

# The deadliest border in the world

Europe's equivalent to the Mexican border is not a wall; it's water



Just another day on the job: the *Iuventa* crew during a 2017 rescue operation in the Mediterranean Sea

BY PETER H. KOEPP

When the catastrophe began, the maritime rescue team on board the *Iuventa* wasn't anywhere nearby. In early May, 3,000 people had set out from Africa in several boats and were now floundering helplessly in flimsy dinghies and worm-eaten wooden vessels along "by far the deadliest border in the world," as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) called the Mediterranean in 2015. The coast of Libya had long since disappeared on the horizon, and the Italian shoreline appeared almost unreachable.

When the group originally set out, the weather had been clear and the sea calm. But then the winds had gotten stronger, with two-meter-high waves rocking the boats, prompting the frightened refugees to cling fast to one another. A number of NGOs had endeavored to help them and succeeded in evacuating unconscious individuals, pregnant women and small children. But those left on board lacked life jackets, and anyone wading through the stink of water in the boat – a mixture of salt, gasoline and feces – subjected themselves to burns on their legs, arms and even lungs.

For its part, the *Iuventa* still had a full six-hour journey before it could reach the very search-and-rescue area it had been forced to leave only three days prior. Over the radio, Dariush Beigui, the first officer on this trip, had heard that there were several boats adrift there, and that one wooden vessel in particular was already sinking. "And we weren't there," he says indignantly, shaking his head and recalling the incident. "We were off taking five people to Lampedusa!"

The order for the *Iuventa* to undertake the seemingly nonsensical trip to Lampedusa had been given by Italy's Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome – and it had been unequivocal. According to Beigui, by withdrawing one of four vessels from the rescue operation, the Italian coast guard had "knowingly accepted the possibility of human deaths."

Even at the time, the crew of the *Iuventa* suspected something wasn't right, but they followed the orders given to them nonetheless. Only months later would they find out why the MRCC had ordered them to Lampedusa. "That was the day," says Sascha Girke, the former on-scene coordinator, "they began criminalizing us and our work."

The *Iuventa* has since been confiscated and 10 members of the crew are now under investigation by authorities in Trapani, Sicily. If

legal proceedings go ahead, crew members face up to 20 years in jail and heavy fines. But let's be clear: the authorities are investigating the crew not because they failed to help, but because they tried to help. The fact that justice officials intervened to stop a rescue mission represented a brand new development in the Mediterranean. "It marked the first time," Girke explains, "that a criminal investigation was brought against an NGO for coming to the aid of shipwrecked people."

The *Iuventa* was originally a fish trawler – that is, until four years ago, when 2,000 donors contributed over €150,000 to enable the Brandenburg-based association known as Jugend Rettet ("Youth Rescue") to purchase the 33-by-6.7-meter ship and restore it as a seaworthy vessel. On June 25, 2016, they received their first mission. "Back then," notes Girke, "the navy, coast guard and maritime rescuers were all working on the same side." In other words, they still shared the goal of saving refugees, giving them emergency

"I saw people dying by the thousands in the Mediterranean, and I saw the rescuers. I just had to get involved." In April and May of 2017, Beigui was first officer on the *Iuventa*. It was his second mission.

On May 4, the *Iuventa* found itself just northwest of Tripoli. At 3 a.m. UTC (Coordinated Universal Time, or 5 a.m. CET), on-scene coordinator Sascha Girke radioed "good morning" to the MRCC. "Our intention is to patrol approx. 15 nm from the Libyan coast." He gave the *Iuventa*'s position as 33°14.08'N and 012°25.19'E. The sea was calm; it was a beautiful day in early May. In other words, the conditions were ideal for escape attempts across the Mediterranean.

Less than two hours later, the crew spotted a wooden boat. This was a rare event, as the *Iuventa* was usually given the coordinates of unseaworthy vessels by the MRCC, or sometimes it was another boat that requested support. What happened after that was pretty routine: The *Iuventa* placed a

"We proceed with rescue," radioed Girke to the MRCC, "and take the ppl [people] temporary [sic] on board the *Iuventa*." Girke also spoke via VHF radio with the on-scene coordinator on the *Phoenix*, which belonged to the Malta-based aid organization Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), which also received its order from the MRCC.

