

# 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 largely triggered this current upsurge in attention to the situation.<sup>1</sup> Among these incidents was the worst single shipwreck tragedy on record, involving the death of an estimated 800 migrants.<sup>2</sup> 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. The complexity of these 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 Mediterranean Context

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that an estimated 219,000 migrants crossed the Mediterranean

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Timothy G. Hammond is a Mediterranean regional analyst and subject matter expert whose research interests include examining the interdependence between national, human, and environmental forms of security. He holds an M.A. degree in Mediterranean Security Studies from the University of Malta, an M.S. degree in Conflict Analysis and Resolution from George Mason University, and a B.A. degree in Communication and Culture Studies from Michigan Technological University. He may be contacted at [Tim.G.Hammond@Gmail.com](mailto:Tim.G.Hammond@Gmail.com).

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and arrived to European shores in 2014.<sup>3</sup> While various maritime migration routes are used, more than 170,000 of these migrants—nearly 80%—arrived to Italy and Malta by way of Libya and Tunisia.<sup>4</sup> 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 migrant arrivals to 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”.<sup>5</sup> There are many indications that 2015 will see the highest number of migrants in the Mediterranean yet. The first five months of 2015 have seen incidents of unprecedented mass arrivals and an estimated 1,800 deaths at sea so far, revealing sharp increases compared to the same period last year. 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 to Greece using the Eastern Mediterranean route that passes through the Aegean Sea from Turkey.

Given its geographic position as the hub between Europe, Africa, and Asia, the Mediterranean is particularly sensitive to the world’s highest numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons since World War II.<sup>6</sup> A joint policy brief presented by the European University Institute’s Migration Policy Center highlighted the fact that the Mediterranean Sea is the most dangerous border between countries that are not at war with each other.<sup>7</sup> The existence of this level of mass migration without the occurrence of conventionally understood state versus state warfare presents significant challenges for state-led response mechanisms. Ongoing hybrid conflicts along the Mediterranean’s shores and in its neighboring regions provide a contextual framework for understanding the record-breaking immigration to Europe. These conflicts involve a complicated and blended array of state-and-non-state-centric entities and issues.<sup>8</sup> Violence in these conflicts most often occurs in an asymmetric fashion in which civilians are often the victims and even the targets of warfare—causing large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons.

Irregular migration in the Mediterranean is a particularly complex phenomenon as it crosses through and involves the continents of Eu-

rope, Africa, and Asia. A map of the sea may create the image that the Mediterranean acts 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—if not more so—than it has acted as a barrier between them. 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 warfare and at other times they have led to the sharing of ideas and technologies that progressed humankind forward. Today, there are diverse socio-economic and geopolitical realities present on different sides of the Mediterranean, 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 euro-zone.<sup>9</sup> Less portrayed in the media; however, is the fact that the majority of refugees from the Middle East and Africa migrate to neighboring countries. This information presents important and all-too-often ignored context for evaluating the relative scale of Europe's responsibilities.

## **Irregular, Not Illegal, Migration**

One of the most important considerations to make is that migrants crossing the Mediterranean are by no means representative of a single or homogenous group. Rather than using the term “illegal migration” when referring to the Mediterranean crisis, the terms “mixed migration” and “irregular migration” are more accurately 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. Simply put, irregular migration is a broader-scope term that refers to migrants traveling between countries without authorized travel documentation for doing so. Given the legal rights to which they may

be entitled under certain circumstances, many irregular migrants and asylum-seekers may therefore not be considered illegal migrants.

To address different forms of immigration, Europe's conventional policy framework has been designed to distinguish voluntary versus forced forms of migration.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the question is asked as to whether migrants are choosing to migrate to better their own economic prospects (most commonly referred to as economic migrants), or whether they are forced to flee their countries of origin out of fears of political, ethnic, religious, or other forms of persecution. Through the international legal principle of non-refoulement this latter group of migrants is protected from being returned to a country where their life and dignity is endangered, and they may be granted a form of asylum.<sup>11</sup>

Host countries within the European Union may grant migrants with refugee status (applies to those fleeing persecution in their home country), subsidiary protection (applies to those already outside their home country and unable to return due to possibility of persecution), or authorization to stay for various humanitarian reasons that may be defined by the host country itself.<sup>12</sup>

To process migrants' applications for asylum their identities must be verified and their reasons for entry must be evaluated. The complicated truth of the matter is that migrants travel to Europe by irregular means from all across West Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East 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 the fact that some migrants may also attempt to claim certain nationalities that are privy to better protection, such as Syrians and Somalis.

Despite these complications, the majority of migrants arriving to Europe via the Mediterranean are legitimately in need of protection as they have fled conflict-ridden countries. In evidence to this, Syrian nationals have become the most commonly reported migrant group, with Eritrean migrants being the second most commonly reported group.<sup>13</sup> There have also been significant numbers of Somali, Afghan, and Sudanese migrants.

