The Mediterranean Migration Crisis

by Timothy G. Hammond

Increased international attention has recently been paid to the ongoing and escalating irregular migration crisis in the Mediterranean Sea. The combined death toll of more than 1,200 migrants in a series of shipwreck disasters occurring in mid-April 2015 triggered an upsurge in attention to the situation. Among these incidents was the worst single shipwreck tragedy on record in the Mediterranean, involving the death of an estimated 800 migrants. While by no means a new phenomenon, the number of sub-Saharan African and Middle Eastern migrants traveling across the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe—along with the associated death toll—is unprecedented in scale. Record immigration is occurring at a time when Europe is preoccupied with internal economic and political challenges, and is thus left ill-prepared to collectively address the crisis. The complexity of Mediterranean migration flows is challenging current frameworks, and Europe is struggling to develop a comprehensive architecture that balances efforts to assist persons in need with efforts to secure its borders.

The Migration Crisis Within its Mediteranean Context

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that an estimated 219,000 migrants crossed the Mediterranean and arrived to European shores in 2014. While various maritime migration routes are used, more than 170,000 of these migrants—nearly 80 percent—arrived in Italy and Malta by way of Libya and Tunisia. This is the Central Mediterranean route, and it is the most heavily trafficked and the deadliest maritime migration route in the world.

The number of irregular migrants reaching Europe in 2014 surpassed the previous record seen in 2011, when a wave of immigration followed the revolutionary struggles of the media-named "Arab Spring". There are many indications that 2015 will see the highest number of migrants in the Mediterranean yet. The first six months of 2015 have seen 137,000 migrants cross the sea to reach Europe so far, compared to the 75,000 migrant arrivals in the same period last year. The first five months of 2015 also saw an estimated 1,800 deaths at sea. These figures are expected to continue to escalate if migrant smugglers follow past trends of facilitating increased passages during the summer months when there are calmer conditions at sea. Record numbers of migrants are not only traveling the Central Mediterranean route, but are also arriving in Greece using the Eastern Mediterranean route that passes through the Aegean Sea from Turkey.

Given its geographic position between Europe, Africa, and Asia, the Mediterranean region is particularly sensitive to the world's highest numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons since World War II. The European University Institute's Migration Policy Center stressed that the Mediterranean Sea is the most dangerous border between countries that are not at war with each other. Ongoing hybrid conflicts

along the Mediterranean's shores and in neighboring regions, which involve a blended array of state- and non-state-centric actors and issues, provide a contextual framework for understanding the record-breaking migration to Europe. The asymmetric form of warfare in these hybrid conflicts often directly targets civilians—resulting in large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons.

Irregular migration in the Mediterranean is particularly complex considering that it directly traverses, involves, and affects the United States' EUCOM, CENTCOM, and AFRICOM Geographic Combatant Commanders' Areas of Responsibility (AORs). A map portraying these AORs may create an image of the Mediterranean Sea as a natural barrier between southern Europe, northern Africa, and the Middle East. However, throughout the history of human civilizations, the sea has provided connective tissue between the three continents just as much as it has acted as a barrier between them—if not more so. The Mediterranean Sea has witnessed many consequences that arise when diverse empires, ethnicities, religions, and cultures interact. Historically, such interactions have at times led to conflict and, at other times, to the sharing of knowledge that advanced humankind. Today, each of the involved AORs presents diverse socio-economic and geopolitical realities, yet they are strung together by mass human population movements. Irregular migration flows are a dramatic demonstration of how occurrences on one end of the Mediterranean reverberate across all its shores.

Tensions in Europe are high as the immigration influx is occurring at a time when Europeans are particularly concerned with terrorism, foreign fighter transit, and the fragile state of the Eurozone. Less portrayed in the media, however, is that the majority of refugees from Middle Eastern and African countries migrate to neighboring countries. This information presents important context for evaluating the relative scale of Europe's responsibilities.

Irregular, Not Illegal, Migration

Migrants crossing the Mediterranean are not representative of a single or homogenous group. The terms "mixed migration" and "irregular migration" are used to portray the reality that different types of migrants are subject to different international laws; based on this, they will face different treatments in their host countries. Given the legal rights to which they may be entitled under certain circumstances, many irregular migrants and asylum-seekers may not be considered illegal migrants.

Europe's conventional immigration policy framework has been designed to distinguish voluntary versus forced forms of migration. The question is asked as to whether migrants are choosing to migrate to better their economic prospects (commonly referred to as economic migrants), or whether they are forced to flee their countries of origin due to political, ethnic, religious, or other forms of persecution. The international legal principle of non-refoulement protects this latter group of migrants from being returned to a country where their lives are endangered, and host countries may grant them a form of asylum.