The transfer of people from one boat to the other is a dangerous operation. Beigui himself had been in rescue boats on many occasions and seen firsthand how people jump into the water and try to reach their rescuers by swimming to them or grabbing hold of their boat. He had seen desperate parents raise their children from out of overcrowded and crumbling boats. He has had to resist the impulse to immediately reach his arms out to them; indeed, if he were to do that, the parents would inevitably push forward, followed by other passengers, which would lead to capsizing the boat.

On May 4, the *Iuventa* stayed at an appropriate distance. It took

operated by SOS Méditerranée and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the *Vos Hestia* belonging to Save the Children, *Sea Watch 2* and the large *Phoenix* operated by the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), which was originally supposed to have taken on all the passengers on the *Iuventa*.

Some of those passengers were already on board the *Phoenix* when the MRCC instructed that ship's captain to take on only a portion of the refugees. The idea was for 25 people to stay on the *Iuventa* – almost all of them under the age of 18 – and then have the *Iuventa* take them 90 nautical miles north to meet a coast guard ship.

The agitated telephone conversations that followed this order were later summarized by Girke in an e-mail to the MRCC. He would argue that the *Iuventa* could not guarantee the security of these passengers on such a journey due to the ship's unsecured railing, which meant that these young passengers could fall overboard in rocky waters. Also, due to a lack of space below deck, they would be exposed to wind, sun, rain and waves. Plus, supervision at night would be impossible and the crew would be exposed to unacceptable risks. "*Iuventa* is not able to proceed to place of safety" wrote Girke. "And if we transfer the ppl to a place of safety, we are no longer able to assist with SAR in the area."

Not only the *Phoenix*, but also the *Vos Hestia* would have been willing to take in the young refugees, but the MRCC rejected this proposal. There was a major maritime emergency and an urgent request for help from other rescuers, but officials at the MRCC threatened legal consequences. At some point, they started writing in all caps: "PLEASE PROCEED ASAP TO RENDEZVOUS [sic] POSITION," was the message. And "I REMEMBER YOU [sic] THAT YOU CHOOSE THIS MRCC FOR THE SAR CASES. YOU'RE UNDER OUR COORDINATION."

The next morning at 3:09 a.m. UTC, the MRCC gave in a bit, with new "instructions" ordering the *Vos Hestia* to take on 20 of the remaining young passengers. They ordered this transfer to take place immediately, that is, in the middle of the night, two hours before sunrise. This was unusual due to the high level of danger. The *Vos Hestia* was instructed to take them and journey immediately to Sicily. The *Iuventa* was told to "proceed towards CP904 Fiorillo [an Italian coast guard ship] in R/V psn. LAT 34°30'N - LONG. 012°30'E." The instructions were explicit: "CP904 Fio-

riello is already waiting there for you." The MRCC, noted Girke, "was obviously in a hurry. And we knew right away that something wasn't right."

One large RIB remained with the other teams, while the *Iuventa* followed orders and set off northwards with its remaining five passengers. At the rendezvous point, however, there was no CP904 Fiorillo to be seen; instead came the instruction to continue on to Lampedusa, which meant a journey of at least 10 more hours.

Upon arriving in Lampedusa, Girke and several crew members were escorted to the harbor police station and interrogated. For six hours, Girke answered the officials' questions and provided all photos and the ship's logbook. Finally, they had him sign a protocol, but it was in Italian so he couldn't read it. His request to see a translation was rejected, so to avoid wasting any more time, Girke signed it, "contrary to all reason," as he would later say. "I just wanted to get out of there."

On Aug. 1, 2017, the *Iuventa* was once again instructed to dock at Lampedusa, where further interrogations then took place. The day after that, the ship was confiscated, and it has been in the port of Trapani, Sicily, ever since. The official confiscation order proves that local prosecutors there had been investigating the *Iuventa* crew since the fall of 2016. The crew also eventually found out why they had been asked to sail to Lampedusa in May: the wiretaps on the ship were activated on May 6, the day the *Iuventa* was permitted to return to the search and rescue area.

One man who raised his voice against refugees and maritime rescuers in Italy is today that country's minister of the interior: Matteo Salvini of the far-right Lega party. During the election campaign, he had repeatedly called for the confiscation of all NGO rescue ships and for their crews to be prosecuted. Various right-wing parties went to great lengths in the media to insist that the NGOs were financed by "large international powers." This, they argued, made them no better than human traffickers, and the *Iuventa* nothing more than a "taxi del mare." After the elections, Salvini ordered Italian ports to block all ships belonging to maritime rescue operators from mooring.

