Cyber threats: are you ready?

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Cyber defence in focus
The EU has taken action in response to the deaths of hundreds of people fleeing conflict and poverty in the Middle East and Africa, many of whom have become victims of human smuggling and trafficking across the Mediterranean. On 18 May 2015, the EU Council approved the Crisis Management Concept for a military Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operation to disrupt a business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the south-central Mediterranean. Consequently, on 22 June 2015, the EU launched a European Union military operation in the south-central Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED).

Following the Political and Security Committee’s decision, the EUNAVFOR MED has been codenamed ‘Operation Sophia’, after a baby girl born on 22 August 2015, to a Somali woman on board a German frigate off the coast of Libya.

The Three Phases of Operation Sophia

Operation Sophia consists of three operational phases, planned in full compliance with international law. These phases focus on surveillance, search operations, and disposal practices, respectively. In the two months since the achievement of Full Operational Capability, on 27 July 2015, the operation has successfully met the objectives laid out for Phase 1. These concerned the surveillance and assessment of human smuggling and trafficking networks across the south-central Mediterranean.

With the necessary intelligence information collected and analysed, the EU Political and Security Committee approved the corresponding Rules of Engagement and authorised a transition to Operational Phase 2. Since 7 October 2015, the command of Operation Sophia has been authorised to take more active steps towards curbing illegal activities in the Mediterranean. The aim is to conduct boarding, search, seizure and diversion, on the high seas, of vessels suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking. The UN Resolution 2240 (2015), announced on 9 October, provides an additional political endorsement and authorises Member States to seize vessels confirmed as being used for migrant smuggling and human trafficking from Libya.

The third phase of the operation will lead to the disposal of such vessels and related assets, and the apprehension of traffickers and smugglers.

Common Security and Defence Policy operations have the full support of the European Defence Agency (EDA). To this end, the EDA has taken three steps to facilitate the implementation of Operation Sophia: firstly, the Agency is contributing to the improvement of maritime situational awareness by the provision of the MARSUR networking project. With MARSUR, the existing naval and maritime information exchange systems are linked together, facilitating information flow and control. Secondly, the EDA has offered training in cyber awareness to the military staff of the operation, in order to increase resilience against potential cyber threats. Last but not least, human resources management software developed by the EDA is being employed at the operation’s headquarters.

Facts & figures:
Area of operation: central part of southern Mediterranean Sea; Headquarters: Rome, Italy; Starting date: 22 June 2015; Mandate validation: 12 months since Full Operation Capability; Force strength: dependent upon rotation; currently the flagship (the Italian aircraft carrier Cavour) and 5 other naval units and 6 air assets; Contributing States: 22 Member States (Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom); Operation budget: 11.82 million for the whole 12-month mission.
Rear Admiral (UH) Enrico Credendino, the Operation Commander, presents the achievements of Operation Sophia Phase 1 to European Defence Matters, along with the upcoming challenges related to entering Phase 2

How would you summarise the progress and achievements of Operation Sophia Phase 1?

EUNAVFOR MED – Operation Sophia Phase 1 started on 22 June, following the decision of the European Council. A few days later, the appointed EUNAVFOR MED Force Commander, Rear Admiral (LH) Andrea Gueglio, led the flagship, Italian Aircraft Carrier Cavour, into the Joint Operation Area of 525,000 nautical miles in the central Mediterranean (an area six times wider than the length of Italy). One month later, the Force reached Full Operational Capability, following the integration of Germany’s frigate FGS Schleswig-Holstein and the auxiliary ship FGS Werra, as well as the UK’s hydrographic ship, HMS Enterprise. The surface units were supported by additional airborne surveillance assets, including two Italian EH101 helicopters, a UK Merlin MK 2 MPRA helicopter, a French Falcon 50, a Luxembourg SW3 Merlin III, and a Spanish P3B Orion MPA.

The first phase, conducted entirely in international waters, aimed to collect useful information and gain a clear understanding of the business model used by migrant smugglers and traffickers. Steps were also taken to ensure that the proper joint procedures were in place with all relevant partners, in order to collect data and evidence regarding the criminal activity of the smugglers and traffickers. This will facilitate future prosecutions.

Within two months, EUNAVFOR MED assets reported 22 sightings of suspected smugglers and traffickers on the high sea. These suspects will be the subject of interception and apprehension efforts during Phase 2. Furthermore, as a result of EUNAVFOR MED activities, 16 suspected smugglers and traffickers have so far been prosecuted by the Italian authorities, with 16 boats seized. In addition, 3399 lives have been saved at sea, including 2546 men, 683 women, 186 children and 4 babies.

Without a doubt, the success of this first phase is down to the comprehensive liaison network established by EUNAVFOR MED. This network includes all relevant military actors, such as the Italian Operation Mare Sicuro and Frontex Operation Triton, as well as non-military actors, such as Europol, Eurojust and UN agencies, international governmental and non-governmental organisations as well as local non-governmental organisations.

What changes to the mission have brought about the shift to Phase 2? How do you see the future development of the mission?

Moving from Phase I to Phase 2 in international waters allows for EUNAVFOR MED assets to board, search, seize and, if necessary, divert suspicious vessels on the high seas, under the conditions provided for by applicable international law. This legal framework was further strengthened by the UN Security Council on 9 October 2015 when, acting under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, it adopted the Resolution 2240 (2015) authorising Member States to seize vessels confirmed as being used for migrant smuggling or human trafficking from Libya.

There are three main pillars to the second phase of the operation in international waters: firstly, the capture and disposal of the vessels used by smugglers and traffickers; secondly, the restriction of smugglers’ and traffickers’ freedom of movement on the high seas; and, lastly, the apprehension of smugglers and traffickers, including those travelling on migrants’ boats. These actions should certainly prove an effective means of disrupting the business model employed by smugglers and traffickers, thereby serving, also, as a deterrent. They cannot, however, be our sole solution, so long as our activities are limited to international waters. Nevertheless, throughout these activities we will remain committed to saving lives at sea upon request by the competent Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) and in accordance with the International Law of the Sea.

Each mission is also about capability development and experience sharing; from this point of view what lessons learned can you identify?

This mission is a new type of Law Enforcement Operation conducted with military assets and is certainly indebted to the experience gained in the European Operation ATALANTA, working on counter piracy in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, in the Operation planning phase, we received support from an Operation ATALANTA expert team, who directly presented best practices and provided advice regarding areas of possible concern.

On the other hand, during Phase I we also had the chance to test our procedures, in particular with regard to information sharing with other military operations with more experience in the area, such as the Italian Operation Mare Sicuro and the Frontex Operation Triton.

Last but not least, we are exchanging information with a few civilian companies to further develop our software in accordance with the lessons identified during the first months of the Operation.