To process migrants' asylum applications, their identities must be verified, and their reasons for entry must be evaluated. The complicated reality is that migrants travel to Europe by irregular means from many countries and for varied reasons, and the distinctions between chosen versus forced forms of migration are increasingly unclear. At what point, exactly, are conditions deplorable enough that emigration is no longer a voluntary option but a necessity? Further complicating the process is that some migrants attempt to claim certain nationalities that are privy to better protection, such as Syrians and Somalis.

Despite these complications, the majority of migrants arriving in Europe via the Mediterranean are legitimately in need of protection. In evidence to this, Syrians and Eritreans have become the top two migrant nationalities with significant numbers of Somali, Afghan, and Sudanese migrants as well. Notably, UNHCR reports that one-third of the 137,000 migrants who arrived to Europe so far this year were from Syria and qualified for international protection.

Migrants' Journies

The majority of migrants in the Mediterranean reach Europe from Libya; however, most of them are not Libyan nationals. To provide clarity on migrants' nationalities, irregular migration may best be explained by differentiating the *countries of origin* from the *transit countries* and the *destination countries*.

The Mediterranean's irregular migrants originate from different countries throughout West Africa, East Africa, and the Middle East. Markedly, Syrian migrants represented 60 percent of all migrant arrivals by sea to Europe in 2014. In addition to providing this high number of asylum-seekers, Syria also currently holds the world's highest number of internally displaced persons—a figure standing at around 7,600,000. Syria's neighbors (including Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan)—have seen an influx of at least 3,000,000 Syrian

refugees. These figures are the consequence of more than four years of violent conflict that began in 2011 when mass protests sparked against President Bashar al-Asad. An array of pro-Assad (including Hezbollah) and opposition (including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)) groups and militias continue to compete for ideological and territorial control. The failed status of Somalia and repressive conditions in Eritrea also make them major countries of origin.

From their respective home territories, many migrants traverse the Sahara, paying to travel from checkpoint to checkpoint until they reach Libya. Libya is a prime migration route in part due to its geographic position between the Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea. The porous land borders to its south permit undetected entry and its long coastline and close proximity to Malta and the Italian Peninsula provide migrants with an exit strategy. The combination of its geography with the disintegration of its governance and border security has created near-perfect conditions for criminal networks.

Since the overthrow of Muammar Qadhafi in 2011, Libya has descended into near-failed state status. Two main rival governments vie for control in Libya: the internationally-recognized governing council elected in 2014, operating from the eastern city of Tobruk, and the coalition of armed groups known as Libya Dawn, which occupy the western capital of Tripoli. Various other local, tribal, and extremist groups (such as Ansar al-Sharia and ISIL) also compete for degrees of power and control.

Emigration of migrants out of Libya complicates distinctions between economic migrants and refugees. Libya has the largest proven crude oil reserves and the fourth-largest proven natural gas reserves in Africa. These hydrocarbon resources provided Libya with a strong regional economy, and as such it was an attractive destination for economic migrants from other African countries. Many people from sub-Saharan Africa who originally left their country of origin to work in Libya have now fled from the country to Europe since 2011. Others not wishing to emigrate or risk their lives at sea are presented with the economic incentives of participating in the migrant smuggling business themselves.

Libya's security vacuum allowed human smuggling networks to fill the void and earn tremendous profits. After paying smugglers exorbitant amounts to be packed into inflatable vessels or wooden fishing boats, migrants voyage north toward Italy and Malta. The threats to voyagers include abuse from the smugglers, drowning at sea, and asphyxiation in over-packed hulls. Most migrants are aware of the risks, and they choose to take their chances to better their situations. Once intercepted at sea by Italian, Maltese, or Greek authorities, migrants are sent to migrant reception and detention facilities where they will wait—often for 12 to 18 months—for their identities to be verified and their asylum applications to be processed. Detention policies vary by country; however, Italy, Malta, and Greece have faced criticism from the international community for providing inadequate conditions. Many asylum-seekers detained in Europe have already experienced abysmal detention conditions in Libya. Strict detention practices in Europe have at times been unlawfully maintained—possibly as a deterrence mechanism. This approach has proven ineffective as migrant arrivals continue to increase. The implementation of stricter border security mechanisms carries with it the risk of unintentionally fueling criminal networks, as illegal methods of entry become perceived as migrants' only remaining options. Furthermore, when one route of entry is closed, migration flows tend to shift to other migratory routes in the Mediterranean region.

