Over Land and Sea. NGOs/CSOs and EU Border Externalisation Along the Central Mediterranean Route

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Introduction

This paper looks at the space between Italy and North Africa, where European border externalisation intervenes both on land and at sea to contain migration movements along the so-called “Central Mediterranean Route”, and assesses the relationship between non-governmental/civil society organisations (NGOs/CSOs) and EU-externalisation in this liminal, transnational and mobile spatial configuration. In so doing, it introduces the notion of anti-externalisation, with its variants counter-externalisation and counter-delocalisation. The paper identifies relevant practices among NGOs/CSOs: different non-governmental actors show different attitudes towards externalisation, resulting in actions that fall into one or the other category. The paper further shows that different spaces, places and contexts along this route impact on the relationship between externalisation and NGOs/CSOs: depending on where the latter carry out their activities, it may be more likely for them to end up supporting externalisation, bowing to governmental desiderata, or more easier to effectively oppose it for those wishing to do so. To better situate the analysis at the itinerant scale of the route (Casas-Cortés et al. 2017; Cobarrubias 2020), the paper also adopts a trajectory approach (Schwarz 2020).

The concept of “border externalisation” includes the whole range of activities that states directly carry out, as well as those they outsource to other state or non-state actors (through funding or other kind of incentives), outside their own territorial boundaries, with the aim of preventing or limiting unwanted immigration into their territories. This goes beyond border control stricto sensu also include improving living conditions in countries of transit and origin for both local and foreign nationals, as this is supposed to reduce the factors urging people to embark on irregular journeys to Europe. This could be called “soft externalisation”, to distinguish it from the externalisation of activities directly related to border control, and this is what NGOs/CSOs may be involved in, mainly through humanitarian and development projects,
especially in light of the fact that such activities are often funded, directly or indirectly, by governmental sources. Regardless of the funding source (some NGOs/CSOs only rely on private donations), all migration-related NGOs/CSOs operating in countries of origin and transit, as well as international waters, are confronted with the question whether they are really serving the interests of (would-be) migrants or just supporting European governmental strategies that are aimed at containing migration in the first place.

Recent research has addressed the influence of place-specific settings on border dynamics (Novak 2017) from the specific NGOs/CSOs perspective, highlighting the interaction between local contexts and migration-related NGOs/CSOs (Fischer and Jørgensen 2020), and the way space and place shape non-governmental activities (DeBono and Mainwaring 2020). These works focus specifically on solidarity initiatives and compare two spatially distinct contexts each, namely a place of arrival (the city of Hamburg, in both case studies) and one of transit (the Mediterranean and the city of Athens, respectively), with no geographical continuity between them. This paper adds to this literature, first, by adopting the externalisation lens, and, second, by applying it to the itinerant scale of the route (Casas-Cortés et al. 2017; Cobarrubias 2020), to show how NGOs/CSOs position themselves along the multifaceted spatial continuum connecting North Africa with Southern Europe across the Central Mediterranean, including the land, air and sea dimensions. Thus, the paper embeds externalisation in a particular context to show how space and place impact on non-governmental forms of externalisation as well as anti-externalisation. For the purposes of this article, anti-externalisation includes any activity intendedly or unintendedly producing effects contrary to those envisaged by externalising actors. This paper specifically focuses on intended anti-externalisation, as well as on two specific sub-categories thereof. Indeed, under given circumstances, which are to some extent related to the specific spatial environment, anti-externalisation can take the shape of counter-externalisation or counter-delocalisation, as described later in this section.

NGOs/CSOs are a quite broad and heterogeneous category, including more or less formalised international and local, large and small, professionalised and volunteer organisations with diverse political positionings, ranging from purported neutrality to outspoken (pro-migrant or anti-migrant) political engagement. Not only may NGOs/CSOs differ from one another with regard to their aims and motivations, but their work is also embedded in specific local contexts, which affects the way they enter into a relationship with externalisation dynamics. NGOs/CSOs working in different places can accept or (try to) oppose the relevant constraints, but they can also exploit the place-specific opportunities.

This paper shows that NGOs/CSOs working on land, in the territories of North African countries, are more likely to be involved in soft externalisation,
as limitations to their agency are imposed by both European governmental
donors and local formal and informal authorities, and NGOs/CSOs them-
selves sometimes passively accept to become state partners in externalisation.
However, even on land, there is still some leeway for NGOs/CSOs who are
more critical of externalisation to intendedly carry out anti-externalisation
activities. The sea dimension is more complex, and the potential of its fluid
nature is exploited by both governmental authorities trying to implement
externalisation and more critical non-governmental actors trying to oppose
it, with some search and rescue (SAR) NGOs engaged in what can be called
“counter-externalisation”. By “counter-externalisation” I mean an anti-
externalisation that is not only intended – as opposed to unintended anti-
externalisation – but also consists in an equal and opposite reaction to
externalisation. It is a non-governmental externalised direct action against
governmental externalisation that resorts to the same specificities of the spatial
context of which externalisation policies take advantage.

The paper further explores the potential of delocalised non-governmental
action to support everyone’s right to mobility through practices of “counter-
delocalisation”. With this term I refer to transnational, transborder and de-
territorialised practices of intended anti-externalisation echoing governmental
ones aimed at externalisation. Finally, the paper illuminates connections
between anti-externalisation activities on land and at sea, following
a trajectory approach (Schwarz 2020) that adapts to the itinerant scale of the
route.

By focusing on NGOs/CSOs, and by situating the research along the
heterogeneous border continuum of the route, the paper also echoes recent
invitations to de-centre the analysis of migration-related agency and spatial
dynamics from state-centric (if not Euro-centric) perspectives
(Triandafyllidou 2020; Zardo and Wolff 2021; see also Rumford 2006).

While mainly focusing on Libya and the space of the sea, the paper also
refers to NGOs/CSOs in two other countries of the Central Mediterranean
route: Tunisia and Egypt.

