AGENCY, RESISTANCE AND (FORCED) MOBILITIES. THE CASE OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TRANSIT THROUGH ITALY

Agency, resistência e mobilidades (forçadas). O caso dos refugiados sírios em trânsito na Itália

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Abstract. During the biennium 2013–2014 Syrian refugees started to reach Italy through Mediterranean seaborne migration routes, from Libya and Egypt. Their presence contributed to partially modifying the configuration of the incoming migration flows to Italy, both in terms of socio-demographic composition and access to the European asylum system. Data shows that most of the Syrian refugees who landed in Italy between 2013 and 2014 decided to pursue their journeys to Northern Europe, by overcoming the restrictions imposed by the Dublin Regulation. The article focuses on the phenomenon of transit, as an interesting standpoint from which to observe certain acts of agency and resistance, put in place by refugees in order to "choose the country where to live": the refusal to provide fingerprints during identification, the organization of hunger strikes, the secondary mobility per se. Moreover, the article attempts to shed light on the relational and socio-political context in which these practices have taken shape, by focusing on the construction of relationships with activists and volunteers, and the (explicit and tacit) processes of negotiation which refugees conducted with police authorities and other stakeholders.

Keywords: Syrian refugees, Italy, transit, agency, resistance.

Resumo. *Durante o biênio 2013-2014 refugiados sírios começaram a chegar à Itália, através de rotas migratórias marítimas no Mediterrâneo, desde a Líbia e o Egito. A presença deles contribuiu a modificar parcialmente a configuração dos fluxos imigratórios na Itália, em termos de composição sócio-demográfica e acesso ao sistema europeu de asilo. Os dados mostram que a maioria dos refugiados sírios que desembarcaram na Itália entre 2013 e 2014 decidiu prosseguir sua jornada para o Norte da Europa, ignorando as restrições impostas*

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pelo regulamento de Dublin. O artigo versa sobre o fenômeno do trânsito, como um ponto de vista interessante para observar certos atos de agência e resistência, postos em prática por refugiados a fim de "escolher o país onde viver": a recusa de fornecer impressões digitais durante a identificação, a organização de greves de fome, a própria mobilidade secundária. Além disso, o artigo tenta lançar luz sobre o contexto relacional e socio-político em que estas práticas têm tomado forma, colocando em foco a construção de relacionamentos com ativistas e voluntários, e os processos (explícitos e implícitos) de negociação que os refugiados realizam com autoridades policiais e outras partes interessadas.

Palavras-chave*: refugiados sírios, Itália, trânsito, agência, resistência.*

1. Introduction

The conflict in Syria is alive and kicking, and people are being continuously forced to leave their homes and their country in order to save their own lives. It started in the summer of 2011, as consequence of Bashar al-Assad's brutal repression of a pacific revolution[2], and we are yet to foresee its conclusion. According to the United Nations High Committee for Refugees[3], more than 13,5 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria, at least 6,6 million are Internally Displaced Persons and more than 4,8 million have been registered as refugees in the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA). One of the main results of the conflict has been the developing of intra- and extra-regional forced mobilities, whose patterns have been continuously changing in parallel with the evolution of border regimes. While in the first phase of the conflict, most of the MENA region countries were more or less accessible for Syrians, we are currently observing the progressive closure of all the exit routes from the country. Even Europe has recently introduced ulterior political measures aimed at keeping refugees far from places where they could find protection (e.g. EU–Turkey agreements).

Notwithstanding the increasing global border enforcement, since the beginning of the conflict, more than one million Syrian citizens managed to reach Europe to present an asylum claim and the main recipient countries have been Germany, Serbia and Kosovo (62%), followed by Sweden, Hungary, Austria, Netherlands, Denmark (26%) and other countries (11%)[4].

Syrian migration to Europe started immediately after the conflict, but has become more visible since 2013. Due to the absence of humanitarian corridors and other pathways of legal access[5], Syrian refugees started to travel

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[2] YASSIN-KASSAB, Robin, AL SHAMI Leyla. *Burning Country. Syrians in revolution and war.*

[3] UNHCR. *Syria Regional Response. Inter Agency information sharing.*

[4] *IDEM*. Europe**:** Syrian Asylum Applications.

[5] More information concerning low rates of resettlement of Syrian refugees are available here: <http://www.unhcr.org/protection/resettlement/52b2febafc5/factsheet-resettlement-syrian-refugees.html>.

"irregularly", reaching Europe through lethal seaborne migration routes and crossing EU land borders with smugglers' help. Although Italy (2013–2014) and Greece (2015–2016) have been the main "first arrival countries", they are not the main countries of asylum[6]. Concerning Italy, official data regarding seaborne arrivals and the number of asylum claims draw the contours of the transit phenomenon: in 2013 only the 6% of Syrian refugees who disembarked in Italy presented an asylum claim[7] and the percentage shifted to the 3% in 2014[8]. They have *de facto* overcome the restrictions imposed by the Dublin Regulation, according to which Italy, as a first EU country of arrival, was supposed to be responsible for the collection and examination of their asylum claims.

