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Externalising migration control in Niger: the humanitarian–security nexus and the International Organization for Migration (IOM)

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates the role of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in the global migration regime against the backdrop of the European Union (EU) border externalisation process in Niger. Over the last few years, UN agencies have been considered an essential component of the EU strategy to prevent irregular migrants from reaching Europe. Drawing on qualitative research and ethnographic fieldwork, combining empirical observation with critical analysis, we explore the 'humanitarian–security nexus' by focusing on the IOM's 'humanitarian borderwork' under the financial umbrella of the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (ETFA). While the results of purely securitarian measures in Niger may have been 'disappointing', the outsourcing of migration management through IOM balances the interests of the Nigerien government and the EU. By focusing on IOM humanitarian operations and assisted voluntary returns and reintegration (AVRR) programmes, the article shows the further expansion of European humanitarian borders into the heart of the Sahel, highlighting new interdiction practices, hidden forms of deportation, side effects and contestation from below.

The contribution was conceived and written in close collaboration between the two authors. However, it is possible to attribute the introduction, the second and sixth sections to Silvia Pitzalis and the third, fourth, fifth sections and the conclusions to Fabio De Blasis.

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Keywords – Niger, border regime, Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration, IOM, irregular migration.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, scholars have been increasingly interested in the multiple ways the EU seeks to externalise its borders in third countries. 'Externalisation' can be defined as the process through which 'destination countries promote, support, delegate, impose, or directly carry out activities related to migration and border management outside their territories to prevent unwanted arrivals at their territorial borders' (Cuttitta 2020: 2). As externalisation is not a 'smooth top-down process' and third countries are not mere executors of EU plans, a key aspect is also the involvement of non-state actors, including supra- and intergovernmental organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) (Pécoud 2020).

In this article, we focus on the role of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Niger, a transit migration hub linking West/Central Africa to North Africa and (eventually) Europe, which has become one of the main targets of EU (border) policymakers since the mid-2000s (Brachet 2018; Bøås 2020; Boyer *et al.* 2020). We intend to further expand the analysis of the 'humanitarian–security nexus' at Europe's frontiers (Andersson 2017), mainly on how International Organisations (IOs) contribute to the enforcement of the European political agenda on migration in third/transit countries. While the role of the IOM in contemporary border regimes is well explored in the literature (Geiger 2008; Andrijasevic & Walters 2010; Ashutosh & Mountz 2011; Brachet 2016; Lavenex 2016; Bartels 2017; Fine 2018; Geiger & Pécoud 2020; Bradley 2020), empirical evidence on its EU-funded activities in 'transit migration countries', and particularly in Niger, is still lacking. Specifically, we seek to empirically understand how the IOM carries out what Pallister-Wilkins (2017b: 85) calls 'humanitarian borderwork' and contributes to the production of 'European humanitarian borders' – to be understood as 'spaces of their own politics', which themselves become zones of the humanitarian government of migration (Walters 2011: 146).

Many scholars have highlighted how humanitarian action in and around the Mediterranean has been used to strengthen European border enforcement and migrant interdiction, engendering a new form of 'ethical policing' that simultaneously 'cares and controls' (Moreno-Lax 2018: 121; see also Agier 2008; Pallister-Wilkins 2015, 2017a; De Genova 2017; Cuttitta 2018; Missbach & Phillips 2020). This article will show how the IOM has become a key player in the further extension of the EU humanitarian borderwork into the heart of the western Sahel, turning Niger into a new space of humanitarian interdiction.

The article draws on primary sources and two fieldwork periods in Niger (April–May 2019 and January–February 2020) as part of an international cooperation project. The research adopted a qualitative approach based on

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in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation. We interviewed a total of 27 'transit' western/central African migrants in touch with the IOM; interviews were carried out with IOM (4) and UNHCR (2) officials and with key informants from CSOs and NGOs (9). Participant observation was conducted in Niamey at the 'Togolese Community House' (TCH-diaspora association) and the migrant reception centre run by the Catholic Church; several visits and 'ethnographic observations' were made in and around IOM's transit centres in Niamey and Agadez.

The paper is organised as follows: the first section introduces the role of the IOM in global migration governance; the second shows Niger as one of the main targets of EU border externalisation policies and the rise of the humanitarian–security nexus; the third, fourth and fifth sections analyse the role of the IOM in the Niger, its 'humanitarian' interventions and the assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programme; the sixth section shows the side effects, contestation and reaction from below to such practices.

THE IOM AND FORMS OF ASSISTED DEPORTATIONS

Created in 1951, the IOM, acquired its actual form and name in 1989 (Ducasse-Rogier 2002). It was not perceived as a genuine migration agency for a long time because of its exteriority to the UN system, its chaotic history and its relatively limited number of member states. While formerly limited to technical tasks, the IOM was, from the beginning, a politicised organisation closely associated with US leadership and with a homogeneous group of developed, 'white' and Western capitalist states (Pécoud 2018, 2020). Over the last decades, the IOM has considerably expanded its presence and influence worldwide to become a leader in global migration governance. In 2016, the IOM assumed the status of the UN Migration Agency mainly in response to the refugee/migrant crisis in the Euro-Mediterranean region (Lavenex 2016).

