

The Contribution of the Italian Guardia di Finanza in Military Operations in the Mediterranean and Greater Middle East (2006-2022)

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Abstract

This study examines three significant military operations conducted over the past 15 years to safeguard the Mediterranean and Greater Middle East. The operations under scrutiny are ISAF in Afghanistan, EUNAVFOR MED Sophia in Libya, and Themis in Tunisia. The research focuses on the pivotal role played by Italy's Guardia di Finanza, an ancient police force with a military structure, in these operations, particularly through specific missions such as Sarissa and Grifo. A comprehensive review of the extant literature, encompassing both specialised reviews and official documents from both the EU and NATO, as well as parliamentary records from Italy, has been undertaken in order to analyse the Guardia di Finanza's contributions to crisis management and prevention. The study highlights the dual police and military capabilities of the corps, and its instrumental role in training local forces, conducting maritime patrols, and combating illegal trafficking. The findings emphasise the importance of specialised military police forces in international peacekeeping and border security operations, demonstrating the Guardia di Finanza's significant impact on enhancing regional stability and security cooperation in the Mediterranean basin.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Tunisia, Libya, Guardia di Finanza, Migrations, Italy

1. Introduction

The Guardia di Finanza represents a distinctive police force within Italy, characterised by its military-style organisation. Its primary function is the exclusive and general oversight of economic and financial matters pertaining to the coffers of the State and the European Union. While it is an integral part of the Armed Forces, it is not a direct part of them, as it depends on the Ministry of Economy. The Guardia di Finanza's origins can be traced back to King Vittorio Amedeo III of Sardinia, who, in 1774, established the 'Legione Truppe Leggere' (Legion of the Light Troops) with the specific task of financial surveillance of the Kingdom's land and sea borders. The Legion was also entrusted with the responsibility of military defence. Following the unification of Italy under the Kingdom of Italy, the various financial corps that had previously existed in the pre-unitary states were consolidated into the Corps of Customs Guards. The Customs Guard was entrusted with the responsibility of supervising customs and defending the state in times of war.

In 1881, it was renamed the *Corpo della Regia Guardia di Finanza* (Corps of the Royal Revenue Guard), which had the task of preventing, repressing and denouncing smuggling and any contravention or violation of financial laws and regulations, as well as protecting the interests of the financial administration and contributing to the defence of public order and security.

The most recent reform in 2001 served to reinforce the "military" character of the Corps, thereby underscoring its function as a police force, endowed with a comprehensive aptitude in economic and financial affairs, with the aim of safeguarding the public budget, the regions, local authorities and the European Union. This change resulted in the Guardia di Finanza operating in a significantly broader context than had previously been the case within Italy. Subsequent reforms in 2010 established a liaison officer position between the Ministry of Defence and the General Command of the Guardia di Finanza, entrusted with the coordination of the latter's contingent during military operations in the event of war and military missions abroad (Maccariello, 2013).

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In recent times, the Guardia di Finanza has sought to enhance its international presence through the deployment of its members in operations that support, advise and train local police forces in various countries worldwide. This has been achieved within the framework of both NATO and peacekeeping operations promoted by the United Nations and the European Union. Given the increasing number of interventions by international organisations to manage crises, the Guardia di Finanza is often called upon to support the forces deployed in the theatres of operation, in order to disseminate its know-how to local police forces involved in the fight against financial crime and customs supervision on land, at sea and in the air.

The present paper will deal with three military operations carried out in the Mediterranean. These operations involved the Italian Armed Forces and the Italian Police in a synergistic manner.

The initial operation under scrutiny was Operation Sarissa, which took place in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2016. This operation was executed under the aegis of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), operating under the auspices of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). It was a peacekeeping operation in which Italy's elite special military corps, known as Task Force 45, was deployed against Taliban resistance and in support of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

The mission, as far as it is known due to the high level of secrecy of the documents issued by the Italian government and military command, consisted of unconventional warfare operations, hostage rescue operations, a fight against illegal trafficking and counter-terrorism actions. The composition of the Italian Special Forces encompassed personnel from all the special units of the Armed Forces and the special units of the Guardia di Finanza.

The second operation analysed is EUNAVFOR Med Sophia, officially called the European Union Naval Force in the South Central Mediterranean, which was the first military maritime security operation organised and promoted by the European Union. This operation ran from 2015 to 2020, but continued under the name EUNAVFOR Med Irini. It was conducted in the aftermath of the civil war in Libya, which had resulted in an increasing number of individuals seeking refuge elsewhere. This was further exacerbated by the catastrophic events that led to the shipwreck of several Libyan migrants and asylum seekers in April 2015. Consequently, the primary objective of the deployment of military forces, which Italy augmented with naval assets and resources, was to interdict and intervene in the trafficking routes of migrants in the Mediterranean region.

The third and final operation examined in this study is Operation Themis. This operation, which was in effect since February 2018, aimed to protect the European Union's land and sea borders and to combat new migration routes in the Mediterranean, particularly those originating in western Tunisia and Algeria. The operation was conducted under the aegis of the Frontex Agency (European Union border and coast guards), which set up its operations centre in Italy at the Air and Naval Operations Command of the Guardia di Finanza. The Italian military personnel recruited for the Frontex pool were drawn from the Guardia di Finanza and the Italian Navy's Harbour Office/Coast Guard Corps.