The paper builds on two decades (2002–2021) of archival research on
(externalised) migration and border management in the Mediterranean, and
is further informed by multiple fieldwork sessions carried out in Italy, Malta,
Tunisia and Egypt between 2004 and 2020, also including interviews with
NGOs/CSOs and other stakeholders. Interviews on the work of NGOs/CSOs
in different environments were carried out in different periods: 2015–2016
(SAR at sea), 2016 (Tunisia), 2017 (Egypt), 2020 (Libya). To protect the
privacy and safety of the interviewees and their organisations, reported
speeches have been reduced to a minimum and anonymised.²

The next section embeds the research in the itinerant scale of the route, seen
as a mobile, flexible, areal spatial configuration in which NGOs/CSOs may
contribute to both bordering and de-bordering dynamics, supporting as well
as opposing externalisation. Examples of relevant practices are presented in the following four sections. The first provides an overview of migration-related activities carried out by NGOs/CSOs on land and at sea, showing how these may end up supporting – also depending on the place-specific contingencies – European externalisation logics. The second shows that some NGOs/CSOs deliberately try to get in the way of European externalisation through anti-externalisation activities on land, whose effects may also reverberate on the sea surface. The third and fourth sections focus on the maritime dimension, and introduce counter-externalisation (resulting from non-governmental SAR activism) and counter-delocalisation (resulting from trans-border networks of volunteers) as specific forms of anti-externalisation.

Spaces and Routes

The nascent literature on the relationship between NGOs/CSOs and externalisation has focused on specific state territories, such as Mauritania (Poutignat and Streiff-Fénart 2010), Senegal (Rodriguez 2019), Morocco (Gazzotti 2021), Tunisia (Cuttitta 2020; Dini and Giusa 2020; Roman 2019) and Egypt (Cuttitta 2020). However, externalisation is part of a broader strategy of migration and border management that increasingly relies on more complex and encompassing spatial configurations. Loyd and Mountz (2014, 36) note that “[o]ver the past thirty years, the regional scale has been created as a potential means of regulating human mobility, due to the inability of individual nation states to control migration”. Consequently, the EU has established multilateral initiatives with different countries of origin and transit, rather than focusing only on bilateral relations (Gabrielli 2016). The spatial configuration of the region, however, always refers to, or is at least strongly reminiscent of, an idea of fixed areal boundedness, of closed territoriality, whereas externalisation also turns to more flexible and dynamic strategies, to more relational and fluid concepts of territory and scale (Novak 2011). Recent literature has shed light on how the efforts of territorial state actors to manage migration increasingly focus on more informal, blurred and elusive spatial configurations, such as routes (Casas-Cortés et al. 2017) and corridors (Ciabarri 2014; Kasperek 2016). These configurations better reflect the fragmented and unpredictable nature of migrants’ journeys and trajectories (Collyer 2007; Schwarz 2020) across those fragmented spaces resulting from “networked socio-technical practices” (Painter 2010, 1093) and relations.

Migrants, who are confronted with different mobility regimes along their journeys, “often find ways to (temporarily) escape, circumvent or invert the logics of a particular system to their own likings” (Schapendonk et al. 2020, 213). Scholars have consequently suggested to adopt a “trajectory approach” to better “understand the interplay between migrant im/mobilities and the various mobility regimes that affect them” (Schwarz 2020, 223). Such an
approach is also increasingly adopted by control actors to adapt and react to migrants’ tactics, in order to better trace, intercept, immobilise, decelerate and manage the latter’s mobility. From the control perspective, the route then appears as complementary to the region (Cobarrubias 2020), insofar as each route is conceived of as linearly cutting across the borders of different countries, thus connecting different components within a region, and expressing motion instead of immobility. The route, then, is an additional scale that is not fixed but itinerant (Cobarrubias 2020). Despite its imaginary as a line, it is always an area, albeit an elusive one, whose contours are mobile and never clear-cut.

The “Central Mediterranean route”, according to the definition of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency Frontex, is not a single, linear route. Indeed, following Frontex’ Euro-centric perspective based on the geographical position of landing countries (Italy and Malta), it is an assemblage of ever-changing routes originating from or transiting through different countries of embarkation (Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Turkey). Moreover, the sea-crossing is – at least for those who are not nationals of the country of embarkation – just an additional segment of multiple and diverse routes converging to North Africa from different countries and continents. In sum, people arriving to Europe via the Central Mediterranean route cross different land and sea territories, different legal, political and geographical partitions. On land, they cross (multiple) state borders, and, within these, further (and sometimes blurred and/or shifting) ones between areas subjected to formal and/or informal local authorities (e.g. municipalities, tribes, militias, fighting parties). At sea, they cross legal partitions such as national waters, contiguous zones, international waters, and SAR regions. The relevant spatial units fall under different (and sometimes overlapping) legal regimes, as well as political (state and non-state) powers. Consequently, people on the move may also encounter different actors (public authorities, private security firms, traffickers etc.) trying to arrest, control or exploit them, as well as other actors, such as IOs and NGOs/CSOs, each with their different aims and motivations.

Thus, not only is the route an itinerant scale (Cobarrubias 2020), but it also makes border assemblages emerge that, just like the route, are themselves itinerant (Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2016), shifting and ever-changing. This paper shows how specific actors and dynamics within such border assemblages, namely NGOs/CSOs and their networked relations and practices, may also act against governmental policies, by opposing or impeding – rather than supporting – externalised control through practices of what this paper calls anti-externalisation, including variants such as counter-externalisation and counter-delocalisation. Not only are all of these practices to some extent place-dependent, insofar as they adapt to the specific characteristics of the legal and socio-political environment. Some of them are also itinerant, adapting to the mobile scale of the route.
Surely, the fact that NGOs/CSOs may oppose externalisation doesn’t mean NGOs/CSOs are anti-externalisation agents by default. On the contrary, the next section shows that their activities may – intendedly or unintendedly – support European externalisation, depending on their values and motivations, as well as on where activities are carried out.

**Supporting Externalisation on Land and at Sea**

Conditions for NGOs/CSOs to carry out migration-related activities change depending on where NGOs/CSOs’ tasks are performed. Spatial variables play a role at different scales. On land or at sea, in the territory of one or another country, in detention centres (DCs) or the NGOs/CSOs’ premises, in urban or rural areas, in national or international waters, in the Libyan, Tunisian, Maltese or Italian SAR region, opportunities for NGOs/CSOs to act – and to act according to their convictions – may vary significantly.

Of course, other variables may have an impact on the likelihood of NGOs/CSOs’ migration-related activities to support or oppose externalisation. A crucial one is the source of funding, insofar as donors may to some extent determine the way their money is actually spent. NGOs/CSOs, indeed, are often inclined to comply with their donors’ wishes, as they are eager to secure funding for their self-perpetuation in the first place. Importantly, the overwhelming majority of the migration-related activities carried out by international NGOs (I-NGOs) in North African countries are funded by the EU, (mainly European) governments of the Global North, or IOs such as IOM (International Organization for Migration) and UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), whereby the IOs’ main donors, again, are the EU and (mainly European) governments of the Global North.