As of 2022, the IOM has 174 member states and operates in more than 100 countries with different activities related to migration: it provides advice to the governments of member states in designing migration policies and facilitates interstate cooperation over migration issues; trains all kinds of actors, including state employees, media, non-governmental and civil society organisations; promotes economic development, entrepreneurship, voluntary return and reintegration from destination and transit states to the countries of origin; intervenes in crises to assist internally and internationally displaced people; carries out anti-trafficking, awareness and sensitisation campaigns on the risks of migration and gathers data and conducts research on migration issues and publishes world migration reports (Pécoud 2020).

The EU relies on the IOM especially – though not only – when it comes to cooperating with sending and transit states, involving their governments and other actors (including NGOs and CSOs) in the control of migration and externilising border control (Andrijasevic & Walters 2010; Wunderlich 2012; Georgi & Schatral 2012; Koch 2014; Brachet 2016; Fine 2018). In the absence of an

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agreed-upon regime, European states cannot simply impose their norms and must formally respect the sovereignty of transit and sending countries. This creates a need for intermediaries such as IOs, with the reputation of being neutral and trusted by all parties (Korneev 2014; Lavenex 2016; Den Hertog 2017). On the one hand, the EU has largely financed the IOM since the 2000s to circumvent third countries' resistance to adopting European norms regarding migration control (Geiger 2008) and to achieve externalisation objectives more subtly (Geiger & Pécoud 2014; Bartels 2017); on the other hand, cooperating with the IOM creates an opportunity for third countries, which are aware of the importance of adopting EU standards but refuse the compelling interferences of asymmetric schemes of negotiation (Pécoud 2017). At the junction of the EU's mandatory directives and third countries' negotiation strategies, the IOM holds 'a singular 'in-between' place and finds itself at the heart of power struggles that structure contemporary international politics' (Maâ 2020: 3). This central role is due to the IOM's bureaucratic skills, strong presence in the field and experience and expertise, enabling the organisation to become a key partner upon which all parties depend (Den Hertog 2017).

Furthermore, the IOM's functions can be seen as a 'consent-generating apparatus' by constructing a depoliticised consensus on migration policy that hides the political divergences between states (Ashutosh & Mountz 2011). This is also achieved through discourse and policy measures that mix security concerns over border control with humanitarian actions supposedly in favour of migrants (Andrijasevic & Walters 2010; Georgi 2010; Brachet 2016; Frowd 2020; Fine & Walters 2021). Hence, the IOM remains highly tied to its prominent donors' political orientations (Lavenex 2016), emerging as a 'service provider' to implement aspects of migration policy outsourced by Western and wealthier governments (Pécoud 2020).

Assisted voluntary return and reintegration

The AVRR program is a major service provided by the IOM to governments worldwide and a central element of the organisation's identity in the broader scope of the international governance of migrations (Collyer 2012; Koch 2014). According to the IOM, AVRR is 'an indispensable part of a comprehensive approach to migration management aiming at orderly and humane return and reintegration of migrants who are unable or unwilling to remain in host or transit countries and wish to return voluntarily to their countries of origin' (IOM official 2019 Int.).

In recent decades, AVRR programmes have expanded considerably. They seemed to attract both European and transit states, reconciling seemingly antagonistic interests (Maâ 2020) and playing a crucial role in European efforts to control migration (Cleton & Schweitzer 2021).

Initially set up as humanitarian policies facilitating the relocation of refugees to their countries of origin after cessation of conflicts (Vandevoordt 2016),

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contemporary AVRR schemes in Western countries primarily aim to 'persuade' irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers facing detention or expulsion to 'depart voluntarily' (Collyer 2012; Kalir & Wissink 2015; Kalir 2017; Cleton & Chauvin 2019). While the IOM is regularly criticised for its non-accountability and the vagueness of its mandate (Ashutosh & Mountz 2011), voluntary return is often analysed as a dissimulated form of deportation (Blitz *et al.* 2005; Chappart 2009), and its 'voluntariness' has long been questioned by scholars (Webber 2011; Koch 2014; Erdal & Oeppen 2018; Scalettaris & Gubert 2018). Although AVRR seems a gesture of goodwill because it purports to ensure migrants make their way home smoothly, in many cases, those targeted by this programme, living in a constant state of deportability (De Genova 2002), are not ready or willing to return.

Threatened by 'the withdrawal of social benefits and by deportation, they may finally consent to what is labeled as "voluntary return", a term that begins to appear contradictory' (Dünnwald 2013: 229). In this regard, scholars have framed the IOM's voluntary returns as a hidden and more politically sustainable form of 'soft deportations' (Leerkes *et al.* 2016; Kalir 2017), 'obliged voluntariness' (Dünnwald 2013) and 'constrained choice' with deterrence and forces operating in the background (Lietaert *et al.* 2017). As AVRR is reshaping 'a new political imaginary of deportation', some scholars have highlighted a 'deportation twist' (Fine & Walters 2021).

Though the literature on the IOM's operations in the Global South has expanded considerably in recent years (Blitz *et al.* 2005; Wunderlich 2012; Brachet 2016; Den Hertog 2017; Bartels 2017, 2018; Fine 2018; Dini 2018; Frowd 2018, 2020; Miramond 2020; Maâ 2020), less explored is the way the AVRR programme is being implemented on the ground in 'transit states' and its intersection with the humanitarian–security nexus in Europe's frontiers. In the following sections, we try to fill this gap by focusing on the IOM's EU-funded operation in Niger, an emerging laboratory of the humanitarian government of migration via UN agencies (Van Dessel 2019) that has recently become the largest global hub for voluntary return.