2. The Sarissa mission

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established in 2001, following the Bonn Conference and the establishment of the Afghan Transitional Authority by Afghan opposition leaders (Saikal, 2006). Initially, a three-way partnership was established between the Afghan Transitional Authority, UNAMA, and ISAF. However, in 2003, NATO assumed leadership of the ISAF operation (Saikal, 2006). This leadership transition was instrumental in overcoming the challenges associated with the identification of new nations to assume leadership of the mission and the establishment of new headquarters on a semi-annual basis. This development enabled smaller nations to assume a significant role within a multinational headquarters. Thereafter, the ISAF's operational scope in Afghanistan underwent expansion, initially confined to the provision of security within and surrounding Kabul. This was subsequently expanded to encompass the entire nation of Afghanistan, and the establishment of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in various regions was initiated. Concurrently, additional troops were deployed to support provincial and parliamentary elections. Furthermore, the ISAF gradually expanded its operations to the south and east of Afghanistan, and the number of ISAF forces in the country increased.

The primary objective of the ISAF, as mandated by the United Nations, was to enable the Afghan government to provide effective security across the country and to develop new Afghan security forces in order to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists. The transfer of security responsibility to Afghan forces and the conclusion of the ISAF mission at the end of 2014 were also discussed. It is crucial to underscore the arduous nature of the ISAF mission, which entailed a substantial troop presence and engagement in combat with insurgents, the support of the Afghan National Security Forces, and the establishment of the foundations for enhancements in governance and socio-economic development for sustainable stability.

Following the conclusion of the ISAF mission, the Resolute Support non-combat mission was initiated, with the objective of providing further training, advice, and assistance to the Afghan security forces and institutions.

The Italian Operation Sarissa, deriving its nomenclature from an ancient Macedonian lance, was executed within the purview of the International Security Assistance Force. Since 20 December 2001, the mission had twofold objectives: firstly, to defend and monitor Kabul and the airbases in the vicinity of the capital; and secondly, to protect the new transitional government led by Hamid Karzai.

The international significance of this mission was emphasized by the deployment of elite military components from multiple nations to participate in the operation. In order to substantiate this assertion, the Italian government took the decision to deploy a garrison of soldiers exclusively from the Special Forces of the Italian Armed Forces. Since 2002, the Italian contingent, designated Task Force 45 (TF-45), operated in conjunction with the Afghan military to safeguard the bases in Herat and Farah. With approximately 4,200 units, Italy provided the fifth largest contingent of troops. The on-site operational command of all Italian troops was the exclusive prerogative of the 9th Parachute Assault Regiment "Col Moschin", the elite corps of the Italian Army, and the Italian operational command hub was the Joint Command for Special Forces Operations (Comando Interforze per le Operazioni delle Forze Speciali - COFS) in Rome. Italy, among others, held command of the entire "Sarissa" operation between 2005 and 2006.

2.1 Mission fulfilment and achievements

The UN mission in Afghanistan was not without its challenges, and involved unconventional warfare missions, special reconnaissance, difficult counter-terrorism actions that often required delicate operations to extract civilian and military hostages, escort service to military and diplomatic authorities, and combating illicit trafficking in weapons and drugs. The initial operational scenario of the mission was limited exclusively to the Afghan capital, Kabul. The protection of the nation's territory was entrusted to the newly formed Afghan National Army. However, in 2003, following demands from the Karzai government, the operations were extended to the entire country.

The ISAF contingent, in addition to providing military defence, had the challenging task of supporting the socio-economic revival of Afghanistan. A central tenet of the mission entailed the training and education of the Afghan National Army and local police forces, empowering them to defend their homeland independently. The efficacy of this approach led to a shift in the mission's purpose, with the focus transitioning from mere peacekeeping to one of fostering long-term stability and national development. As the local troops demonstrated capability and autonomy, the international forces repatriated them. On 11 August 2003, NATO assumed control of operations, delegating command to the deployed nations on a six-monthly rotation.

As previously mentioned, although the primary operations involved only the defence of the capital, the scenario soon had to be expanded (Stollenwerk, 2018). The expansion of ISAF in Afghanistan can be summarised in four phases. The initial phase of this expansion occurred in a northward direction. While the United States military maintained security in Kabul, a portion of the European military forces established military bases in the northern regions, ultimately securing an area of approximately 3,600 km² encompassing the cities of Mazar-e Sharif, Meymaneh, Feyzabad, and Baghlan (NATO, 2022a). However, in February 2005, NATO declared its intention to expand westward. This decision was underpinned by the deployment of an additional 2,000 soldiers, contributing to the control and security of over 50% of Afghan territory.

The third phase of expansion was focused in the southern part of the country. In 2006, the United States of America transferred command of the southern regions to ISAF. This development led to the deployment of approximately 20,000 NATO soldiers, constituting three-quarters of the country's armed forces. The primary objective of this deployment was to consolidate the security of the territories to be protected. The fourth and final phase of the military expansion of the mission occurred in October 2006, when the ISAF contingent assumed command of the international forces deployed in Afghanistan and control of the areas to the east. The forces deployed there subsequently assumed the role of trainers for the local forces.

The ISAF mission in Afghanistan was formally concluded on 28 December 2014, a development that was accompanied by the regrettable loss of 3,621 lives, including 53 Italian Armed Forces personnel (De Angelis & Cadalanu, 2022). Following the conclusion of Operation Sarissa, NATO troops remained deployed within Afghan territory under the designation 'Operation Resolute Support'. In contradistinction to the preceding operation, the principal objective of this one was the provision of advisory services to Afghan institutions, with a view to establishing a framework for the implementation of a rule of law. This entailed the establishment of credible and transparent bodies with trained and well-equipped security forces to ensure the security of the country and its citizens. It is noteworthy that Operation Resolute Support also concluded in July 2021.

