The geopolitical fabric of the border regime in the EU-African borderlands

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The Mediterranean Sea has long been a Mare Nostrum but since the decolonisation in the twentieth century it has become a sharp divide between Europe and Africa. In the past decade, the closure of that border has become symbolized by the desperate attempts of migrants from the global South, mainly Sub-Saharan Africans, to cross the Mediterranean on board small pateras to enter European countries without the requested documents to travel legally. The welfare and opportunity differential between North and South, as well as demographic conditions South of the Mediterranean, explain the high potential for migration between the two sides of the border. However the reduction of opportunities for labour migration and tighter border controls have led to an increase in numbers of undocumented residents including visa overstayers, asylum seekers whose application has been rejected and undocumented migrants crossing the border irregularly. This paper shows how migration control has become a central, increasingly machine-like as also moral highly dubious geopolitical strategy of the EU in the Mediterranean region and how bordering processes affect these EU-African borderlands.

Geopolitical ambitions in the European African borderlands

From the mid-1990s, the EU developed its Mediterranean dimension to improve its relations with its neighbours in the South. At the initiative of Spain and France, the EU engaged into the Barcelona process and signed the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 1995 to construct a zone of security and prosperity in the region and to strengthen economic development and democracy in southern countries. While the eastern enlargement eventually became effective in 2004, the European Commission took the initiative for the Wider Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), to strengthen the relations with states in the eastern and southern borderlands of the EU that were not seen as future candidate member states. The policy aims to promote security and stability in a wider region through bilateral action plans.

Most recently the EU interest for the Mediterranean region has been reinforced with the newly elected French President Nicolas Sarkozy calling for a Mediterranean Union. First conceived as a collaborative effort between countries on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea, the project was opposed by several Member States, noticeably Germany. Besides, it was rejected by Turkey who feared that it was a manoeuvre to postpone its accession to the EU. After some arrangements to accommodate these objections, the summit for the establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean, the new name underlines that it is now a treaty between the EU and neighbouring states, has been scheduled for July 2008.

Although the foreign relations mentioned above covered many policy domains including trade and security, it is striking that migration emerged as major security policy issue. For a large part this seems to be due both to domestic pressures in many Member States where migration and integration are seen as major societal problems, and to the very dynamic of European integration with the removal of internal border controls in the Schengen zone.

The EU-Commission sees "border management" as one of the core goals of the ENP:

> "Border management is likely to be a priority in most Action Plans as it is only by working together that the EU and its neighbours can manage common borders more efficiently in order to facilitate legitimate movements. The Action Plans should thus include measures to improve the efficiency of border management, such as support for the creation and training corps of professional non-military border guards and measures to make travel documents more secure. The goal should be to facilitate movement of persons, whilst maintaining or improving a high level of security." (COM 2004/373 final: 16f.)

The coupling of migration control, border regime, security and foreign policy results in specific collaborative efforts, in which the EU brings its Southern neighbours to help controls its external border and combat undocumented migration. To this end, in July 2006 a large Euro-African Ministerial Conference on Migration and Development was organised in Rabat which involved the EU and African countries from both sides of the Sahara desert (See figure 1). The Rabat Declaration adopted at this conference connects development aid and migration control and externalises border controls to the southern countries, especially transit countries like Morocco. It is slowly but surely shifting the border control southwards: from the (Mediterranean) sea to the (Sahara) desert. In short, geopolitically speaking, policing the external EU border and selective filtering of cross-border flows of migrants has clearly become a key geopolitical priority in the geopolitical discourses of the EU and a bargaining chip to obtain development aid and better trade conditions for the Northern African countries.
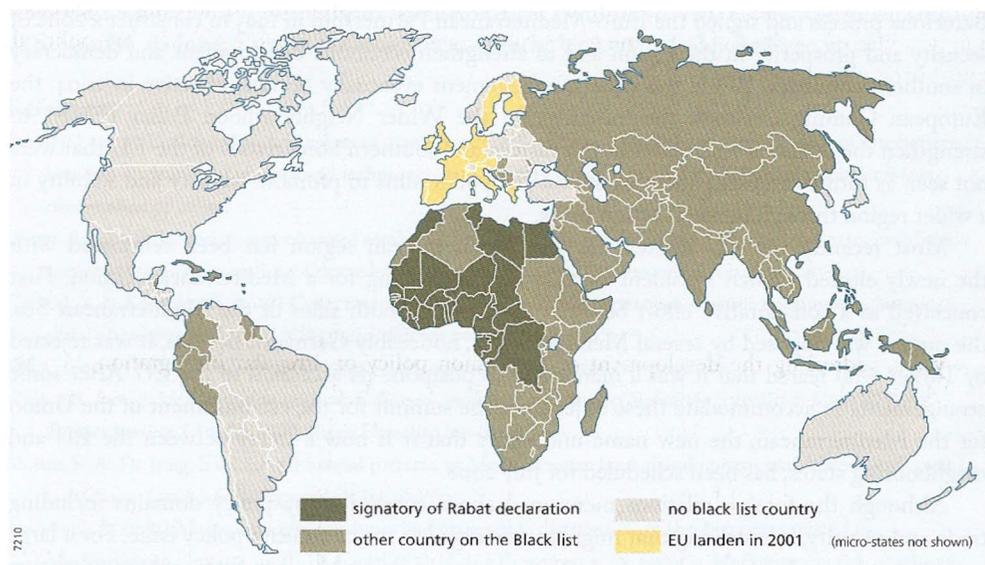

legend:
- signatory of Rabat declaration
- other country on the Black list
- no black list country
- EU landen in 2001 (micro-states not shown)

Figure 1 Signatories of the Rabat declaration (11 July 2006). Source: http://www.maec.gov.ma/migration/En/conference.htm (accessed 31 December 2007).