EXTERNALISING MIGRATION CONTROL IN NIGER: THE HUMANITARIAN–SECURITY NEXUS

Because of its strategic position between West and North Africa, Niger is a historical crossroads for the movement of goods and people. In the decades following its independence from France, because of repeated economic, social and political crises, Niger emerged mainly as a country of emigration, with flows directed towards neighbouring or other West African states. However, the northern Saharan area has assumed an essential role as a crossing hub for Nigeriens and other nationals from the subregion seeking work in the Maghreb, particularly following the oil industry boom in Libya and Algeria. It was mainly in the 1990s that the city of Agadez, known as a gateway to the desert, became a logistical hub for West African migrants heading to North Africa and eventually

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Europe (Tinti & Westcott 2016; Tubiana *et al.* 2018). Within the same period, the development of a transit migration economy, which was tolerated (if not sponsored) by the state, also allowed the political stabilisation of the Agadez region and the normalisation of relations between the Tuareg populations and the central government in Niamey.

In the 2000s, the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime and the opening of the Libyan route to Europe constituted a further strong impetus for the intensification of transit migration: between 2011 and 2016, some 100,000 migrants passed through Niger each year (Molenaar 2017: 4).[1] In 2016, at least 333,891 migrants transited through northern Niger towards Libya and Algeria, making it a peak year according to the IOM (2017); in the same year, over 50% of the approximately 180,000 migrants who reached Lampedusa (Italy) had crossed Niger (Raineri 2018).

Even if the dynamics of trans-Saharan migration have remained primarily intra-African (Brachet 2016), the steady increase in transit migration has not gone unnoticed by European Union policymakers. Indeed, following the 'myth of invasion' (De Haas 2008), 'the Sahara has recently become the third external border that the EU seeks to control, after the Mediterranean Sea and the North African coastline' (Van Dessel 2019: 442; see also Gaibazzi *et al.* 2017; Brachet 2018; Cassarino 2018; Bøås 2020). Niger is the main recipient of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (ETFA), addressing the so-called root causes of irregular migration in African sending states, with over €250 million assigned in 2015–2020 and 15 projects primarily focused on migration.[2] Through this 'migration policy instrument' (Zardo 2020) and other interventions – including the EUCAP Sahel mission, which has extended its mandate from terrorism to migration and border control – the EU has been actively supporting the development of a complex strategy in which security/control and humanitarian/compassion logics fuse to curb irregular migration.

In the first instance, the strategy implied the production of a 'transit state label' as a 'tool of governance' (Frowd 2020) to justify the securitisation of migratory routes and the (de facto) criminalisation of irregular migration. Despite a mixed migratory landscape, Niger as a transit state was created 'through the speeches, policy declarations, and everyday routines of key officials from the Nigerien government and its partners [European Union and International Organizations]' (Frowd 2020: 341). 'Transit state' framing thus pushed migration into a much higher association with human trafficking and called for urgent actions against smugglers.

In May 2015, the government of Niger rapidly passed the EU-sponsored '*Loi* 2015–36, *relative au traffic illicite des migrants*' to address irregular migration and human smuggling. President Mahamadou Issoufou legitimised the law with the discovery, about a year earlier, the bodies of 92 Nigeriens, mostly women and children, in the desert in nearby Algeria (for whose deaths smugglers were blamed). The EU has strongly supported the implementation of the anti-smuggling law via the capacity building of Nigerien authorities and

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encouraged the formulation of the National Strategy for the Fight against Irregular Migration (Jegen 2020).

The anti-smuggling law criminalised the transport and housing of third-country nationals, including those from the ECOWAS region – establishing severe prison sentences, monetary fines and the seizure of vehicles and properties – and 'allowed for the detention of migrants subjected to illicit smuggling, without clarifying the grounds for such detention' (Lawyer *Avocats sans Frontières* 2019 Int.). Between 2016 and April 2018, Niger's security forces 'arrested at least 282 drivers, car owners, intermediaries, and "ghetto" owners housing migrants, and confiscated 300 to 350 vehicles, in Agadez and on the road to Libya' (Tubiana *et al.* 2018: 23; see also Moretti 2020).

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, the implementation of the law resulted not only in the disruption of the economy of Agadez but also 'in a de facto ban of all travel north of Agadez … in violation of the freedom of movement of ECOWAS nationals' and the criminalisation 'of all migration upwards, pushing them [migrants] into hiding, which renders them more vulnerable to abuse and human rights violations'.[3]

Even though 'traditional routes' have recorded an impressive decline in official numbers due to increased checkpoints along former official roads and the growing human insecurity in Libya, new alternative routes – more expensive, longer and riskier – have been opened, especially towards Algeria (Molenaar 2017; Tubiana *et al.* 2018; Raineri 2018). In response, the government of Algeria has rapidly securitised its border and, since 2017, has been massively deporting irregular migrants to Niger. In 2018 alone, according to the European Council on Refugee and Exiles, more than 25,000 migrants were deported from Algeria to Niger, including Nigerien and sub-Saharan citizens but also Syrians and Bangladeshis.[4] Expulsions and deportations continued even during the pandemic: between January and September 2022, over 17,000 people were affected.[5]

Notwithstanding the Nigerien government's apparent commitment to crack down on irregular migration, the outcomes of the securitisation and criminalisation of migration might not have met the EU's expectations (Raineri 2018; Bøås 2020). Raineri argues that 'human smuggling is part of a state-sponsored protection racket, which has proved extremely resilient' since the smuggling industry has a 'high degree of social legitimacy in northern Niger' and 'intermingles with local networks of patronage politics that contribute to Niger's precarious stability' (2018: 81). It follows that the Nigerien government's willingness and ability to act as a robust partner in EU antimigration policies should not be taken for granted.