2.2 The Guardia di Finanza Task Force 'Grifo'

In a statement, US General McChrystal, ISAF commander in 2010, described Italian operations in Afghanistan as follows: "I do not wish to divulge the specifics. I can only say that I could observe the work and professionalism of that team. I believe that the Italians would be proud of their soldiers" (NATO, 2022b).

The Italian military contingent in Afghanistan commenced its deployment in 2006, following a request from the Italian Inter-Forces Operational Summit Command (COI) for the General Command of the Guardia di Finanza to collaborate in the training of personnel of Afghan institutions in the sector. This initiative entailed the deployment of a team of military experts and specialists in customs and border police. This initiative was part of the legal framework defined by UN Security Council Resolution 1386, which, in December 2001, authorised the deployment of the multinational International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), in which Italy participated with a military contingent responsible for the Western Region.

The institution-building phase was initiated in 2006 with the objective of developing the operational capabilities of the Afghan Border Police (ABP), a police force responsible for border control and surveillance. These capabilities were to be employed in the fight against smuggling and trafficking. In November 2006, the first contingent of the Guardia di Finanza was deployed to Afghanistan. The task of the Task Force Grifo was to provide training to officers, and subsequently to non-commissioned officers and agents of the Afghan border police stationed in Herat province. The 'Grifo' operated in support of the NATO/ISAF mission on a bilateral basis.

A total of 14 contingents were deployed, comprising 198 military personnel. The training activities developed by the Grifo Task Force led to the establishment of 16 different types of courses, including the technical operational qualification course for customs and border police activities, for the benefit of the border police detachment of the Afghan Border Police located at Herat International Airport, and the anti-corruption course for the benefit of public officials of the Herat Governorate. Furthermore, courses were conducted on counterfeiting and money laundering. The Corps Contingent conducted a total of 120 courses, benefiting 1,448 trainees, including 42 women, across the Border Police, Customs Administration, and Herat Governorate (Camera dei Deputati, 2013). Furthermore, Task Force Grifo produced a compendium of Afghan customs laws and a handbook on the powers of border police at airports. These publications were met with high regard by the Afghan people and by NATO, which requested their use in training activities developed in other contexts. The gradual augmentation of the Task Force Grifo's personnel, from an initial complement of 10 to the 10 units of the 'Grifo 14' model, was driven by the escalating demands for training in the context of the mission's eventual drawdown from Afghanistan (Camera dei Deputati, 2010).

Furthermore, in order to monitor the operational development of the Afghan Border Police, since January 2011, the Guardia di Finanza employed an Inspector in the so-called 'Exercise' cell at the Headquarters of the Regional Command West of the ISAF contingent.

On 12th July 2013, the Guardia di Finanza officers concluded their activities and returned home. Following the withdrawal of the contingent, a significant quantity of goods used for activities on the ground, including furniture, IT material, equipment and even two armoured vehicles, were donated to the Afghan Border Police. This decision was made in recognition of the significant financial implications associated with the potential repatriation of these assets.

The remaining members of the Grifo Task Force can be considered to have performed well, particularly in light of the appreciation expressed by the Border Police of Herat for the support they received, despite the well-known difficulties posed by a theatre of operations still subject to high levels of instability.

Personnel from a variety of police forces, including those from Lebanon, Poland, Macedonia, Somalia, Senegal, Mali, Angola, Kenya, Mauritania, Mozambique and Nigeria, underwent training at the Specialisation Training Centre in Orvieto, a centre of excellence of the Guardia di Finanza.

Notably, two courses were conducted in June 2010 and October 2011 for the Afghan country, under the auspices of the Directorate General for Political and Security Affairs (DGAP) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with financing stemming from Law No. 180/92. The courses were designed to provide training for customs officers and Afghan Border Police officers, with a total of 39 participants. The objective of the programme was to equip the participants with the theoretical and practical knowledge and skills required to transfer their expertise to their colleagues upon their return home (Analisi Difesa, 2013).

3. The 'EUNAVFOR Med/Sophia' operation in Libya

3.1 Mission Incipit, Analysis and Purpose

The Libyan civil war, which began in February 2011 and lasted until October of that year, pitted pro-Gaddafi forces against those of the National Transitional Council. The war concluded with the dictator being sentenced to death following a summary trial and the National Transitional Council achieving victory. With the exception of military operations that were exclusively combat-oriented, in which Italian soldiers participated, the most significant operations conducted in the Libyan region and the Mediterranean basin were to be traced back to the aftermath of the Libyan civil war, primarily, and all subsequent guerrilla wars that ensued in North Africa.

A significant number of individuals residing in regions afflicted by ongoing conflict were compelled to seek refuge in more secure territories. This phenomenon, characterised by the mass movement of individuals in search of safety and refuge, continued unabated until the year 2013, when the term 'European migrant crisis' began to be used in media discourse. This term was coined following the sinking of five boats carrying migrants in the Mediterranean Sea, resulting in the deaths of over 1,200 people (Doboš, 2023), many of whom were asylum seekers from Libya. In the aftermath of this tragedy, the European Union Naval Force in the Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR Med) was established, officially designated as "Operation Sophia". This operation represented the European Union's inaugural military maritime security initiative. The fundamental objective of the mission was to address the increasing congestion of migrant smuggling routes in the Mediterranean.

