

The WatchTheMed Alarm Phone

A Disobedient Border-Intervention

Maurice Stierl

Abstract The activist project ‘WatchTheMed Alarm Phone’ was launched in autumn 2014 and functions as a hotline for travellers in distress at sea. Various individuals, groups and transnational movements came together to intervene practically to support precarious human mobility in often deadly spaces. This article focuses on the emergence of the Alarm Phone and its first three months in operation in the three main regions of the Mediterranean Sea. Countering the violence of the EU border regime and underpinned by a belief in the freedom of movement for all, the activists regard the Alarm Phone as a political mobilisation in solidarity with the political struggles enacted by people on the move throughout and beyond Europe.

Introduction

The WatchTheMed Alarm Phone was founded in autumn 2014 as a response to the violence of Europe’s border regime and its practices of ‘pushing-back’ and ‘leaving-to-die’ that turn the Mediterranean Sea into a mass grave year after year (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2014a). Located in diverse European and Northern African contexts, human rights and no-border activists have decided to intervene in a space often considered as reserved for the border guardians of sovereign (supra-)states. Through an emergency phone hotline for those in immediate distress at sea, the Alarm Phone seeks to support human movement attempting to overcome Europe’s dangerous maritime borderzones.

This article will provide some preliminary insights into the emergence, working and self-conception of this alternative alarm network and focuses on its initial

three months in operation.¹ Since its launch, the Alarm Phone has been contacted hundreds of times from all three main regions of the Mediterranean Sea. Many of these cases illustrate not only the various forms of violence and human rights abuse occurring within and beyond the external borders of Europe but also the exacerbation of migration struggles in maritime spaces. The Alarm Phone intervenes in a crucial space of border crossing during a historic time of transformation. The movements of migrants and refugees across the Mediterranean Sea intensified tremendously in 2014, exposing, challenging and sometimes succumbing to Europe's politics of deterrence. The first months of 2015 clearly suggest that these movements are not slowing down. Quite the contrary: thousands already successfully crossed the sea but, in particular off the coast of Libya, hundreds have died (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2015a). In times of escalating conflicts in many regions of the world and an increasingly restrictive global visa regime that result in millions fleeing on ever-more dangerous paths, these migration struggles animate and reinforce disputes amongst European border authorities and point to an unfolding, if not long existing, European crisis of legitimacy.

Various individuals and groups have gathered around a practical task, the creation of an emergency phone line, in order to oppose a politics of closure and move towards a Mediterranean space marked by solidarity and the freedom of human mobility. The following three parts offer snap-shots of a new movement that decided to create a disobedient border intervention.

Creating a Border Intervention

“He said to me: you are in an area due to the Maltese forces, not to us. You have to call the Maltese navy. I said to him please we are dying. [...] You can call the Maltese forces and I will give you the number now: 00356...” (Gatti 2013)

On the 11th of October 2013, merely eight days after the shipwreck off the coast of Lampedusa with more than 360 lives lost, Dr Mohanad Jammo reached out to the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome (WatchTheMed 2013a). Calling from a vessel in immediate distress located south of Lampedusa and in the Maltese Search and Rescue (SAR) zone, Dr Jammo was one of more

¹ Please note that the author is an active member of the Alarm Phone. I would like to thank all the interviewees for their time and insights and Lorenzo Pezzani, Martina Tazzioli, Charles Heller and Glenda Garelli for their thoughts and valuable suggestions.

than 400 refugees who had fled Libya to reach European shores. Water was continuously leaking inside the vessel through the holes that gun shots had left, fired from a Libyan vessel flying the Berber flag that had chased after them the night before. In quarrels over the question of who would take responsibility to coordinate a rescue operation between the authorities in Rome and the Armed Forces of Malta (AFM), time was lost and rescue efforts delayed. The vessel capsized, and more than 200 people drowned, amongst them Dr Jammo's two little sons.