Nevertheless, in the last few years and against a backdrop of multiple migrations and humanitarian 'crises', the involvement of UN agencies in managing migration seems to have allowed for a balancing of interests between the EU and the Nigerien government. Algerian deportations, combined with forced returns from Libya and the increase in internally displaced people, refugees

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and asylum seekers fleeing jihadist conflicts from Nigeria, Mali and Burkina Faso,[6] have paved the way for the rise of a humanitarian government of migration. In this context, the IOM and the UNHCR began to play a leading role in controlling forced migration and transit flows. Van Dessel has noted (2019: 453), 'the EU delegated to the IOM the relocation of migration control in Niger, and … simultaneously it delegated to the UNHCR the transfer of its responsibility in the area of asylum … The combined effect of the projects carried out simultaneously by the IOM and the UNHCR has allowed the EU to filter and restrict all movement northwards from the region for migrants and refugees alike.' In the last few years, while the Nigerien government and EU have been promoting a new image of Niger as a 'welcoming country', the UN humanitarian machine has led to the establishment of numerous reception camps, transit centres, search and rescue (SAR) operations and resettlement and return programmes. The following section focuses on the IOM's role in Niger, exploring its humanitarian borderwork on behalf of the EU.

THE IOM AND HUMANITARIAN BORDERWORK IN NIGER

The first IOM office in Niger was opened in 2006. Initially, IOM Niger engaged in what Pécoud (2020: 8) calls 'seemingly mundane activities' such as capacity-building and 'the socialisation of policymakers', yet hiding 'disciplining' activities in which governments are instructed on how to behave and persuaded to (self-) impose norms upon themselves (see also Dini 2018). Since the mid-2010s, however, the IOM has been implementing significant operations on the ground. The IOM's first transit centre for migrants was opened in 2014 with funds from the Italian, British and US governments and the UN Central Emergency Fund. In 2015, shortly after the approval of the anti-smuggling law, IOM Niger implemented the Migration Resource and Response Mechanism (MRRM) and 'Strengthening the governance of migration and the response to mixed migration flows in the region of Agadez' (AGAMI), funded by Italy, the UK and the European Commission for 12 months. Both projects aimed to provide direct assistance to migrants in IOM transit centres (Agadez, Dirkou, Arlit, Niamey) and implement return and reintegration projects in the countries of origin as well as communication and sensibilisation campaigns.

However, it was, after the La Valletta Agreement that the IOM exponentially increased its funds and operations and could assure the continuation of MRRM I into MRRM II over 36 months (August 2016–August 2019) bolstered by €7 million from EU ETFA (Falaschi 2016). Shortly after, within the context of the 2016 EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration,[7] the IOM launched Sustainable Return from Niger (SURENI), funded with €15 million over 36 months: the objective was to face 'the large numbers of stranded and returned migrants from North Africa and the European Union'.[8] An examination of the specific goals of the SURENI project shows the massive scale and scope of the EU/IOM operations in Niger: it aimed to

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(i) assist up to 30,000 migrants; (ii) support the voluntary return of up to 12,000 migrants; (iii) conduct outreach to up to 40,000 en route and potential migrants through sensibilisation and information campaigns; and (iv) support national and local authorities and partners to acquire data on migration causes, flows and trends.

With the abovementioned projects, the IOM's operations in Niger have grown exponentially. The agency has assumed a prominent role in controlling transit migration flows, particularly 'forced backward transit migration' from Algeria and Libya. The first remarkable sign is the massive amount of data collected not only on migratory routes but also on migrants as such through the creation of seven 'flow monitoring points' (three in the Agadez region, three on the border with Nigeria and one in Tahoua). The IOM's cooperation with local authorities on this matter has increased to the extent that data collected by the agency – including biometric data – are now stored on the servers of the Directorate for Territorial Surveillance (DTS), Niger's national police (Zandonini 2020). Between 2016 and 2019, IOM registered 1,055,214 migrants travelling from (55%), to (29%) and within (16%) Niger (IOM 2020: 1).

The data collection and profiling of migrants respond to different needs of the EU and IOM: making transit movements 'knowable' and therefore 'governable' (Vaughan-Williams 2015: 2) through targeted intervention; identifying countries to which migrants can be returned; reproducing the transit state label that justifies the existence of the IOM and creates the need for its humanitarian interventions (Ashutosh & Mountz 2011; Dini 2018; Fine 2018; Al Tamimi *et al.* 2020); and promoting a 'border spectacle' (De Genova 2013) and a 'culture of immobility' (Pécoud 2010) through awareness-raising and information campaigns in which the risks of migration are mainly used as arguments to discourage migrants from attempting to enter the EU irregularly (Heller 2014; Bartels 2017; Kluczewska 2020). In this regard, IOM Niger conducts 'regular outreach activities' in Agadez, Arlit, Dirkou and Niamey, with 'over 50 community mobilisers' that 'sensitise migrants and local communities about irregular migration and its alternatives [voluntary repatriation]' (IOM Official 2020 Int.). Between 2016 and December 2021, IOM Niger 'sensitised' 469,683 people (IOM 2021: 5) through various campaigns that are used 'as soft tools of border externalisation' by creating a border spectacle of migrant victimisation, stigmatisation and delegitimisation, which conceals the political causes of the risks increasingly faced by sub-Saharan migrants en route to North Africa and Europe (Van Dessel 2021).

