The Mediterranean Crisis: A Snapshot

Background Note prepared for the GFMD Thematic Meeting on the Migration Crisis in the Mediterranean[1]

Brussels, July 15, 2015

A steady flow of irregular migrants has made the journey by sea to reach Europe since the 1990s, seeking safety and opportunity. The sharply increasing numbers of people making these perilous journeys since 2013—accompanied by a rising death toll—has pushed unauthorized maritime migration[2] to the top of EU policymakers' agendas. But the crisis in the Mediterranean is not a purely European crisis. Past experience, in Europe and other parts of the world, demonstrates that migration crises—characterized by large mixed flows made up of refugees, other people who migrate under varying degrees of compulsion, and voluntary migrants—are only brought to manageable levels through cooperation among countries of origin, countries of transit, and the intended destination countries. State actors, moreover, need the cooperation of other stakeholders, in the private sector, civil society, humanitarian and development institutions and, of course, migrant communities.

UNHCR data suggest that 219,000 migrants arrived in Europe by sea in 2014; between January and June 2015, an estimated 137,000 migrants crossed the Mediterranean, up from 75,000 in the same time period last year.[3] The number of recorded fatalities spiraled upwards as well, with at least 3,500 migrants reported drowned or missing in 2014, and nearly 2,000 fatalities recorded between January and June 2015.[4] The true death toll is likely to be even higher.

Initiatives on the part of European states have been driven by crisis, starting with the death of approximately 367 migrants in a shipwreck off the coast of Lampedusa in October, 2013. This tragic incident sparked the initiation of the large-scale Italian search-and-rescue operation, *Mare Nostrum*. Controversy followed immediately. Some states painted *Mare Nostrum* as a magnet for migrants (even though the flows had surged before the operation started and continued after it ceased), and the onward movement of migrants from Italy to other European states caused great concern in those destinations.

The primary maritime migration routes from Africa and the Middle East to Europe have fluctuated over the years, depending on considerations like reception and border management policies and the geopolitical climate in origin, transit and destination countries. The maritime routes include those crossing the central Mediterranean; the eastern Mediterranean; the western Mediterranean; or venturing into the Atlantic Ocean. In 2014, most unauthorized maritime migrants entered the European Union via routes across the central Mediterranean or

---

[1] This background paper for the Global Forum on Migration and Development's Thematic Meeting on the Migration Crisis in the Mediterranean was written by Kathleen Newland, Kate Hooper and Elizabeth Collett. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Migration Policy Institute or the Turkish Chairmanship of the Global Forum on Migration and Development.

[2] Defined for the purposes of this paper as those migrants travelling by sea without permission to enter a destination country on a vessel not authorized to enter the country's port. Kathleen Newland, "Maritime Migration: A Wicked Problem."

[3] UNHCR, *The sea route to Europe: The Mediterranean passage in the age of refugees* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2015), 5, www.unhcr.org/5592bd059.html.

[4] Ibid, 8-9.

the eastern Mediterranean.[5] Between January and June 2015, the eastern Mediterranean route had overtaken the central Mediterranean route as the primary source of unauthorized maritime arrivals in Europe.[6] But the maritime routes are only the end stages of journeys that often start far away from the shores of the Mediterranean, in countries driven by conflict, repression, inequality and/or poverty.

Unlike other regions of the world, EU regional jurisprudence sets out Member States' obligations for rescue or interception of migrants at sea. The European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2012 that European flag states are responsible for the protection of any migrants their vessels pick up, even in international waters.[7] After a period from December 2014 to May 2015 in which search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean were curtailed, (as Italy's *Mare Nostrum* was replaced by the much more limited EU Operation Triton, which was primarily a border patrol operation), EU members have deployed maritime assets to an enhanced search and rescue effort, which has bent the curve of fatalities downward—although only after more than 1000 people died in a single week on April 2015. A heavy burden also falls on national coastguards (primarily Italy and Greece) as well as commercial vessels, which must bear the associated costs of these rescue operations. In addition, private rescue vessels, deployed by the Migrant Offshore Aid Station and Médecins sans Frontières, are saving lives in the Mediterranean.

