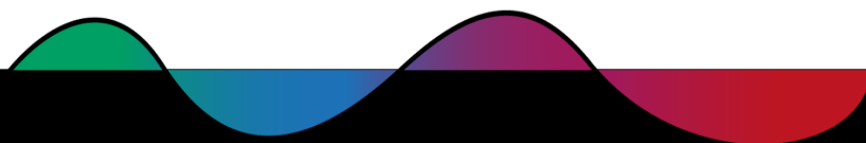


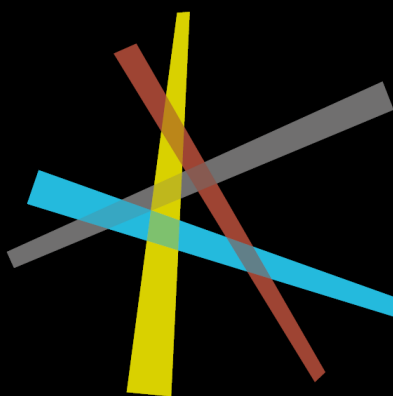
# SOLROUTES



## *Sicilian Strait*

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In collaboration with:



# MOBS

## Introduction

This document stems from a cooperation between the SOLROUTES and the MOBS<sup>1</sup> research projects. It is focused on the Sicilian Strait as a crucial place for the deployment of migration routes across the Mediterranean maritime space. Accordingly, the choice to locate our fieldwork in Mazara del Vallo - which is one of the most important fishing ports in Italy and the Central Mediterranean Sea - was since, on one hand, it is a significant destination for the migration coming from the Tunisian shores, and, on the other is the base of a fishing fleet which, at least until a decade ago, was one of the main civil actors of rescue at sea.

The purpose of this document is to provide an overview of research activities carried out under the two projects in Mazara del Vallo. From a methodological perspective the research work carried out was based on a common ethnographical work which involved both the authors, in Mazara del Vallo, for the whole month of July 2023.

Overall, more than thirty people collaborated to the research, among people interviewed and chat happened during informal encounters.

Among the persons interviewed were an anthropologist, a biologist, a politician, a publisher, a former admiral of the Italian Coast Guard, three social workers, three trade unionists, three ship-owners (or former ship-owners), and one former captain of a fishing vessel. Additionally, two Tunisian women were interviewed individually (five in the form of a group), along with four Tunisian youths working in restaurants and one young individual working as a fisherman. The fieldwork is not yet close, and the realisation of a GNW to produce a participative docu-film is expected to happen in the next months.

### Mazara del Vallo. The destination of an old migration route and a node for Tunisian People on the Move.

The choice to locate the fieldwork in Mazara del Vallo is due both to the fact this was the base of one of the largest fishing fleets of the Mediterranean Sea and probably the largest in Italy (competing with S. Benedetto del Tronto) and to the fact that, at least in the first decade of the 2000s, fishing vessels from Mazara del Vallo often happened to be involved in migrants rescue operations. Furthermore, Mazara del Vallo has a historical connection with Tunisia which, throughout the last three decades of the last century, took the shape of a significant migration flow of Tunisian citizens toward Mazara del Vallo, where they have been employed mostly as fishermen or deckhands. Accordingly, Mazara del Vallo

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<sup>1</sup> [www.mobsprin2020.org](http://www.mobsprin2020.org)

could be considered a crucial site to observe both solidarity practices, within the professional category of fishermen and the ways the border is embedded in their professional practices, and a site to observe solidarity among Tunisian residents and Tunisian migrants.

In other words, Mazara del Vallo can be considered a node where different conceptions of solidarity overlap and blur. While this is not an external national/EU border context, nor is it at the core of the “border spectacle” (Cuttitta, 2012; De Genova, 2015), it highlights the crucial role of work in structuring circulations and questions the role of specific actors. For instance, that of fishermen who move in international and contested waters, criss-crossing different juridical systems and, continuously, challenging police controls; or the role of ethnic / compatriots networks which, spanning between the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea, are shaping a solidarity infrastructure, pending the strengthening of a widespread phenomenon of “otherisation” of non-autochthonous people. Furthermore, following Giglioli (2019), analysing how bordering processes work across different kinds of spaces and temporal moments, we denaturalise the idea of borders, showing the historical and social construction of borders and the communities they perimeter.

Mazara del Vallo is a city of about 50,000 inhabitants, lying on the South-Western Sicilian coast and part of the Province of Trapani, whose economy has grown around the fishery sector. While the fishery activities were spread along the whole southern Sicilian coast, though at family or small business level, and with different techniques (such as “*cianciolo*” or “*palangaro*”), Mazara del Vallo took the lead in the II World War aftermath, due to the diffusion of marine engines for trawling fishing; and subsequently, throughout the following decades, through the diffusion, on the Mazara fishing vessels of other technologies such as Sonar, GPS, and blast chillers.

