

IMMIGRATION: THE WORST REFUGEE CRISIS AFTER WORLD WAR II

By Cecile Abi Tayeh
(RIEAS Research Associate)

The article is edited by ***Antonia Dimou (RIEAS Senior Advisor)***

Copyright: Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr)
Publication date: 13th September 2015

Millions of people have fled their homes because of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya. The biggest crisis is centered on Syria, where the number of those fleeing to other countries has currently exceeded four million. Many who are able seek refuge in Europe. This often involves a perilous journey across the Mediterranean, a journey that has cost the lives of thousands of men, women and children. One of the deadliest events was the loss of around 800 people according to the UN in the Mediterranean Sea coming from Libya to Italy. Another event happened in August 2015 where bodies of 49 migrants were found in the hold of a fishing boat - most of them died because of smoke inhalation. This has raised the total number of human losses in 2015 to more than 2,300 dead migrants in the Mediterranean Sea.

According to the UN, there are more refugees in the world today than any time in human history. At the end of 2014, nearly 60 million people were forcibly displaced¹. This is nearly three times the number recorded just a decade ago. One in

¹ UNHCR website, Worldwide displacement hits all-time high as war and persecution increase, Last accessed on 25/08/2015

RIEAS Copyright@2015

every 122 persons is a refugee now, either displaced within their country or seeking asylum elsewhere. The majority of the world's refugees are under 18 years of age. Thousands of refugees and asylum seekers, the majority fleeing the wars in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, are trying to reach Europe via its southern states - Greece, Italy and Spain. Since January 2015, a total of 160,000 refugees and migrants arrived in various Greek islands; more than 20,000 arrived in August 2015 alone. More than 100,000 were also rescued and brought back to Italy this year². This is only a small part of those who try to escape the horrible conditions of war. Millions of refugees fleeing Syria are trying to survive in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The refugees who are able to escape to Europe are those who managed to collect enough money to pay traffickers operating ships.

The refugee crisis is accelerated by the horrific treatment of refugees, seeking asylum in Central Europe through the Balkans and Italy, and shows their brutal and inhuman situations. Desperate people, fearing for their lives, fleeing the regions of the Middle East and North Africa ravaged by war, are facing terrible hardships. Each day brings new horrors: bodies drifting in the Mediterranean Sea; refugees without food or water and crammed in intolerable sanitary conditions; families with young children forced to make hundreds of kilometers on foot; Police using batons and tear gas against unarmed migrants; and everywhere, the boundaries and barriers, secured with barbed wire and security forces that push back refugees by force. The ongoing refugee crisis is the most dramatic expression of the crisis of a social system that is no longer compatible with the most basic needs of the vast majority of refugees. Massive migratory flows are coming from the wider Middle East to the European Union. A significant number of migrants from Libya are helped by smuggling networks that facilitate illegal migration to the EU; boats carry migrants who try to survive a long and risky journey.

² Idem

RIEAS Copyright@2015

No doubt that the problem of illegal immigration from MENA is right in front of us. In 2014, 274,000 illegal immigrants entered the EU, against 100,000 in 2013. Given that there are currently around 4.000.000 refugees, everything leads us to think that in 2016 the illegal entrance figure to the EU will increase sharply. Many arrive by sea from the south and south-east of the Mediterranean, while others arrive by land from the east. Noteworthy, the urgency of the situation and the encompassed human tragedy must not be pretext of an angelic approach to political issues. Concurrently, human rights, charity and compassion require saving shipwrecks. There is a widespread belief that the 2011 military intervention in Libya was the starting point and the main cause of illegal migration to Europe³. However, it has to be clarified that this was not the case as there is a series of underlying issues that one needs to take into account. Except for the desire to avoid a series of massacres in the southern shores of the Mediterranean, the objective of the 2011 military intervention was to prevent migration caused by a long and savage civil war, such as the conflict that happens in Syria for more than four years. Domestic conflicts in Libya and Syria, and the chaotic situation in parts of North Africa and the Middle East largely explain the absence of any government or organization able to control human flows. The number of Libyan migrants fleeing their country is estimated to be less than the number of Syrians. The reason is linked to non-intervention and the perpetuation of war in Syria. Syria is nowadays facing the savagery of the Islamic State which has enabled the development of a deadly geopolitical situation and a massive wave of migration. And again, a limited intervention in Syria could not safely guarantee a strategic and political success, thus a lesson emerges that there is need to identify the risks and threats to the periphery of Europe before they are performed. This is a lesson that is incorporated in the European Security Strategy of 2003⁴.