Led entirely by Italy, the operation focused on countering illegal trafficking in human beings. The broader European Union objective was to ensure the return of stability and security to Libya. Operation Sophia was a pioneering example of a collaborative effort among military, civilian, and non-governmental organisations in a complex operational context. The exacerbation of the situation with regard to the landings was underpinned by the existence of a dense criminal network that profits from the desperation of people attempting to escape their homelands in search of a better future. In the aftermath of the sinking of a fishing boat carrying over 800 migrants in the Mediterranean Sea on 18 April 2015, the European Union's response was prompt, leading to the establishment of the mission under discussion. The UNHCR characterised this incident as the largest disaster in recent history. On 18 May 2015, the European Council delineated the mission's objectives, which included the military management of the crisis and the search for those responsible for organising the Mediterranean crossings. From the outset of the operation, Italian, German and British vessels played a pivotal role in the mission's success. These assets were able to identify the modus operandi of the criminals and the primary ports of departure, which would subsequently inform the second phase of the mission, namely countering activity at sea (Nováky, 2018). Operation EUNAVFOR Med - Sophia can be summarised in four distinct phases.

The initial phase (22 June - 7 October 2015) involved the deployment of military forces tasked with the gathering of intelligence to identify the criminal network orchestrating the crossings.

Phase 2 commenced on 7 October 2015. During this phase, Task Force assets were authorised to stop, inspect, hijack and potentially seize all ships suspected of being used for the illicit trafficking of human beings. The second phase was subdivided into two sub-phases. The first sub-phase took place on the high sea. During this period, targeted action was taken against those engaged in the smuggling trade, with the dismantling of their logistical bases, both at sea and on land. This strategy was implemented with the aim of preventing the perpetrators from continuing their criminal activities and avoiding the temptation to commit further offences. The second sub-phase was conducted in Libyan territorial waters, following the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution. The re-deployment of those who had emigrated illegally was considered, where possible.

3.2 Mission fulfilment and achievements

The operational command and control of the operation was based in Italy. The operational headquarters (OHQ) were situated within the 'F. Baracca' Military Airport in Rome-Centocelle. Rear-Admiral Enrico Credentino was appointed as the commander of the operation. The OHQ was responsible for the coordination of all assets deployed by the European armed forces and police forces. In this instance, 25 states participated, with a total of 5 naval units and 6 air assets being deployed. Furthermore, Italy provided 520 military personnel, one naval unit, and three air assets. The chain of command and control for the Italian contingent was divided into two segments: the first being Operational Command (OPCOM), overseen by the Chief of Defence Staff, and the second being Operational Control (OPCON), overseen by the Operation Commander, a role delegated by the Chief of Staff Defence. The command of the air assets, which were also of Italian nationality, was carried out on site aboard the naval assets deployed there. In light of the evolving situation in Libya and the shifting dynamics of the involved parties, the European Commission, in 2016, took the decision to expand the initial tasks assigned to the mission.

It was recognised that training the Libyan Coast Guard and the Libyan Navy in managing the issue of migration was both necessary and essential. Another challenging task assigned subsequently was to ensure compliance with the arms embargo imposed by UN resolutions in 2016 and 2017. Subsequent additions to the primary mission encompassed the enhancement of surveillance and control measures to address potential illicit oil

trafficking from Libya, while facilitating enhanced exchange of information between supranational agencies, including FRONTEX and EUROPOL.

From an Italian perspective, the overall balance of the operation can be described as positive. Indeed, between 2015 and the conclusion of the operation, over 250 smugglers accused of human trafficking were arrested and brought to justice in Italy, and over 200 Libyan military personnel were trained at Military Training Institutes in Italy, and over 550 boats used for trafficking were seized and subsequently destroyed (Difesa, 2022).

Operation Sophia can be considered to have definitively concluded with the expiration of the deadlines set by the European Union in June 2019. Nevertheless, in order to ensure the continuity of the operations previously assigned to Operation Sophia, it was deemed necessary to maintain the mission's objectives and activities. Consequently, the arms embargo imposed on Libya in 2011 was followed by a conference in Berlin, attended by representatives of the main European governments and the parties to the conflict. The Berlin Conference concluded with the consensus that the initiation of peace negotiations was contingent upon a cessation of hostilities within Libyan territory. In the wake of this political realignment, a decision was taken to launch a new mission: This mission was designated EUNAVFOR Med - Irini.

This operation was placed under the control and strategic direction of the PSC (Political and Security Committee), with the additional responsibility of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union and the Council of the European Union. The operation's nomenclature was derived from the translation of the word 'peace' from the modern Greek.

The operation's commander was Italian Rear Admiral Stefano Turchetto, who was replaced in 2021 by Fabio Agostini. EUNAVFOR Med - Irini had at its disposal a range of assets, including air and naval assets, as well as satellite and maritime stations, provided by the European armed forces and police forces. The operation's coordination was overseen by the EUNAVFOR Med - Sophia staff, headquartered at the "F. Baracca" Military Airport in Rome - Centocelle. The personnel of EUNAVFOR Med - Irini were drawn from both Italian and European armed forces, a reflection of the operation's significant international character.

