At the borders: Iceland, Frontex and Fortress Europe

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This presentation will present for discussion an MA project in anthropology (in progress), which is part of the larger Icelandic Research Fund Centre of Excellence project *Mobilities and Transnational Iceland*. One theme of this research concerns the role of the Icelandic Coast Guard in Frontex, the EU's boarder and coast guard agency, and its mission in the Mediterranean. In particular, focus is placed on the Icelandic coast guard’s work with Frontex in the context of the recent so-called refugee crisis.

Underlying the analysis is the work of anthropologist Maurizio Albahari\(^1\) on the Mediterranean as the world's deadliest border and the aim is to situate the Icelandic Coast Guard's work in South Europe within a conceptual framework of the process of securitization and Albahari's *crimes of peace*. Emphasis is also placed on Icelandic exceptionalism, nationalism, notions of heroism and especially non-violence, which is an integral part of Icelandic cultural and national identity. Particularly insightful is the work of Kristín Loftsdóttir and Helga Björnsdóttir regarding a similar problematic of the Icelandic peacekeeping unit (ICRU) in which armed Icelandic peacekeepers operated under NATO in Afghanistan.\(^2\)

When in 2010 the Icelandic Coast Guard started collaborating with Frontex it was largely driven by attempts to meet financial cuts that the institution suffered following the 2008 economic crisis. In recent years the the Coast Guard has sent personnel and equipment, i.e. vessels and the institution's only airplane, for this particular project in the Mediterranean for several

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months a year thus covering maintenance expenses of the equipment and avoiding the lay off of personnel. Now the Coast Guard no longer sends ships to the Mediterranean, due to a change in their managing model, but continues to collaborate with Frontex in patrolling from the air.

According to the results of primary research it appears that the general attitude amongst Coast Guard employers regarding the Frontex project is at least threefold: Concern over having to do without essential equipment for months at the time back in Iceland is mixed with a feeling of obligation to participate in the political sphere of the international society, as well as pride over having participated directly or indirectly in the rescuing of thousands of people during their seven years of work for Frontex. In the words of one research participant: "We consider ourselves to be doing good."

While Coast Guard members lay much emphasis on that part of their work for Frontex that has to with search and rescue operations the general understanding amongst critical scholars as well as activists is that migration and asylum seeking in the EU have been incorporated into a process of securitisation. The fact of the matter is that Frontex is not a humanitarian organization but a supra-national institution primarily concerned with maintaining the integrity of Europe’s borders. Scholars have demonstrated how securitisation has had severe negative impact on the status and human rights of migrants with Frontex frequently placed in the center of this critique. Security concerns tend to come before humanitarian considerations when it comes to border control and while rescue operations at sea are carried out on a regular basis some argue that their primary goal is not to ensure the safety of those saved from drowning but "to apprehend migrants before they reach a particular territory."

Kristín Loftsdóttir and Helga Björnsdóttir maintain that at the time of the ICRU's founding the Icelandic government downplayed its participation in conflicts and war related activities by situating the undertaking within a humanitarian framework. Likewise, Albahari claims that "a salvational and humanitarian discourse seeks to make the military and surveillance project more palatable to public opinion and politicians."

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While agents of the Icelandic state participate in rescue operations at the EU's southern external borders the large majority of people travelling independently to Iceland to seek protection are systematically refused asylum and deported from the country. Iceland's geographical location makes the Dublin regulation applicable in most asylum cases, including those who might have a strong legal ground to their claim for asylum. According to statistics from the Directorate of Immigration regarding January to March of this year, out of the 350 total applications only 127 were looked into substantively. There of 35 received a positive answer to their plea.\textsuperscript{7}

Some primary conclusions of the research being discussed here indicate that Coast Guard members negotiate their experiences working for Frontex to fit with their own values, emphasising the worth of each individual life they directly or indirectly have a hand in saving from death and placing responsibility of death at sea primarily on so called smugglers (also known as facilitators).

Finally, Helga Björnsdóttir argues that from the Icelandic state's point of view the ICRU in Kabul formed an integral part in solidifying Iceland's image as a legitimate international player, devoted to being an active participant in a political sphere dominated by militaristic ideology.\textsuperscript{8}

The Icelandic Coast Guard’s presence and efforts in the Mediterranean can be seen in the same light as discourses on international obligations are amongst the reasons provided for the collaboration and at least one research participant emphasised that even if it weren't for the financial compensations provided by Frontex the Coast Guard might still participate in the collaboration, as a means of fulfilling the state's duty in the international arena.

Further research is needed to shed light on these issues and produce a holistic account of the Icelandic state and its agencies in regards of the current geo-political situation in continental Europe.
