

# **THE BELLY OF THE BEAST**

## **Mediterranean Security in the Age of Crisis**

**Tassos Symeonides**

(RIEAS Ακαδημαϊκός Σύμβουλος)

**Copyright:** Research Institute for European and American Studies ([www.rieas.gr](http://www.rieas.gr))  
**Publication date:** 12 November 2017

**Note:** The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS).

The Mediterranean Sea, cradle of civilizations, is frothing with instability, violence, illegal immigration, and rapidly advancing criminalization. Its southern littoral has been transformed into an open wound as brittle lawless “states” disintegrate, or are near collapse, and corrupt politics, religious fanaticism, and aggressive tribalism offer plenty of opportunities for criminal enterprises and, more recently, Islamic terrorism. Looking at the map there isn’t one single state that may be termed “stable” or “secure” or both on the southern rim of the Mediterranean basin.

Pre-existing festering crises (e.g. Greece-Turkey, Israel and the Arabs) were joined in 2011 by the chaos triggered by the Western attack on the Qaddafi regime and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Qaddafi’s fall and murder turned Libya into a lawless bandit land tormented by rival heavily armed gangster factions which, among others, feed criminal human trafficking enterprises that push hundreds of thousands of desperate African illegals across the water onto Europe. Meantime, in Syria, a truly apocalyptic conflict has ruined the country and has drawn the United States and Russia, plus dozens of other countries, into a bloody cauldron. Both of these former states, Libya and Syria, promise a future full of deadly regional crises and, even, threats of a much wider conflict involving the US and Russia and their respective coalitions.

“United” Europe is the primary actor suffering from the burgeoning Med crisis--and, simultaneously, the one that cannot decide to take action. The pressure of undocumented alien flows is stirring severe political and social crises in Italy and Greece, but Brussels remains unmoved. Europe’s “central powers,” i.e. Germany plus her Northern satellites, stand confused before the steadily deteriorating Med situation--and, for the time being, they limit themselves to the usual political-diplomatic drone so familiar to those who follow the EU’s unending barren efforts to shape “consensus” and promote “humanitarian targets.”

NATO’s presence in the Mediterranean has similarly little helpful impact on Med security challenges. NATO’s 2011 Operation Unified Protector targeting Qaddafi, and supporting Libya’s tribal “pro-democracy” warlords, has been added to the long list of Western interventions that turn distant lands, existing in a modicum of stability, into perennial disaster zones. With NATO still struggling to redefine itself after the collapse of communism, “consultation” and “multilateral proposed action” lead to inconclusive “policy proposals”--especially since NATO is presently obliged to compete with the EU’s stirring to organize its own “European army” and Germany’s apparent reawakening as a potential continental major military power.

If the past is any yardstick to estimate hopes for decisive European action in the Med, the future looks unpromising. Those who care to remember the EU innumerable Med “initiatives,” like the Barcelona Process, the European Neighborhood Policy, and Nikolas Sarkozy’s daft idea of a Mediterranean “union,” which later morphed into a Union for the Mediterranean, will tell you that such “multilateral” approaches end up stillborn given the unshakable tradition of the EC/EU seeking “common” political and security strategies but never arriving at workable action.

In the aftermath of the hugely destabilizing “Arab Spring,” Western approaches to the Med region have become even more indecisive and confused. There are irresolvable disagreements on everything from illegal immigration and the threat of ISIS/ISIL/IS/Daesh to the pipe dream of “promoting” democracy and fueling “political community building” among countries with fundamentally different beliefs from the “values” the West routinely brandishes in the face of the rest of the world. Furthermore, what Western powers define as “security” does not always coincide with what countries of the Med’s southern rim see as methods of defeating threats. The gap is unbridgeable as the two sides speak different languages not only linguistically but politically as well.

A further complicating factor in the European approach to the Med conundrum is the economic neo-liberal emphasis that permeates Brussels-Berlin thinking--and which underlies Europe's own internal economic, political, and social crisis. The EU seems unable to comprehend that trade and economic relations, touted as all-curing remedies, cannot precede domestic political stability, government efficacy, and a modicum of self-sustaining economic activity. This miscommunication and Europe's aversion to priorities of southern Med tier countries, mainly centered on regime security rather than "values," make any effective dialogue in key issues ineffective and, in the longer run, impossible.

In view of the above, talk of "multilateralism" involving North and South in trying to control the Mediterranean crisis remains an empty shell used primarily as a prop for the interminable meetings and conclaves on what to do next. Furthermore, Europe's own divisions on how to treat fundamental strategic issues reduce the room for developing effective and *actionable* policy on the Med crisis. It is impossible, for example, to accommodate the stubborn fixation of Northern Europeans with "diversity" and "human rights" within a hands-on brash-knuckles approach of dealing with the illegal immigration invasion. Ironically, any such proactive policy will benefit primarily the North, i.e the target destination of all the uninvited, but Northern countries are unable, so far, to modify their "values" in ways that will protect and strengthen *their own societies*.

Leaving aside global strategic implications for a moment, the criminalization of the Mediterranean because of illegal immigration flows should be amenable to intervention and deterrence measures. The lessons of dealing with Somali pirates, for example, could be sources of developing Med strategies, which, nevertheless, must be substantially more aggressive in targeting and neutralizing smuggler hubs. Naval presence and interdiction, plus persistent Special Forces deployments, should form the spear head of any such anti-crime policy. A necessary addendum the force component is the ratification of multilateral agreements radically altering the legal framework of dealing with Med pirates, smugglers, and human traffickers.

As for long-term policies of boosting social-economic conditions in essentially basket case countries, the exercise has been tried multiple times before with disappointing effects. Endless academic tracts continue to focus on targets of "virtuous political civilization" and "stable state institutions" but, as it is unfortunately the case in real life, such conditions cannot be

imported, let alone imposed on societies with deep fundamental domestic maladies and retardations.

In an era of growing state-threatening instability, with Western societies sinking in an unprecedented crisis of domestic politics, often painted with insurrectionist hues, and ways of dealing with growing terrorist threats, realism and the will to act have dangerously weakened.

The causes of this debilitating process aren't going away any time soon and, if anything, they are gaining thrust because of the increasing blindness of political elites generated by fears of the "political cost" and the eternal aversion to calling a spade a spade. While "analysts" and "experts" will no doubt continue with the interminable search for "sustainable strategic actions of political and social development," those with a sense of reality will need to push for aggressive tactical strategies to hurt the criminal hubs, menace their gangsters at sea, from the air, and on the ground, destroy their bases, and impose order by force.

This is war by other means and the sooner we realize it and digest it the better.