The field command rotates on a six-monthly basis between Italy and Greece. Concurrently with the change in the Force Commander (Sea Command), the flagship, designated the amphibious assault ship 'San Giusto' of the Italian Navy, also changed. The deployment of these assets was meticulously orchestrated to ensure maximum efficacy in thwarting and intercepting potential naval and air threats. Furthermore, that the dissemination of images and data collected from navigation and overflights was shared with all European and international security agencies, in addition to those gathered during Operation Sophia. It is noteworthy that even for Operation EUNAVFOR Med - Irini, the balance was overwhelmingly positive. Following the inception of the operation, in two years, 6,200 ships were investigated and a further 22 suspected of illegally transporting weapons were inspected. Additionally, approximately 250 so-called 'friendly' approaches were carried out, and more than 80 suspicious air flights were checked. Furthermore, the implementation of a comprehensive network of air-sea patrols enabled the concentration of information at the EU satellite centre in Spain, thereby ensuring the security and continuous monitoring of Libyan ports, airports and oil installations. In addition, 35 reports were submitted to the UN Panel of Experts by the operations command in relation to alleged violations of the embargo (Analisi Difesa, 2022).

One of the most significant achievements of the operation was undoubtedly the seizure of the 'Royal Diamond 7' off the Libyan coast. This was a ship boarded by the German frigate Hamburg, which had departed from the United Arab Emirates and was headed for Benghazi. The ship was found to be transporting aviation fuel for the Libyan army, led by General Khalifa Haftar.

3.3 The activities of the Guardia di Finanza in assisting the Libyan police

The deployment of Italian military personnel in Libya, with the aim of training the local coastguards to address the issue of illegal immigration, was governed by a number of legislative acts. The Protocol for Cooperation between Italy and Libya, which was signed on 29 December 2007, addressed the issue of illegal immigration and human trafficking. The Additional Technical-Operational Protocol, signed on 29 December 2009, provided for the delivery to the Libyan government of decommissioned Italian naval units, four in total, as well as the training of personnel employed on board and the routine maintenance of these units.

The Memorandum subsequently delineated the terms of the agreement. The 2 February 2017 Understanding on Cooperation in the Field of Development of Countering Illegal Migration and Trafficking in Human Beings. The 84/2018 Decree-Law stipulated the provision of 12 naval units (10 former members of the Italian Coast Guard and 2 former members of the Italian Guardia di Finanza) at no cost to enhance the operational efficiency of Libyan operatives.

The financial implications of this initiative for Italy amounted to approximately €1,370,000, a figure that covered the costs associated with the maintenance and training of all personnel employed on board the aforementioned vessels (Camera dei Deputati, 2021).

In January 2017, the General Command of the Guardia di Finanza entered into a technical agreement with the Commander of the EUNAVFOR Med - "Sophia" operation (Camera dei Deputati, 2021). This agreement delineated the contribution of the Guardia di Finanza in the training of Libyan Coast Guard and Navy personnel. In the context of the ongoing training programme on board the Italian Navy ship "San Giusto", the agreement provided for a further training phase on board a Guardia di Finanza naval unit. This training was designed to ensure that the Libyan personnel were fully acquainted with the patrol vessels, after which they were assigned according to the regulatory sources mentioned above, and the various operational contexts in which they were likely to operate. The arduous training programme was conducted at the facilities of the Guardia di Finanza Nautical School in Gaeta (LT), the Corps' preeminent centre for the technical training of naval personnel. The inaugural training course was held in April 2021 in the presence of the highest state officials, including the Minister of the Interior, the Chief of Police, and the Commanding General of the Guardia di Finanza (Neri, 2017).

All subsequent cooperation and collaboration initiatives can be traced back to the effects of Law No. 145 of 21 July 2016, the so-called 'Framework Law on International Missions'. The initial distribution of aid and subsidies, in the form of training and supplies, was directed towards Libya, encompassing the training of 39 military personnel and the subsequent deployment of four Libyan-flagged coastguards. These coastguards were guarded and audited between 2013 and 2017 at the Logistic Comprensorio of the Guardia di Finanza Naval Centre at Miseno – Naples (Comando Generale della Guardia di Finanza, 2018).

Following the final handover of the naval units, the Libyan government requested further assistance from the Guardia di Finanza Corps, requesting the deployment of personnel to provide on-site support to Libyan military personnel. This was to ensure the maintenance of their technical and practical knowledge.

Consequently, since 21 October 2020, the Guardia di Finanza initiated a bilateral mission in Libya with the objective of providing technical support and training to the Libyan Coast Guard and the General Administration for Coastal Security of Libya. These administrations bore the responsibility for the physical control of maritime borders with a view to preventing and repressing illicit trafficking by sea. The initial deployment of the corps to the region, based in Tripoli, comprised a senior officer and four military personnel, drawn from the ranks of inspectors, superintendents, corporals and costum officers (Comando Generale della Guardia di Finanza, 2021).

The relationship between the Italian contingent in Libya and the Libyan authorities became so well established and evolved that, according to the Commander of the Italian Contingent in Libya, over 60% of the rescue operations carried out by the Libyan authorities were carried out with naval units ceded and overhauled by the Guardia di Finanza (Alemanno, 2021). Following the 2011 clashes, two of the vessels were sunk and four others were severely damaged (Ciaprini, 2017). The restoration was carried out by Guardia di Finanza personnel at the Logistics Centre in Miseno.

The first Libyan trainees for the future courses to be held in Italy were recruited from among the participants of Operation EUNAVFOR Med - Sophia. The 39 individuals were divided into four sections and participated in the training programme for individual coastguards. The crews underwent a training period of approximately one month, during which they were provided with technical knowledge on equipment, conduct and manoeuvre in operational trim, as well as the main boarding techniques to be employed in the event of encountering human traffickers.