The article wants to highlight the agency of refugees during the transit through Europe and the challenge of the Dublin Regulation; it took shape through practices of resistance, struggle and negotiation, as well as individual decision-making processes which need to be analysed in light of the socio-political context and the relational environment in which the transit occurred. The contexts in which the transit took place are here hypothesised as *political fields*[9] where relationships between actors play an essential and constitutive role.

From a theoretical point of view, refugees' agency highlights a combination of complex mechanisms between the forced and the voluntary components of migration. As stressed by Mezzadra[10], who cites Samaddar's work[11], it is not possible to draw a clear line between forced and voluntary migration, because each migratory path comprehends both instances. The focus on the agentive processes carried out by so-called "forced migrants" who *de facto* voluntarily choose to continue their travel, constitutes an opportunity to reflect on the epistemic crisis (p. 2) that affects the traditional categories aimed at defining migrants and migrations (asylum seekers vs. economic migrants; forced vs. voluntary migration).

The research, limited to the biennium 2013–2014, has been conducted using qualitative methods of investigation, ascribed to social ethnography, which have been integrated with the re-elaboration of second-hand data published by several official sources. The cities of Catania and Milan, as significant spaces of arrival, transit and departure, have been chosen as case studies. Participant observations[12] and 35 in-depth interviews with the people involved in this process (20 Syrian refugees – 10 men and 10 women – 5 human rights activists,

[6] UNHCR. *Europe: Syrian Asylum Applications*.
[7] IOM. *Fatal Journeys. Tracking lives lost during migration;* EUROSTAT. *Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex. Annual aggregated data (2008 – 2015).*
[8] FRONTEX AGENCY. *Annual Risk Analysis 2015*; UNHCR. *Europe: Syrian..., op. cit.*
[9] BOURDIEU, Pierre. La représentation politique. Éléments pour une théorie du champ politique.
[10] MEZZADRA, Sandro. The proliferation of borders and the right to escape.
[11] SAMADDAR, Ranabin. Forced Migration: State of the Field, p. 2.
[12] GOLD, Raymond L. Roles in sociological field observation.

5 volunteers, 3 members of associations, 2 public officers) have been conducted in these key locations. Concerning Catania, Conquergood's way of rethinking ethnography[13] has been particularly useful: I have been obliged to re-interpret myself, and my work, in terms of co-performance, because the presence of a *detached observer* would have been perceived as intrusive and out of place. Therefore, using my professional skills as a social worker, interpreter and legal assistant, I collaborated with local volunteers and activists in first aid and reception tasks during the first fieldwork session at Catania Train Station. On the contrary, the observation at Milano Centrale was more detached because the reception context of Syrian refugees was more institutionalised and structured.

Starting with a brief outline of Syrian seaborne migration to Europe and a reflection on the Italian reception system for refugees, the article analyses the configuration of transit throughout Italy, as a challenge to the Dublin Regulation. It further develops through its focus on Catania and Milan, as key sites for observing the individual and collective agency of refugees, and its articulation in the frame of local policies aimed at managing the phenomenon of transit migration.

2. Syrian seaborne migration to Italy and beyond: features and routes

The seaborne migration phenomenon in the Mediterranean Sea is nothing new. Starting in 1985, one of the main consequences of Fortress Europe's edification has been the progressive evolution of movement paths along increasingly risky routes in an attempt to overcome the multiple frontiers in Southern Europe. Nowadays the human costs of the enforcement of a border patrol are continuously growing and the Mediterranean Sea has been identified as the most dangerous border in the world[14]. As stated in Frontex's report[15], there are three fundamental migratory corridors in the Mediterranean Sea (Eastern, Central and Western), and the presence of Syrian asylum seekers has been noticed on all of them. The Central Mediterranean corridor, which constitutes an attempt to connect North African shores with Italy and Malta, includes the dominant Libyan route, the secondary Egyptian route, and the Tunisian one, which is almost closed[16].

The context of Mediterranean migratory routes has been partly modified by the Arab revolts and the wars in Libya and Syria[17]: new categories of people started

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[13] CONQUERGOOD, Dwight. Rethinking ethnography: towards a critical cultural politics.

[14] IOM, *op. cit.*

[15] FRONTEX AGENCY, *op. cit.*

[16] DE HAAS, Hein. *Trans-Sahara Migration to Northern Africa and EU: Historical roots and current trends;* MONZINI, Paola. Sea-border crossings: The organization of irregular migration to Italy.

[17] ABDELFATTAH, Dina. *The impact of Arab Revolts on Migration;* FARGUES, Philippe; BONFANTI, Sara. *When the best option is s leaky boat: why migrants risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean and what Europe is doing about it;* RIBAS-MATEOS, Natalia (ed.). *Spaces of Refugee Flight: Migration and Mobilities after the Arab Spring in the Eastern Mediterranean.*

to travel old routes which partially changed their configuration due to the evolution of border surveillance and rescue policies, as well as smuggling strategies.

