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No Goodbye!

The Departure from the South and the New Trans-Mediterranean Solidarity

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This summer, the Boats4People campaign succeeded in building another transnational network across the western Mediterranean Sea. Last year, the West African Caravan from Bamako to Dakar had taken the first step. Now the Mediterranean Sea: the campaign's first goal is the installation of an alternative emergency call system for boat people. In the longer term, the aim is to connect social struggles around the Mediterranean. Revolts against pauperisation, as they are currently happening in Greece and Spain, have been taking place for decades further south. This is the background of the EU's sealing off against the South.

In 1981, the names of cities such "Berlin, Zurich, Brixton!" turned into rallying cries. A wave of squattings and neighbourhood unrests seized major European cities. When in 1983/1984 the so-called bread-riots in North Africa began and were broken down with concessions and repression after only a few days – more than 150 people were killed in Tunisia! – a new internationalist movement emerged in Europe. The reference to national liberation

movements had become obsolete. The states that had gained their independence against European colonialism had attempted to implement development strategies at the expense of their rural populations, yet failed in economic terms. They had accepted the structural adjustment programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and cut food subsidies. This was the trigger for the bread riots.

The new metropolitan internationalism, however, failed to build bridges across the Mediterranean. The movement even failed to retrace the continuity of social struggles in the Maghreb region or gain a deeper understanding of the conflicts. Robust interviews with activists who fled from the Maghreb have emerged only recently in the European context. They include detailed accounts of the ongoing, repeatedly suppressed cycle of conflict, see for example the interview with Khaled Garbi Ben Ammar. In the late 1970s Ben Ammar had studied in Tunisia, was exiled, and he eventually fled to Europe in 1990 (http://uninomade.org/un%E2%80%99insurrezione-in-movimento/). He describes how, in the 1980s, workers, students, and the unemployed were consistently available to help out with, or participate in, labour strikes and demonstrations, and they were also involved in discussions about these campaigns. Little knowledge of these new forms of organizing made it to Europe. For the most part, this ignorance resulted from distorted perceptions of North Africa equalling the region with the rule of Islamism.

Beginning in the late 1970s, the Arab states “invented” a convenient enemy: the Islamists. There are numerous cross-connections between the secular governments and oppositional Islamist forces. Initially the Islamists participated in defeating the social revolts, yet eventually some Islamist factions themselves were the target of violent repression.

In 1988, several thousand people participated in the Congress on New Internationalism in Bremen and the anti-IMF Congress in Berlin. Shortly thereafter, in October 1988, young people in Algeria started a countrywide uprising. The poor fully supported and participated in the struggle. The activists were young people just like those in Berlin; they had similar ideas, but they were a lot poorer, starved by IMF policies inhibiting free consumption. Police and military forces crushed the uprising; about 500 people died. The silence of the metropolitan left was disgraceful. Islamist groups absorbed remainders of the uprising and subsequently won the election. As a consequence, in 1992 the military staged a coup with tacit Western blessing, and a terrible civil war ensued. To this day, the study and discussion of these events is subject to criminal persecution.

People who fled across the Mediterranean back then did not yet encounter the agents of Frontex. Many southern European countries had not yet imposed visa restrictions for Maghrebians seeking to immigrate. The Schengen system and "Fortress Europe" had not been put in place. The only major obstacle to overcome was leaving the Maghreb region, because it was difficult to get a passport. On the other hand, secret emigration was not prohibited by criminal law at the time. From the 1960s to the 1980s, legalizations were conducted covertly and on a case-by-case basis in all Western European countries, providing a useful tool to integrate so-called 'guest workers' into the factory labour market.

In the 1990s, and especially after 9/11 in 2001, North African regimes emulated U.S. anti-terrorist strategies and established a sophisticated system of preventive repression in their own countries. People risked arrest and torture if they were suspected of refusing to denounce someone. Any kind of gathering or meeting became suspicious, be they those of Islamists or other groups.