Many of the people recently detected making unauthorized sea crossings are nationals of countries with a high acceptance rate for asylum applications among EU Member States. Between January and June 2015, Syrians comprised 34 percent of all arrivals, followed by Eritreans (12 percent) and Afghans (11 percent).[8] In the first quarter of 2015, their respective acceptance rates (for first-instance decisions on asylum applications) were 94 percent, 90 percent, and 66 percent.[9] However, the profile of arrivals varies by route (see Table 1).

Table 1: Main countries of origin for arrivals via the eastern and central Mediterranean routes, January-June 2015

Eastern Mediterranean route	**Central Mediterranean route**
Syria (57 percent)	Eritrea (25 percent)
Afghanistan (22 percent)	Nigeria (10 percent)
Iraq (5 percent)	Somalia (10 percent)
	Syria (7 percent)
	Gambia (6 percent)

Source: UNHCR, *The sea route to Europe: The Mediterranean passage in the age of refugees* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2015), 11, www.unhcr.org/5592bd059.html.

Although these data are limited—reflecting only those intercepted or detected by border authorities, and including self-reported data—they show that arrivals consist of "mixed" migration flows. In addition, the shifts in routes—and strategies—to gain access to Europe are indicative of both the effective information networks in place along these migration routes, and the ability of smugglers and other facilitators to react rapidly and adapt their business models to changing circumstances.[10]

---

[5] Frontex, *Annual Risk Analysis 2015* (Warsaw: European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union, 2015): 16. http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Annual_Risk_Analysis_2015.pdf.

[6] UNHCR, *The sea route to Europe.*

[7] Kathleen Newland, "Maritime Migration: A Wicked Problem," 9.

[8] Ibid, 6.

[9] Eurostat, "First instance decisions on applications by citizenship, age and sex (quarterly)," Accessed July 2, 2015, http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asydcfstq&lang=en.

[10] Elizabeth Collett, "Unauthorized Maritime Migration in Europe and the Mediterranean Region," 2.

EU policy responses to irregular maritime migration

A number of EU Member States—particularly those on Europe's maritime borders—have taken steps to tackle rising unauthorized maritime migration over the last two decades. National-level policy responses towards unauthorized maritime migration have tended to focus either on (a) enforcement and deterrence or (b) rescue and protection measures, with varying degrees of success. Examples of these national-level policy responses include:

- *Enhanced border surveillance or patrols.* In response to increased migration along the West African route, Spain increased patrols and created an electronic surveillance system (SIVE) to detect those attempting to make the crossing.[11]
- *Bilateral readmission and cooperation agreements.* These agreements may be formal or informal, and may focus on border management and readmission or broader economic goals.[12] They often build on existing historical, cultural, or political ties between the two countries. Spain entered into several bilateral readmission and cooperation agreements with sending and transit countries like Senegal and Mali, to facilitate returns and build capacity to reduce flows.[13] Italy has also entered into bilateral agreements with countries such as Tunisia and Algeria, often including seasonal labor agreements to facilitate legal modes of entry.[14]
- *Direct action to disrupt smuggling networks.* The EU has sought authorization from Libyan authorities and, through member states, from the UN Security Council, to take armed action against smugglers in Libyan waters and along its coastline. Thus far, authorization has been denied, so action is confined to intelligence gathering or apprehension of smugglers in international waters.
- *Search-and-rescue operations.* Italy's *Mare Nostrum* operation rescued more than 140,000 people in the Mediterranean, before being phased out at the end of 2014 due to its high operating costs of 9 million Euros/month, amid calls for greater burden sharing.[15]

Beyond providing support to individual Member States, the European Union has also entered into agreements directly with third countries, facilitated multilateral dialogue on these issues, and pursued longer-term solutions under the aegis of its foreign policy, security, or development agendas.