Following the conclusion of this intensive training period, the trainees participated in 107 lesson modules, of which 87 were practical lessons held directly on board the vessels, with the remaining modules covering firefighting and sea survival techniques. Upon reaching full operational readiness, the coastguards, now flying the Libyan flag, proceeded to the ports of Tripoli and Misurata, accompanied by the Guardia di Finanza Nautical School.

In accordance with a request from the Ministry of the Interior, a contingent of 26 coastguard officers, including specialists in the Corps' naval contingent and specialised in Anti-Terrorism and Ready Deployment services, continued their mission in Libya on board the Ship Vaccaro from 19 July to 1 August 2017. The Italian naval unit was the first military vessel to enter Libyan ports since the post-war period (Minuto, 2017). As of 2022, the Guardia di Finanza had participated in the Libyan authorities' requirements with 39 personnel, providing technical assistance and technical support to naval units in force at the Libyan Coast Guard and the Libyan General Coastal Security Agency. In addition, training activities were conducted through the construction of a

shipyard and a nautical school in Libyan territory, with personnel alternating in Libyan territory every eight months. Security was provided by the Carabinieri of the 8th Parachute Regiment 'Tuscania' during each movement of the Guardia di Finanza soldiers. Other training activities were conducted by the teaching staff of the Guardia di Finanza Nautical School in Gaeta on Libyan underwater operators. This was deemed necessary to enhance the competencies of Libyan operators, thereby enabling them to function with greater autonomy.

4. The Themis Operation in the Mediterranean Sea

4.1 The European Border and Coast Guard Agency – FRONTEX

Prior to an analysis of the management of migratory flows, it is imperative to consider the body that oversaw the 'Themis' and 'Triton' operations. The FRONTEX agency was entrusted with the control and management of the external borders of the Schengen Area, a group of 26 European states that abolished internal borders. It also oversees the European Union. The fundamental purpose of FRONTEX was to coordinate and manage all border police authorities and state bodies within the Schengen Area and the European Union. The agency was established following the dissolution of the previous European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union. This dissolution was formalised by EU Regulation No. 2016/1624, which was approved by the Council of the European Union on 14 September 2016. The agency was headquartered in Warsaw, Poland, and was responsible for coordinating action and managing the resources pooled by each national authority.

The European coastguard and border guard's primary objective was to oversee the external borders of the European Union, thereby guaranteeing the security of the Union and facilitating the efficient management of migration flows. The establishment of a supranational body to serve as a liaison for each EU member state was necessitated by the migrant crisis that engulfed Europe in 2015. In the face of this crisis, the European Commission was compelled to take urgent measures to address the situation, recognizing the limitations of the existing Frontex agency in terms of both resources and expertise. Consequently, in December 2015, the European Commission initiated the establishment of a new agency that, while retaining the primary objectives of the original, was designed to address the limitations experienced by the former agency. This proposal was endorsed by both the European Commission and the European Council (Léonard, 2010; Zhong & Carrapico, 2024).

The establishment of the new Agency was made possible by two articles of the "Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union", specifically Art. 77 and Art. 79. These articles permitted the European Union to adopt legislation for the gradual establishment of an integrated system for the management of external borders and to put in place laws concerning the return of third-country nationals residing illegally in the territory of the Union (European Union, 2018). Following the European Union's approval of the regulation establishing both the European Border and Coast Guard and the coordinating agency on 14 September 2016, the Frontex Agency was responsible for providing personnel and resources from the national corps of the respective Member States in the most vulnerable areas, thereby ensuring additional assistance was provided (European Union, 2018). In addition to its border surveillance responsibilities, the Frontex Agency frequently undertook conventional police operations and addresses safety concerns at sea and environmental protection. A fundamental responsibility of the agency was the conduct of risk assessments.

The responsibility for assessing and analysing the risks to the security of the EU's borders, producing reports and forecasts regarding the likely trend in migration flows, laid with Frontex. These reports were disseminated to all EU countries and the European Commission, with the aim of informing policy decisions in the near future. Furthermore, the agency prepared documents on an annual basis to evaluate the capacity for action of each individual member state. Data was also collected by sending Agency liaison officers to individual states. The liaison function was also expressed in the sharing of data collected within Frontex. All data collected during patrols, for instance, was directed to the Warsaw headquarters and disseminated to national authorities. This was deemed necessary on account of the fact that a single sighting of a fishing vessel in European waters may not necessarily arouse suspicion in the operator, yet a police force could well complete an investigation launched some time before, perhaps into maritime pollution and the mismanagement of European fisheries funds.

Consequently, Frontex disseminated all information gathered at the borders not only to the relevant national authorities but also to EUROPOL and all other European agencies. The information shared encompassed all data pertaining to individuals and vehicles suspected of involvement in the trafficking of drugs, human beings, and terrorism.

The effective functioning of the Frontex Agency was also contingent upon its excellent international relations with its neighbouring states. These relations were frequently reinforced through the deployment of Agency officials on the ground, facilitating the smooth repatriation of irregular residents of the European Union.

Frontex frequently assumed the role of coordinating flight operations and, when feasible, retrieving individuals' personal documentation. The efficiency of Frontex was not solely contingent on the personnel of the border police corps of the Member States; the Agency had to also be able to swiftly dispatch personnel and resources to countries facing an emergency. In accordance with the Agency's request, Member States were obliged to provide an intervention task force rapid reaction reserve of 1,500 men. This reserve was formally designated as the "rapid reaction reserve" (European Parliament, 2021).