Bordering processes in the European African borderlands

Geopolitical lenses tend to remain quite abstract and avoid facing up the messy consequences of strategic choices: the embodied experiences of soldiers on the battleground or those of the undocumented immigrants and the border patrollers. Border studies and their scrutiny of the bordering processes can help accounting for these consequences.

What is perhaps most illustrative in the current make-up of the external border regime is that the EU has composed a so-called 'black list', consisting of a total of 132 states whose inhabitants require a visa for entrance into EU-space (see Figure 2). All countries in the Mediterranean region except Israel and Turkey are on this list. The criteria used for a state to be put on this list relate to the perceived possibility of irregular residence after entering EU-space, the perceived influence on public security, and the international relations existing between the EU and the third country in question (Guild, 2001). Over four successive years (2003-2006) Algeria has by far the highest rate of visa refusals in ENP countries, followed by other Mediterranean countries as Morocco, Tunisia and Syria (Boniface & Wesseling, 2008: 29-30). When scrutinizing this list further, it can be ascertained that most Muslim states are on the list, as are most developing countries. Hence, there is an implicit strong inclination to not only use this list as a tool to guarantee security, but also as a means of keeping the world's poorest out.

The geopolitical result of this *b/ordering* regime of the EU is a bifurcated policy of immigration in which a strong selection among non-EU migrants is made between those who are wanted (the investors, the tourists, some IT managers, some cleaners, some construction workers etc) and who are unwanted (the rest), largely based on the net result of their migration for the economy of the receiving country. Those who wish to enter the EU and fall outside the nationally defined and continuously changing category "wanted migrants" are often denied access and hence are increasingly taking irregular migration routes. In this context, Van Houtum and Pijpers (2007) have argued that by implementing such a protectionist and highly selective immigration policy, the EU has come to resemble a gated community in which the bio-political control and management of immigration is, to a large extent, the product of fear. The community thereby defines itself to be the good life, thereby reifying figures of societal difference and danger, such as the criminal, the terrorist, the invading enemy, the *xenos*, the migrant (Huysmans, 2000). Often fear manifests itself in terms of fear of losing material gain, e.g. the anxiety of losing economic welfare or public security. More often, however, this fear relates to the entrance of the immigrant, the stranger and is, as such, associated with a fear of losing a community's self-defined identity.

Bearing witness of this geopolitical doctrine, a whole range of proposals have been released by the Directorate General Justice and Home Affairs of the European Commission over the last few years, addressing the development of a common policy on irregular immigration, human trafficking and the management of external borders towards this purpose. Most recently, the European Commission has established a European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (FRONTEX) (see Figure 3). The goal of FRONTEX is to strive for an overall enhanced common effectiveness and efficiency in controlling the Union's external border, or in the words of FRONTEX itself: the goal is to come to "a pan European model of Integrated Border Security" (Frontex, 2007). The use of advanced technologies in the field of biometric identification such as iris scanning, facial recognition and fingerprints are becoming customary in this respect.