From a sociological point of view, the fishery industry in Mazara del Vallo reflects an intricate ecological, economic, and social transformation. The fishing industry has been the main economic development driver for the local community; it contributed to the rise of a massive workforce demand partially met by Tunisian migrants; it has been a deadly challenge to the ecological balance of the central Mediterranean Sea.

As for the first aspect, the boom of the fishing industry was due to the development of the trawler fleet, in the Sixties. A trend triggered by a combination of vote trading with scatter-gun public contributions for the fishing fleet development (Ben-Yehoyada, 2019). Accordingly, throughout several decades, an innumerable quantity of money has been made available by the State, for the subsidy of Mazara del Vallo fisheries, mainly through nonrefundable contribution schemes for boat construction or renovation, and allowances for bunker purchase.

*"This is a fleet built from scratch, thanks to state aid. They were all farmers and went barefoot. There were public contributions for diesel. And with a very low cost of diesel, the more you spent on the bunker the more you had contributions; and there were public contributions for purchasing ships. And then there was the detaxation of social contributions, so social contributions were minimal"* Antonio, an old trade unionist, tells me. This is the framework of the development of Mazara fisheries and migration. Let's see how these two processes are intertwined.

Currently, about 10-15% of the Mazara del Vallo residents are Tunisian. Yet, this is not a novelty; instead, it is the outcome of a migration process that started far before Italy became a country of immigration. Indeed, the growth of the Tunisian community in Mazara del Vallo can be interpreted as a migration flow depending on a pull factor. That was the soaring demand for workforce which happened from the Sixties to the Nineties.

Pending Tunisia's decolonisation process (and in the following decades), while thousands of Italians left the country to get back to Italy, or elsewhere, the first Tunisian migrants arrived in Sicily. They found employment either in agriculture or in the fishing sector. Despite a high degree of labour exploitation, the great fishiness of the central Mediterranean, and the fact that wages for those working in the fishing sector were vastly higher than those in other sectors, made employment in the fishing industry - where the work was very strenuous and demanding - extremely coveted.

*"Once upon a time, there was a pay-as-you-go contract, so no one got the wages under the collective contracts, but they got much, much more! There was a sort of profit share agreement between the capital and labour force. After deducting the expenses of rigging, half of the catch went to the shipowner and the other half was shared, with 2 shares to the captain, 1 1/2 shares to the foreman ("capomacchina") and fishmaster ("capopesca"), and the rest in equal parts among the rest of the embarked workforce. So much catch meant so much profit. And being a deckhand aboard a fishing vessel guaranteed an income that, at that time, no other industry made possible." (Vittorio, politician)*

At the very beginning, this migration flow involved only males. Then, progressively, through family reunification, a gender rebalancing trend took place, shaping the "Tunisian colony" of Mazara del Vallo. A trend which was combined with dynamics of spatial concentration, professional segregation, and educational differentiation.

As for the first aspect, taking advantage of a wide availability of properties that were of poor quality, or sustained significant damages from the earthquakes of 1968 and 1981, Tunisian people used to settle in the historic centre of Mazara del Vallo (the so-called "Kasba"), a middle-aged part of the town, close to the old fluvial port, which also has an

Arab layout. On a side note, it is worth to be mentioned the fact that the Arab domination of Sicily, began in 827, precisely with the landing in Mazara del Vallo.

While Mazara fishing boats embarking Tunisian workforce became a sort of transnational space, in which the linguistic frontier dissolved into heterogeneous phonological universes composed of dialects and slang expressions. As Ben-Yehoyada (2019) has pointed out, if the boat, on the one hand, is crossed by clear social divisions (social class and nationality), on the other, it is a space where different relationships are experimented with and where the vehicular language is configured as a mixture of languages and registers: Sicilian, Italian, bastardized Sicilian, Mazara or fishermen's jargon.

On the contrary, on the land for decades, Tunisian and Italian people used to live separately. Accordingly, the Kasba (the old town) was a sort of "ghetto", and, only recently, it has been renewed and valorised with, both infrastructural connections (public illumination, sewage systems, etc.) and some decorative intervention (wall art and ceramics) contributing to make it a tourist attraction. Within this frame, the Tunisian presence is framed as a demonstration of a multicultural tradition. Yet, this does not obliterate the existence of a "color line" affecting spatial distribution of Tunisian people in the city (Giglioli, 2017).

Accordingly, while the Tunisian residents have recently begun to spread in all the city districts, their current presence in the Kasba is tangible. Indeed, Tunisian people feel familiar to architecture, which recalls the typical Tunisian urban style.

