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European governments are responsible for the Mediterranean death toll

Tom Vickers

The deaths of at least 1,200 people in the last week, as they attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe, have caused outrage in the European media, and protestations of concern from political leaders. Yet this scale of death was widely predicted when the EU-Italian operation Mare Nostrum was replaced last November by the Triton operation, run by Frontex, the EU's border agency. While Mare Nostrum included a remit for search and rescue in international waters, Triton has a much more limited remit that focuses on border enforcement within EU waters. Under Mare Nostrum, more than 3,400 people are thought to have drowned attempting the crossing in the year to October 2014, and 1,600 have died so far this year.

British government ministers' active opposition to search and rescue operations has led some commentators, [even in the mainstream press](#), to accuse them of murder. Their justification at the time was that Mare Nostrum was creating, in the words of Foreign Office minister Lady Anelay, an 'unintended pull factor' attracting migrants to Europe. The implication was that allowing them to drown would deter others from attempting the crossing. There is continuity here with the [deliberate policy of destitution](#) for asylum seekers, which was introduced by the last Labour government and continued by the Coalition, justified by the argument that this would discourage people from coming to Britain (despite [evidence to the contrary](#)), or to leave once here.

The [response that has been proposed so far by an emergency summit of European leaders](#) is to send 'naval assets' to engage in search and rescue, and in the longer term to consider military action against people smugglers based in Libya. This is unlikely to improve the situation. As [activists monitoring the situation in the Mediterranean point out](#), every previous attempt to forcibly shut down migration routes into Europe has failed to stop people moving, but has forced them to take longer and more dangerous routes.

The recent deaths in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean are partly a result of efforts to make it more difficult to people to cross into Europe elsewhere. Military action against smugglers in Libya will only produce further misery and increase the desperation of those trying to migrate. On the other hand, if migrants were able to enter Europe by regular, legal routes, the smugglers would lose their market and many lives would be saved.

As I argue [here](#) and in greater detail [here](#), British capitalism is fundamentally imperialist, and this shapes its relations with other countries and its treatment of migrants. We need to remember who is ultimately responsible for the levels of desperation that are leading so many to risk their lives trying to flee to Europe. It is Britain and other European powers [that have destabilised the Middle East and North Africa in recent years](#) through a series of bloody interventions. The bombing of Libya in 2011 was [Britain's 46th separate military intervention in the region since the end of the Second World War](#).

As long as the British economy is so heavily dependent on overseas assets, [which totalled six and a half times GDP in 2013](#), it seems inevitable that British governments will take whatever steps they consider necessary to defend these investments and the profits they produce. British governments have an interest in not allowing those who have witnessed the impact of their imperialist foreign policy to settle in Britain, and so their hostility toward refugees is also likely to continue.

A further reason for the British government to support such drastic steps to keep refugees out of Europe is that the claim to asylum is [based on universal human rights](#), which contradicts the neoliberal drive to 'manage' migration according to demand for labour. In general the presence of

migrants within Britain and their access to resources has become increasingly conditional on demand for their labour, yet asylum is a fundamentally needs-based claim. It should therefore be unsurprising that the fine-tuning of UK immigration controls according to the needs of British capital over recent years, epitomised by [the Points Based System](#) (pdf) introduced in 2008 and the various [measures to restrict EU migrants' access to benefits](#), have gone hand in hand with restrictions on asylum.

The people drowning in their hundreds in the Mediterranean are the victims of securitised immigration controls, imperialist wars, and an approach to immigration policy that places profit before people. Of course we should demand that EU states do everything possible to save people from drowning, and we should also demand a safe means for them to cross into Europe and equal rights with citizens when they arrive.

However, the issues outlined above suggest it would be naive to think the British government will do anything to address the root causes of this crisis. Even if there is a change of government at the general election, on the issues raised above Labour is no different. It may be more realistic to look for change led by migrants themselves, like those who in recent months [have been mounting determined resistance inside and outside Britain's immigration prisons](#).

They could find natural allies in poorer sections of the British working class, who under austerity are facing [sanctions](#), [cuts](#), [growing precarity](#) and [low wages](#) and [are beginning to fight back](#). Like the restrictions on migration, these attacks on the British working class are fundamentally about restoring capitalist profits, regardless of human needs, and this offers a powerful basis for solidarity.

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