³ Alex Dewaal, the African Union and the Libya Conflict of 2011, 19 December 2012

⁴ European Security Strategy, "A secure Europe in a Better World", Brussels 12 December 2003

RIEAS Copyright@2015

Beyond Syria, the age and country composition of migrants who are funnelled via criminal networks calls the attention of the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and a large part of the Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2010, the African continent had over one billion inhabitants, four times more than in 1950, with estimates to have two billion in 2050⁵. Currently, Africa represents a quarter of the world's births and despite revival efforts of Africa, demography, underdevelopment, and the existence of incompetent leaders and armed conflicts will generate new migration flows to Europe.

The countries of the European Union need to articulate strong policies. It is in this context that the so-called "every man for himself" and the perennial call to revise the Schengen agreements, questioning the free movement within the EU, is not a good advice. Whatever arguments European countries propose for the problem of migration flows to Europe, it is clear that the volatile geopolitical situation in the wider Middle East goes beyond the means and the political willingness of EU Member States to resolve the illegal migration phenomenon. Obviously, Italy is overwhelmed by human flows, while Greece and Malta also need to face a persistent migratory pressure. Control of migratory flows requires joint action, which is costly and time-consuming in the Mediterranean Sea, and the countries of origin and the transit.

As agreed at the European Council of 23 April 2015, the tripling of funding for Frontex⁶ - the EU Agency responsible to conduct the Triton Operation⁷ and deploy new maritime assets - is not sufficient. Frontex needs to play an increasing role, even central, to the security of Europe's maritime borders, without excluding the military option. In the

⁵ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "World Population Prospects", No 2011/2, July 2011

⁶Frontex (from French: Frontièresextérieures for "external borders") is the agency of the European Union (EU) that manages cooperation between national border guards undertaken to secure the external borders of the Union, including from illegal immigration, human trafficking and terrorist infiltration. The agency was established in 2004 and has its headquarters in Warsaw, Poland.

⁷Frontex finalized all preparations for the launch of Joint Operation Triton on November 1st 2014. With a monthly budget of EUR 2,9 million the agency will coordinate the deployment of three open sea patrol vessels, two coastal patrol vessels, two coastal patrol boats, two aircraft, and one helicopter in the Central Mediterranean.

RIEAS Copyright@2015

framework of the 10 proposals for action that were issued by the European Commission on 20 April 2015, the concept of military intervention was presented to the heads of EU states. The military objective would be to seize or destroy, depending on circumstances, the boats used to transport migrants, similar to the "Atalanta" operation that was launched against piracy at the Somali coast in 2008⁸. The European Commission also proposed the strengthening of cooperation between the organizations of Europol⁹, Frontex, EASO¹⁰ (European Asylum Support Office) and Eurojust¹¹, in order to gather the information required for an overall action against human traffickers. It is realized that an exceptional situation requires exceptional means.

There are serious considerations for an intervention by force on the Libyan shores to stop illegal trafficking and curb human flows. As highlighted by NATO's General Secretary, NATO could contribute to the development of a global response, but no doubt that the EU needs to play a central role given that the MENA region is its immediate neighborhood. The EU's policy towards the domestic conflict in Libya is assessed that it should have been more active, even intrusive. The absence of a UN resolution on the

⁸ European Union Naval Force Atlanta, European Union External Action, Best Management Practices for Protection against Somalia Based Piracy, BMP4, Version 4 – August 2011.

⁹The European Police Office, commonly abbreviated Europol, is the law enforcement agency of the European Union (EU) that handles criminal intelligence and combating serious international organized crime by means of cooperation between the relevant authorities of the member states, including those tasked with customs, immigration services, border and financial police etc. Headquartered in The Hague, the agency has approximately 800 staff[citation needed], of which there are regular police officers and approximately 145 liaison officers as well as personnel seconded from national law enforcement organizations.

¹⁰The European Asylum Support Office is an agency created by European Union Regulation 439/2010 to strengthen EU Member States practical cooperation on asylum, enhance the implementation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), and support Member States under particular pressure.