Rescue operations

In addition to the above activities, rescue operations are a central and distinctive element of IOM operations in Niger, showing a direct engagement on the ground in the process of humanitarian bordering in the Sahel. In particular, two operations have been set up to assist 'migrants in distress' or lost in the

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desert: since October 2016, the IOM, in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior, has been undertaking SAR operations in the region of Agadez; since September 2017, following the intensification of deportations of irregular foreign migrants by the government of Algeria, the IOM has also been undertaking humanitarian rescue operations (HRO) of deportees at the Niger/Algeria border. Irregular migrants are dropped by the Algerian police in the middle of the night at *point zero* – about 12 kilometres from the city of Assamaka – and forced to walk several kilometres in the desert until they reach the Nigerien border. As reported by an IOM official during an interview, 'about 500 migrants get deported every week … IOM is usually notified in advance [by Algerian authorities] and can prepare the HRO to assist them … and bring them in Assamaka where they receive basic assistance, including food, water, and NFI kits' (IOM Official 2020 Int.). Between 2016 and December 2021, the IOM rescued 49,839 foreign migrants through HRO and (to a lesser extent) SAR in the Agadez Region (IOM 2021: 1). To provide humanitarian assistance to stranded migrants or deportees, new transit centres were set up: at the time of our fieldwork, the IOM operated six centres at four different locations (Agadez, Arlit, and Dirkou and three in Niamey). Between 2016 and 2021, 'over 60,000 migrants were assisted in these transit centers, of which nearly 80% had no identification papers' (IOM Official 2020 Int.).

What is interesting, moreover, is that assistance in the centres is conditional upon signing up for AVRR, and – as reported again by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants – 'no other real alternative is provided for those who do not want to sign up for it, including those who are in vulnerable situations and have been victims of multiple human rights violations'.[9]

AVRR, HUMANITARIAN-INDUCED DEPORTATIONS AND DETENTIONS

AVRR in Niger, as shown previously, is funded by the ETFA as part of the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration. A senior IOM official describes AVRR as 'a program which offers stranded and vulnerable migrants the return journey and a reintegration project in the country of origin, with an in-kind contribution of 300 dollars to support the development of small economic activities to discourage irregular migration' (IOM Official 2019 Int.). In just a few years, the EU/IOM partnership has turned Niger into the largest global hub of (un)voluntary repatriation: returns from Niger to third countries increased dramatically from 1,322 in 2015 to 16,319 in 2019, when IOM Niger recorded the highest number globally (IOM 2020: 16). Between 2015 and 2021, more than 50,000 migrants were returned through AVRR (IOM 2021).[10]

IOM officials explain this impressive growth through the 'migration crisis' in Niger (that of smuggling and stranded migrants), then in Libya (that of state

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collapse, traffickers, armed groups, migrant detention), and lastly in Algeria (deportations by Algerian authorities).

Turning deportees into returnees through aid conditionality

While all these crises have produced migration flows to be managed (through improved 'migration governance') and migrants to be saved (through humanitarian operations), we argue that 'aid conditionality' has become the main tool – though not the only – to channel 'deportees' into the voluntary repatriation machine. As shown by our interviews – inside and outside IOM's transit centres – it is the trauma of deportation, the need for immediate assistance – shelter, food and medical care – and the lack of any other alternative which drive the majority to join AVRR, rather than the desire of return and reintegration. Most have lost everything: as argued by Losseny, a 27-year-old man from Ivory Coast in Agadez, during a focus group at the TCH, 'we were taken everything away by the Algerian police … the money, the phone, and even the shoes' (Deportee from Algeria 2020 focus group). Once rescued at the Niger/Algeria border, they have no choice but to sign up for a voluntary return to access the assistance provided by IOM in its transit centres. Augustin, a 29-year-old from Togo, deported to Niger in December 2019 after two years spent in Algeria, explains during an interview in Niamey his experience, showing both the violence of deportations and the way the IOM is turning deportees into returnees:

I was living in Oran, on the construction site where I was also working … Suddenly, the police came into my room at night and found me with no papers. They beat me up, took all my savings, and forced me to get into a truck, we were stored like sheep. There was also a pregnant woman and children. The journey lasted about ten hours. They put us in a camp, a detention centre in Tamanrasset … the day after they left us in the middle of the desert in the late evening, they made us come down by force, beaten us with iron sticks and belts while telling us to run. We walked for 4–5 hours, it was cold, and we were hungry and thirsty. Some people died in front of my eyes. The IOM rescued us with a truck and took us to Assamaka. We were given some water and food, and then we were told that to get further aid in the transit centres of Arlit [merely a roof to spend the night], we were supposed to sign up for return. (Deportee from Algeria 2020 Int.)

It is not surprising that most deportees sign up for AVRR – over 98% of migrants choose to join the programme according to the IOM (2021: 2) – and are then taken to the Arlit transit centre 'where they are profiled, registered, and will be waiting until the return is finalised' (IOM Official 2020 Int.). The foregoing indicates that the IOM's HROs at the Niger/Algeria border are channelling 'irregular' migrants, potential asylum seekers and refugees into the repatriation machine. We propose thus the concept of 'humanitarian-induced deportations' to identify such a policy of turning deportees into returnees through aid conditionality.