It must be said that in the Mazara historical centre, there are few meeting places for Tunisian people, which include at least two/three clubs, or bars, where Tunisian (sea)men, when they are not working at sea, are used to meet; a mosque; and a Tunisian government representation space. Still, these places, do not significantly make feel comfortable Tunisian residents, as they were part of the former regime's propaganda infrastructure toward Tunisian migrants.

Contrary to expectation, this dense Tunisian presence has not enabled the raising/spread of shops, or craftsmen workshops, trading typical Tunisian food, or goods.

Yet, contacts with the country of origin are so close that whichever goods a Tunisian man or woman could need, it is sufficient he/she orders it, and in less of a week, it reaches it. Either by liners or by the same fishing vessels. As one of my informants tells me, "*A lot of shadows hang over the fishing sector because everything here you could need comes by the sea ... weapons, drugs, people ...whatever!*" (Ernesto, anthropologist)

In other words, the sea allows some degree of opacity. Among these opacities are also those regarding migration, both above the role of fisheries in the past, and their current role, which is unclear.

If we assume a historical perspective, it is quite clear that Tunisian gendered migration in Mazara del Vallo entailed a clear professional segregation. While males, who were "first migrants", were employed onboard the Mazara fishing vessels, women initially were segregated at home, or employed as domestic workers. Only recently, Tunisian women gained visibility in the public space, contributing to breaking the walls of the "Tunisian enclave". *"Women could be considered as the 'picklock' of the penetration of Tunisians into Italian society,"* tells Ernesto. Then, he continues: *"This is because men are absent as they work on the boats" and because women have continuous relationships with local institutions (e.g., talking to teachers, attending public offices, etc.). Accordingly, they are the ones who are breaking the invisible barrier that encloses the Tunisian community in specific perimeters, geographical and social". "For years and years, Tunisians and Italians, have been two communities that did not recognise each other",* goes on Ernesto, *"Tunisian people were socially invisible, politically and culturally irrelevant, yet economically essential."*

Within this framework, it is worth mentioning the fact, that in 1981, the Tunisian government, in order to maintain a relationship with a large expat community, approved the opening of a Tunisian primary school in Mazara del Vallo. Yet, the initiative's success over the long period worked as a disadvantage for Tunisian children, who experienced harsh difficulties in the passage to secondary school. Furthermore, as a consequence, it strengthened the social, and cultural, boundaries between Tunisians and Italians. Along this vein Saitta highlight that instead of integration, interculture, interpenetration between cultures, what can be found is segregation (albeit in some "soft" form), exploitation of the foreign workforce, clear separation between the indigenous and Tunisian universes.

Casting a glance at current events, the crisis facing the fishing industry can be seen as a process that radically changes the scenario.



*Mazara del Vallo – The fishing port (probably in the Nineties)*

The Mazara fishing fleet, which at the end of the 1980s amounted to 350/400 units, each one employing about 10/15 people, has shrunk to about 70 units, employing, on average, 6 to 8 people on board. Furthermore, fishing harvests, now, are not even comparable to those of the 1980s or 1990s. The pay-as-you-go system is no longer sufficient to reach the minimum wage envisaged by sectorial collective contracts. A dynamic which has a dramatic effect on the local economy, as well as on employment perspectives. Furthermore, there is more and more competition in the international fishing industry. The Tunisian fishing fleet has registered tremendous growth – due also to an international know-how transfer process triggered by Tunisian fishermen bringing back to their country of origin their acquired competencies, and skills, and to the fact that many Italian shipowners transferred their enterprises to the South Mediterranean shores, with the aim of evading taxation, and EU rules. In addition, new fleets from Mediterranean countries without any consolidate maritime tradition are entering the Mediterranean fishing basin.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Among these countries Egypt is considered the country with the largest fishing fleet (estimated more than 3000 vessels).



*Mazara del Vallo – The fishing port (July 2023)*

As a consequence, the sons/daughters of fishermen and shipowners abandon the fishing sector, often closing their activities. The same happens to young Tunisians who no longer embark or wish to work in the fisheries. Rather they prefer to leave, to migrate elsewhere, and to work in other sectors. While those who stay, normally, use to work in the tourist sector. In other words, there's no longer an economic future in the Mazara fishing sector. At least, for a large part of families which, from the Sixties/Seventies, were gaining their wages through work in the fisheries. An undergoing concentration of capital is transforming the whole sector allowing the survival of few "big players", able to carry out fishing far away from the central Mediterranean Sea (Aegean Sea or Atlantic Ocean), and facilitating the progressive reduction of the rest of the fleet, which suffers more and more the pressure of other fishing navies (Tunisian, Egyptian, Turkish, etc.).