## Migrants' Journeys

The majority of migrants crossing the sea arrive to Europe from Libya; however, most of them are not Libyan nationals. To provide clarity on who exactly these migrants are, irregular migration may best be explained by differentiating the *countries of origin* from the *transit countries* and the *destination countries*.

Irregular migrants crossing the Mediterranean originate from many different countries throughout West Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East. Markedly, Syrian migrants represented 60 percent of all migrant arrivals by sea to Europe in 2014.<sup>14</sup> In addition to providing this high number of Syrian asylum-seekers, Syria also currently holds the world's highest number of internally displaced persons—a figure standing at around 7,600,000.<sup>15</sup> Syria's neighbors—including Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan—have seen an influx of over 3,000,000 Syrian refugees.<sup>16</sup> These figures are the consequence of more than four years of asymmetric warfare (which commonly involves the targeting of civilians) that began in 2011 when mass protests sparked against President Bashar al-Assad. An array of pro-Assad (including Hezbollah) and opposition groups and militias (including the Islamic State) continue to compete for ideological and territorial control. Additionally, the failed status of Somalia and repressive conditions in Eritrea make them major countries of origin of irregular migrants in the Mediterranean.

From their respective countries of origin, many migrants—from West Africa and the Horn of Africa alike—traverse through the Sahara Desert, traveling from checkpoint to checkpoint and paying their way until they reach Libya. Libya is a prime hub for irregular migration in part due to its geographic position between the Sahara Desert 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. However, it is the combination of its geography with the disintegration of its governance and border security that has created near-perfect conditions for the success of human smuggling networks.

Since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has descended into near-failed state status. Two main rival governments vie

for control: 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 the Islamic State) also compete for degrees of power and control.

Libya has the largest proved crude oil reserves and the fourth-largest proved natural gas reserves in Africa.<sup>17</sup> 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 fled from the country to Europe since 2011.<sup>18</sup> This dynamic is one example of the blending of the economic migrant and refugee categorizations that European officials are used to determining in granting asylum. 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 has allowed criminal human smuggling networks to fill the void and make millions of dollars. After paying smugglers exorbitant amounts to be packed into inflatable vessels or wooden fishing boats, migrants voyage north toward Italy and Malta. The voyages' threats 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 applications for asylum to be processed. Detention policies vary by country; however, Italy, Malta, and Greece have all faced criticism from the international community for providing inadequate conditions. Many asylum-seekers arriving to Europe have already experienced detention in Libya—where migrants and UN observers have described the conditions as abysmal and inhumane.<sup>19</sup> Strict detention policies in Europe have at times allegedly been unlawfully maintained as a deterrence mechanism. The implementation of stricter border security mechanisms in the past

has presented challenging consequences, such as fueling illegal methods of entry and shifting migratory routes in the Mediterranean.

The majority of migrants do not intend to stay in the European countries in which they first arrive, including Italy, Greece and Malta. 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.<sup>20</sup>

Europe's Dublin regulations are in conflict with many migrants' aspirations to reside in their planned destination countries. These regulations stipulate that the country through which an irregular migrant first enters the EU is solely responsible for processing that migrant's asylum application. Furthermore, a migrant caught illegally residing in another European country is sent back to the country through which they first arrived.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> Notably, these rescues were made with regular assistance from the Armed Forces of Malta as well as transiting merchant vessels. *Mare Nostrum* commenced operations following the October 2013 shipwreck off the coast of Lampedusa (a small Italian island and popular migration hub just 70 miles off the coast of Tunisia), in which more than 350 migrants died at sea.<sup>23</sup> Media attention to this tragedy helped galvanize public support for migrant rescue operations.

Some hailed *Mare Nostrum* as an essential humanitarian mission, while others argued that it unintentionally 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.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, Italy scaled down its SAR operation one year after it was launched. The following month, in November 2014, the EU’s border control agency, Frontex, launched Joint Operation Triton.

In stark contrast to the SAR mission of Italy’s 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.<sup>25</sup> Five months later, the record-breaking shipwreck incident in April reignited debates on how best to respond to the situation and prevent the loss of life along Europe’s shores.

Humanitarian principles, however, are not Europe’s only concerns. The established presence of Islamic State affiliates on Libya’s coast has increased the perception that irregular migration from Libyan shores is a threat to European security. The Islamic State released propaganda declaring war on Rome, and threats that terrorists could take control of migration networks were disseminated.<sup>26</sup> 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, and various proposals are currently being made—from military solutions such as targeting migrant smugglers’ vessels on Libyan shores<sup>27</sup> (a drastic movement that would stress the livelihoods of Libyan fishermen and risk significant civilian casualties), to the redistribution of asylum-seekers throughout European member states<sup>28</sup> (which draws northern Europe into an issue 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 behind 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 of foreign fighter transit.

Trial and error 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 cross-continental 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 and founding member of the Barcelona Process, 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.*”<sup>29</sup> 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 such challenging situations.

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## Endnotes

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