¹¹Eurojust (also spelled as EUROJUST) is an agency of the European Union dealing with judicial co-operation in criminal matters. The seat of Eurojust is in The Hague. Established in 2002, it was created to improve the handling of serious cross-border and organized crime by stimulating investigative and prosecutorial co-ordination among agencies of the EU Member States. Eurojust is composed of a College formed of 28 National Members, experienced judges, prosecutors, or police officers of equivalent competence from each EU Member State. The terms and duties of the members are defined by the state that appoints them. Eurojust also co-operates with third states and other EU bodies, such as the European Judicial Network, Europol, and OLAF.

RIEAS Copyright@2015

deployment of military forces in Libya after the overthrow of Gaddafi, the refusal of the Libyan National Transitional Council to accept the arrival of Western troops, and the opposition of the Arab League to the military option, all reinforced the EU and NATO unwillingness for any kind of military undertaking.

Thus on the ground, chaos is widespread and dominated by militias, and Libya is run by two rival governments and two parliaments; one is supported by the Fajr Libya militia coalition which controls the capital of Tripoli, and the other is recognized by the international community and has its headquarters in the city of Tobruk. Truly, predictions are highly uncertain, but one thing is clear that the Libyan chaos cannot be confined within this pseudo-state. Therefore, European diplomacy must act with no time waste. National reconciliation is necessary in Libya but if it is not achieved in the immediate future the EU need to make a concrete distinction between friend and enemy, identify local forces with which it will be possible to cooperate, and use Euro-Atlantic bodies to work on stabilization.

But when it comes to facing the world's most serious refugee crisis since the Second World War, a sober debate is prerequisite to identify efficient ways to tackle this crisis. The majority of migrants attempting to reach Europe are fleeing away from poverty, dictatorial oppression, and religious extremism. 62% of those who had reached Europe in 2015 originate from Syria, Eritrea and Afghanistan¹². And if one adds to the mix those coming from Darfur, Iraq, Somalia, and Nigeria – then the total proportion of migrants likely to qualify for asylum in Europe rises to well over 70%. It has to be noted that there non-European countries whose social infrastructure has been critically burdened because of the refugee crisis, such as Lebanon, which houses 1.2 million Syrian refugees within a total population of roughly 4.5 million. To put that in logical context, a country that is more than 100 times smaller than the EU has already received more than

¹²UNHCR Global Appeal 2015 Update, 2015 UNHCR sub-regional operations profile - Northern, Western, Central and Southern Europe

RIEAS Copyright@2015

50 times as many refugees as the EU will ever consider resettling. Lebanon experiences a refugee crisis, apart from the one of Palestinian refugees. To the total regional picture one has to add Jordan and Turkey that receive a massive flux of refugee's on a daily basis.

Four million Syrians have registered and others are awaiting registration with the United Nations High Commission of Refugees which leads a coordinated regional emergency response. Each year of the conflict brings an exponential growth of refugees. For example, in 2012, there were 100,000 refugees. By April 2013, there were 800,000, and doubled to 1.6 million in less than four months. There are now four million Syrians scattered throughout the region, making them the world's largest refugee population under the United Nations' mandate. According to UN predictions, at this rate, Syrian refugees could reach 4.27 million by the end of 2015, thus representing the worst exodus since the Rwandan genocide 20 years ago.

The Mediterranean is no longer the *Mare Nostrum*¹³ and European diplomacy must be in tune with the geopolitical realities. The misconception of *Mare Nostrum* induces distortions: First, it does not encompass situations and comprehend the nature of conflicts whose shockwaves reach the European shores. Configurations in Mediterranean geopolitics are manifold and complex, and the Greater Mediterranean is a diverse region that encompasses Southern Sahara and the Middle East, not to mention the Black Sea as a marginal zone within area. The geography of migration flows thus refers to this vast space of often antagonistic players.

If the unity of the Mediterranean remains a critical issue, it has to be understood that the area is not a lake but a shared sea bounded by over 20 countries. Europe will be in position to meet present and future challenges only by reviving the spirit of universality

¹³Mare Nostrum (Latin for "Our Sea") was a Roman name for the Mediterranean Sea. In the years following the unification of Italy in 1861, the term was revived by Italian nationalists who believed that Italy was the successor state to the Roman Empire.

RIEAS Copyright@2015

and its tutelary role. In many ways, the current situation and the multifaceted challenges call upon a return to the roots of European civilization. Only this way, Europe will be in position to meet the challenges of the 21st century that lie ahead.