## Gender and migration: a resilience that silences

The presence of Tunisian women in Mazara del Vallo is particularly evident. As previously mentioned, these women are gradually gaining more visibility, especially in the public sphere. However, contrary to the assumption that increased visibility may equate to liberation, the observations and conversations reveal a different reality.

As I engaged with the women in discussion, the latter revolved around household responsibilities and financial challenges.

Throughout our conversations, I have understood that these women carry a double burden, striving to maintain a balance to fit the expectations of both Tunisian and Italian cultures. They navigate the challenges of both societies and strive to meet the diverse demands placed upon them, whether in terms of their children's education, maintaining a strong family, or generating a good income to build a life both here and there.

The prolonged absence of sailors at sea, away from their families, places these women under greater social responsibility. Whether consciously or unconsciously, they become stricter in raising their children and exert more pressure on them to avoid any perception that they neglected their upbringing. As expressed by many of those I met, they make a double effort to ensure their children succeed in school and do not follow in their father's footsteps as fishermen.

Even though the representatives of the "new generation" I met don't express a sense of belonging or a strong connection to their country of origin, they were born and raised in Italy, and their lives, friends, and activities revolve around this place. While they acknowledge their Tunisian origin, their day-to-day life centres on Italy. And despite the apparent openness and understanding they receive from their mothers, and the need to respect their choices and freedom, it is still paradoxical that they still consider it important to put some boundaries and rules on them to avoid criticism from people in Tunisia for not conforming to their expectations or customs.

Moreover, it is interesting to note the tendency, referred to as "ykaween" in Tunisia, which implies that every successful migration story should eventually culminate in building something in the country of origin. Therefore, individuals who sacrifice their lives in exile, in order to be culturally and socially recognized as successful migrants, are expected to demonstrate that they have at least established a house, or some form of investment, in their home country. One of the interviews that one of us had with a woman named R. reveals that she built three houses in Tunisia, taking the initiative to work and support her husband in doing so. Even at the beginning, when she was jobless, she used her savings and economized on living expenses to accumulate funds for buying a house.

*“At first, I hesitated to tell people about my job as a cleaner, as in Tunisia, it was not socially acceptable and could diminish one's social status. However, now, I proudly say that I don't care about others' opinions. I recognize the importance of my work in enabling me to provide an education for my children. My eldest child is now a doctor, the other one is on track to become a teacher next year, and my daughter is continuing her education.”*

Recently, as she mentioned, they purchased a house in Mazara, which is a common trend among the Tunisian community in the area. She moved into the house about a year ago, it seems spacious, well-maintained, and meticulously organized.

The houses they build in their country of origin are a testament to their determination and the sacrifices they made for their families, as well as a fruit of their role as good mothers and wives. The things R. mentioned during one of our conversations, as well as the encounter with other women, made me reflect on some thought-provoking questions. These questions revolve around the concept of the "illusion", as discussed by Sayad, where he refers to the image that migrants often present to their families and communities back home, emphasizing their success and positive experiences in the host country while downplaying the challenges and hardships they face. Parallely, is it the burden placed on migrant women accompanying their husbands, where society expects them to shoulder various responsibilities and maintain a certain image something similar?

During our meetings with many of these women, I would overhear discussions about household expenses. Despite their husbands working outside, these women felt a strong sense of responsibility for managing the household finances, even those who chose to stay at home, whether reluctantly or willingly, due to limited job opportunities in the area. The available job opportunities in Mazara primarily revolve around shrimp cleaning, cleaning services, or working in restaurants as waitresses. It's noteworthy that working in restaurants is socially frowned upon for married women, especially in areas not frequented by tourists and primarily consisting of the Tunisian community, which is mostly male. Working in such establishments is considered socially undesirable for a married woman due to potential inappropriate behaviour by male patrons, as mentioned by several people.

Nevertheless, many of them have built their own career alongside their husbands as a practical way to improve the family's financial situation. Additionally, they expressed how they couldn't go out, spend their vacations, or enjoy outings as they wished, being deprived of many things due to the high cost of living.

One of these women, named Asia, who has been in Italy for over 25 years, adds another layer to the discussion. The phrase "we women are fighters" encapsulates the essence of her resilience here and there (in the hosting country as well as the country of origin). Her sacrifices for a better life for her children, the challenges of being far away from them, and the exploitation and lack of respect for workers in Mazara depict the complex realities of migrant women.

Her husband had passed away, leaving her to raise their two children. Asia expressed the challenges of being alone, far away from her family, but she believed it was the only way to provide her children with a better life. If she had stayed in Tunisia, as she said, their situation would have been much worse, as there is little support for widowed women, and the financial aid provided by the government is considered shameful and insufficient.