Last but not least come the NGOs’ intentions, their motivations, their more or less political and critical (or supportive) attitude towards the extant border regime. While many organisations believe in the political neutrality of their (humanitarian) activities, others openly condemn governmental externalisation policies, and some go as far as to defy them with their practices, as shown in the next sections. The case of Generation Identity, instead, shows that civil society actors can also deliberately provide support to externalised migration control. Generation Identity is a far-right European international civil society initiative that chartered a vessel to patrol the Central Mediterranean in 2017, trying to hamper SAR NGOs while supporting the Libyan Coast Guard to facilitate pull-backs to Libya. In the end, it only conducted one short mission with very little to no success at all (Cusumano 2022). While this is the only example of what could be called intended support to externalisation along the Central Mediterranean route, unintended support to externalisation can be observed in many cases both on land and at sea.
On land, NGOs/CSOs’ engage in a number of activities that are likely to serve the logic of externalisation. Assisted voluntary return schemes in transit countries clearly aim at keeping people away from Europe by facilitating repatriations. In the last decade, in Libya alone, NGOs/CSOs such as the Italian CIR and the Libyan IOCEA have participated in such projects. From the perspective of European governmental donors, awareness campaigns providing (would-be) migrants with information on the feasibility of their migratory projects, on the opportunities of regular and the consequences of irregular migration, are also meant to discourage people from embarking on or continuing a journey to Europe. In Tunisia and Egypt, a number of (mainly local) NGOs/CSOs have engaged in such projects. In Libya, where such activities are not carried out, the main focus being on emergency, several representatives of local NGOs/CSOs expressed the wish to engage in awareness campaigns in the future. Indeed, while this paper mainly focuses on I-NGOs, it is worth noting that local NGOs/CSOs may also become key in externalisation dynamics. EU-funded professionalisation projects, for example, aim to provide the nascent Libyan civil society with the necessary know-how to compete in the global marketplace of international cooperation (Cuttitta Under review), with a view to co-opt local NGOs/CSOs (Bürkner and Scott 2019) into the mechanisms of “soft externalisation”. Externalisation thus impacts not only on the presence of I-NGOs (only three of the around twenty I-NGOs working in Libya in 2020 were not dealing with migration) but also on the development of the nascent local civil society. Pursuing this line of inquiry further would shed light on the place-transforming dynamics of externalisation. Indeed, places do not only impact on the forms in which externalisation manifest itself: they are also transformed by those.

NGOs/CSOs are also involved in projects for the economic and cultural integration of foreign migrants (notably those recognised as refugees) in North African countries (notably Tunisia and Egypt, as the unstable socio-political framework does not seem to allow for NGOs/CSOs in Libya to go much beyond humanitarian, emergency activities). Livelihood initiatives include micro-credit projects aimed at supporting start-ups, while other programmes aim at facilitating connections between migrants and the local population through courses and activities in fields such as handicraft, theatre, music etc. Governmental donors are arguably inspired by the logic of externalised containment when funding these schemes, in so far as work and opportunities to live a decent life and feel at home are supposed to divert people from the idea of continuing their journey towards Europe.

Even healthcare and legal advice have at least an indirect relationship with externalisation. Relevant projects managed by NGOs/CSOs in North African countries reveal that legal advice is limited to supporting legalistic understandings of human rights (Perolini Forthcoming), which only foster those rights codified by states (the right to life, to healthcare, to asylum and to return
to one’s own country), and only insofar as they do not put the extant externalised border regime into question (see Stock 2021 for Morocco). For example, the work of asylum-related NGOs/CSOs typically sees the host country as one where appropriate protection should be granted to asylum-seekers, so that these are not tempted to continue their journey to Europe, whereas the latter’s externalisation policies are not questioned (Dini and Giusa 2020, 69–84). Healthcare is often provided only partially, and under conditions dictated by local formal (e.g., governments) and informal (e.g., militias) powers that are the European authorities’ partners in externalisation. As a result, NGOs/CSOs may limit themselves to provide a humanitarian fig leaf for externalisation policies that force people to remain in countries where they are exposed to all sorts of abuses (see also Gazzotti 2021 for Morocco).

Specific local contexts may be more or less apt to avoid complicity with externalisation policies: for example, Libyan DCs are contested places, that not only serve the interests of European externalisation by stopping or decelerating migrants’ mobility (Tsianos and Karakayali 2010), but also subject migrants to the economic exploitation of local formal and informal authorities, including militias, smugglers and traffickers (Achtnich 2022; Malakooti 2019). Access to (certain categories of) detainees or certain areas is often limited by DC managers who prefer to avoid interferences in “domestic affairs”. In 2019, the Libya I-NGO Forum (the network of I-NGOs working in Libya) adopted non-binding guidelines stating that activities in DCs should be limited to life-saving. This came also as a response to a series of short-term projects funded by the Italian government in Libyan DCs and implemented by a number of Italian NGOs. These projects were harshly criticised. First, in Italy, where there was a call for NGOs to boycott the Italian development agency’s tender as a protest against externalisation policies: at that time, in 2017, the Italian government was concluding agreements with Libyan militias, and criminalising SAR NGOs operating at sea, while the very limited budget and duration of the projects, and the fact that actions were to be carried out in DCs controlled by militias, suggested that the initiative was just humanitarian window-dressing for inhuman externalisation policies. Then, when the projects started (ten Italian NGOs didn’t boycott the tender and were granted funding), they were criticised by the international community in Libya for not respecting humanitarian principles. As a representative of a European governmental donor told me, NGOs were “just implementing blindly the politics of the Italian government”. Some did not coordinate with the other actors, thus causing duplications and overlaps; others hired former guards of the DCs; some, instead of distributing hygiene kits directly to the detainees, gave them to the managers of the DC, who sold them on to third parties; others, again, went as far as to instal new gates and fences in the centres (ASGI 2020), thus turning from humanitarian actors to externalised border security agents.
The Italian government’s projects in Libyan DCs are a clear example of NGOs bowing to the logic of externalised migration containment. Countries such as Libya, and specific places such as DCs, show the entanglement of externalised care with externalised control in given spatial contexts. More broadly, most – if not all – NGOs/CSOs operating on land in the countries of the Central Mediterranean route are arguably complicit, at least to some extent, with European externalisation. They only have little leeway because of limitations imposed on them by donors as well as the local contexts, where migrants are seen as exploitable subjects in the first place. Libyan authorities, for example, are long known for their racist sentiments, policies and practices towards migrants (Jacques 2013; UNSMIL and OHCHR 2018), as well as for suspecting foreign actors – including I-NGOs – of supporting their domestic opponents. Surely, such local contexts are not ideal for (soft) externalisation, insofar as they do not facilitate the establishment of an environment in which refugees are granted appropriate protection and foreign citizens are given opportunities to successfully integrate, and consequently give up any plan to travel further to Europe. As a donor told me, “if you go to Libya, […] and say we want to come here to support migrants, they will slam the door in your face!”. However, precisely because any initiative aimed at empowering migrants is hardly tolerated, these contexts are also problematic for NGOs/CSOs (especially international ones) that aim to support migrants against externalisation.