One of the main consequences of the war in Syria has certainly been the forced displacement of thousands of people, which primarily concerned the countries of the MENA region. In 2013, Libya and Egypt hosted respectively at least 24,000 and 140,000 Syrian refugees, thus it is possible to state that their presence, combined with the serious worsening of living conditions in both countries, played a determinant role in their decision to risk their lives at sea in order to reach EU[18]. The presence of Syrians on those seaborne routes has radically changed the socio-demographic composition of incoming seaborne migration flows, shifting it from a "young male-dominated composition" to a family-based one, with an increased presence of women, children and elderly people[19].

Syrian asylum seekers started to arrive in Italy by sea in July 2013, in concomitance with the upswing of refugees, and, according to the IOM[20], at the end of the year they reached at least 11,500 units. In 2013 the low number of asylum claims, between 650 and 700 units, demonstrated that at least 10,650 people had escaped from Italy without presenting any asylum claims, and the data on 2014 confirmed this trend with about 1,400 application claims against more than 39,500 refugees[21] (Tab.1).

Tab.1 - Total number of people who reached Italy by sea, Syrian refugees, asylum claims (2008-2014)

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Total	36.951	9.573	4.406	62.692	13.267	42.925	170.100
Syrian refugees					581 (4%)	11.503 (26%)	39.651 (23%)
Asylum applications (Syria)						700	1.400

Author's elaboration on Italian Ministry of Interior's data concerning the total of disembarkations (2015), on Frontex's data (2015) and on Eurostat's data concerning asylum claims (2015).

This data allows us to state that between 2013 and 2014 Italy has represented a "transit country" for Syrian refugees. According to Duvell[22], the concept of "transit", both referred to migrations and countries is "blurred and politicised" and is "closely related to processes identified with the internalisation or externalisation of EU migration policies, notably capacity

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[18] DENARO, Chiara. The Reconfiguration of Mediterranean Migration Routes after the War in Syria: Narratives on the Egyptian Route to Italy and Beyond.

[19] *Ibidem*.

[20] IOM, *op. cit*.

[21] FRONTEX AGENCY, *op. cit*.; UNHCR. *Europe: Syrian..., op. cit*.

[22] DÜVELL, Franck. Transit migration. A politicised and blurred concept.

building projects in the field of migration control in neighbouring countries and readmission agreements". Moreover, "the fact that only non-EU countries are labelled transit countries, whereas in fact several EU countries are transited by migrants on their way to other destinations [...] illustrates selective application of the concept and a certain political bias". Finally, the label of "transit migrant" often brings with it a negative acceptation, especially related with the elusion of migration laws (e.g. Dublin Regulation).

As stressed by Brekke and Brochman[23], who analysed the case of Eritrean refugees travelling from Italy to Norway, the secondary migration of asylum seekers in Europe is strictly connected to the huge discrepancies between reception standards between EU countries or, in other words, to the gap between goals and reality in the realisation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). In their work, starting with the combination of a structural approach and an attention to individual decision-making processes, they reflected on how secondary movements were able to challenge the Dublin Regulation: even in this case the question of fingerprints represented a key issue.

> The DR was particularly well known among the migrants. The significance of fingerprints was widely discussed and most informants knew about the consequences of the regulation. We interviewed a group of young Eritrean men who had arrived in Lampedusa on a boat carrying 54 asylum seekers. While at sea, everyone had agreed to collectively resist having their fingerprints taken once they arrived. This resulted in a confrontation between government officials and these new arrivals. In the end, they were all fingerprinted and registered[24].

The case of Syrian (and Eritrean[25]) refugees in 2013 and 2014 made a little step forward regarding Brekke and Brochman's case study, both in terms of agency and individual strategies, and in terms of negotiation and obtained results. While what they called "secondary migration" was undertaken by refugees after the identification and the release of fingerprints, and was subject to the possibility of "Dublin transfers" back to Italy, the kind of transit that I analyse in the article was based on the overcoming of the Dublin Regulation through avoiding the provision of fingerprints: this allowed the refugees to really choose their country of asylum, without risking being deported back to the EU country in which they had first arrived. In the case of Syrians, most of them managed to avoid the registration of fingerprints in Southern Italy, and they created different "internal routes" in order to reach the northern borders: the most travelled route was from Catania to Milan, and both train stations started

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[23] BREKKE Jan-Paul, BROCHMANN Grete. Stuck in transit: the secondary migration of asylum seekers in Europe, national differences and the Dublin Regulation.

[24] BREKKE, Jan-Paul, AARSET , Monica, 2009, apud, BREKKE, BROCHMAN, op. cit.

[25] See Brigida (BRIGIDA, Valeria. Lampedusa, vincono gli eritrei. No alle impronte digitali).

to represent renowned transit spaces. In order to differentiate between these kinds of transit mobility, which, I will argue in the following paragraphs, was in a certain way more agency-oriented and resistance-based than the so-called "secondary migration", I defined it as "second escape".

3. From the rescue at sea to the reception in Italy: an emergency-based approach

A brief focus on the Italian rescue and reception system for seaborne refugees is necessary in order to frame the transit within an opportune socio-political and relational context: during the biennium analysed here, it is possible to retrace some continuities and ruptures compared with the past.

