



**CCIS** | Center for Comparative  
Immigration Studies

## Standoff Politics and Carcerality at Sea: Criminalizing Solidarity in the Central Mediterranean

Monday, April 8, 2023 | 1:30PM - 3:00PM Pacific Time

In-person Event Only | ERC Conference Room | 15



### Michael Gordon

Michael Gordon is a Research Associate at the International Migration Research Centre (IMRC) at Wilfrid Laurier University. His research broadly surrounds irregularized migration and the externalization of European border controls, with a particular focus on the acts of solidarity through the work of civil society Search and Rescue (SAR) operations. These research interests coalesce around the theoretical intersections between sovereignty, solidarity, forced migration and borders at the supposed margins of the Global North. Michael holds a PhD in International Relations from McMaster University and an MA in Global Governance from the University of Waterloo. Currently, he serves as a Co-Editor of *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*.

Standoffs at sea between European state governments and civil fleet Search and Rescue (SAR) operations have become increasingly common and represent an emergent norm in the Central Mediterranean. Following a rescue at sea, migrants are often barred from disembarking and left stranded on NGO vessels for an extended period of time, creating rescue boats an intermediate space of off-shore containment. As NGOs challenge the singularity of state authority at sea through conducting SAR operations at sea, enacting a contentious politics of solidarity collides with biopolitical modes of state control. While the work of the civil fleet has never been without contention, there has been a marked shift in the spatial politics of the sea. This shift in the governance of the sea ensures that NGO vessels are transformed from spaces of rescue and liberation for people on the move into sites of confinement and control. The article highlights the emergence of a multifaceted attempt by European states to blockade the Mediterranean. Moreover, I explore how this now routinized practice of the standoff transforms SAR vessels into carceral spaces in the Mediterranean borderscape. As NGOs challenge the singularity of state authority at sea, standoff politics become a means of reasserting sovereign authority over the commons. The emergence of standoff politics signals an effort to utilize legal and bureaucratic mechanisms to assert sovereign authority over the commons as exclusive state space. In effect, standoffs animate the European strategy of containment that signals an escalation and evolution in the criminalization of solidarity.

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