Asia regretted the situation in Mazara, especially after the expenses increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, considering that there is a lot of exploitation and a lack of respect for workers in the area, she expressed deep dismay over the women who are forced to accept inhumane working conditions, under the pretext of supporting their families, finding it demeaning and devaluing their worth. This acceptance of such work was not the norm in the past, as both she and R. pointed out. They could not comprehend the sudden change in attitude towards these jobs.

She kept repeating every time, *"We women, we are fighters, we are struggling a lot and bear many responsibilities, and then someone comes and says how lucky you are to live in Italy or abroad in general"*. No one knows what we go through. Yes, I am grateful for everything, but here, no one helps you except yourself. You have to rely on yourself and not expect help from anyone. If you continue to rely on others, as we said in Arabic, "Begging only brings shame."

Within this framework, the role of migrant women in the area is evident, and crucial, they are facing many responsibilities and supporting a huge burden to maintain a solid family and face challenging expectations from both societies, but this role remains unrecognized.

In summary, the phrase *"a resilience that silences"* captures the multifaceted experiences of Tunisian migrant women in Mazara. Their resilience, often unnoticed or unspoken, becomes a powerful force in navigating challenges, contributing to family income, and striving for better lives. The silence is not an absence of voice but a nuanced expression of their unspoken battles and determination in the face of adversity. The complexities of

their experiences, as highlighted through their discussions and interactions, demonstrate that visibility alone does not translate into liberation. Which reflects the paradoxical nature of the migration experience. Migration, in this context, does not automatically guarantee liberation for these women. Instead, it adds additional roles and responsibilities to their lives, and thus, a more nuanced understanding of their experiences is essential. The burden of responsibilities, struggles, and the lack of external support create a silent narrative contrasting with the perception of an easier life abroad. The women's resilience highlights a gendered dynamic where migrant women are central to both domestic and financial spheres but remain unrecognized.

## The Mazara fishermen and the border at sea

While the whole growth of the Tunisian population of Mazara, throughout the 70s, as well as the 80s and the 90s, happened in a situation of border porosity – border control at sea where exceptional, and there was no document control on ferries from Tunis to Palermo – the same cannot be said regarding the current situation.

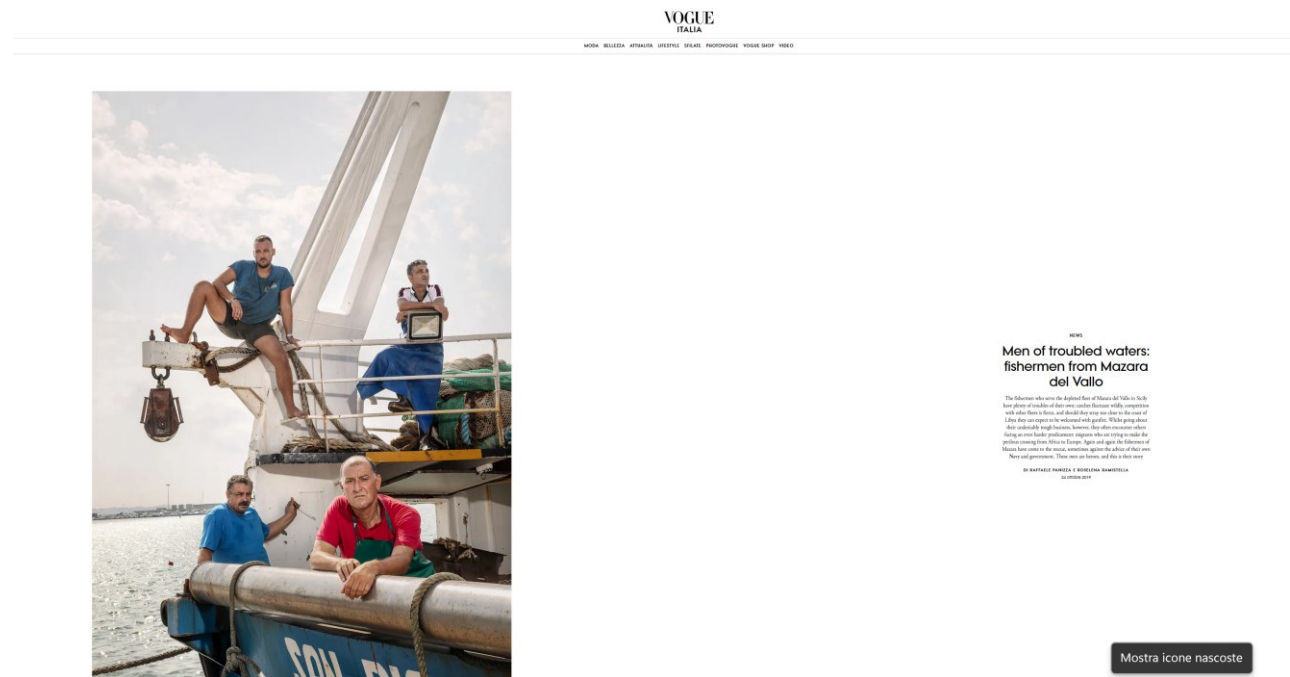
While solidarity at sea was taken for granted for a long time, being it embedded in a multiplicity of practices through which seamen ensured reciprocal safety (the so-called Law of the Sea), and by the observation of principles of the *International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue convention* (and their translations into national laws), in recent years something new has happened. The progressive tightening of the legislation on rescue at sea has invested the fishing sector, as well as other solidarity actors in the maritime space (e.g.: the civilian fleet), thus reconfiguring the Mediterranean Sea as a battleground, where different “maritime actors” encounter and, sometimes, conflate.