Concerning the rescue policies of seaborne migrants, the terrible shipwrecks that occurred in October 2013 – respectively on the 3rd and the 11th, when more then 600 people lost their lives – signalled a turning point with the launch of the Mare Nostrum Operation with a budget of nine million euros per month[26]. Beyond the attempt to conciliate security regulations and humanitarian instances[27], Mare Nostrum brought about three novelties, namely "the massive rescue" of migrants up to 90 maritime miles from the Italian coast, the (theoretic) provision of "goods and services" on the military ships and the end of "pushbacks at sea". Initially, the military ships had also been imagined as "spaces of identification", a place to take their fingerprints and pictures: the border was shifted "at sea", far from any kind of guarantee[28]. The most immediate consequence of the "massive rescue" of migrants was probably the "massive disembarking" phenomenon, which has had an important role in both theoretical and practical emergency building processes, and a domino effect on the hosting system, which should be "ready" to accommodate 1,000 or more people at a time. This practice inevitably contributed in sustaining the already declared "emergency". In fact, notwithstanding that seaborne migration to Italy has been defined as a structural phenomenon[29], Italian political answers have often been emergency-based and built on its representation as unpredictable and exceptional fact, and on the assumption of non-manageability with traditional political means or ordinary legal tools[30]. The conceptualisation of "structural emergency"[31] seems to fit the Italian situation well, where immigration issues,

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[26] MORCONE, Mario. IGC Workshop on protection at sea.

[27] CAMPESI, Giuseppe. Frontex, the Euro-Mediterranean Border and the Paradoxes of Humanitarian Rhetoric.

[28] VASSALLO PALEOLOGO, Fulvio. *Mare Nostrum – Luci ed ombre sulle modalità operative*.

[29] CAPONIO, Tiziana, ZINCONE, Giovanna. Immigrant and immigration policy making: The case of Italy.

[30] DENARO, Chiara. *La crisi del Modello Lampedusa*; VASSALLO PALEOLOGO, Fulvio *Diritti sotto sequestro. Dall'emergenza umanitaria allo stato di eccezione*; MARCHETTI, *op. cit*.

[31] VRENNA Massimiliano, BIONDI DAL MONTE Francesca. L'emergenza "strutturale". Alcune riflessioni a margine degli sbarchi dei migranti provenienti dal Nord Africa.

especially related to the sea, are *de facto* part of the "other events" that can be managed by the Civil Protection Department, whose main tasks concern intervention in the case of earthquakes and other kinds of natural disasters[32].

In 2013 the Italian reception system's configuration was quite complex and multi-layered, and it still is. There were only 14 ordinary governmental reception centres (CPSA, CARA, CDA), while there were 1,657 extraordinary (CAS) governmental reception centres[33]. The governmental reception system was flanked by the SPRAR (Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati), whose competence of management has been totally transferred to local authorities. It had been enlarged up to a capacity of more than 20,000 units, which in turn are divided into ordinary and extraordinary and additional places. Some data (Tab.2) could help to clarify the detachment between the demand and supply of places in ordinary and extraordinary reception centres and the considerable burden on the extraordinary reception system that was implemented in 2011 (Emergenza Nord Africa)[34] and re-used between 2013 and 2014.

Tab. 2 - Disembarkations in Italy and places in ordinary/extraordinary hosting centres

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014
Total of disembarks	>62,300	>13,200	>42,900	>170,000
SPRAR	3,000	3.979	9.356	20,596
CPSA/CARA/CDA	5,733	5,733	5,733	9,504
CAS	50,000 (ENA)	50,000 (ENA)	5,500 (CAS)	32,028 (CAS)

Author's elaboration on data published by the Ministry of Interior (2015), SPRAR (2015), Italian Civil Protection (2013).

These elaborations show, first of all, the structural deficit of the Italian hosting system and, secondly, the weight of the extraordinary component, enabling an understanding of the emergency-based nature of Italian reception and hosting policies. Moreover, the declared and un-declared emergency, related to incoming migration flows by sea, has been tackled through the use of exceptional spaces to accommodate people, such as ex-barracks, ex-schools, makeshift camps, ex-hotels and residences, stadiums and indoor sport arenas: *statusless* places,

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[32] DENARO, *La crisi del..., op. cit.*

[33] ITALIAN MINISTRY OF INTERIOR. *Trend degli arrivi dei migranti sulle coste italiane. Anni 2011 – 2012 – 2013 – 2014.*

[34] The Emergenza Nord Africa (ENA) had *de facto* authorised extraordinary procedures to subcontract reception centres through direct assignations, without tender notices and competitions (up to 50.000 places). It entailed the extension of the ranges of subjects authorised to create and manage a hosting centre, the multiplication of suitable places to accommodate people, the legitimation of inconsistencies between law requirements and hosting practices, especially concerning the standards of reception and the provision of services and the collapse of useful criteria to monitor and evaluate the projects (DENARO, *La crisi del..., op. cit.*).

sometimes lacking in minimum standards of fitness for human habitation and devoid of hosting services such as legal, social and sanitary assistance.