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Undocumented migrants and humanitarian detentions

Although deportees account for most 'beneficiaries' of AVRR, according to IOM officials, 'aid conditionality' is not the only tool that fuels voluntary repatriations. The IOM collaborates closely with Nigerien police authorities to 'soft-deport' irregular transit migrants via AVRR. In this case, the program works similarly to contemporary AVRR schemes in Western countries to persuade 'deportable migrants' to 'depart voluntarily'. During our visits to – and around – the IOM's 'Eagle' transit centres in Niamey, we met several migrants who could not be identified as 'Algerian deportees' or 'stranded migrants'. They were, instead, undocumented migrants who had been caught by Nigerien police and turned to the IOM for voluntary return. As clarified by an IOM official, there was an agreement signed in early 2019 between the agency and the DTS 'which allows the police forces to direct all irregular migrants they caught while transiting in Niger to IOM for voluntary return as an alternative to the detention and expulsion' (IOM Official 2020 Int.). Such returns are cheaper than 'state deportations' (Vandevoordt 2016: 2), but they are also more politically sustainable for the Nigerien government, especially when they involve ECOWAS citizens. There is no official data on the number of undocumented migrants addressed to the IOM by the police forces, and the IOM's officials were reluctant to reveal this information. However, interviews and ethnographic observations suggest a significant and growing presence of such migrants in IOM's transit centres. 'Interceptions' occur at police checkpoints and bus stations and through raids, especially at night: undocumented migrants are taken to the police stations and then handed over to the IOM. During a focus group with Cameroonian and Central African Republic migrants trapped in the IOM's transit centre in Niamey, Samba, a 22-year-old Central African Republic migrant, shared his experience, similar to many others, and discussed how he ended up in the 'Eagle' transit centres:

> I wanted to reach Algeria and then Europe from Morocco. I did not make it because I was found without documents by the police at the bus station in Maradi. I was first asked for some money, and then I was taken to the police station … there, I was told, no possibility of choice [given that alternative was detention], that I was going to be handed over to IOM for repatriation to the Central African Republic. It was not my choice at all! Nobody here [seven people from the Central African Republic, all in IOM's transit centre] has chosen repatriation. (Trapped migrant 2020 focus group)

As also confirmed by IOM officials, bureaucratic procedures to finalise the return to certain countries might take longer than expected. The return may also be 'frozen' or delayed because of logistics, scarce cooperation with national authorities or insecurity in the contexts of origin, as in the case of the seven Central African Republic migrants we interviewed. Because of such circumstances, the IOM's system involves trapping unwilling-to-return migrants in overcrowded transit centres for up to several months in a sort of 'humanitarian

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detention' (Miramond 2020) – though free to get out during the day – with no information either on the return process or regarding possibilities of asylum, as stated by Eric, another Central African Republic migrant trapped in the 'Eagle' transit centre in Niamey:

I have been in the IOM centre in Niamey for two months. The living conditions are extremely poor … They tell us that the procedures are lengthy, and we do not receive much information about our return process. It is definitely not our choice … Many of us left years ago because of the civil war; some are refugees in Cameroon and have been living in refugee camps. Do you think I want to return to a country I left because of the war? … Now that the war is soaring again, it is like they are sending us to our death. It is like we have no human rights. (Trapped migrant 2020 focus group)

The increasing influx of migrants into the repatriation machine and the recurrent difficulties in the management of return procedures – even in the case of willing-to-return ECOWAS citizens – are not only producing poor living conditions, overcrowding and humanitarian detentions in the transit centres but also preventing access to those who would like to use the programme to return to their countries of origin. Consequently, an informal 'waiting list' for access to the transit centres was found to exist in Niamey. Some migrants we interviewed during our participant observation at the Catholic Church's assistance centre had been registered for weeks as candidates for return. Still, they were living in the streets and not allowed to access the IOM's centres or use the accommodation and food services.

THE INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION AGAINST MIGRATION: SIDE EFFECTS AND OPPOSITION FROM BELOW

So far, we have argued that the IOM has been relatively successful in producing, on behalf of the EU, a 'humanitarian border' in Niger and that AVRR is used to curb irregular migration. While recognising the power of humanitarianism in producing a space of interdiction (Agier 2008; Fassin 2010; Pallister-Wilkins 2017a; Moreno-Lax 2018), at the same time, its effectiveness in curbing irregular migration in the mid-long term should not be taken for granted. If African migrants face mobility regimes (Glick Schiller & Salazar 2013), they might also find ways to resist, transgress and circumvent them (Schapendonk 2017, 2020).

First, the IOM's inability to finalise the returns within the promised time frame provoked episodes of protest and mobilisation by migrants who are stuck in Niger while waiting for their return. In April 2020, shortly after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, several migrants protested against a seemingly endless quarantine in Arlit,[11] while in August 2022, protests by migrants of different nationalities, many of them deported from Algeria, took place in Agadez and Arlit, regarding the way the IOM handled the AVRR, letting them wait for months under precarious conditions and delaying their departure several times.[12]

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In no way, however, can these protests be linked to a desire for reintegration into the country of origin. Many of the migrants we met had already crossed Niger two or three times; some seem to consider AVRR as a sort of 'insurance' in the context of increasingly risky routes. There are no official data, but we were given some estimations of roughly 85% of returnees in Senegal and Gambia leaving within 12 months after voluntary return. The use of the IOM as a 'travel agency' (Pécoud 2020: 4) is also provoking frustration among IOM officials, as explained during an interview:

Too many migrants strategically use the IOM channel as a 'travel agency' to finance their return journey to their country of origin and leave again, thus not following the reintegration project. They might try four or five times to reach Algeria despite the risk of being rejected and even shot at the border … until a few months ago, many were trying to use the AVRR in Niger multiple times [it can be used only once], often providing false generalities, but now we take fingerprints, we are not a travel agency! (IOM Official 2020 Int.)