The lawyer for Jugend Rettet, Nicola Canestrini, has since learned of a notification sent to the Italian secret service by a security contractor who had been installed on the ship belonging to Save the Children, which often



"And we weren't there." Sascha Girke (left) and Dariush Beigui (right) are under investigation for giving refugees a helping hand.

care and escorting them to a safe harbor – and nothing else. In fact, roughly 200 volunteers would go on to participate in 16 *Iuventa* missions that would rescue 14,000 people from drowning.

However, in May 2017, the mood in Italy turned against the refugees – and against the EU, with many Italians feeling that the EU had failed to support their country. Around 160,000 people had crossed the sea and reached the Italian shore in 2016 alone. Right-wing parties in particular started taking an active stance against the maritime rescuers, whom they denounced as "partners to the human traffickers." This is when the *Iuventa* became caught in the crosshairs.

Beigui is an inland ship operator by profession. His cargo is usually diesel fuel. Like many of his fellow rescuers, on several occasions he sacrificed his vacation to work for a good cause. Why?

call to the MRCC, which then ordered the rescue, upon which two 30-knot rigid inflatable boats (RIBs) were put in the water. These two boats had solid bases and each contained 150 life jackets and life rafts for 80 people. The crew then set off to the people in need.

"Yes, they need rescuing," says Beigui emphatically, arguing that people minutes away from drowning are not the only ones who need help. For example, the boat's engine could give out or the occupants might have nothing to eat or drink. "Every refugee boat in the area is in distress. They're simply not capable of reaching any port on their own steam."

Girke reported the ship's position as 33°03.49'N 012°50.2'E, and the MRCC instructed the *Iuventa* to take on 35 individuals from the boats. Almost one hour later, a second wooden boat approached.

many hours before the smaller RIBs had brought all the refugees to the ship, which was not equipped to take them on for a longer period of time or for transport; the *Iuventa* was too small for such tasks and only had one toilet and no cooking facilities. Still, on previous missions, when storm clouds loomed on the horizon, they had taken 480 people on board – even though 120 was the official limit. A large number of them had been in inflatable life rafts that they then tied to the ship.

Back on this particular day, the *Iuventa* rescued 75 male passengers, including 55 minors, before the MRCC instructed them to sail to a different "search and rescue" (SAR) operation three or four nautical miles away, where further refugee boats were in distress and other rescue ships were also occupied with saving the passengers: the *Aquarius*

collaborated with the *Iuventa*. The man sent e-mails to Salvini as well as to Luigi di Maio from the populist Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), in which he insisted that the rescue missions were no coincidence but rather a direct transfer of refugees, with the *Iuventa* as the last link in a chain of human trafficking. He claimed that the crew had communicated with smugglers via a WhatsApp group and said that they had even dragged an empty refugee boat back into Libyan waters and allowed smugglers to reuse it. In another instance, he argued, they had made it possible for a fisherman or smuggler to dismantle the boat engine and take it with him.

Girke denies these accusations. A report from the Forensic Architecture research group at Goldsmiths College at the University of London also exonerated the crew. Their research findings come to the conclusion that “the seizure of the *Iuventa* is emblematic of a new attempt by European authorities to stem the flow of migration across the Mediterranean.”

The individuals rescued on that day have not been questioned about these events. Canestrini has signaled his readiness to provide the PIN numbers and passwords of the confiscated phones, tablets and computers as soon as an independent expert is put in charge of evaluating the devices and their content.

Italian state prosecutors continue to defend the confiscation of the *Iuventa* as a “preventive measure” designed to thwart further “aid in illegal entry” into the country. Other maritime rescue ships have also been confiscated for months. In 2016 and 2017, there were 13 NGO ships operating on the Mediterranean; in 2016 alone, these ships saved the lives of roughly 180,000 people. Today, according to Canestrini, there is only one NGO ship still out there. He calls it a “Europe-wide wave of repression” and a “campaign against solidarity.”

In the *Iuventa* case, 24 investigations are currently being carried out into search and rescue crews on suspicion of aiding and abetting illegal immigration to Italy. In addition to the 10 *Iuventa* crew members, these also include individuals at Save the Children and Médecins Sans Frontières. A total of more than 100 investigations and criminal cases are underway for so-called “crimes of solidarity,” such as those against aid workers in Lesbos, Tunisian fishermen, Italian mayors, French farmers, Eritrean priests and others.