As opposed to the variety of activities carried out on land, NGOs/CSOs operating at sea are only known for their SAR-related engagement. As long as the rescued can be brought to Europe, NGOs/CSOs arguably act against externalisation: as shown in the section on counter-externalisation, they avoid that people die at sea, as a side effect of externalisation, or prevent them from being rescued by other actors, such as Libyan or Tunisian authorities, and forcibly returned to North Africa, as a direct effect of externalisation. However, even in the period 2014–2016, when operational cooperation between Italian authorities and SAR NGOs was at its highest peak, more principled SAR NGOs were asking themselves whether they were legitimating externalised migration control, by relieving states from their responsibilities and allowing their vessels to focus on border enforcement rather than SAR (Cuttitta 2018; Stierl 2018). Such risk became even more apparent when the NGO MOAS (Migrant Offshore Aid Station), which was using drones donated by the constructor Schiebel to search migrant boats in distress, allowed Libyan Navy officials to board its vessel and test the drones, as the EU-backed Libyan government was considering purchasing them (Ludwig 2016) in order to intercept migrants and pull them back to Libya.

Two years later, on 17 August 2018, when the attitude of European authorities towards SAR NGOs had already changed, five Tunisian citizens were rescued in international waters by the Aquarius, a vessel operated by the NGO
SOS Méditerranée. The Aquarius contacted the Italian MRCC but found that all European ports were closed, while a Tunisian patrol boat arrived on scene, asking for the handover of the rescued. The NGO didn’t dare to challenge the legally dubious prohibition to enter European waters. Instead, it sought “guidance from UNHCR” (SOS Méditerranée 2018) and accepted that the rescued have individual remote interviews with a representative of the UN refugee agency. The interviews convinced the five Tunisians that applying for asylum would not be a good idea, so they accepted a “voluntary” repatriation. Consequently, the Aquarius entered Tunisian waters and handed them over to the Tunisian Navy. Ironically, an NGO that one year earlier had been accused by the then vice-president of the Italian Camera dei Deputati of providing “taxi services” to Europe and acting in the interest of smugglers (Santoni 2017) was thus forced to provide “repatriation services” to Africa in the interest of European authorities, acting as an externalised border guard against its will.

This section has provided examples of NGOs/CSOs supporting externalisation on land as well as at sea. It has shown that in both contexts organisations mostly act in a grey zone where it is difficult to completely avoid complicity with European externalisation policies, even if this is their aim.

**Anti-Externalisation**

NGOs/CSOs are aware of the risks of supporting restrictive and inhuman externalisation policies, and some sincerely struggle to strike a balance between such risks and their aim to provide independent support to migrants. The previous section has shown that spatial variables at different scales – from the host country to the facility where services are provided – play a role in limiting the NGOs/CSOs’ scope of action in this sense. This section shows how NGOs/CSOs’ activities can instead actively oppose externalisation through what I call intended anti-externalisation.

Anti-externalisation includes any act producing effects contrary to those envisaged by externalising actors. In some cases, anti-externalisation may be just an inadvertent side-effect of NGOs/CSOs’ activities. Cultural and economic integration, for instance, may end up providing people with the material and immaterial resources required for embarking on a sea-crossing, even if this is not the aim of the NGOs/CSOs managing the relevant schemes. This was the case of some projects that should have helped migrants set up economic activities to better integrate in Tunisia. The beneficiaries sold the equipment they should have used to start an enterprise, and used the money to take the next boat to Sicily instead.

Other cases show that NGOs/CSOs may deliberately carry out their activities in such a way that containment is not the only possible outcome. As regards awareness campaigns, for example, representatives of NGOs/CSOs in Tunisia and Egypt told me that the aim of their information activities is to
empower people by showing them the entire picture, including not only the risks and hardships but also the entitlements and opportunities that come with an irregular journey, so they can take their own decision. A decision to attempt the sea-crossing, then, would not be an unintended outcome of NGOs/CSOs’ activities (Novak 2013). In this case NGOs/CSOs act as neutral players, taking into account that their activities may result in either support or opposition to externalisation aims.

The main focus of this section is a third category of actions: those carried out by NGOs/CSOs with the (sometimes even declared) intention to get in the way of European externalisation or specific aspects thereof. Hereafter I bring some examples of such “intended anti-externalisation”.

