- Did/do you (e.g. as a migrant) directly participate in those initiatives? If yes, how did/do you secure support from solidarity actors?
- Did/do you (e.g. as an NGO) provide any kind of support to those initiatives? If yes, was/is it them who reach/ed out to you to ask for help, or you who reach/ed out to them to offer support?
- How are/were contacts with other potential solidarity actors (journalists, activists, NGOs etc.) established?
- Do you know people who were involved in mobilisations in Libya and then continued supporting the cause after reaching Europe?