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Italy, Libya, and the Threat of Coronavirus

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Apr 6, 2020

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Brief Analysis

Since Italy first announced its first confirmed case of [coronavirus in late January](#), the virus has spread throughout the country with unprecedented speed. Today, Italy has become one of the major epicenters of the pandemic as the number of confirmed cases and deaths continues to climb, though restrictive social distancing measures are offering some hope to Italians.

As the government's strict coronavirus lockdown has upended the lives of many individuals, the epidemic is also impacting Italy as a Mediterranean state. On the one hand, Italy's large migrant population, largely from African states, is at particular risk for becoming a new cluster for spreading the virus. From a macro-perspective, other countries' responses to the Italian tragedy are causing Italians of all backgrounds to band together, while increasing their frustration with the European Union. [This realignment may impact public opinion on major foreign policy issues, such as Libya.](#)

How Refugees Complicate Italy's Lockdown

With the entire country on mandatory lockdown and all non-essential businesses closed, Italy's large refugee population is particularly vulnerable. Italy is a common destination for many north African and sub-Saharan migrants looking to flee to Europe, with approximately 82 percent of migrants traveling to Europe via the sea route between Libya and Italy. Between January 2015 and March 2020, 492,841 total refugee and migrant have arrived to Italy by boat.

The journey by sea between Libya and Italy is already lethally treacherous; around 10,000 people have drowned since 2015. The threat of drowning is further complicated by the pandemic as there have been no rescue missions since the end of February. NGOs normally patrol the waters of the central Mediterranean rescue migrants from capsized boats, but have ceased operation due to the severity of the coronavirus outbreak in Europe. Previously, the Italian coastguard has rescued as many as 5,000 people in a single day.

In addition, the Italian government requires a two-week quarantine for all ships docking at Italian ports given the

threat of the virus's spread. Many services that aim help refugees have been temporarily suspended or reduced their staffs in compliance with Italy's lockdown.

With the severity of the outbreak in Italy, many fear vulnerable populations will be the worst affected. Individuals who successfully completed the journey from Libya to Italy may also be at a higher risk of infection because of the poor conditions in Italy's overcrowded shelters. In some of these centers, there are ten people to one room, making it impossible to implement the recommended conditions for sanitation and social distancing. These threats are compounded by a shortage of running water and sterile materials in those centers, especially those in southern Italy. These dire circumstances have prompted Interior Minister Luciana Lamorghese to demand a plan that includes the redistribution of these migrants to the various centers in Italy in an attempt to ease pressure on accommodation centers on the front lines.

However, some organizations are making greater efforts to include this population by navigating the language barrier. Much of the information content on the coronavirus ignores the large portion of the population who may require instruction in other languages. Therefore, a number of Italian civil society organizations have launched campaigns to raise awareness among immigrants about the dangers of the virus and how to stop its spread. For example, the "ARCA DI NOÈ" association has produced educational films and electronic platforms in multiple languages, including Arabic and other languages on the best practices for dampening the virus's spread.

In an attempt to curb the flow of illegal immigration from Libya, the EU and Italy created a series of projects to secure the borders of Libya. The three year old agreement between Italy and Libya has assisted Libya's maritime authorities in stopping boats and returning people to detention centers. Italy has trained and equipped the Libyan Coast Guard and other authorities to keep people in Libya. Since the deal was initially struck in 2017, around 40,000 individuals have been intercepted and returned to Libya, including 947 just in January of this year.

A Potential Identity Shift: Italians' Response to Coronavirus

In contrast, one unexpected silver lining of the epidemic has been its ability to unify Italians, regardless of background. Residents of various religions and nationalities have exhibited unprecedented signs of solidarity in the collective effort to overcome the pandemic. Such solidarity is necessary; the devastating effects of this virus are likely to impact the country for years, and the situation has already been described as worse than the devastation after the Second World War.

The Muslim community in Italy, which has doubled over the past twenty years to approximately a million and a half, has shown remarkable solidarity with the Italian people under these circumstances. Some imams have been active on social media sites via livestreams from the afflicted cities demanding that Muslims adhere to the laws and quarantines put in place to combat the virus. Imams have also launched support initiatives for hospitals, including efforts to donate thousands of medical masks. There have also been major efforts to fight rumors and ensure that congregations have access to the facts of the virus, focusing especially on combating rumors that have been reported of cremation among the deceased who are infected with the virus—a practice staunchly against Muslim belief and one that could have caused major unrest among Muslims. It is notable that Italy has in fact maintained respect for the customs and traditions of all religions during this sensitive time. Authorities have delivered the bodies of Muslims to imams to ensure burial according to Islamic practice, provided that safe conditions are provided for the burial process so that the burial does not put others at risk of contamination.

It is notable that this sense of unifying 'Italianness' is emerging at a time when Italians are becoming widely critical of the European Union for its failures to help Italy. While Germany and the Czech Republic have both prevented the transfer of vital supplies, and as borders within the Schengen zone close, demonstrating the limits of these agreement, both China and Russia have stepped in in ways that are building a genuine sense of good-will among

Italians. If this goodwill becomes more permanent, it is possible that such a shift would also impact Italy's foreign policy in the Mediterranean region, as the European Union, Russia, and China pursue their interests across North Africa.

The question of growing Russian and, to a lesser extent, Chinese influence in North Africa is not a new issue, but the visible fissures within the European Union given the strain of coronavirus also suggest a potential shift in its attitudes towards conflicts in the Middle East where the EU and Russia have clashed. As Europe struggles, Italy may be inclined to support—or at least remain neutral on—increased Russian and Chinese influence in countries like Libya and Syria.

Libya has particular importance for Italy given the two countries' close proximity and Italy's colonial past in the country. Today, the ongoing civil war in Libya is considered an issue of national security for Rome, given the illegal immigration and terrorism from Libya. At present, Italy supports the UN-backed Al-Wefaq government. In contrast, Russia has given major support to General Haftar with France also standing in contrast to Rome's position, Italy may increasingly concede its current position, especially given its [failed efforts to mediate the conflict](#).

The coronavirus epidemic is likely to shape Italy's future for years to come, and in ways not directly connected to issues of healthcare. Between Italy's ongoing migration challenges and Italy's population coming together at this strange time, Italy may also see a shift in its identity that becomes a more permanent feature of the country. ❖



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