Under Ben Ali (1987-2011), there were more than 30,000 political prisoners – compared to a Tunisian population of 9 million people. Finally, the organisations were dismantled. The resistance against pauperisation shifted to informal and everyday contexts.

At the same time, the EU began to reach out to the southern countries. Libya was released from international isolation in 2003 and received money from the privatization of oil production. The EU also promised greater economic support to Tunisia and Morocco. Unlike the EU enlargement toward Eastern Europe, which brought about a gradual adjustment of living standards, the increasing influence of European politics in the region south of the Mediterranean resulted in the establishment of a socio-geographic frontline vis-à-vis the Maghreb. The chasm between prosperity and poverty widened, the wage gap grew to up to 1:10, producing a social divide between North and South unprecedented in the millennia-old history of the Mediterranean region.

The containment of the "dangerous classes" in North Africa was the founding rationale of the EU's first Security Doctrine and the European Neighbourhood Policy (both 2003). The defence against migration was elevated to a shared political goal. Since 2003/2004, North African countries have implemented new laws on residence rights and border crossing to penalise free emigration, increased the surveillance of 'foreigners', and regularly carry out raids. The surveillance of North African coastlines and seas was coordinated with southern European countries and the emerging Frontex agency.

These trends were the context in which British PM Blair, Italian chancellor Berlusconi, and German Home Secretary Schily urged the North African countries to build refugee camps. North African states accepted the EU funds and transformed their camps and

detention centres into deportation facilities. In 2005, our organisation – the Research Institute for Flight and Migration with the Committee for Basic Rights – and the French-speaking network Migreurop simultaneously called for protests against the extraterritorialisation ("outsourcing" might be a better term here) of migration control (http://www.ffm-berlin.de/aufrufdeutsch.pdf, 2005). However, we failed to establish a transnational conversation on the subject.

Since the Strait of Gibraltar has been closely monitored beginning in 2003/2004, more and more boat people from both Tunisia and also other African states attempt to cross the Strait of Sicily. In response, the Italian government declared a state of emergency for the Island of Lampedusa. With the support of Frontex, the EU began to use military surveillance technology at sea.

Boat people emerged in the Mediterranean in about 1990/1991, when the EU tightened the visa requirements for all southern Mediterranean neighbouring states. Since then, the Mediterranean has turned into the largest cemetery of post-World War II Western Europe. With the new high-tech blockade and increasing numbers of deportations to Libya on the high seas (beginning in 2004/2005), the number of boat people who die has risen tremendously.

In 2004, a cargo ship named after, and owned by, Cap Anamur, a humanitarian organization, rescued 37 refugees in the Strait of Sicily. This was the first indicator that actual resistance against Fortress Europe would require the establishment of a rescue system in the Mediterranean. Cap Anamur's attempt was defeated by the police and subject to legal persecution. The European left did not even consider it a legitimate form of resistance (and instead denounced it as a 'humanitarian show'). The rescue action thus

could not rely on any transnational or even trans-Mediterranean support.

The transnational caravan in West Africa in 2011, however, indicated that a new form of internationalism finally began to gain ground. Migrants, people with foreign language skills, and highly mobile youth play a central role; they know how to extend the social village of friendships and networks of exchange over thousands of miles.

When the EU responded to the Arabellion with further militarization, a ship blockade, and a Frontex operation in the Strait of Sicily, the number of dead boat people peaked once more in 2011. For the first time, the failure to provide assistance was documented. Refugees drowned and died of thirst at sea while being closely watched by the high-tech eyes of EU and NATO. By now, there are active social and political networks across the western Mediterranean. Cheap high tech devices are also available to refugees, migrants, rebels, and no-border activists. All of this resulted in the Boats 4 People (B4P) campaign: weeks of travelling encounters and discussions about Mediterranean border activism, accompanied by the establishment of an alternative emergency call system: WatchTheMed.

Everything about B4P, including reports and pictures of the stops in Cecina, Palermo, Tunis, Monastir, and Lampedusa, as well as press releases and a variety of information can be found at www.boats4people.org; www.ffm-online.org; http://afrique-europe-interact.net/