In October 2014, around the anniversary of the shipwreck, the WatchTheMed Alarm Phone went live. It is conceived as a real-time emergency intervention in a space characterised by the unabated dying of thousands who attempt to cross maritime borders toward Europe year after year. Referring to the left-to-die case from October 2013, its first public statement asked: "What would have happened if the boat-people could have directed a second call to an independent phone-hotline through which a team of civil society members could raise alarm and put immediate pressure on authorities to rescue?" (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2014a)

Initiated by a coalition of human rights and migrant activist groups, including WatchTheMed, Boats4People, Welcome to Europe, Afrique Europe Interact, Borderline-Europe, No Borders Morocco, FFM and Voix des Migrants, the Alarm Phone drew inspiration from individuals located in migrant communities who had, for years, been contact persons for those in distress at sea. One of them, Father Mussie Zerai, an Eritrean priest who resides in Switzerland had encouraged the creation of the alarm hotline and offered to share the experiences and expertise he gained in innumerable calls from Eritrean refugees at sea seeking his support. The call announcing the Alarm Phone as a response to a European politics of deterrence found widespread endorsement and support. Dr Jammo and other survivors of border crossings, relatives of those who disappeared when seeking to reach Europe, migrant rights and civil society groups in Africa and Europe, academics such as Étienne Balibar and Antonio Negri, artists including Nobel Laureate Elfriede Jelinek, investigative journalists such as Gabriele del Grande, as well as former UN Special Rapporteur Jean Ziegler all signed the call (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2014b).

In months of preparation before its launch, distress scenarios in the Western and Central Mediterranean Sea as well as the Aegean Sea were played out in emergency rehearsals. A wealth of technical-legal knowledge and regional expertise was collected, brought together, and fed into detailed handbooks and step-by-step emergency instructions, offering insights into the complex and fast-

changing materialities, infrastructures and socio-political conditions decisively shaping and impacting on processes of bordering in the Mediterranean Sea. Uncountable questions were raised and sought to be answered: In what ways do sea journeys between Turkey and Greece, Morocco and Spain, Libya and Italy differ? How do varying weather conditions, winds, waves and currents impact on the movements of vessels? And what types of vessels are commonly used? How far does mobile phone reception and coastal radars stretch into maritime spaces, and where do SAR zones and territorial waters begin and end? What are the languages needed to communicate with passengers on board? How can satellite phones provide us with the position of the vessel? Who are the responsible authorities to alert and what have been prior experiences of engaging with them? What agreements exist between the EU and third-countries and what are the many forms of human rights abuse that occur in these borderspaces?

Answers to many of these questions were found within the network itself, from experiences and knowledges accumulated in years of anti-racist campaigning and border struggles within and beyond Europe, but also from the personal experiences of those who had once embarked on and survived dangerous sea crossings. Ali, for example, now residing in Germany, had met Alarm Phone activists at refugee protests in front of the UNHCR in Tunisia during which he went on a hunger-strike.² Unable to live in the notorious Choucha refugee camp or to return to his 'home country', Ali decided to take a boat to Italy in May 2014. From Tunisia he travelled to Libya where he stayed in an overcrowded 'farm', paid a high sum of money, and crossed the sea below deck with hundreds of other travellers. "At that moment we realised that it is a death-boat, we thought we would die in the waves. [...] We stayed in there for 13 hours, water started to leak in but then the Italian coastguard came and rescued us. When I came to Europe I stayed in touch and learned about the Alarm Phone, I liked the idea and joined."³

Since October 2014, the Alarm Phone is operated day and night by volunteering shift teams and supporters situated in various European and North African settings. While the project does not possess independent means of rescue, its shift teams offer advice, information and the possibility of raising public alarm to pressurise coastguards to conduct rescue operations, if need be also beyond the sovereign territorial spaces of the EU. Watching one of the best monitored seas in the world through different means and eyes, this alternative alarm network struggles against maritime abandonment of people in distress who were, in past incidents, left to die despite received SOS signals or direct

² Interview with Ali, name changed, 22/01/2015.