The majority of migrants do not intend to stay in the European countries in which they first arrive. These are primarily planned as transit countries while migrants intend to ultimately reside in more northern European countries, where they perceive they will find more opportunities and better treatment. Germany and Sweden currently host the highest number of Syrian refugees in Europe.

Europe's Dublin regulations complicate matters for migrants and for host countries. These regulations stipulate that the country through which an irregular migrant first enters the European Union is solely responsible for processing that migrant's asylum application. Additionally, a migrant caught illegally residing in another European country is sent back to the country in which they first arrived. The Dublin regulations have caused frustrations among southern European countries, declaring they face a disproportionate share of responsibility for regulating borders on behalf of Europe as a whole. Given their limited economic and geographic capacities, Italian and Maltese officials in particular have called upon the EU for increased "burden sharing."

Maritime Responses

Illustrative of Italy's responsibility was its Naval Search and Rescue (SAR) operation Mare Nostrum, which saved the lives of some 150,000 migrants from October 2013 to October 2014. Notably, these rescues were made with regular assistance from the Armed Forces of Malta and merchant vessels. Mare Nostrum commenced operations following the October 2013 shipwreck off the coast of Lampedusa (a small Italian

island and popular migration hub), in which more than 350 migrants died at sea. Media attention to this tragedy galvanized public support for migrant rescue operations.

Some hailed Mare Nostrum as an essential humanitarian mission, while others argued that it facilitated immigration by creating a "pull factor" for migrants. Strong and polarized political opinions emerged as Mare Nostrum's operating costs soared to more than 9,000,000 euros per month. After Italy ultimately scaled Mare Nostrum down, in November 2014, the EU's border control agency, Frontex, launched Joint Operation Triton.

In contrast to the SAR mission Mare Nostrum, Triton was primarily designed as a border surveillance operation with significantly reduced manpower, reach, and scope of operations. This scaled-back response increased concerns that the Mediterranean would further become a mass "cemetery" at sea. Five months later, the record-breaking shipwreck incident in April reignited debates on how best to prevent the loss of life along Europe's shores.

Humanitarian principles, however, are not Europe's only concerns. The established presence of ISIL affiliates on Libya's coast has increased the perception that irregular migration from Libyan shores is a threat to European security. ISIL released propaganda declaring war on Rome. Additionally, rumors that terrorists could infiltrate the migration networks were disseminated. These ongoing developments have strengthened perceptions of the Mediterranean as Europe's vulnerable underbelly.

Navigating the Challenges that Lie Ahead

European leaders continue to try to find a balanced approach in responding to the migration crisis. Funding for Triton was increased following the shipwreck disaster in April 2015, and various proposals are currently on the table—from military solutions such as targeting migrant smugglers' vessels on Libyan shores (a move that could stress the livelihoods of Libyan fishermen, risk significant civilian casualties, and threaten refugees) to the redistribution of asylum-seekers throughout European member states (which draws northern Europe into a situation which many perceive as a primarily southern concern).

The option of closing down borders in Europe (and perceiving immigration as a threat) will likely shake two significant pillars upholding the European Union's ideology: freedom of movement (represented by member-states of the Schengen area) and respect for international humanitarian principles. The option of opening up borders to accept asylum-seekers (and perceiving immigration as a humanitarian crisis) will likely intensify European preoccupations over economic stability and job security and heighten concerns over long-term demographic shifts and fears over foreign fighter transit.

The trial and error approach has demonstrated that the treatment of the irregular migration crisis as either a humanitarian crisis or a security threat has proven ineffective and unsustainable. What is evident in moving forward is that the transnational and transcontinental nature of this issue requires a strong multilateral approach. This approach must take into consideration the interconnected nature of the wider Mediterranean basin and its specific socio-economic and geopolitical realities. The former president of Malta, Professor Guido de Marco, may have said it best when he proposed that, "there can be no security in Europe unless there is security in the Mediterranean and there can be no security in the Mediterranean unless there is security in Europe."[1] At the heart of the irregular migration crisis we are reminded of the Mediterranean's reemergence as a focal point for world affairs in an age when multifarious hybrid conflicts and their associated borderless threats challenge normative state-centric perceptions on how to address international challenges.

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[1] Guido de Marco, "The Mediterranean Dilemma: A Bridge or a Great Divide?", *Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies*, September 2007, http://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/194233/Prof._Guido_de_Marco_Med_Agenda.pdf.