In parallel with this institutional reception system we observed, starting in 2013, the development of informal networks of activists and volunteers, with different personal and political backgrounds and multiple relationships with migrants. In particular, Syrian refugees already knew some "helpline numbers" before they left Libya or Egypt, and they called them from the high sea to launch the SOS operations, after they disembarked and during the "second escape".

4. The configuration of transit as a challenge to the Dublin Regulation: the question of providing fingerprints

Ever since they began arriving in Italy by sea, Syrian refugees have shown their will to pursue their journey toward Northern European countries. The procedure of identification imposed by the Shengen Border Code and the Dublin Regulation, which should imply the registration of refugees' fingerprints in the EURODAC database, was seen as an obstacle to overcome. The protests against the Dublin Regulation, which started between July–August 2013, and the fundamental point of conflict between them and the public authorities, concerned the question of fingerprints. The first documented attempt of Syrian asylum seekers to challenge the Dublin Regulation occurred on 14 August 2013 at the Andrea Doria School, where they were taken after they had disembarked on Catania's beach (La Playa) on 10 August, when 6 of the 120 people lost their lives. It was followed by another demonstration, which occurred at Palacannizzaro, in Catania, from 7–17 October 2013. According to the witnesses collected by associations, activists and journalists in these cases, the Italian Police tried to take asylum seekers' fingerprints by using force. Some cases of people being injured have been reported[35].

> "Before our eyes," reported M., "they took the fingerprints of an unconscious man. We were no longer people. We felt like a flock." Also: "There was a pregnant woman, and they beat her too. Finally her husband decided to leave them to take the fingerprints. If we asked to go to the hospital they would say 'Ok, but first we need the fingerprints'"[36].

The protests organised by the Syrians, including some cases of hunger strikes, have been filmed and photographed by them, allowing the large-scale diffusion of witnesses on social networks such as YouTube and Facebook. The particular use of new technologies, such as WhatsApp and Viber, which permit users to share videos and pictures, has been a factor in building networks and

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[35] CARNEMOLLA, Davide. Sicilia - Diritti sempre più violati: da Catania testimonianze di migranti ed attivisti e a Siracusa violenti pestaggi della polizia e reclusione forzata; TOMASSINI, Veronica. I siriani e il campo pestaggi.

[36] Ctzen Redazione. Siria, un migrante racconta le violenze subite a Catania.

has been configured as an essential instrument to highlight realities, which were not accessible and visible otherwise. The most popular example of this political use of technology has been the Lampedusa case, in which a Syrian asylum seeker spread a video shot by a simple smartphone. It has shown the world a practice used in the Lampedusa reception centre (CPSA of Contrada Imbriacola), which consisted of making migrants undress in open spaces and washing them with a pump, as an anti-scabies treatment[37].

The overlapping of different legal references concerning the fingerprints question, and the lack of a clear *modus operandi* which could be followed by police officers, produced a *space of indetermination*, in which a procedural point of view has been transformed into a *space of improvisation*. With the concept of a "space of improvisation", I mean a space where the behaviours, responses and decisions taken by a specific actor (e.g. the police), concerning the same category of people in a very similar situation (e.g. Syrian refugees refusing to provide fingerprints), are very time - and space - specific. Furthermore, I hypothesise that a space of improvisation can be produced as consequence of what I call a "space of indetermination", namely a space, or a situation where the legal procedures to be followed are not clear, or not univocally definable. As outlined by the Associazione Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione, on the one hand, national and European immigration laws share a duty to identify a foreigner who enters the territory of the State illegally. Even if they possess documents, the identification should involve the taking of fingerprints, and refusal could result in a penal violation if manifested with a violent form of resistance, or an administrative one if expressed by passive resistance. On the other hand, the law explicitly forbids the use of coercion and of physical or psychological violence by the police, even if it is aimed at overcoming a kind of passive resistance concerning the fingerprint collection, inasmuch as they are in contradiction of Article 13 of the Italian Constitution and of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights[38].

Thus, it is possible to hypothesise that Italian authorities were caught unprepared by the practices of resistance to fingerprint collection actuated by the Syrians, who started to organise demonstrations, hunger strikes and passive resistance, and to spread their stories on social networks thanks to activists', lawyers' and independent journalists' support. It is not possible to identify a specific turning point, which marked a clear change of orientation concerning the fingerprints question, and perhaps it does not exist. The majority of Syrians who survived the shipwreck that occurred on 11 October 2013 managed to

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[37] Cf. LA REPUBLICA. Cie Lampedusa, il video-shock del Tg2 indigna e scuote le coscienze.
[38] ASSOCIAZIONE STUDI GIURIDICI SULL'IMMIGRAZIONE. L'identificazione dei cittadini stranieri da parte delle forze di polizia e il divieto dell'uso della forza per i rilievi foto-dattiloscopici.

escape without providing fingerprints, while between 7–17 October 2013 there were more than 120 people informally detained at Palacannizzaro.