Frontex was instrumental in ensuring that Member States maintain an equal level of training by providing guidelines in the field of training. This ensured that the same standards of situation control and management were guaranteed at each 'border'.

The Agency's operational activities were conducted in collaboration with the personnel of the Member States' Border Police Corps. These personnel were increasingly joined by personnel from the so-called 'Permanent Corps', which was the first 'uniformed' service in the history of the European Union.

These personnel underwent rigorous training in the most advanced military training institutions in Europe, frequently in Italy at the Guardia di Finanza Schools. They were equipped with state-of-the-art technology. Their duties included monitoring the proper functioning of the European Schengen area, supporting the management of migratory flows, combating cross-border crime, organising repatriation activities and assisting travellers to make their journey in the European Union safer and easier.

The Standing Corps operated under the command of the National Authorities where it was deployed. Personnel operated at various locations, including ports, airports, land and sea borders, and the Agency's Headquarters in Warsaw. They were invested with executive powers to carry out controls and were authorised to possess weapons. The composition of the Standing Corps encompassed four categories of personnel. The first category comprised border guards recruited directly by Frontex and regularly deployed in the field according to their operational profile. The second category consisted of personnel seconded by Member States on a long-term basis. The third category encompassed personnel seconded by Member States on a short-term basis. The fourth category incorporated the reserve of border guards of EU Member States, which were placed at the disposal of Frontex for the purpose of facilitating rapid crisis management.

With regard to Italy, the national authorities responsible for guaranteeing the security of the external maritime borders of the Schengen Area, and thus for cooperating closely with the Frontex Agency, were the Coast Guard, the technical corps of the Italian Navy, and the Guardia di Finanza.

The Agency also strictly adhered to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees with its 1967 Protocol. Indeed, it repeatedly acted by asserting that in order to have effective border management, fundamental rights had to be unconditionally respected and protected.

The fundamental rights underpinning the Agency's codes of conduct were emphasised during the recruitment process, with all staff members receiving dedicated training in fundamental rights. Among the rights most highly valued by the Agency were the principle of non-refoulement, which obliged each State party to the Convention not to turn back an individual seeking asylum in that State, and the principle of search and rescue. In practice, the monitoring and protection of fundamental rights by Frontex was based on a number of factors, including the reporting of serious incidents (understood as violations of rights), a system for receiving complaints from directly affected persons, and a consultative forum that advises the Agency itself. A particularly noteworthy figure in this regard was the Fundamental Rights Officer (FRO), who was responsible for overseeing Frontex's adherence to fundamental rights. Furthermore, the FRO was tasked with the annual production of a report on the activities undertaken by the office in the context of safeguarding fundamental rights. The fundamental rights observers on the ground assumed responsibility from the FRO, whose purpose was also to support the national control mechanisms.

4.2 Themis Mission

In the Mediterranean, the Mare Nostrum mission was initiated in the aftermath of the Lampedusa tragedy, which resulted in the loss of 368 lives. The mission entailed the coordination and surveillance of the Strait of Sicily by naval units of the Italian Navy and aircraft of the Italian Air Force. The operation was conducted with a high level of proficiency by the Italian military, yet it did not receive the necessary assistance from other European armed forces and police forces. Consequently, the Italian government made persistent requests for assistance, which ultimately led to the launch of Operation Triton. This operation was established to replace Operation Mare Nostrum, which had been designed to control migratory flows. Initially designated 'Frontex Plus', the operation was launched on 1 November 2014. This operation, which commenced on 1 November 2014, relied on voluntary contributions from 15 of the 28 EU Member States (Frontex, 2018).

Participation was either through the provision of personnel and resources for emergency situations or through the contribution of financial support only. The states that committed to providing such contributions were, in addition to Italy, Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Switzerland, Romania, Poland, Lithuania and Malta.

Operation Triton comprised the following elements: aerial surveillance by two aircraft, maritime patrols by three vessels, and seven teams of personnel on land engaged in intelligence activities. All air and naval assets were coordinated from Rome, and thus authorised to land and dock on our territory.

The area of operations of Triton was gradually increased due to the ever-increasing migration phenomenon until Operation Triton was finally replaced by Operation Themis on 1 February 2018. The Italian government provided a significant impetus for the expansion and evolution of the operation by consistently seeking assistance from the European Union to address the mounting influx of migrants (European Council, n.d.). In order to achieve the objectives set forth by the Frontex Agency, in addition to the traditional search and rescue operations at sea, European border control activities within the Schengen area were incorporated.

Within the context of EU border security, Themis aimed to eradicate uncontrolled migration and cross-border crime, and to the extent feasible, to harmonise the management of sea flows among all actors involved in the field (European Council, n.d.).

4.3 Mission objectives and results

On 1 February 2018, the Themis mission replaced the Triton mission. The operation was conducted in the central Mediterranean Sea with the objective of assisting Italy in the management of migration flows from Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Turkey, and also Albania. Frontex Director Fabrice Leggeri, a French national, determined that migrants rescued during the operation would be disembarked at the port closest to the point of rescue. This decision had the potential to create significant uncertainty regarding future procedures. Furthermore, from an Italian perspective, it was determined that a larger area should be patrolled, with the exclusive Italian patrol zone being reduced to a mere 24 nautical miles from the Italian coastline (Ministero dell'Interno, 2018). The results achieved during Operation Themis were significant, and it can be concluded that Operation Themis was a positive experience for the Italian team. The impact of the Frontex agency can be illustrated by presenting the results in numerical form. The data from the Triton and Themis operations indicated that more than 300,000 people were rescued in the area of interest. This assertion is further substantiated by data from Frontex, which documented 300,009 individuals being rescued. Additionally, 1,556 cases of illegal immigration were thwarted. A total of 185 individuals directly implicated in the smuggling of migrants were apprehended. In addition, 271 illicit journeys were prevented. Furthermore, operations were conducted to combat drug trafficking, resulting in the seizure of over 500 kg of substances and the apprehension of the perpetrators.