- *Facilitating circular migration.* Policies to encourage circular migration have included legislation to facilitate more seasonal workers and highly skilled workers (through the Blue Card scheme).[16] These programs are rarely accessible to refugees in countries of transit or first asylum, however.
- *Agreements with third countries.* EU mobility partnerships (between non-EU countries, the European Commission, and consenting EU Member States) include readmissions and visa agreements and measures to build border management capacity. Although existing partnerships with countries like Morocco or Tunisia represent a more nuanced approach to external relations, they have yet to significantly affect the management of migration flows across the Mediterranean.[17]

---

[11] Collett, "Unauthorized Maritime Migration in Europe and the Mediterranean Region," 4-5.
[12] Collett, "Unauthorized Maritime Migration in Europe and the Mediterranean Region," 7.
[13] Collett, "Unauthorized Maritime Migration in Europe and the Mediterranean Region," 4-5.
[14] Italy's partnership with Libya went further, facilitating pushbacks, providing financial support for detention facilities, and providing financial incentives for Italian patrols within Libyan territorial waters. This was mired in controversy and eventually ruled unlawful by the ECHR.
[15] European Council on Refugees and Exiles, "MareNostrum to end – New Frontex operation will not ensure rescue of migrants in international waters," October 10, 2014, http://ecre.org/component/content/article/70-weekly-bulletin-articles/855-operation-mare-nostrum-to-end-frontex-triton-operation-will-not-ensure-rescue-at-sea-of-migrants-in-international-waters.html.
[16] Ibid, 13.
[17] Collett, 10.

- ***Multilateral dialogues.*** The European Union is also involved in a series of regional dialogues, such as the Union for the Mediterranean and a planned EU-African Union summit in November, 2015. These dialogues help to build networks with third countries and regions, and serve as fora to discuss common concerns, priorities, and areas for cooperation. However, these dialogues bring together many national and regional actors with different policy priorities, which can inhibit concrete action and momentum in this arena, particularly in light of rapidly shifting events.[18]
- ***Migrant transit centers.*** The prototype transit center has been established in Niger, to inform migrants of the dangers of the onward journey and the legal channels for migration that might be open to them.
- ***Development initiatives.*** One important initiative is the recently launched Regional Development and Protection Program (RDPP) to support and facilitate durable solutions for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. This initiative couples support for infrastructure and protection with skills training and employment opportunities.[19]

The Need for Comprehensive Approaches

Each initiative may address one piece of the migration puzzle in the Mediterranean, but they have yet to coalesce into a comprehensive plan. A crisis as complex as that unfolding in the Mediterranean holds great potential for unintended consequences. Destroying smuggling operations in Libya, for example, would leave tens of thousands of migrants stranded in the hands of ruthless criminal organizations. The cut-back of state-sponsored search and rescue at the beginning of 2015 put untenable burdens on commercial shipping operating in the Mediterranean. Increased patrolling along one route simply tends to shift traffic to another.

One-dimensional or short-term responses to the maritime migration crisis in the Mediterranean are unlikely to be effective. Europe's response cannot merely be to push migration back to countries of transit and first asylum. Some countries of origin are too chaotic or too hostile to engage, but the others should be brought into the discussion of ways to bring unauthorized migration under control. Such an effort will require engagement with all legitimate actors in the region and beyond. Long-term commitment is necessary, across a wide range of policy arenas— starting with rescue and continuing with refugee status determination, additional humanitarian responses to vulnerable migrants, more serious burden-sharing, wider channels for legal migration, broader cooperation with the private sector and civil society, and sustained development cooperation. Development is not a 'cure' for migration, but it is a part of the broad transformation of countries of origin that will permit people to achieve greater security in their homelands.

---

[18] Collett, "Unauthorized Maritime Migration in Europe and the Mediterranean Region."
[19] European Resettlement Network, "Regional Protection Programmes," Accessed July 4, 2015, http://www.resettlement.eu/page/regional-protection-programmes.