More realistically, we can theorise a long period of trans-local coexistence of contrasting practices: to "close the eyes" and let them go, or to detain them in *statusless* spaces until the collection of fingerprints. The latter modus operandi caused extreme cases, documented by the witnesses, in which the separation line between torture and legal force became very fuzzy.

In March 2014, disembarkations restarted but the authorities' approach to the fingerprint question seemed to have changed.

> When we arrived at the port we waited almost 2 hours before disembarking. When we got down, there was a reception centre, almost 200 metres away from the port. They photographed us before entering the centre. I asked them if we would have to leave fingerprints. They answered "No." They told me: "You are free, you can do whatever you want. But we want to take pictures quickly, so we can go to the other reception centre" (Interview with R, Syrian refugee. Catania Train Station, 18 June 2014).

Sixteen witnesses reported the photographic identification, without fingerprints. Nine of them were photographed in a reception centre, five on the military ship and one while they were disembarking from the ship. Two refugees declared to have signed a document, and both of them did not know what they had signed.

> They did not take our fingerprints. We were only photographed while we were getting off the ship. Then we signed a paper, but due to the absence of an interpreter I definitely don't know what I signed (Interview with A., Syrian refugee, Catania Train Station, 19 June 2014).

Finally, three people reported that they had been convinced to provide only one fingerprint of one hand, and one was obliged to provide all fingerprints.

> They took only one fingerprint of one hand. The police told me that this fingerprint didn't have any value for the asylum claim and that they were taking it for security reasons. They did not force me to release the print of a specific finger. They let me choose (Interview with M. Syrian refugee, Catania Train Station, 20 June 2014)

5. The first stop-over in the "second escape", Catania Station

As underlined before, during 2013–14 the most travelled migration routes to Italy were the Libyan and the Egyptian ones. Therefore, independently from Mare Nostrum's presence, which permitted the disembarkation of people a long way from the rescue zones, it is possible to assert Sicily's key role. After Lampedusa's closure the main places to disembark were Pozzallo (RG), Augusta (SR), Porto Empedocle (AG) and, in a few cases, Catania; the migrants were

generally accommodated in ordinary reception centres (CSPA, CDA), in extraordinary reception centres (CAS) or in the previously defined *statusless* spaces. According to the interviews collected during the fieldworks, Syrian asylum seekers used to leave these hosting centres for anything between two hours and five days and, as reported by a volunteer in Pozzallo, during August and September 2013 it was possible to observe groups of asylum seekers walking at night on the railways' margins, as "phantoms" (Interview with E., volunteer with refugees, Pozzallo, 30 April 2014).

The main transit space in Sicily was Catania Train Station. At Catania Train Station, I met N. and A., two activists and volunteers involved in first aid reception tasks. N., recently renamed by the mass media "Lady SOS", started to be a cornerstone for the Syrian community in the summer of 2013[39].

> Catania Train Station is on the sea. The railway runs parallel to the beach and along the southeast coast of Sicily up to Messina. Several trains leave from Catania to Milan, the new door to Europe. At the station I met N., a Moroccan girl from Catania. I was waiting for her with about sixty Syrian refugees on the benches, in the small park on the right of the square.

> There were many women, veiled, with babies in their arms crying, or sleeping. They had a thousand eyes, to control the other children, who run and play in the little green in the midst of the machines. They had tired faces, exhausted by the travel, marked by the sun. Chapped noses, faces flushed, typical of one who has travelled two days by boat to Italy. Twelve hours under the burning sun, which characterizes the days of "good sea". The men were concerned, distressed; they were still seeking ways, solutions, to get "safe places". Places to start living again. (Extract from the Notebook used during the fieldwork. Catania, 1 May 2014)

Even though access to the fieldwork was very spontaneous, and I felt welcome right from the beginning, the re-interpretation of myself as part of the context has not been so immediate. My initial aim was to not get involved in any kind of reception of refugees, but the reception was really informal and completely voluntary: the ratio of refugees to volunteers was 50:1 and at least one more person was needed. Everyday there where between 30–200 people, and there was a lot of work to do. My professional skills as a social worker and interpreter have been fundamental to the participant observation, and extremely helpful in solving the ethical dilemma, which a detached observation in such a dramatic context would have generated.

> N.'s days are endless and saturated. By her side there is A. Sometimes occasional volunteers come to help them. They have an extraordinary way of making acquaintances with everyone, one by one, greetings, welcomes...making sure that no one is hurt. That everyone has clothes and

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[39] KINGTON, Tom. Lady SOS - the first call for Syrians in peril at sea.

shoes. That women have tampons, diapers for children. They point out the market where they can buy bread and cheese, juice and sandwiches at the corner of the square.

I accompany 30 of them. Three euros and 50 cents, 4 euros and 50 cents and…twenty, fifteen, eleven euros and so on. I translate the prices of bread, cheese, bread sticks, wet wipes, a kinder egg, coke, pieces of rotisserie, sweets. Is there water on the train? No, there isn't. And so we buy five bottles of water, three small ones, two big ones (Extract from the Notebook used during the fieldwork. Catania, 1 May 2014).