³ Ibid.

encounters at sea with commercial or borderguard vessels (WatchTheMed 2011). Entering a space seemingly reserved for state border authorities and commercial activity, the Alarm Phone creates a hitherto inexistent presence in the Mediterranean border region, openly cautioning sovereign border guardians “that we are informed and ‘watching’ them” (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2014a).

As a practical border intervention, the Alarm Phone is embedded in and underpinned by a radical critique: The Mediterranean Sea is not a space in itself where tragedies occur seemingly naturally or where fate dictates who may or may not survive. It is the European border regime and its practitioners that curtail human mobility ever more forcefully, re-direct certain movements towards increasingly dangerous paths and thereby actively turn maritime spaces into ones of mass suffering and dying. As part of “the increasing struggles against a repressive European border regime”, Alarm Phone is a small but growing vehicle of solidarity, supporting the freedom of movement for all (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2014c).

Importantly, the hotline is not considered a solution but, as Alarm Phone activist Helmut points out, merely an “intensified form of a social practice, an intervention that places a pattern of action at its centre — the reaching out and connecting via phone lines — which is, however, only thinkable within a social universe of transnational practices that also go beyond Fortress Europe and puncture holes into its walls.”⁴ The Alarm Phone number, circulated amongst migrant communities and activist groups, is spread evermore widely and, in its first months of operation, has been dialled already hundreds of times.

Calling +334 86 51 71 61 means Alarm

Since its launch in October 2014, the Alarm Phone has been contacted many times from the three main maritime border regions, the Western and Central Mediterranean Sea as well as the Aegean Sea. The severity and scale of the cases differed, ranging from situations of immediate distress in the Central and Western Mediterranean to potential and actual push-backs toward Turkey after entering Greek territory. Those who dialled the number were not always those in distress but, especially in the beginning, oftentimes relatives, friends and other (migrant) activist groups concerned about the travellers’ well-being.

⁴ Interview with Helmut, 21/01/2015, author’s translation.

In late October 2014, the Alarm Phone was contacted by Mr D., a Syrian refugee calling from a police station in Turkey (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2014d). In an apparent state of shock, he recounted the events that had occurred only hours earlier in the Aegean Sea. Leaving Turkish territory in order to reach the Greek island of Chios and to apply for asylum there, a rubber vessel carrying 33 Syrian refugees was intercepted by the Hellenic coastguards. Accompanied by threatening gun shots in the air, the travellers were ordered to disembark and enter the coastguards' vessel. Mr D. recounts how the coastguards boarded their vessel, disabled the engine and then forced them back onto it. The Alarm Phone report notes:

“Then the coastguard punctured the vessel and left them behind in Turkish waters with a hole in the vessel and without an engine. Mr D. stated that the coastguard wanted ‘to see us drown.’” (Ibid.)

Fortunately, the passengers were able to alarm the Turkish coastguards who came to the rescue, hours later. The refugees disembarked in Cesme, were then brought to Izmir and released shortly afterwards. Mr D. remained in contact with Alarm Phone members, eager to make this illegal and cruel push-back operation by Greek coastguards publicly known.

A few weeks later, in the morning of the 14th of November 2014, Father Zerai sent a message to members of the Alarm Phone shift team, the MRCC Rome and the Maltese coastguard, notifying them about a vessel in distress off the coast of Libya (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2014e). The message said that approximately 200 refugees from Syria, Palestine and African countries, including women and children, were in an urgent emergency situation. With the provided coordinates, shift team members Sophie and Lisa were able to locate the vessel north-west of Zuwarah, Libya with no apparent vessels in vicinity. In first direct exchanges with the passengers through a Thuraya satellite phone, the shift team detected Arabic as the main spoken language on board. Alerted by the shift team, Hatem, an Arabic-speaking Alarm Phone member, immediately reached out to the refugees, trying to gather as many information and details as possible.