Border control enforcement practices progressively extended to maritime working practices and procedures. Accordingly, we can say that “moving the border” onboard each boat sailing across the Mediterranean Sea, raised contradictions between the moral imperative to rescue people at sea, whoever they are, and the more and more severe, and intricate laws and regulations approved to contrast unauthorised migration.

Trying to describe the trajectory of Mazara fishermen, in the rescue at sea infrastructure, and their evolving role, we would summarise it in a passage from heroes to unwanted collaborators

As David Bowie pointed out, in one of his most famous songs, “*We can be heroes, just for one day*”. This song verse describes precisely what happened to the Mazara del Vallo fishermen. The most famous case which involved them happened on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2008, during a sea storm with waves about 7-8 meters high. On that occasion, five Mazara crews

were asked by the Coast Guard to join a massive rescue operation involving two boats adrift, with about 650 people onboard. At that time Mazara's fishermen were often involved in the rescue of men and women at sea, but after this case, their stories circulated throughout the whole world; there were social network pages dedicated to them, and the most famous newspapers wanted them for their cover stories.



*Fishermen from Mazara del Vallo on Vogue magazine [<https://www.vogue.it/news/article/men-of-troubled-waters-mazara-del-vallo-fishermen>]*

Yet, for multiple reasons, this season has gone by quickly. Across the first 2000s, the fisheries sector was suffering from a structural crisis, linked to a general slump in fish consumption. This was due, on the one hand, to structural change in households connected to women's greater access to work, and less time available for preparing meals; on the other, we find, some cyclical factors; like the Greek economic crisis of 2008. Greece was indeed a big consumer and importer of fish, but the contraction of the economy led to a general slump in consumption and, more specifically, a sharp drop in fish consumption. It was at this juncture, that Mazara fisheries changed their type of fishing. While before they used to fish on shoals - that means in shallow waters (up to 100-200 metres deep) 'raking in' everything they could; from now those who are not closing their fishing activities, specialise in fishing on very deep waters (800-900 mt. deep). This change entails a change in the rigging of fishing boats, a change in the catch (red shrimp); a reduction in the workforce on board fishing vessels. The development of red shrimp fishing is associated with the introduction of blast chilling technologies, available onboard fishing vessels.

With blast chillers, the freshly caught red shrimps are brought down to -40° (so all decomposition processes stop) and, then, stored in cold rooms that keep it at -20/-30°. Once it reaches ports with international connections or airports, the frozen shrimp is loaded into cold rooms (or reefer containers) and shipped worldwide.

Yet, this specialisation brings a geographical change; the fishing companies carrying out this transformation move their vessels to more suitable basins, i.e. to areas with deeper waters (Aegean Sea or Atlantic Ocean). Conversely, those who cannot adapt to this transformation are probably retiring. To reduce the impact of trawling fish, EU legislation envisages a deadline (2030) beyond which trawling fish will be banned; accordingly, the State is providing a kind of subsidy for those who are scrapping their fishing vessel (*contributi alla rottamazione*).

At the same time, what happened after the conclusion of the “Mare Nostrum operation”<sup>3</sup> caused a change in relations between the institutional rescue apparatus and the fishermen.

*"Before, it was they who called us and asked us to do the rescuing, to intervene where we were needed. In addition, they would pay us for lost fishing days" Giovanni, a retired captain and ship-owner, tells me. Now "If you rescue someone, then they block your boat and make a lot of bureaucratic problems for you. Even when you find dead bodies because the sea is full of dead bodies. What happened to Saro, was that he found a dead body in the nets, and he called the Coast Guard, and they gave him a lot of trouble; they stopped his boat, they inspected it, and then they made him go through a huge amount of bureaucratic procedures because a dead body could not stay where is fish for food consumption. But that was not his place, they had just pulled him up in the nets. So, after all this mess, when Saro went back into the sea and pulled up another dead body, a part of a dead body, instead of calling the Coast Guard, they threw him overboard". (Tony, retired captain and shipowner).*