The first shows that intended anti-externalisation is also possible on land, when acting in a territory subjected to the sovereign authority of a state, and even within projects funded by European governmental sources and carried out in cooperation with IOs. Such a context arguably limits the possibilities for any significant action against the established border regime, but it doesn’t entirely exclude them. CIR (Consiglio Italiano per i Rifugiati– Italian Refugee Council) is tasked with assisting refugees and asylum seekers, and was the first and only foreign NGO ever allowed to work in Gaddafi’s Libya, in 2009. In cooperation with UNHCR, CIR provided assistance to people held in Libyan DCs. Being there allowed CIR representatives to play a crucial role in an initiative that dealt a heavy blow to European externalisation policies. In May 2009, immediately after CIR opened its Tripoli office, the Italian government launched a maritime push-back campaign by intercepting people in international waters and forcibly returning them to Libya. CIR representatives in Libya were able to collect the signatures of some of the returned. Twenty-four Somali and Eritrean nationals could thus file an application with the European Court of Human Rights. In 2012, in the Hirsi case, the court condemned Italy and declared that push-back practice unlawful, posing a significant challenge to European externalisation. Importantly, while CIR is an asylum organisation, specifically mandated to support refugees and asylum seekers (not migrants in general), its action in this case was beneficial to anyone embarking on a sea-crossing, since on the high seas the principle of non-refoulement, which according to international law prohibits forced returns, is applicable to anybody, including each and every passenger of any boat. The sea route was thus made viable for all. This shows that NGOs/CSOs’ activities on land may have an immediate impact not just on the stationary dimension of people’s lives in the place where the activities are carried out, as is typically the case of healthcare, but also on the dynamic dimension of people’s movement on route to Europe. The trajectory approach of stationary, land-based non-governmental action follows migrants’ mobile agency across the land-sea border, thus merging the two different spatial contexts – the terrestrial and the maritime – into the itinerant dimension of the route.
Another, slightly different example of the possibility for NGOs/CSOs to act according to a route perspective against European externalisation is the engagement of MSF (Médecins sans frontières – Doctors without borders) on land and at sea. The international medical NGO has provided healthcare for migrants in Libya since 2011 and carried out SAR at sea since 2015. Importantly, MSF only funds these activities through private donations, thus maintaining a certain degree of independence from state actors. While this is also the case of most other NGOs engaged in SAR at sea, all the other I-NGOs working in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt receive funding from governmental sources. SAR activities became a way for MSF to play the watchdog role on the high seas, and gain visibility as a legitimate actor in the migration field, in order to denounce the deadly EU border regime and call for safe pathways to Europe (Cuttitta 2018; Stierl 2018). Importantly, the specific knowledge about migration and border control issues which allows MSF to raise its voice against European externalisation policies largely stems from the work carried out by the NGO in Libya, where MSF provides healthcare at some disembarkation points (where migrants intercepted at sea are returned by the Libyan Coast Guard), in a number of DCs, as well as in more informal settings such as a privately run “safe house” for victims of traffickers. Besides being the only I-NGO working in Libya only on private donations (and, arguably, precisely because of this), MSF is also the only I-NGO in Libya that dares to speak out, denouncing the situation of migrants in and outside detention in Libya, as well as Europe’s responsibilities for these. This is done both through public reports and within the closed circle of the international humanitarian community in Libya, including governmental donors, IOs and the other NGOs/CSOs, as several representatives of all these actors told me. SAR activities at sea have given MSF much more visibility in Europe, allowing the NGO’s critical voice against the atrocities of the externalised EU-border regime in Libya to reach a much wider audience.

There is an important difference between CIR and MSF – the two NGOs whose activities have been presented in this section as examples of intended anti-externalisation, as well as of the merging of the land and sea dimension into that of the route. CIR, aside from the Hirsi case, has mostly been engaged, like most I-NGOs operating in Libya, in activities that didn’t directly question the extant externalised border regime, including repatriation schemes and the projects in Libyan DCs funded by the Italian government. MSF is closer to a category of more politically engaged NGOs/CSOs instead. These only carry out activities born out of the will to develop counter hegemonic (Delgado Wise 2020), disobedient (Heller, Pezzani, and Stierl 2017) or even subversive (Vandevoordt 2019) practices and discourses that repoliticise (Cuttitta 2018) border management, effectively opposing externalisation. This is exemplified by some NGOs/CSOs engaged in SAR-related activities, as shown in the next two sections.
Counter-Externalisation: SAR NGOs

This section looks at the anti-externalisation work carried out in the Central Mediterranean by some SAR NGOs that do not simply define themselves as humanitarian but also as political actors engaged against the restrictive governmental border regime. To stress the specific nature of such anti-externalisation initiatives, I put forward the notion of counter-externalisation. Inspired by concepts such as Counter-Reformation, counter-revolution, counter-information etc., it suggests an equal and opposite reaction, meaning that the actions taken against externalisation do not limit themselves to produce effects contrary to externalisation but are themselves externalised (see also Mann and Mourão 2022). Of course, NGOs/CSOs, unlike states, have no territories and no borders that can be externalised. Counter-externalisation, however, consists of activities organised and coordinated from a centralised base, located in a given territory, and practically carried out in an external setting (international waters). More particularly, counter-externalisation resorts to the same arsenal of place-specific externalisation instruments that are made available to governmental actors by the maritime environment. It has been noted that European authorities, in externalising their borders, have constructed the sea as an “empty” space to shirk responsibilities for border deaths and forced returns (Bigo 2015; Schindel 2022). Indeed, because of the many gaps and uncertainties in international law (Fink and Gombeer 2018), as well as the lack of an effective judicial system for most of the cases that may arise, legal accountability in international waters remains difficult to ascertain. Political accountability also remains obscure because of the lack of visibility of the fluid space of the sea. These factors facilitate “sovereignty games” (Gammeltoft-Hansen 2016) and contribute to the “interstitiality” (Lutterbeck 2019) of this space. Externalisation based on the specificities of the maritime space has triggered an equal and opposite reaction from SAR NGOs. These try to disrupt the construction of the sea as mare nullius (Mainwaring and DeBono 2021) and turn the characteristics of the maritime dimension to their own advantage, through practices such as those described below.

SAR practices in the Central Mediterranean have experienced significant transformations in the last decade: first, because of the emergence of SAR NGOs since 2014; then, because of the changed attitude of state authorities towards those. In the years following the European Court of Human Rights’ judgement in the Hirsi case, especially after the unprecedented sensation caused by the Lampedusa shipwreck of October 2013, and in light of the difficult situation in Libya that made an effective management of that country’s sea borders impossible, the Italian and European authorities accepted the principle that people making it to international waters must be disembarked in Europe. Italy even launched a military mission officially
tasked with SAR, Operation Mare Nostrum (2013–2014), and took over the responsibility to disembark in its territory people rescued not only in the Italian but also in the Maltese and, more importantly, the would-be Libyan SAR region. The latter existed only in theory as it had never been declared by Libya, given the non-existence of an effective Libyan MRCC (Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre), which is a pre-requisite for any country to declare its SAR region. Things started changing in late 2016: the European and Italian authorities gradually limited the geographical scope of their patrolling activities, leaving the would-be Libyan SAR region unattended, and started training the Libyan Coast Guard. The latter, in turn, started assaulting NGO vessels operating in the would-be Libyan SAR region. In the following years, Italy and Libya signed a new cooperation agreement in 2017, and the European and Italian authorities launched a political offensive against SAR NGOs, accusing them of facilitating irregular migration. Externalisation stretched the EU border as far as across the Atlantic Ocean when diplomatic pressure reportedly convinced the Panamanian government to de-flag the Aquarius (Kelly 2018). The NGO vessel had been previously de-flagged by the UK already, and had to give up SAR for months before it found another flag state. Legal proceedings – both criminal and administrative – were also initiated against NGOs in order to prevent their vessels from carrying out SAR missions (Cusumano and Villa 2021). Many gave up and left the Mediterranean when the Italian government required them to sign a dubious code of conduct in 2017 (Cusumano 2019; Mussi 2017), others left after the following Italian government declared Italian ports “closed” for NGO vessels. Others, again, remained, or came back after the two most recent Italian governments (appointed in September 2019 and February 2021, respectively) adopted a slightly more open policy, by lifting the harshest sanctions and the ban to enter Italian ports, while still imposing long waiting times at sea and subjecting NGO vessels to administrative harassment in order to block them on land and prevent them from carrying out SAR (Linardi 2021). Meanwhile, the Libyan Coast Guard has been increasingly active in patrolling international waters and carrying out interceptions disguised as SAR operations (Moreno-Lax 2018). This resulted in the forced return of a growing number of people to Libya, especially after Libya declared its SAR region in 2018, despite its MRCC still not being in line with the required international standards (Santer 2019). Libyan authorities also keep harassing and threatening NGO vessels that lawfully cruise its purported SAR region (Sanderson 2021).