“I got hold of someone, he was shouting, begging more than shouting, ‘please please help us, we are going to die’. I tried to calm him down and gather information about the position. How many people are there, are there kids? You have to ask these questions three or four times due to the loud engine, the people in the background [...]

and the wind. Then the phone cut.”⁵

In several phone calls, Hatem was able to obtain further details that the shift team passed on to the Italian coastguard. The engine had stopped working, water was entering and a deceased woman was on board of the vessel. The MRCC Rome confirmed that they had instructed a merchant vessel to redirect its course and come to rescue, without specifying the time it might take to reach the refugees.

“Then they called me and there was a baby in the background crying, I did not understand. A man told me: ‘a young woman just gave birth on the boat, please help us’. When I called him again there was a lot of shouting and they were saying that the baby had just died. I explained to him that a big cargo boat was coming. Suddenly they saw a boat on the left. [...] They then said ‘the boat is here, we are safe, we are safe’. They embarked on the cargo boat and the phone cut.”⁶

The MRCC Rome confirmed that the refugees would be brought to an Italian harbour. For the first time, the Alarm Phone was in direct contact with people in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea. For Sophie, following the emergency situation of the refugees in “eight hours of extreme stress”, it was “troubling as we heard the panic through the phone”.⁷ Besides mediating information between the MRCC Rome and the refugees, the shift team was able to charge the passengers’ satellite phone with credit from afar in order to further accompany them in this dangerous situation, repeatedly assuring them that their case was known and a rescue operation underway. Re-narrating the events and the activities of the shift team in a published report, the Alarm Phone emphasises the indispensability of rescue efforts beyond European coastlines. While noting that exchanges with the MRCC Rome were productive in this specific emergency situation, it cautions that in case of inaction or delay, “the shift team would have launched a public call to draw attention to the boat in distress, pressurising state and EU authorities to act” (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2014d).

In early December 2014, Alarm Phone member Miriam bore witness to an unfolding tragedy in the Western Mediterranean Sea (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2014f). A rubber vessel had left northern Morocco on the 4th of

⁵ Interview with Hatem, 28/01/2015.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Interview with Sophie, 20/01/2015.

December and was sailing toward Spain. The engine had cut off and concerned community members and friends situated in the forests and mountains close to the Spanish enclave of Melilla notified both the human rights network Caminando Fronteras and the Alarm Phone. Message of safe arrival of the 57 people on board, including 9 children, was anxiously awaited but contact to the passengers had been lost. Miriam, a regional expert, was alerted by the shift team to this emergency situation and began to obtain further information from both the community members and the Spanish sea search and rescue organisation Salvamento Marítimo which had begun an expansive search with two planes, a helicopter as well as two rescue vessels. Due to the presumed lack of a satellite phone on board, no direct contact to the passengers could be established. The search concluded in the night of the 4th of December without success.

On the 5th of December, rescue forces of Salvamento Marítimo finally discovered the vessel and informed Miriam that a rescue operation was taking place. While relieved at first, for Miriam “it was somehow strange as they said that they had only seen a single child and I knew of 9 children on board. But I thought, well, who knows, they are in the process of rescuing.”⁸ The survivors were brought to Almería in Spain and cared for by the Red Cross, but amongst them were only one child, 17 men and 10 women.

“When I called again and enquired about the number of those rescued — that was the moment of shock. I then called the migrant community to inform them about the number. I had deliberated about how inform them but I had to tell the bitter truth. They first only said, ‘thank you, thank you’, and asked me to call again later when everybody had been gathered. That was even worse as I realised that a big group was standing around the phone, desperately wanting to know how the people died and what their names were.”⁹

Those 29 refugees who had gone overboard during the journey, amongst them 8 children, remain missing and are presumed dead. Salvamento Marítimo continued its search but then called it off after another three days without results. Miriam remained in contact with the migrant community and was able to pass on gathered information in the following days. Later on it emerged that she and other members of the Alarm Phone knew a father residing in Morocco whose two little twins had died during the journey.

⁸ Interview with Miriam, 19/01/2015.

⁹ Ibid.