Another testimony of the power posture towards the intervention of fishermen in rescue operation comes from Isa, one of my informants in Mazara del Vallo, who told me: *"My brother is a fisherman, he's the captain of the vessel. He told me, that it happens often, even if normally they do not talk much about it. For instance, once they met a boat in distress in international waters, with a lot of migrants onboard. They gave them water and some other comfort goods, but then they left them. Because they would have had too many problems, rescuing them".*

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<sup>3</sup> Operation Mare Nostrum was a naval and air SAR operation run by the Italian government in 2013, through which about 150,000 migrants were rescued in the central Mediterranean Sea. The Mare Nostrum operation duration was of one year; due to unpopularity and high costs, it was superseded by Frontex's Triton Operation.

*"Now it's different; if you call because you meet people in trouble at sea, they don't even answer you", says Giovanni, continuing his narration. In parallel, other witnesses from the sea talk about the delaying of replies from MRCC<sup>4</sup>.*

This is part of what Vittorio Alessandro, Admiral of the Italian Coast Guard on leave, calls the "silence strategy". Which is, anyway, something more elaborated than a mere non-reply at calls on Channel 16<sup>5</sup>.

He explains that *"most rescues are now classified as migratory events, to give it a police stamp".* And in case of 'migratory events' the competence to intervene is of Guardia di Finanza, not Coast Guard. A way to bend the data construction, and to put the topic of rescue at sea in a precise frame in the media coverage. In these cases, when migrants are involved, *"the Coast Guard IMRCC, when it starts an intervention, no longer labels the case as a SAR (Search and Rescue) event, rather it defines it as a migration event".* So, *"even in the case of an intervention on request by IMRCC - and this concerns NGOs in particular - this type of intervention is not framed as a SAR event. Consequently, what is assigned is not a POS (acronym of Place of Safety) as the international conventions envisage it, and which is required to be close; rather, it is the PDS (acronym of Port of Disembarkation), as if it were a merchant shipment".*

*"The novelty that has strongly entered into the rescue process is silence (...) Silence has become a veil over all the sea rescue activities. It has become the 'stone in the mouth', to evoke an expression which initially was referred to mafia".* In 2013, on the occasion of the shipwreck on 3 October, a fishing boat from Mazara was accused of failing to rescue a boat with 366 people that capsized off the coast. *"In that case, the silence was that of the fishing crew from Mazara; according to the first conviction they had, ...the silence was that of this boat that stopped, recorded that presence of people in danger, they stood there uncertain on what to do... Then, they resumed sailing and arrived in port. That was something that from the point of view of timing and organisation of the vessel - which had fish on board, i.e. a perishable commodity - paradoxically is even understandable. You see them there, and you think, 'They'll come and get them in the morning anyway', the sea was holding, and the boat seemed to be afloat. Then it capsized because they lit a rag.... and the fire and terror spread within the passengers caused the shipwreck".*

*"Yet, when I say silence has taken on an important role, I also mean institutional silence. It is difficult, for example, to know any information from the institutions. For example, about what*

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<sup>4</sup> MRCC is the acronym of Maritime Rescue Coordination Center.

<sup>5</sup> Channel 16 (156.8 MHz) is a marine VHF radio frequency designated as an international distress frequency.

*happened in Cutro<sup>6</sup>, or what is happening, right now. Currently, it is only the judiciary power that, by investigating, is bringing to light things that no one is saying. The same goes for the judiciary in Greece, on the Pylos shipwreck. (...) The silence is also that of the ships that hear and do not intervene".*

We then talk about the routes of merchant ships on the Suez-Algeiras route, which once used to pass close to the Gulf of Sirte, and now - indicatively - since 2015, passes much further north, between Malta and Sicily. "At a congress of Confitarma<sup>7</sup> the shipowners, in the presence of the Minister of Transport, had said so: 'Let us know what you mean to do with us, with our ships'. This president of Confitarma, then said, 'We can't be stopped; you can't leave our ships stationary for days as you did with the "Mare Jonio"<sup>8</sup>'. Then, the route has moved North, and, in the unlikely event that a merchant ship is asked to intervene, the event is labelled as SAR (search and rescue). So that they can claim back the costs and the insurance". Which is not the case for fishermen.

Turning the other way is also part of the strategy of silence, but what strikes me is that this strategy of managing sea rescue individualises the risks involved in rescue activities; thus, imposing an additional 'obligation of silence' on the "lesser actors" in the maritime scenario.