Buying train tickets for the same day depended on several factors, such as the time of arrival, the eventual need to wait for money from someone, the possession of a passport. Therefore the absence of an official transit centre was very evident. The Mosque of Catania was the only available place to host Syrian asylum seekers in transit at night.

I bring another 50 of them to the mosque. We overpass the waterfront plaza, then Corso Vittorio, then the first square on the left, where there are palm trees.

I check that no one is left behind.

I think about research and interviews but there is no time. There are hundreds of people who need everything. During these chaotic moments they repeat this sentence to me like a mantra: "Ya Chiara, Wallahi shufna el mawt bil bahar (Chiara, I swear, we saw death at sea)" (Extract from the Notebook used during the fieldwork. Catania, 1 May 2014).

According to the interviews, the fact that refugees had risked life at sea was extremely related to the will to choose their final destination. Many of them prefer to use the self-definition of "survivors" (naji'in) as an alternative to "refugees" (laji'in): they had crossed several frontiers, their homes had often been destroyed, each of them had lost at least one relative, many of them had sold everything in their possession to pay for each step of the journey to Europe. Now they wanted to reach the best option, "the right place", where they could "start living again".

"Where do you want to go, Insh'Allah?" I asked.

I don't know. Maybe Germany, or Sweden or Norway. I lost everything in Syria. I think that I will continue my travel until I have the sensation of being in the right place, or… in a good place. Insh'Allah God will tell me where to stop, and where to attempt to start living again (Interview with Y., Syrian refugee. Catania Train Station, 2 May 2014).

The dynamic of the Syrians' second flight has been characterised by the multiplicity of people, all of whom belonged to different backgrounds and covered different roles.

Primarily, the demand to escape from the reception centres to reach Catania Station seemed to have generated an informal smugglers' network, where a fuzzy line separated the improvised and the planned components. The presence of

people who did not know the territories, and who were willing to pay, seemed to have pushed a lot of people into becoming traffickers, taxi drivers (for long distances), helpers for a fee (buying phone cards or tickets became profitable activities). The continued exploitation of the Syrians' condition of vulnerability and invisibility was perfectly observable near the reception centres and in all the places the refugees disembark. It is not possible to establish the transit market's prices, because of the unplanned nature of the phenomenon, but costs of 100 euros to go from Syracuse to Catania, 200 euros from Porto Empedocle and 300 euros from Pozzallo to Catania have been reported during interviews.

The police monitored the transit by asking the volunteers how many people were leaving each day, and during the spring and summer of 2014 the numbers were very high: 50, 100, 150, 200 per day. The volunteers at the station had been able to build networks: with citizens who would bring used clothes or games for children; with little food shops and bakeries; with pharmacies and tobacconists; and with the bus and train ticket booths, which became very understanding of and flexible towards the groups of "poor people" who were seeking a safe place to stay.

When considering the presence of these networks, it is important to state that their informal character meant that there were limits to what they could achieve and that the volunteer network co-existed with a smuggling network, which generated different kinds of problems. First of all, the volunteers' network at the station, which was run on a no-fee basis, was in open contradiction to the logic that led the smugglers, and its position was quite dangerous because they risked ruining their market.

Besides, despite the evidence of Catania's configuration as a transit space, the local authorities did not choose any particular problem-solving strategy. In fact, on the contrary, their political choice has been to not react, leaving the train station to become a battlefield, between the good and the bad, the profitless and the profitable, the spontaneous help and the exploitation, the human rights defence and the smuggling phenomenon.

6. The door to Europe: Milano Centrale Station

Most trains from Catania Station were directed to Milan, which became a second transit space where all the migratory pathways from the point of entry in Southern Italy (Villa S. Giovanni, Reggio Calabria, Crotone, Taranto, Bari, Napoli) converged. Since the shipwreck on 11 October 2013, Milano Centrale Station and Garibaldi Station started to receive groups of Syrians coming from the south, and the network of volunteers dealt with the new phenomenon first hand.

In this case the authorities' political responses have been completely different compared to those in Catania and have consisted of the opening of ten

"transit centres" for Syrians and the predisposition of a reception point within the central station, managed by third sector associations in tight collaboration with public social services (Comune di Milano). The first transit reception centre, situated on Via Fratelli Zoia and the second one, on Via Aldini, were managed by a non-profit association (Progetto Arca), which declared to have hosted more than 26,000 Syrians since October 2013[40]. One of the social workers and volunteers' concerns has been building a network with the south, in the attempt to improve the management of large arrivals, in terms of numbers. The use of social networks to organise the reception, already used by the informal networks, started to be recognised as the only useful tool for quick information exchange, especially because of the lack of official communication channels. In September 2014 the social cooperative Universis started to manage the welcome point at the central station, where they provided essential goods such as food and water, and registered the asylum seekers in order to organise them between the transit hosting centres according to the availability. At the first reception point social workers, cultural and linguistic mediators, Arab-speakers and Anglophone volunteers, and NGO workers (Save the Children) were employed. The reception space was immediately visible and there was a small area created to host activities for children, such as games or drawings.