The economic reintegration in the country of origin seems to be largely unreached since most of the repatriated migrants consist of deportees turned into returnees through aid conditionality, and the top–down 'reintegration' rhetoric often clashes with individual aspirations, the dream of *Eldorado* and the 'power of imagination' (Salazar 2011). In addition, AVRR merely provides an in-kind contribution of $300, considered by most migrants interviewed in Niamey and Agadez 'like charity, which is not solving the problems that make us leave' (Deportee from Algeria who refused AVRR 2020 Int.). Thus, if most of the returnees leave shortly after repatriation (and might even turn again into 'Algerian deportees'), some leave the IOM's transit centres even before the return is finalised, ending up in Agadez's ghettos or in Niamey's poor suburbs to look for a job which will finance, perhaps, a new journey to Algeria (and eventually Europe). Loran, a 25-year-old Togolese deportee, made this point during a focus group at the TCH in Niamey:

What IOM proposes [the AVRR programme] does not solve the problems that pushed us to leave. I initially accepted repatriation because I had no choice, but I knew from the very beginning that I did not want to return to Togo … I stayed in the Agadez centre and kept that roof and those meals as long as possible. I took the IOM's help until they told me to leave, given my decision not to proceed with the return. I took a bus and came to Niamey to look for a job. I will try again to go to Algeria as soon as I get some money. (Deportee from Algeria who refused AVRR 2020 focus group)

Some 'creative' migrants even try to use AVRR to reach alternative-aspired destinations. This was the 'tactic' adopted by Michel, a 32-year-old Cameroonian deported in November 2019 and transported by the IOM to the centre of Agadez (via Arlit) after accepting AVRR in Assamaka. At the IOM, he claimed to be 'a Ghanaian citizen to be taken to Ghana, where there are more job opportunities than in Cameroon' (Deportee from Algeria 2020 Int.).

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Interestingly, some migrants have become quite familiar with the IOM's system and show a clear sense of resistance. Richard, a 34-year-old Liberian, refused AVRR in Assamaka and reached Niamey onboard a truck. Being indebted in Liberia and having no money to remain on the move trapped Richard in Niger for six months. When asked about his opinion regarding AVRR/IOM, he said that 'IOM is trying to prevent human mobility' (Deportee from Algeria 2020 Int.). Like other deportees who refuse AVRR or cannot take advantage of it, Richard survived because of some grassroots CSOs that have recently played a significant role in providing 'alternative' assistance and creating opposition and resistance around the IOM.

As shown in other contexts (Caillault 2012; Kalir & Wissink, 2015; Ahouga 2017; Pécoud 2018), the IOM has been working intensively to co-opt CSOs, particularly diaspora associations within its 'humanitarian/developmental borderwork' and consensus-generating apparatus. Several NGOs and even trade unions have frequent relations with IOM Niger; they are involved in capacity-building and training programmes, sensitisation campaigns and development projects.[13] The ECOWAS association (bringing together 15 national communities) has been extensively engaged and 'frequently sends to IOM stranded and vulnerable migrants who wish to go home' (President of ECOWAS association 2019 Int.). At the time of our fieldwork, its Nigerian president was also the president of another NGO – *Lutte contre le Trafic Humain et la Prostitution* (LTHP) – involved by the IOM in its sensibilisation campaigns against sex trafficking and exploitation, mainly targeting Nigerian women. The IOM became even more involved with the 'Togolese community' and its TCH in Niamey, where we interviewed several migrants and conducted participant observation. Here, the IOM has financed the construction of toilets and showers and supplied desks, laptops, and a printer to externalise the reception of 'to-be-returned migrants' when its transit centres are overcrowded.

Despite this, the IOM has failed to gain the full consensus of the entire CSO landscape in Niger. In recent years, opposition from below to the humanitarian apparatus has indeed grown significantly, challenging the 'consensual and migrant-friendly rhetoric which hides the asymmetric power relations between countries and the predominance of the political agenda of Western states' (Pécoud 2020: 9). Even more 'institutional-friendly' actors have come to assume a critical approach toward the UN agency, as stated by the head of the Pastoral Services for Migrants of the Catholic Church in Niamey:

> At the very beginning, we were cooperating with IOM. They presented themselves as humanitarian operators focusing on saving and protecting migrants … However, we soon realised that IOM had other political interests than just saving migrants. They wanted to block them on their route to Europe and control their movement even into the African continent. Now we have no interest in cooperating with IOM (Head, Catholic Church 2020 Int.)

Some CSOs show an even more explicit hostility, reflecting a broader and growing political mobilization against the agency and the EU. A member of

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Alarm Phone Sahara (APS) – which in May 2022 filed, together with other national and international associations, an appeal to the ECOWAS Court of Justice against the 2015 antismuggling law – argued that 'the name [of the UN Agency] should be changed from the International Organisation for Migration to the International Organisation against Migration' (Member of APS 2020 Int.). The most critical position is that of *Alternatives Espaces Citoyen* (AEC),[14] an association at the forefront of the small but growing critical opposition movement towards the European Union, the Nigerien government and the 'humanitarian machine', as reported by one of its members during an interview in Niamey:

> The IOM is the operational arm of the European border externalisation strategy in Niger. For me, it is evident. IOM has been given a clear operational mandate to curb irregular migration toward Libya, Algeria and, therefore, Europe. What they are doing here should be called deportations. I have no problem defying so-called voluntary returns as deportation. Likely, civil society in Niger has begun to understand, and many have given up cooperation with IOM. On the other hand, the UNHCR has also been charged with controlling and curbing the flow of asylum seekers and refugees to the north. Some of our exponents have even been prosecuted for saying this publicly. (Member of AEC 2020 Int.)