In the case of a 'migratory event' in which most sea rescue cases today fall, unless you are a vessel of a corporate shipowner, for which automatically the event is classified as SAR, the resulting economic risks (vessel detention and/or seizure, inspections, controls, etc.) are individualised; in other words, you rescue at your own risk. And you bear any increased costs (direct and indirect) caused by the rescue activity. All this induces a further level of silence (like that of the fishermen from Mazara mentioned earlier): an attitude of indifference is, imposed, inviting people to 'look the other way', and rewarding those who pretend not to have seen anything.

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<sup>6</sup> Cutro is the place where happened one of Italy's worst migrant boat shipwrecks. On 26.02.2023 a boat carrying about 200 people sank amid bad weather conditions, trying to land on the coastline of Steccato di Cutro (Crotonoe).

<sup>7</sup> Confitarma is the trade association of the Italian shipping industry gathering Italian shipping companies and shipping groups active in the sectors of freight and passenger transport, cruises and auxiliary services of traffic.

<sup>8</sup> "Mare Jonio" is the naval asset of *Mediterranea Saving Humans* a "civil society platform" making connections between existing networks and individuals taking a stand against the deaths and the human rights violations committed daily in the Mediterranean Sea.



## Planned GNW

Regarding the possibility of creating a GNW in Mazara del Vallo, we are working on the idea of creating a participatory docu-film, with Massimo Cannarella.

The inspiring concept around which we are organising our work is that of the “Dead Sea” (*Mar morto*). Indeed, a multiplicity of processes and dynamics investing local economy and society in Mazara del Vallo are dealing with decline, deterioration, and “de-futurisation”. E.g.: the fisheries in Mazara del Vallo are declining; both Italian and Tunisian youth in Mazara do not mean to give continuity to their parents' activities at sea; the Central Mediterranean marine environment has been seriously damaged, and the development of trawling fishing currently threatens it; the borderisation of the sea endangers the historical connections between Sicily and Tunisia; etc.

GNW could involve, at least, the following groups of people: fishermen (both Italian and Tunisian); young people (both Italian and Tunisian). Yet, some other subjects (e.g.: institutional actors; wives or mothers of fishermen, etc.) could have a role in the GNW.

The idea would be to organize some collective workshops focused on a) the lack of future in the fishing sector, as well as the stories of solidarity at sea and the violence of borderisation practices at sea; b) the lack of future of young generations who experience the contradiction between their aspirations and those of their parents (who migrated for similar reasons).

Locations: Mazara del Vallo and Mahdia (or Kerkennah islands). Possibly some interviews to Italian and Tunisian youth could happen also in different contexts (e.g. places where they migrated).

A key element in the construction of the narrative will be the incorporation of visuals resonating with historical and cultural themes. This could encompass old photographs, artefacts, and footage evoking a profound sense of shared history. By seamlessly weaving these elements into the narrative, we aim to present a comprehensive and nuanced view of the enduring connection between Mazara and Tunisia.

In this sense, we are planning our next stay in Mazara del Vallo between the months of January and February.

## Opportunities and criticalities for the development of research work on solidarity in Mazara del Vallo

Opportunities	Criticalities
<p>1) The Tunisian community in Mazara del Vallo has had a crucial role in the migration of Tunisian people to Europe. Even if Mazara del Vallo it is no longer a site of massive settlements, according to our sources it still is a crucial node for Tunisian migration flows. According to our sources, it works as a “lung”, when there is some crisis factor invest Europe, a lot of Tunisian people, get back to Mazara del Vallo to find shelter; when all is good they leave Mazara del Vallo to go away. Currently, arrivals from Tunisia continue; yet, they stand quite “below the line”; normally, they regards small numbers, and no one seems to give relevance to them.</p> <p>Research work in Mazara del Vallo can help in understanding the role of nationals networks in constructing the Tunisians’ migration routes,</p> <p>2) Despite the shrinking of the fishing fleet and the corresponding decrease in employment, fishermen still have a privileged perspective to understand what happens in the Sicilian Channel.</p>	<p>1) Summarising, the fishermen in Mazara del Vallo no longer seem a key-actor in the central Mediterranean Sea. This is due to: a) the fact the Mazara fishing fleet registered a massive shrink; b) the fact that the fishing vessels operating in the Sicilian Channel are less and less; c) the fact that they are either not involved in the rescue operations, or they are explicitly discouraged to take the charge of rescue when they meet migrants’ boats in distress.</p> <p>2) Mazara del Vallo, as a place, in this moment, is not at the core of the places invested by the current borderization processes.</p> <p>3) Access to both the Tunisian community, and the fishing social world, is not easy. Through his ethnographic fieldwork in Mazara del Vallo, Nadia has demonstrated that knowledge of the language, and gender, could be precious assets to gain access to the Tunisian community. As for the fishing fleet, documents to work onboard are requireds (libretto di navigazione) as well as the availability of a great bodily capital.</p>

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