> Besides, in Milan Train Station the fingerprints question seemed to be far from people's minds, and people seemed to be projected towards their new life. There was a map of Europe attached to the reception point's wall: men and women were finally able to understand where they were and were they had come from, to breathe, and to start to dream, by drawing pathways with their fingers along the infinite routes through Europe (Extract from the Notebook used during the fieldwork. Milan, 23 July 2014).

Duvell's reflection concerning transit[41] outlines how the dimension of a migrant's intention, is very complex: "sometimes the intention to transit a certain country was there from the outset, but sometimes the intention only emerges as a response to the adverse conditions in the present country of stay, and sometimes, there is an intention but no efforts are made to realise this, thus it is a mere dream". As underlined in most of the interviews, the Syrians' will to continue to travel to Northern Europe, mainly to Sweden and Germany, was supported by the presence of relatives and friends in those countries or by the awareness of the Italian asylum system's structural weakness. In various cases a sort of comparative knowledge concerning the socio-economical situations of the different EU countries led to this awareness, while in others, the main decisional factor was a simple faith in hearsay. Some of them knew that Italy was already paying the crisis' consequences in terms of redefinition of the welfare

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[40] MAJORINO, Pierfrancesco, SARFATTI Caterina. *Milano come Lampedusa*.
[41] DÜVELL, *op. cit*.

state, and "didn't have enough resources, not even for Italians" (Interview with S., Syrian refugee, Milano Train Station, 1 May 2014).

> They ask me continuously if Sweden is really better than Germany, or what I would choose if I was in their place. I feel a big responsibility on my shoulders. They want information on procedures to get asylum, travel documents and citizenship, on the application of the Dublin Regulation, on the social welfare, on the health system, on work and education systems. They need to know in order to choose the best way, as they firmly believe that it is their right. They perceive themselves as human beings, who fled the war, who lost everything, who risked their lives at sea, who have seen people falling down from boats and drowning. This perception seems to drive their actions (Extract from the Notebook used during the fieldwork. Milan, 18 September 2014).

Milan was the real door to Europe for Syrians. Out of the hosting centres there were smugglers of all kinds who proposed different routes, prices and means of transport. The main destinations were Germany or Sweden, and less often Denmark, the Netherlands or Norway. There were many possible pathways: France and Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Trains and buses were chosen autonomously, while minibuses and cars were proposed by the smugglers. Notwithstanding the southern authorities' "closed-eyes" approach in addressing the Syrians' escape, and the presence in Milan of ten transit centres, the Italian political schizophrenia frequently appeared at the northern borders with Switzerland and Austria, where there have been several cases of arrests and pushbacks.

7. Conclusive remarks

In this article I attempted to provide an examination of patterns of forced migration to, and transit within, Europe as part of the contemporary migration "crisis". Starting with an ethnographical approach, the fundamental effort has been to frame Syrian refugees' transit within a socio-political and relational context, which could help the understanding of refugees' agency. To that purpose I have also focused on the importance of social networks, on the role of volunteers as transit facilitators as well as the decision-making of the migrants themselves and the arbitrary decisions from border guards. Moreover, the article illustrates how opportunities for onward movement outside of formal registration structures could be established quickly and in a very dynamic way by showing Italy was not simply a country of reception and processing refugees but a place of transit.

Looking at the case of Syrian refugees it is possible to observe how agency took shape through individual and collective pathways of resistance, through processes of explicit and implicit negotiations with relevant stakeholders and authorities, and thanks to their capability to build networks and to look for fundamental contacts. The use of new technology, such as social media in which

one can quickly share videos and pictures, has played an important role in the process of building these networks. The empirical data collected during the interviews show how these processes are deeply relational and how refugees' acts of agency *de facto* shed light on the complex combination of voluntary and forced instances of the migration phenomena. They definitely validate Mezzadra's suggestion concerning the need for a re-discussion of traditional categories and labels on which migration management policies are based, in order to deal with the contemporary epistemic crisis[42].

Furthermore, the passive resistance to the praxis of fingerprint collection, actuated by Syrians, and their clear will to overcome the restrictions forced upon them by the Dublin Regulation II and III, challenged all the actors involved in the process, from the public authorities, such as police officers and social workers in the hosting centres, to the citizens, the volunteers, the people employed in the ticket booths and the activists. From a political point of view, the same "emergency", represented by hundreds of people, families and children in continuous transit, has been managed in two different ways, namely the southern authorities' "closed-eyes" approach and the northern authorities' "answer-at-all-costs" approach.

Finally, the results of the empirical research highlight the image of refugees as agents and protagonists, and a detachment from the common interpretation of forced migrants as "passive victims" that generally emerges, meanwhile, as cause and consequence of the emergency-based policies of migration management. Syrians' second escape can be read as an attempt to deviate from ordinary labelling processes, by proclaiming their "right to chose where to live".

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[42] MEZZADRA, *op. cit*.

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