The importance of Frontex for Italy was multifaceted. The agency consistently advocated on behalf of Italy, particularly in terms of economic and physical assistance in the management of migratory flows. This underscored the pivotal role Italy played in the Frontex mission. Indeed, the agency chose to establish its headquarters for the management of operations in the Mediterranean in Italy. The European agency opted to rely on the Guardia di Finanza Corps for its headquarters and personnel to cooperate with Frontex. The efficacy of Frontex, indeed, was rooted in its meticulous and systematic chain of command and control.

The Guardia di Finanza emerged as a notable institution in Italy, as evidenced by its decision to host Frontex hubs and the OECD's establishment of an academy for training and combating economic and financial crime at the Guardia di Finanza's Scuola di Polizia Economico-Finanziaria in Rome. This cooperation resulted in Frontex providing significant financial support for the expansion of the corps' air and naval vessels.

4.4 The activities of the Guardia di Finanza in support of the Tunisian police force

As previously stated, Guardia di Finanza training centres and educational institutes frequently serve as international cooperation centres for the training of foreign police personnel, who rely on Guardia di Finanza instructors to enhance their cultural and professional background. This was also the case with the Tunisian police force. Since 2018, instruction courses were held for a diverse range of Tunisian police officers. Two information courses for 'Trainers of the Customs and Border Police of the Republic of Tunisia' were conducted in October and November 2018. The teaching activity delivered at the Guardia di Finanza Training and Specialisation School, which was based in Orvieto, formed part of the international cooperation initiatives organised by the Guardia di Finanza and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI). Until 2022, approximately 20 Tunisian military personnel were trained (Guardia di Finanza, 2022). The primary objective of the course was to enhance the operational capacity of the North African country's law enforcement agencies, with a particular focus on combating trafficking, managing irregular migration flows and the activities of criminal and terrorist organisations. In both editions, course lectures included the teaching of best practices in police

procedures, customs, police techniques, firearms techniques, personal defence, control of the international movement of persons, vehicles, valuables and services (Il Finanziere, 2019).

The considerable achievements of the Tunisian authorities during the courses held in Italy led to the establishment of the 'Border Management Programme for the Maghreb Region - Tunisia' project within the European framework. In the course of this project, the Guardia di Finanza's Nautical School in Gaeta was the site of a visit by senior officials of the Tunisian Garde Nationale in 2020, accompanied by personnel from the Italian Ministry of the Interior. The visit was also aimed at sharing the complex Italian coastal radar network.

In October 2020, as part of a project funded by the European Union in collaboration with the International Centre for Migration Development (ICMPD), the Guardia di Finanza was selected, specifically the Nautical School, to provide training for 15 military personnel of the Tunisian Garde Nationale in the context of the creation of a coastal surveillance system in Tunisia called BMP Maghreb. The course, entitled "Safety at Sea for Naval Units", was meticulously designed to impart knowledge and skills related to international maritime law, search and rescue procedures, and conventions at sea. Furthermore, it aimed to facilitate the practical application of these concepts through on-board exercises conducted aboard Guardia di Finanza naval units. Subsequently, in June 2022, a further course was held at the Nautical School to train the operators of the Tunisian Garde Nationale. The didactic activity focused on the use of marine electronic sensors, in particular radar equipment, and developed over time through the provision of technical-theoretical content related to the management of on-board systems necessary for search and rescue (SAR) activities in navigation.

5. Conclusions

This excursus has examined three of the numerous military operations in which Italian soldiers were engaged across the globe. The conclusion drawn is that the actions undertaken by Italians in the international arena met with success. This is a highly positive trend, particularly in light of the fact that approximately 7,500 Italian military personnel were deployed abroad in 35 missions in Europe and beyond on an annual basis. The contemporary geopolitical landscape, characterised by the emergence of formidable terrorist organisations, introduced unprecedented challenges to the international operations of the Italian military. This resulted in Italy assuming a more prominent role in theatres of conflict, necessitating the establishment of a comprehensive political agenda to provide a framework for the organisation of a chain of command and control, the enhancement of equipment and training, and the facilitation of a detailed discussion on these matters.

Italy became a popular destination for foreign police forces and international organisations, which were increasingly utilising its facilities and military to indoctrinate and train personnel on a global scale. This trend is not exclusive to the Guardia di Finanza, as evidenced in this paper. The Italian Air Force also significantly upgraded its training systems, leading to its schools in Italy becoming a renowned institution for pilots from Europe and beyond. Training is underway for the local and remote control of high-tech drones that will be used to monitor and patrol the waters and SAR area south of Sicily. The Italian Navy was deployed throughout the Mediterranean and in African hot spots, particularly in the waters off Somalia, to prevent and combat human trafficking and piracy.

Finally, the Carabinieri Corps carries out the military police mission throughout Europe, which involves the military in the delicate task of protecting the high offices of the State and the European Union when they travel for institutional commitments.

It is evident that Italy's strategic location and robust logistical capabilities position it as a leading contender in the effort to combat security threats emanating from the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa.

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