Not only does the Libyan Coast Guard use patrol boats donated by Italy, but it is also regularly informed by European authorities about migrant boats spotted by Frontex’ reconnaissance airplanes or drones, which systematically ignore nearby NGO vessels (Sea-Watch 2021c). Moreover, some pull-backs operated by Libyan authorities have been coordinated by Italian navy ships
stationed in Tripoli, while others have been unlawfully carried out from the Maltese SAR region (Sea-Watch 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

The space of the sea has thus become one of intensified externalisation, only opposed by a handful of NGOs. These keep patrolling the area close to Libyan waters and refuse to bring rescued people back to North Africa or hand them over to non-European authorities. Sticking to these principles can be very challenging. Indeed, the case of the Aquarius and the five Tunisian citizens (described in a previous section) shows that SAR NGOs, despite their best intentions, can end up supporting externalisation precisely because of the fluid nature of the maritime space. On other occasions, other SAR NGO vessels, as opposed to the Aquarius, courageously resisted at sea, after being denied entry into Italian or Maltese waters, until a solution for disembarkation in Europe was found, or even forced the blockade imposed by the authorities and entered Italian ports. The most famous case was that of the Sea-Watch 3: the vessel of the German NGO Sea-Watch, after being blocked at sea with 59 people onboard for two weeks, decided to enter Italian waters, and then dock in Lampedusa, after further two days, on 29 June 2019. This was done in violation of the prohibition to enter Italian waters imposed by the Italian government and despite the attempts of a Guardia di Finanza ship to physically prevent the Sea-Watch 3 from entering the port. The captain was first arrested, then released, and the Italian highest court confirmed – against the public prosecutor’s appeal – that the Italian government’s prohibition to enter Italian waters and disembark the rescued was against international law (Di Bari and Masera 2020).

Sea-Watch was conceived from the beginning as a political, not just humanitarian project (Cuttitta 2018), and this is also the case of other non-governmental SAR initiatives. One of these is Mediterranea (Mezzadra 2020), which defines itself as a non-governmental action, more than organisation. Mediterranea is also exemplary of the attitude of civil disobedience towards unjust and unlawful authorities’ policies and practices. In May 2019 its ship Mare Jonio rescued 30 people in the purported Libyan SAR region but “refused any contact with the Libyan authorities and disobeyed orders from the Italian Ministry of the Interior to hand over those survivors to the so-called Libyan Coast Guard […]. Instead, the Mare Jonio sailed north, disembarking all 30 rescued people […] in […] Lampedusa” (Mediterranea 2021). The ship was confiscated for two months, and investigations against the captain and the head of mission were opened. Over two years later, the public prosecutor himself finally asked the judge to acquit the accused from all charges, including not only aiding and abetting illegal immigration but also carrying out SAR without the relevant certifications from the Italian authorities, which has been the illogical foundation for part of the administrative harassment SAR NGOs have been subjected to in recent years.
These cases show that “on occasion, it is by breaking the law and taking action to protect human rights, that the law in turn is transformed” (Costello and Mann 2020, 333). The legal geographies of the Mediterranean, indeed, while conditioning the work of SAR NGOs, also provide opportunities (DeBono and Mainwaring 2020) for them to pursue their anti-externalisation goals. This tactic of simultaneously evading and engaging the law to facilitate border crossing has been to some extent studied in the context of the US-Mexico land border (Cook 2011, 586). There, NGOs/CSOs provide itinerant “escape aid” (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020) by placing water jugs in the desert (Johnson 2015; Williams 2016). The desert confronts travellers with environmental challenges comparable with those posed by the sea, but, unlike international waters, is still a territory subjected to state sovereignty, and thus to the relevant legal and political constraints. Non-governmental international legal direct action on the high seas (Megret 2020) is still understudied, especially in its relationship with human mobility.

At the time of writing, SAR NGO vessels keep carrying out their counter-externalisation activities in the Central Mediterranean by preventing unlawful forced returns by the Libyan Coast Guard and spending weeks at sea waiting for the Italian authorities to assign them a port of safety. At the end of July 2021, the Sea-Watch 3 could rescue and bring 33 people to Italy who had nearly been caught by a Libyan Coast Guard vessel that would have pulled them back to Libya (Sea-Watch 2021d). When they are unable to prevent them, NGO vessels document and denounce the pull-backs, as well as the responsibilities of Italian, Maltese and European authorities in coordinating these.