In the first months of 2015, more and more emergency calls reached the Alarm Phone, presumably due to improved seasonal conditions for maritime border crossings and the increased circulation of the phone's number. In dozens of cases of distress with hundreds of migrants and refugees involved, information could be retrieved and passed on to rescue services (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2015b). The dying, however, did not end. Quite to the contrary. In the first five months of the year alone, more than 1800 people lost their lives and within merely one week in April, more than 1200 travellers drowned (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2015c).

Reinforcing the Underground Railroad

“The frontier is a wake-up call. [...] At the frontier our liberty is stripped away — we hope temporarily — and we enter the universe of control. Even the freest of free societies is unfree at the edge, where things and people go out and other people and things come in; where only the right things and people must go in and out. Here, at the edge, we submit to scrutiny, to inspection, to judgement. These people, guarding these lines, must tell us who we are. We must be passive, docile. To be otherwise is suspect, and at the frontier to come under suspicion is the worst of all possible crimes. [...] The wake-up call of the frontier is also a call to take up arms.”
(Rushdie 2002: 411ff.)

Salman Rushdie conceives of the frontier as a space of suspense, a zone of discipline and appearance in which one subserviently awaits the verdict, spoken by those presumably guarding these lines, telling us who we are. Not necessarily a rigid geographical demarcation, this frontier shifts, multiplies and becomes reproduced in moments and places of encounter between access-enabling and access-denying forces. It is, however, also a space of ambiguity, where the sought-after imposition of an identity onto mobile subjects is a provocation, a wake-up call, and maybe even a call to take up arms.

It was in 2011 that survivors of yet another maritime catastrophe prompted such a wake-up call. A small rubber vessel had fled war-torn Libya, hoping to reach Lampedusa. Drifting uncontrollably in the Mediterranean Sea for more than two weeks, sixty-one passengers died on board, one person shortly after being washed up back in Libya and another person days later in Gaddafi's prison (WatchTheMed 2011). Despite many close encounters at sea, with

fishing vessels, presumably a NATO vessel as well as a helicopter, no one had come to rescue the passengers. The verdict, it seemed, had already been spoken. In silence and abandonment, the travellers were left to die, leaving only nine to tell their story. Father Zerai, Lorenzo Pezzani and Charles Heller were amongst those who listened to the survivors' testimonies and their charge against forces that had left them behind whilst in obvious need and despair. When the journey was reconstructed through their accounts, the scale of human suffering, active passivity and neglect came to the fore.

When Lorenzo and Charles founded the online mapping platform WatchTheMed, they thought of it as a response to cases of abandonment, push-back and other human rights violations at sea. As a sensing tool, this platform would allow users to track and monitor various movements in the Mediterranean Sea, including those of maritime patrols, vessels in distress and rescue operations, and would allow others than EU and North African border authorities to "exercise a critical right to look" (WatchTheMed 2013b).

"By interviewing survivors as well as using some of the very same technologies used by EUROSUR — vessel tracking technologies, satellite imagery, geo-referenced positions from satellite phones — and spatialising the data that emerges from these sources, WTM is able to ask some of the following questions: in which Search and Rescue (SAR) zone was a vessel in distress and which state was responsible to operate rescue? Which vessels were in vicinity? If it was rescued, were the passengers brought to a territory in which they could apply for international protection [or] were they pushed back?" (Ibid.)

The founders regarded WatchTheMed as a tool that would open up the ambivalent and often violent Mediterranean borderzone and subject it to a "disobedient gaze", one that could potentially democratise a highly undemocratic space (Pezzani/Heller 2013). For Lorenzo, it has "the potential [...] to tell the story that the government of migration does not want to tell or to draw the map that the government of migration does not want to draw."¹⁰ Already early on, the possibility of direct intervention was envisioned:

"Apart from reconstructing past events and determining responsibility for migrants' deaths, WatchTheMed has further potential. It would be technically conceivable to map real-time events and spread information about people in distress at sea to immediately pressure

¹⁰ Interview with Lorenzo, 19/03/2014.

