

Rome, 30 May 2019

This time last year I blogged about Baobab Experience¹, a not-for-profit organisation attempting to provide services to migrants in Rome. Operating at that time from an abandoned car park next to a field near Tiburtina station, despite its rudimentary facilities, around two hundred migrants would nightly occupy tents donated by local churches, charities and individuals. The *ad hoc* camp offered shelter, food, medical, legal and practical support and, above all, a welcome to those who would otherwise be homeless.

Earlier this month a delegation from the Church of Scotland visited Rome with a view to learning more about the situation of migrants in Italy and the political situation at both a national and European level. Mediterranean Hope co-ordinated the visit, with a brief to enable the delegation to see at first hand what is happening on the ground. One of the meetings we set up was with Andrea Costa, Baobab's founder.



As the camp at Piazza Maslax had been, like its many previous incarnations, evicted by the Roman authorities last autumn, we were asked to meet Andrea at the new site, Piazzale Spadolini, on the eastern side of Tiburtina station. It was shocking to see that Baobab is now effectively operating from a pavement. When we arrived at 8.00am, volunteers were providing hot coffee to a small number of migrants (the remainder observing Ramadan and therefore fasting during daylight hours). The empty pavement before us was spotless, one man working hard with a dustpan and brush to ensure that there was no trace of those who had spent the night there. Andrea explained that this “camp” is tolerated only on the basis that it disappears

¹ <https://baobabexperience.org/>

every morning. And so, each day, a volunteer arrives in a donated white van to collect a black plastic bag from each migrant containing whatever bedclothes they have. The van returns at night so that the “camp” can be set up again in a seemingly pointless cycle which serves to highlight the impossibility for many migrants of establishing any kind of permanent residence. It was very humbling to hear from Andrea about the determination of the volunteers to continue to offer services from the pavement in these circumstances.

Since then, volunteers have reported that they appeared to have become targets of station staff, who who routinely call the police in an attempt to stifle any support activities being carried out at Piazzale Spadolini during the day. Yesterday, matters reached a head. According to a report published by Baobab², volunteers and migrants there found themselves surrounded by police, army and station staff and were threatened with fines, charges and arrest. Their identity documents were retained for over two hours, they were photographed, and officers, believing that one migrant seeking to defend the volunteers had videoed what was going on, sought to haul him to the police station in order to confiscate his phone.

Ultimately, the officers dispersed, no charges were made, no fines were levied and no one was arrested. One officer, however, is reported to have used a pejorative term, put his hand threateningly on his pistol and made obscene gestures at one of the volunteers as they left. So far, there has been little outcry about such casual intimidation but it seems clear that the creeping criminalisation of humanitarian aid is not confined to those working to rescue those seeking to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Astonishingly, despite the obvious challenges, Baobab, and other organisations like it, remain determined to persist in offering help to those they perceive to be most in need. I wonder how long it would take each of us to give in.



² <https://raiwadunia.com/vietato-essere-umani/>