In doing this, an important role is played by the reconnaissance airplanes deployed by two NGOs. The Seabird and the Moonbird (both managed by Sea-Watch), as well as the Colibri (managed by Pilotes Volontaires), document and report distress cases as well as human rights violations such as forced returns. They contribute to saving lives as well as to preventing abuses, when they alert NGO vessels and these manage to be faster than the Libyan Coast Guard in reaching the distress place and rescuing the passengers, as was the case on 12 February 2021 (Sea-Watch 2021c). Air assets have the advantage of being able to fly over the purported Libyan SAR region without being harassed by the Libyan authorities, and also to spot vessels in Libyan national waters, which allows for an early monitoring of their route. Thus, the inclusion of the air dimension in NGOs/CSOs’ activities is a response to the challenges posed by the specificities of the maritime dimension, most notably the fact that these specificities allow for the European authorities to outsource patrolling activities and forced returns to Libyan ones, as well as for the latter to keep unlawfully harassing NGO vessels in their SAR region, to say nothing of national waters.
This section has shown that some SAR NGOs carry out their intended anti-externalisation activities in a way that is an equal and opposite reaction to specific externalisation moves. First, they resort to legal arguments to claim that people intercepted at sea have the right to get to Europe. Then, against governmental counter-claims that the Libyans should be free to manage their own SAR region, while each coastal country, including Italy and Malta, is free to impose “codes of conduct” and decide who may enter their territorial waters and ports, SAR NGOs insist that priority should be given to the most basic principles of international (maritime) law, such as the freedom of navigation (against the assaults of Libyan authorities on their ships), the duty to rescue and the obligation to disembark rescued people in a port of safety. In any case, they do not limit themselves to making claims and counter-claims but take direct action accordingly, namely in the externalised space of international waters. If the space of the sea can become a privileged ground for externalisation precisely because of its specificities, then what SAR NGOs do can be understood as a counter-externalisation of sorts, insofar as NGOs resort to the very same specificities of the maritime dimension. In sum, the maritime dimension clearly shows that specific spatial environments may condition, transform, support or hinder externalisation as well as its opposing forces.

**Counter-Delocalisation: The Alarm-Phone**

SAR NGOs with their air and sea assets are not the only initiatives supporting migrants during the sea-crossing. People in distress can also call the Alarm Phone, an international hotline set up by a group of volunteers in 2014, following incidents in which non-assistance and delayed assistance from Italian and Maltese authorities resulted in mass casualties (Stierl 2016).

The Alarm Phone’s activities may be seen as a specific variant of “intended anti-externalisation” that slightly differs from “counter-externalisation”. I call this variant “counter-delocalisation”. The term “delocalisation” has often been used as a synonym for externalisation or an umbrella term for any inward or outward shifting of border manifestations (Salter 2006; Walters 2006). Compared to “externalisation” and “internalisation”, “delocalisation” has the advantage of not taking “a univocal perspective implying a clear-cut spatial dynamic (i.e. outward or inward)” (Cuttitta 2020, 7), thus also leaving the question of “who borders?” (Rumford 2006) open. Thus, “delocalisation” might be more apt to explain border dynamics from global, transnational rather than national perspectives, in contexts that make it difficult or even impossible to identify a sole territorial actor of externalisation, and a specific place from where borders are univocally externalised. While counter-externalisation activities can be seen as being carried out in an external setting, and thus externalised (as suggested in the previous section), the Alarm Phone’s activities are both coordinated from and practically carried out in multiple
locations in different territories, far away from where the beneficiaries (people in distress at sea) find themselves. In this sense, they are delocalised rather than externalised.

The Alarm Phone, indeed, is “a transborder and multilingual collective composed of about two hundred activists situated in more than a dozen countries on both sides of the Mediterranean” (Schwarz and Stierl 2019, 662) “who fight against the European border regime”, demanding “safe passages to Europe and freedom of movement for everyone” (Phone 2017). Volunteers based in different countries are able to answer calls in different languages, exchange information with the passengers in distress, upload credit onto their satellite phones online (Stierl 2016, 573), so they can keep communicating, as well as pass on information to authorities and the media. While the Alarm Phone invites to call the Coast Guard numbers first, its volunteers are sometimes the first to be contacted by boat passengers in distress or by the migrants’ relatives or friends who have had no news from their loved ones (Stierl and Dadusc 2021). In these cases, the volunteers inform the relevant Coast Guard authorities and start monitoring the situation.

At the same time, the Alarm Phone makes sure that civilian assets close to the distress case are informed, so they can intervene if able to avoid loss of life or unlawful forced returns. This is important at a time when European and North African MRCCs refrain from informing NGO vessels of distress cases (Sea-Watch 2021c) – they do not even send out NAVTEX messages, that are received automatically by all nearby vessels, any more (Nicolosi 2019; Tonacci 2018) – and limit themselves to contact the Libyan authorities in order to facilitate pull-backs. In several cases the Alarm Phone’s involvement allowed for people to be eventually rescued by SAR NGO ships and brought to Europe, which prevented forced returns by the Libyan authorities (Phone 2021; Sea-Watch 2021a, 2021b; Stierl and Kopp 2019, 54). Thus, the Alarm Phone and the cooperating SAR NGOs have de facto established a parallel, informal and transnational MRCC countering the externalisation trends of governmental MRCCs. This is made possible by the combination between the specificities of the space of the sea and the deterritorialised dimension of the Alarm Phone team.

The Alarm Phone “combines real-time interventions with critical documentation and public outreach” (Phone 2019) by denouncing delays by European and non-European governmental authorities in launching rescue operations, and, more broadly, any failure of governmental or even private (e.g. commercial vessels) actors in complying with international law in the SAR field, e.g. by pushing back people to countries that are not safe, such as Libya, by delegating other actors to do so, or by knowingly endangering lives during purported SAR operations (this has been often the case of interceptions and forced returns carried out by the Libyan Coast Guard, during which Libyan officials have fired shots onto migrant boats or otherwise put the
passengers’ safety into peril). Thus, the Alarm Phone seeks “to counter sovereign impunity and the reactivation of the Mediterranean as a lawless space”, and its politics can be conceived of “as an embodiment of international (counter-)citizenship” (Stierl 2016, 572).

It is the transnational and transborder – if not itinerant but rather sedentary – nature of the Alarm Phone that allows to monitor the migrants’ itinerancy from the moment the contact is established, to follow their travel trajectories with the aim to prevent not only casualties at sea but also externalised (and unlawful) forced returns from international waters, or at least to document and denounce them. The Alarm Phone thus responds to the increasing delocalisation of European border manifestations aimed at the preventive containment of migration movements with a similar, specular counter-delocalisation tactic. Namely the Alarm Phone delocalises its intervention by making it independent from the places where controls are carried out, but still closely linked to the trajectories of migrants’ journeys, which are constantly monitored as far as possible. Governmental remote control (Zaiotti 2016; Zolberg 2003) of migrants is thus countered through non-governmental remote support.

If externalisation strongly relies on a deterritorialised network of professionals (Bigo 2002; Feldman 2012) that share a common framework of standardised knowledge, the Alarm Phone, and its alliance with politically engaged NGOs such as Sea-Watch, counters this process through a deterritorialised network of volunteers who share a common will to oppose externalisation and develop appropriate tools and actions to this end.