actors at sea to rescue them. In order for this to materialise, a well-functioning SOS system and a responsive civilian network across the Mediterranean are necessary preconditions.” (WatchTheMed 2012)

It took the collectivisation of various transnational (migrant) activist struggles that a gaze documenting human rights violations after the fact would turn into a disobedient intervention supporting, in real-time, human movements in the Mediterranean Sea. Various human and migrant rights groups came together as the Alarm Phone coalition and formed an ‘assemblage of capabilities’ around a practical task: the around-the-clock operation of a phone line. Stretching from Tunis to Chicago, from Tangier and Melilla to Palermo, Berlin, Strasbourg, Barcelona, Brussels, Vienna, Zurich, Amsterdam and London, this coalition was unwilling to leave the Mediterranean Sea to traditional border-guardians and decided to shed a spotlight on a deadly borderzone.

Corridors for secure entry have narrowed or been shut altogether, a process perpetuated by border-enforcements and visa regimes that, in increasingly diffusing, militarising and externalising manner, provide the groundwork for a booming industry of assisted travel, readily denounced by state and border guardians as the manifestation of evil. In 2014, border crossings in the Mediterranean Sea increased threefold, partly due to and partly despite these processes, and reached a novel and historic scale of human movement but also a new dimension of human plight with record numbers of known deaths. European responses to the particularly dramatic shipwrecks of October 2013 have varied, ranging from inaction to pledges against human trafficking, from avowals for better maritime surveillance led by EU institutions to Italy’s unilateral navy rescue operation *Mare Nostrum* and its (non-)replacement by the Frontex deterrence operation *Triton* in November 2014 (see also Baird/Spijkerboer/Cuttitta 2015; Kasperek 2015). Authority struggles and “disputes over the type of response to deaths at sea in the Mediterranean and rule of law arguments over limited mandates, competences and legal rules” evidently emerged, between EU member states, between member state governments and EU institutions as well as amongst EU actors involved in border governance (Carrera/den Hertog 2015: 23).

It is in this turbulent and conflictual space that the Alarm Phone has decided to intervene, both discursively and practically. Condemning Frontex’ demand voiced to Italian authorities and borderguards to limit their search and rescue activities to the 30 mile zone off European coasts, members of the hotline regard the present time as crucial to push public sentiments toward a concerted European response to maritime emergency situations. The phone project is

treading a delicate path, demanding greater EU intervention in a particular space while fundamentally opposing the increasingly sophisticated forms of migration detection and control that, ever more potently, generate knowledges on migratory paths and patterns. However, as a proponent of the uncompromised freedom of movement for all, its practices remain fundamentally disobedient, conceived by some members as a small pillar supporting and reinforcing an existing ‘underground railway’ that, under the radar of Europe’s border regime, facilitates ‘irregularised’ movements.¹¹ The months to come, and particularly the ever-more lengthy ‘season’ of Mediterranean border crossing in 2015 will determine whether Europe will listen to the wake-up call that thousands of people voice and enact when moving across life-threatening border barriers; a call which the Alarm Phone seeks to amplify.

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¹¹ As voiced by Alarm Phone member Marion during the general meeting in Berlin, 9-11/01/2015. See also Georgi/Schatral 2012.

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Autor_innen

Dr Maurice Stierl (maurice.stierl@gmail.com) is Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of California, Davis. His research focuses on migration and border struggles in contemporary Europe and is broadly situated in the disciplines of International Relations, International Political Sociology, and Border Studies. He concluded his doctoral research in 2014 at the University of Warwick and is the author of the journal article “No One is Illegal!’ – Resistance and the Politics of Discomfort’ (2012), published in *Globalizations*. His forthcoming publications will appear in the journals *Citizenship Studies*, *Political Geography*, *Global Society*, and *Antipode*, as well as in a volume edited by Dr Nicholas De Genova. Dr Stierl is a member of the activist project *WatchTheMed Alarm Phone* and the research collectives *kritnet*, *MobLab*, *Authority & Political Technologies* and a co-editor of *movements*.

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