If the *Iuventa* crew members will actually be charged, they face imprisonment as well as hefty fines. Public prosecutors have set a price of €15,000 for each of the 14,000 refugees rescued and transported, which brings the total to €210 million. All of this is going ahead even though the MRCC ordered the rescue of each and every one of these people. “Not once did we take someone on board without getting a prior order to do so from the control center,” says Girke. “There were also no transfers to other ships that weren’t ordered in advance.”

Beigui is outraged that the very agency “trusted by all seafarers across the globe” participated in this event. On that day back in early May 2017, there were 21 boats in distress in that area alone; five of them – three rubber dinghies and two wooden boats – disappeared. “This means that as many as 1,000 people drowned, many hundreds of which we could have saved.”

In 2018, more than 2,000 refugees died in the Mediterranean. Today, the Libyan Coast Guard alone is responsible for assisting people in maritime distress and monitoring “by far the deadliest border in the world.” But this is not stopping people from drowning. Which is why Girke regretfully reports: “We really should be there now.”

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# Swimming to Berlin

Their heroic flight from war-torn Syria made the Mardini sisters, Yusra and Sarah, famous all over the world. They now live very different lives in Germany

BY VERENA MAYER

Two sisters. Their father is a swimming coach; both started swimming at a very young age. They trained, they competed and their lives were like those of lots of children from ordinary middle-class families. Yet there is nothing ordinary about these sisters. They come from Syria where they had to flee the war. From Lebanon they traveled to Turkey, and from there they crossed the Mediterranean to Greece. When the engine of the inflatable boat they and countless other migrants were crammed into suddenly broke down, they leapt into the sea and helped keep the boat above water for several hours. They made it to the coast and from there to Macedonia and Hungary and then finally on to Germany, where they caught the attention of the media. Two female Syrian swimmers who saved others from drowning while fleeing the war – their story catapulted the two young women into the global spotlight.

The girls’ odyssey ended in Berlin in 2015, and from that point on the sisters’ stories have taken diverging paths. Yusra Mardini is now 21

caught between the front lines, how their house was destroyed, how a bomb hit their local pool. After bombs forced the family to move six times in two years, the sisters realized they would rather risk their lives and flee Syria than continue living in a war zone. Their mother then sent her daughters to Europe with a relative. Yusra can still clearly remember sitting with her sister in the plane from Beirut to Istanbul. It was full of Syrians and the cabin crew threatened to arrest anyone trying to bring a life jacket with them. Since fleeing Syria, she has avoided the sea, says Yusra. But she still wanted to keep swimming.

In Arab countries, people look askance at a female swimmer, a woman in a swimsuit, said Mardini in a 2018 interview at Berlin’s Olympic Stadium. “People thought I was just doing it to meet men.” In Germany, she was able to prepare for her next big dream, the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo. She trains for three to five hours a day. She might have been a refugee, “but when I’m in the water, I’m an athlete.” She is often asked whether she feels she’s living a dream with her story, which has taken her from a refugee boat to the Olympics and then to meeting the US president and the Pope.

fewer inhabitants. Sarah served as a translator and interpreter, looked after the children and bought washing machines with donated money so the refugees could at least wear clean clothes.

But in the eyes of the Greek authorities, she was committing a crime. In August 2018, Sarah and three dozen other helpers were arrested and accused of human trafficking, membership in a criminal organization, money laundering and spying. It was alleged that Sarah had cooperated with people smugglers and communicated with them over encrypted networks to bring people illegally to Lesbos.

Sarah denies these accusations. She has personal experience with the methods used to exploit people fleeing their countries, so she would never make common cause with human traffickers. Prosecutors had no proof of Sarah’s alleged crimes and in December she was freed on €5,000 bail and allowed to leave Greece for Germany. However, her trial in Greece wages on. Greek authorities are seeking to criminalize the work of voluntary refugee helpers on Greek islands, said Sarah’s lawyer, Zacharias Kesses, at a December press conference in



Becoming butterflies: In 2016, Yusra and Sarah Mardini received the renowned German Bambi award in the “Quiet Heroes” category.

years old. In Germany, she took up where she had left off in Syria: training to swim. She joined the swimming club Wasserfreunde Spandau 04, where sports officials noticed her and nominated her for the new refugee team that was to compete at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. Yusra qualified and by the time she clambered out of the pool after her races in 2016, she had become an international star and one of the few feel-good stories of the global refugee crisis. She met Barack Obama and the Pope. *Time* magazine named her one of the world’s most influential teenagers.