**Conclusions**

This paper has focused on the spatial configuration of the route, as an itinerant scale expanding over land and sea, to explore the relationship between NGOs/CSOs and European governmental attempts to manage the Central Mediterranean border through the externalisation of migration control. In doing this, it has engaged with current debates in migration and border studies regarding the scale of the route and the role played in migration governance by specific spaces and places, as well as specific non-state actors.

Indeed, the purported order of the current EU migration and border regime is pretty much based on externalisation, route management, as well as the collaboration of a variety of state and non-state actors. Arguably, externalisation contributes to changing the Central Mediterranean borderscape not only through militarisation but also through the growing presence of NGOs/CSOs, both on land and at sea.

The relationship between NGOs/CSOs’ migration-related activities and EU-externalisation across the Central Mediterranean is not univocal, and depends on variables including the aims and motivations of NGOs/CSOs as well as the
constraints imposed and the opportunities offered by the different settings in which these actors operate – from the local scale of DCs to the national one of each North African country; from the regional scale of the high seas to the deterritorialised one of transnational and transborder cooperation initiatives.

The paper shows that NGOs/CSOs are comparatively more likely to bow to the logics of externalisation on land than at sea, regardless of their intentions. Indeed, in the territories of North African countries, some humanitarian NGOs don’t mind turning to externalised security agents by repairing gates and fences in Libyan DCs, while others are more inspired by anti-externalisation sentiments but have to face restrictions imposed on their work by local formal and informal authorities, who are all suspicious towards migrants, foreign actors and foreign-funded activities alike. Also at sea, however, NGOs/CSOs are confronted with the risk of being passively or actively complicit with externalisation strategies.

Despite these limitations, the paper shows that NGOs/CSOs can be agents of de-bordering, acting against EU externalisation dynamics, and that activities deliberately producing anti-externalisation effects are possible in all settings: the CIR involvement in the Hirsi case proves that intended anti-externalisation is possible even in difficult terrestrial environments such as Gaddafi’s Libya. The maritime dimension is more propitious to this end, because no government has sovereignty claims on the high seas, and the principle of the freedom of navigation grants SAR NGOs more leeway, at least theoretically. However, the elusive legal geographies of the Central Mediterranean allow for both anti-externalisation and externalisation practices, as well as for the relevant, opposing interpretations of law, which results in a continuous process of governmental and non-governmental de-bordering and re-bordering of the space of the sea. Insofar as non-governmental anti-externalisation action at sea resorts to the same specificities of the maritime space on which externalisation is based, it can be seen as a form of counter-externalisation.

Importantly, the paper also underscores the itinerant character of NGOs/CSOs’ anti-externalisation action, which, like governmental control, adopts the route perspective and follows migrants’ trajectories over land and sea (also resorting to the air dimension to increase monitoring capacities) in order to support their right to mobility. Again, the answer to the European externalisation strategy is an anti-externalisation tactic that uses similar tools. Such a trajectory approach is visible: in the Hirsi case, where action taken on land produces effects at sea; in the case of MSF, whose activities on land (i.e. in Libyan territory) and at sea are clearly connected; in all non-governmental SAR activities (that are itinerant by definition); and even more so in the case of the Alarm Phone, whose transnational and transborder dimension helps monitoring boat trajectories and suggests that this non-governmental initiative amounts to a counter-delocalisation of sorts.
While the distinction between the two variants of “intended anti-externalisation” (“counter-externalisation” and “counter-delocalisation”), as well as between each of the variants and their umbrella-term, may not always be clearcut, these analytical categories help grasp the diversity of non-governmental engagement against externalisation. More broadly, as the paper demonstrates, different spatial contexts along the Central Mediterranean route show heterogeneous configurations of externalisation as well as anti-externalisation policies and practices. The terrestrial and maritime environments, with their political and legal specificities, provide opportunities for, and obstacles to, both aims, and the analysis of NGOs/CSOs’ activities sheds light on this ambivalent scenario, as well as on the tension between place and route – between a more static perspective and a more dynamic one that cuts across territorial borders through a trajectory approach.

Notes

1. Just like the concept of ‘externalisation’, the categories of ‘transit’ and ‘origin’ always assume a certain (in this case Euro-centric) perspective and directionality (see Cuttitta 2020 on externalisation; Düvell 2012 on transit).
2. Interviews were carried out only after the interviewees were provided with detailed written and/or oral information on the research project, on how the interview would be carried out, as well as on their rights, and after they gave their consent to being interviewed. All sensitive aspects of the research have been approved by the ethics advisor and the data protection officer of the University Sorbonne Paris Nord.
3. Thus, the Central Mediterranean route is not even exclusively ‘central’, given the role played by Eastern Mediterranean countries such as Egypt and Turkey.
4. With regard to Libya, this paper only refers to so-called ‘official’ DCs. Other, unofficial DCs exist in the country, but IOs and NGOs/CSOs cannot access them.
5. This was also the case of another CIR initiative, which was negotiated and carried out with the Italian government: a humanitarian corridor for 108 Eritrean asylum seekers, who were allowed to leave Tripoli on a regular flight to Italy in March 2011, at the outbreak of the war. However, humanitarian corridors can hardly be seen as anti-externalisation acts: first, because they are organised together with externalising governments; second, because they select people based on the vulnerability criterion, and thus perpetuate those binaries (‘deserving’ vs. ‘undeserving’, ‘forced’ vs. ‘economic’ migrants) that provide an important ground for externalised border management (Scheel and Ratfisch 2014; Valluy 2007).
6. This changed, at least temporarily, while this paper was under review. Since 5 March 2022 the Libyan authorities have denied Sea Watch permission to enter the Libyan flight information region and thus fly over the purported Libyan SAR region.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Maribel Casas-Cortés, Sebastián Cobarrubias and Paolo Novak, as well as Maurice Stierl, for insightful comments on earlier versions of this paper. My sincere thanks also go to the Institut de Recherche sur le Maghreb Contemporain (IRMC) in Tunis and
the Centre d’Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et sociales (CEDEJ) in Cairo for hosting me during fieldwork. Research on Libya was funded by a grant from the European Union’s research and innovation programme ‘Horizon 2020’ (Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement n. 846320). Research on Tunisia and Egypt was funded by the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO) through grant number 016.130.061.

**Disclosure Statement**

Q3 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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