This strong criticism does not spare the UNHCR, which manages refugee resettlement programmes in the Global North (Emergency Transit Mechanism), involving migrants evacuated from prisons in Libya and transferred to Niger for asylum application (Boyer *et al.* 2020; Jegen 2020). Even in the case of UNHCR, as other scholars revealed in other contexts (Verdirame & Harrell-Bond 2005), there have been organised protests about poor living conditions in camps as well as the right to international protection and relocation to third countries, with repeated demonstrations of asylum seekers and refugees even at the agency's premises, in some cases stopped by police intervention.[15]

CONCLUSIONS

Over the last few years, Niger has become one of the main targets of the EU border externalisation process in third countries. While the outcomes of purely criminalising measures might have been disappointing, not least because of the role played by transit migration in the precarious social and political stability at the local level (Raineri 2018), much more effective has been the strategy of relocating migration control to the UN agencies under the humanitarian framework and against a backdrop of multiple migration crises. Drawing on empirical evidence, this paper has shown the further extension of European humanitarian borders into the heart of the Sahel and the prominent and operational role of IOM Niger within the global governance of borders and transit migration control. Through its 'humanitarian borderwork', IOM Niger seems to have allowed balancing the interest of the Nigerien government and EU

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member states, controlling human mobility by deploying humanitarian assistance as much as by providing border security expertise (Frowd 2018, 2022). Besides 'policing the desert' (Brachet 2016), providing valuable data for EU policymakers and sensitising migrants to discourage them from attempting to reach Europe (Van Dessel 2021), the IOM has proved to be an efficient 'deportation entrepreneur' (Lecadet 2020: 274), turning Niger into the main global hub of (un)voluntary returns. On the one hand, the IOM's cooperation with local police forces resulted in Western-like and more politically sustainable forms of hidden deportations by targeting and persuading irregular migrants otherwise facing detention or expulsion; on the other hand, the IOM's humanitarian operations are meant to channel 'Algerian deportees' and other traumatised/stranded migrants into the repatriation machine, through 'aid conditionality'.

This humanitarian–security nexus at Europe's frontiers (Andersson 2017) creates new practices of humanitarian interdiction and detention without, however, being exempt from side effects, contestations and forms of resistance from below. Reintegration in countries of origin does not materialise because it clashes with migrants' aspirations and needs. While many find ways to keep on moving despite multiple obstacles, some grassroots organisations are also challenging the consensual pro-migrant rhetoric that hides the asymmetric power relations and dominance of the political agenda of the Global North.

NOTES

1. This popularity was partially explained also by the relative security of the journey compared with alternative routes and by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) protocols granting free movements among 15 West African countries.

2. See <https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/sahel-lake-chad/niger_en>.

3. End of the mission statement of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, Felipe González Morales, on his visit to Niger (1–8 October 2018), available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23698&LangID=E>.

4. See endnote 4.

5. See <https://alarmephonesahara.info/en/blog/posts/more-mass-deportations-from-algeria-to-niger-in-august-and-september-2022>.

6. As of June 2021, 586,874 persons have fled their home countries or are internally displaced and living in Niger, according to the UNHCR (2021). The UNHCR defines these migrants as a 'population of concern' and has already biometrically registered hundreds of thousands of them (UNHCR 2021). UNHCR, 2021, Niger country operational update, june 2021.

7. See <https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/all-news-and-stories/migration-management-one-year-launch-eu-iom-joint-initiative-migrant-protection_en>.

8. See <https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/sahel-lake-chad/niger/renforcement-de-la-gestion-et-de-la-gouvernance-des-migrations-et-le_fr>.

9. See endnote 5.

10. These numbers refer to AVRR from the Niger to third countries. The IOM's activities in Niger also include a wide range of operations targeting Nigerien citizens: 'Assisted Voluntary Return' of Nigerien from third countries to the Niger (mainly from Algeria), 'Voluntary Humanitarian Returns' from Libya to the Niger (nearly 9000 between 2016–2019) and the management of forced return of Nigerien citizens from Algeria (between December 2014 and December 2019, 49,112 Nigerien migrants were repatriated by Algerian authorities through 151 'official' convoys) (IOM 2020).

11. See <https://observers.france24.com/en/20200428-migrants-niger-protest-quarantine-without-end-covid19>.

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12. See <https://alarmephonesahara.info/en/blog/posts/niger-protests-of-migrants-in-iom-camps-in-agadez-and-arlit>.

13. As of April 2021, 656 migrants have received training in business management, and 372 migrants have received training in agriculture (IOM 2021: 5).

14. See <https://www.alternativeniger.net/>.

15. In early 2020, conflicts escalated and resulted in the burning down of a UNCHR-run reception camp near the city of Agadez, with the arrest of more than 200 refugees. See <www.alarmephonesahara.info/en/reports/agadez-unhcr-camp-set-on-fire-by-refugees-after-weeks-of-unanswered-protests>.

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