Yusra is now also a special ambassador for the UN Refugee Agency. She travels the world and takes the stage at events. In one interview, Yusra announced that she wants to use her fame to give other refugees hope. So she tells her story repeatedly, most recently in a book titled after her favorite swimming stroke – *Butterfly* – in which she recounts how her family’s home in Syria was

But she assures people that they wouldn’t want to trade places with her. She and her sister have lost so much, “and we just want peace.”

This could all end happily ever after. The Mardini’s story could stand as an example of how you can achieve it all, even if you’ve had to leave everything behind to flee a war – that is, if it weren’t for Yusra’s sister Sarah, her elder by three years. Sarah injured her shoulder on their journey to Europe and had to give up swimming. She went to Lesbos, where in 2015 she washed up in an inflatable raft and nobody would sell her any water, even though she had money to buy it. Sarah resolved to save other refugees from this sort of experience. She was active as a lifeguard and helped settle the refugees arriving in boats when they washed up on the coast. She volunteered at the refugee camp on Lesbos, where thousands of refugees still live in the worst possible sanitary conditions in a tent city designed for far

Berlin. Sarah’s case highlights the challenges confronting NGOs, those rescuing people at sea and others helping refugees across Europe; these heroes operate in a legal gray area and face increasing pressure from a range of unsympathetic governments and critics.

The two sisters don’t see much of each other at the moment. They both travel a lot and each has her own life. Yusra is training in Hamburg, while Sarah lives with their parents, who were also able to leave Syria, in the German capital, where she is studying politics and economics at Bard College Berlin. The last time the wider public saw the two sisters together was in 2016, when they were honored with a Bambi Media Award. The award they received was in the “Quiet Heroes” category.

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Carola Rackete did what her conscience told her was right: After 17 days floating in Italian waters of the Mediterranean, with 40 increasingly desperate refugees onboard her rescue boat *Sea Watch 3*, the 31-year-old German captain docked at Lampedusa harbor, without permission from authorities. In so doing, she flouted a decree initiated by Italy’s newly minted interior minister, Matteo Salvini, which forbade ships operated by NGOs from calling at Italian ports. The minister of justice then detained her on June 29 and placed her under house arrest. Salvini subsequently tweeted: “Law-breaking captain arrested. Pirate ship seized. Big fine on foreign NGO. Migrants all redistributed to other European countries. Mission accomplished.”

## UNSAFE HAVEN

Rackete has become a hero for opponents of Salvini’s blockade policy. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas criticized the arrest: “Saving human lives is a humanitarian obligation. Rescue at sea must not be criminalized.” Rackete herself announced: “I am ready to go to jail.” As of the latest reporting, Rackete is supposedly being sued for “battering” a small motorboat belonging to the Italian police. The vessel, with five policemen on board, had to quickly evade the *Sea Watch 3*. Rackete “deeply regretted” the near mishap. As of the printing of this paper on July 2, two defense funds, one in Germany and one in Italy, had already collected €1.3 million to cover Rackete’s legal costs.



## PAID FOR BY THE POOR

There once was a world without borders – many millennia ago. Strict border-control measures began only after World War I, claims the sociologist and journalist Harald Welzer in his new bestseller *Alles könnte anders sein. Eine Gesellschaftsutopie für freie Menschen* (Everything could be different. A utopian society for free people). National and ethnic identity became one and the same and obligatory identification cards were introduced, making possible the “ethnic cleansings,” resettlements and genocides that “have left such a lasting moral scar on the 20th century.”

Walls are experiencing a renaissance the world over, according to Welzer. International conflicts are currently giving rise to walls on Cyprus (1), the Korean Peninsula (2) and between India and Pakistan. Illegal migration is the cited cause of walls and fences in Hungary (3), between Turkey and Syria (4), between the US and Mexico (5) as well as between India and Bangladesh. And ethnic and political conflicts are triggering the building of walls between Palestinian territories and Israeli settlements in the West Bank (6), between Saudi Arabia and Iraq as well as through Morocco in the Western Sahara.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the planet has gained no less than 50 new and expansive walls, including in Europe. It would behoove the Europeans to consider “the increase in freedom and quality of life brought by the inexistence of borders.”