Figure 2 Black List Countries 2001. Source: Common List, Annex 1, Council Regulation 539/2001.
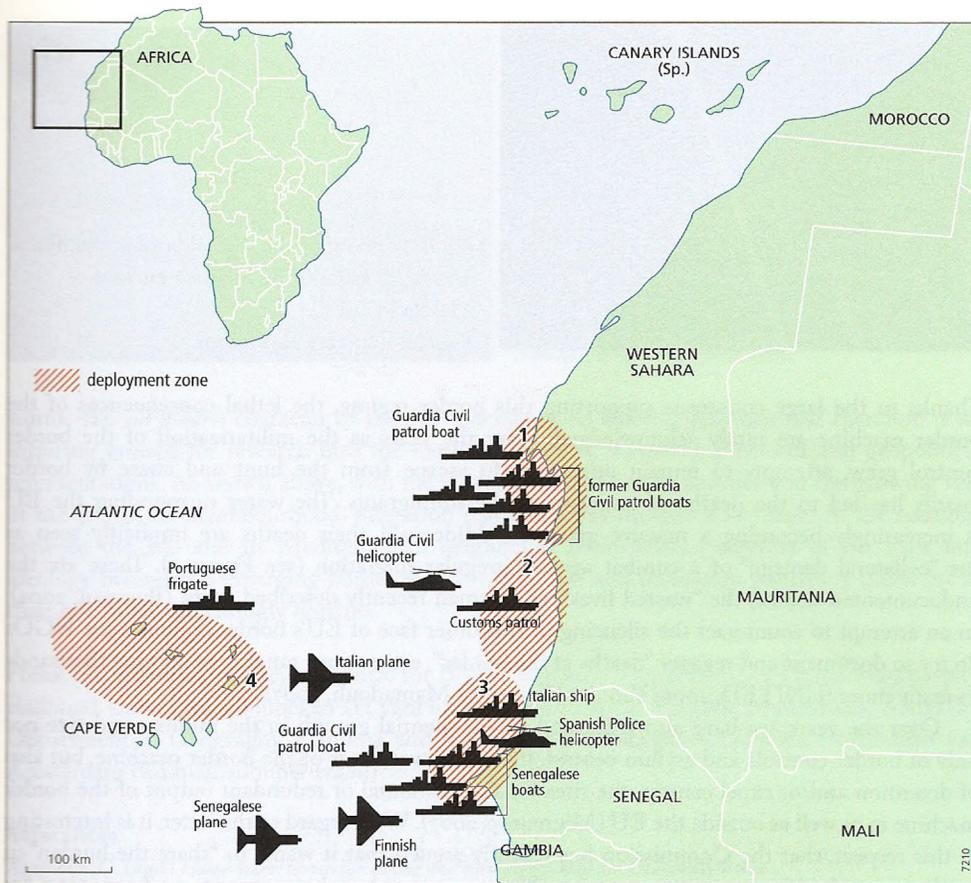
Figure 3 The Frontex deployment at the Western African coast, shortly after the creation of the agency in 2006. Source: BBC, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5331896.stm accessed March 2008.

The European digital border machine

These technologies transform the external border regime increasingly in a *digital border machine*. The border machine processes travellers at the front door detecting "illegal practices", in the digital test-room, and in deportation centres, for those who are expelled (see also Walters, 2002). All this time in the EU border machine your life as a migrant is controlled as in a Foucauldian *panopticon*. The controlling eye of the governor is omnipresent and internalised on the penalty of being considered an out-law, an il-legal. The watching connects to the double function of the word 'border guard'. They guard the border, the entrance to their domain, their law; but they also stand guard, they wait for your coming and watch your moves to check for possible threats to the sustenance of the law (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 A cog of the digital border machine: The fence around the Spanish enclave of Melilla in 2006.
Source: CC Sara Prestianni

Thanks to the large consensus supporting this border regime, the lethal consequences of the border machine are rarely acknowledged. Over the years as the militarization of the border control grew, attempts to remain unseen or to escape from the hunt and chase by border guards has led to the deaths of many would-be immigrants. The water surrounding the EU is increasingly becoming a massive graveyard. Hideously, their deaths are implicitly seen as the "collateral damage" of a combat against irregular migration (see Figure 5). These are the undocumented deaths, the "wasted lives", as Bauman recently described them (Bauman, 2004). In an attempt to counteract the silencing of this other face of EU's border regime some NGOs do try to document and register "deaths at the border", estimations ranging from nine thousands to many more (UNITED, 2006; Van der Wusten & Mamadouh, 2007).

Over the years, we have also witnessed an exponential growth in the number and size not only of border controls and asylum centres, the input processors of the border machine, but also of detention and/or expel centres, the sites for the unwanted or redundant output of the border machine in as well as outside the EU (Migreurop, 2007). With regard to the latter, it is interesting in this respect, that the Commission has recently argued that it wants to "share the burden" of border control with respective countries. As a consequence, what one can see happening are indeed EU financed camps located in non-EU neighbouring countries and anti-immigration campaigns (Spanish Secretary of State for Immigration, 2007) in order to prevent the inflow from migrants from these countries. Hence, countries of origin are being made complicit to the protection of the system, the law of the EU. The making of these spaces of exception, these detention centres for those who have not committed a crime other than not having the right documents, could be seen as a very drastic attempt of control over the whereabouts of the unwanted mobile people: The undocumented or expelled migrants. These migrants are the faceless, depoliticised subclass excepted from the territorial sovereignty, or what Agamben (1998) famously termed the *homo sacer*, of today's EU world.

Conclusion

The European Union attracts an increasing attention of academics, including geographers. At first this attention was largely devoted to the dynamics of internal integration and the relation between the part-taking Member States and the supranational level of governance. Now increasingly attention is being paid to the relation of the European Union to the rest of the

Figure 5 A small boat with exhausted would-be immigrants arriving at the Spanish Canary Islands (2004).
Source: CC Sara Prestianni

world. The *sui generis* character of the EU extends to its external relations and therefore is an inspiring ground for research into the nature of borders, bordering processes and geopolitical representations. As shown above, with the securitisation of border regimes and the growing role of the EU in its neighbourhood, migration regulation has become a key issue in the relations between the EU and its Mediterranean neighbours. More critical scrutiny of the logic and ideology behind this emerging border regime of the EU and its foreign policies is called for as their effects are increasingly horrific.

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