

# MEDITERRANEAN MIGRATION TOWARDS EUROPE: SYSTEM FAILURE?

The Mediterranean has historically been a space of exchange, contact, and conquest. Migration – in all directions – has always been part of the cultural, political and economic negotiation around “Mare Nostrum.” Few things, however, have thrown European identities and the European political project into question more than the recent movement of migrants and refugees across the Mediterranean. In 2014, more than 170,000 migrants reached Italian shores on maritime routes. Italy was the prime landing site for boats, departing mostly from Libya. Approximately a quarter of those crossing were Syrian refugees, while the remainder came from West Africa, Eastern Africa and the Horn of Africa. In 2015, the phenomenon transformed from a “Mediterranean problem” into a European-wide one, with a marked shift from the Central Mediterranean Route (from North Africa to Italy) to the Eastern Mediterranean Route (from Turkey towards Greece and along the Balkan route towards Central, Western and Northern Europe). Between January and mid-December 2015, more than 800,000 individuals arrived in Greece, compared to 150,000 in Italy during the same period. The distribution in 2016 to date has remained roughly the same with 147,000 arrivals in Greece and 13,000 in Italy (see infographic).

With a view to the European policymaker’s perspective, this article outlines the causes, trends and patterns of migration between North Africa, the Middle East and Europe in the period 2014 to early 2016 that should serve to inform political analysis and policy approaches.

## A crisis announced

Why now? While the large-scale arrivals in Europe in 2015 came as a surprise to many, the writing has arguably been on the wall. Libya had not regained its stability since the 2011 conflict but instead descended into further chaos in mid-2014. Yet, it is often forgotten that Libya is traditionally a major magnet for migrant labour in the region and, despite the large-scale departure of migrant workers amidst the fighting in 2011, many returned and continue to enter Libya for work to this day, especially from Egypt, but also through Niger. In conjunction with the growing lawlessness, the large migrant populations for whom Libya is a transit or destination country spelled perfect conditions for people smuggling.

With no end in sight to the war in Syria, hope has been dwindling for the displaced and conflict-affected populations inside Syria, and those in protracted displacement outside. Living conditions in Syria itself and in the main host countries, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, have become increasingly precarious for Syrian refugees. Cuts in basic humanitarian assistance – including food – are likely to have accentuated the underlying despair. In addition to worries over basic subsistence, the onward migration of Syrians is also an expression of a desire for a more stable future, in particular for an overwhelmingly youthful population seeking educational and professional opportunities. However, IOM surveys indicate that up to 90 per cent of Syrians travelling on the Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan route, in fact, departed directly from Syria and only spent a few weeks or even days in transit countries such as Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey. Some of the most important triggers for the movements may therefore be found in Syria itself, including intensified conscription efforts by the Syrian armed forces. This could also go some way towards explaining the large proportion of young men from relatively well-educated, urban, middle class background among the refugees.

In short, changes inside Syria (especially conscription), desperation (from a life in limbo), opportunity (in the form of ever greater availability of information and facilitation of irregular migration), networks (of the growing number of compatriots already present in Europe), but also a certain “now-or-never” mentality deriving from an educated guess that Europe’s doors will not remain “open” for long, have culminated in the current dynamic that has become almost self-perpetuating.

## Who moves (and who doesn't)

While the attention is firmly on Syrian refugees, it is worth taking a closer look at the diversity of populations crossing the Mediterranean. On the Eastern Mediterranean route, Syrians were the largest group by far, with 455,000, more than half of those arriving in Greece in 2015, followed by Afghans and Iraqis. Arrivals in Italy were more diverse, with Syrians only taking fifth place in 2015 after Eritreans, Somalis, Nigerians and Sudanese. Late 2015 and early 2016, by contrast, saw West African nationalities – especially Nigeria, Gambia, Senegal, Mali and Guinea – dominating the route towards Italy.

The changes in the routes and populations between 2014 and 2016 are not incidental and at least three considerations should inform possible solutions: firstly, they illustrate – once again – that migration routes are flexible and adaptable, usually outpacing those trying to study or track them. Closing off one route will open up another; and populations not seen in a certain location today may well appear tomorrow. Turkey is the latest in a series of countries closing off visa-free entry for Syrian nationals, and in combination with the measures agreed upon between the European Union and Turkey in March 2016, there is room for speculation about yet another shift in routes, including a renewed rise of numbers in the Central Mediterranean or entirely new paths, such as the “Northern Route” or via Mauritania.

Secondly, the characteristics of those on the move to and through North Africa and the Middle East and towards Europe are diverse and one solution will not fit all. There is certainly truth in the simplification that migration to Europe broadly combines individuals with mainly economic motivations and those fleeing persecution and war. But it remains a simplification of far more complex, layered and textured realities that shape migration decisions, where questions of safety and survival combine with economic needs and aspirations. Therefore, targeting just one migrant category or oversimplifying the reasons for migration may risk excluding some groups or potential solutions a priori. Blanket declarations of “safe countries of origin” could foster similarly undifferentiated responses.

Thirdly, not everybody moves, and of those who do, not all move to Europe. It is easy to lose a sense of proportion or an appreciation of the fact that migrants still constitute a small percentage of the overall population. Most migration takes place regionally, in particular to neighbouring countries, and the same is true for refugee flows. In a similar vein, there is good evidence that many of those departing Libya by boat had not intended to do so but felt compelled by the insecurity in Libya to leave.

## Of villains and travel agents

Much attention has been paid to the role of people smugglers in organizing – and profiting from – migration across the Mediterranean. While an element of transnational organized crime is undeniably at play in organizing migration across the Mediterranean, responses deriving purely from law enforcement, security and criminal justice approaches may not reach far enough.

Research suggests that smuggling networks operating in North Africa are more like loose chains than tight webs: generally with a person at the top of the hierarchy who never interacts with migrants but reaps the profits, and with layers of front men - often of the same nationality as the migrants - carrying out the daily “dirty work”. Hardly ever is anyone involved in a smuggling network found on the migrant boats. As such, networks can recombine and adapt rapidly. Furthermore, the image of the ruthless, mafia-like villain does not always hold: especially in settings where smuggling is decentralized and popularized, rule of law is weak or absent, and alternative economic opportunities are scarce, smuggling activities can be likened to a form of income generation rather than to criminal operations. Lastly, smuggling thrives in response to a demand for migration that is not met through other, legal channels. In other words, smuggling is in many ways a symptom, rather than cause of the problem.

## No band-aids for system failure

The temptation is great to reduce the problem to “the Syrian crisis”, “smuggling networks” or “rule of law in Libya.” A partial analysis is likely to lead to piecemeal solutions addressing only certain groups or certain

aspects of the phenomenon. According to most experts, the proposal to create so-called “processing centres” in North Africa – questions of legality and political feasibility aside – would at best be ignored and avoided by migrants as irrelevant to them, and at worst turn into a new generation of long-term refugee camps, creating fertile grounds for smugglers, and facilitating mass deportations by host governments. Underlying this is the desire to frame the current situation as a moment of exception that will soon pass, rather than a “new normal.”

Two basic tenets should be at the core of any approach to the Mediterranean situation and migration in general: first, an honest acceptance that migration is here to stay, and second, that the current predicament is not borne out of a single humanitarian crisis, but a series of political, developmental and humanitarian failures. The obvious fact that these will not be rectified or resolved in the near future should not engender resignation. Instead, it should sharpen the focus on what could be possible: more legal migration options, whether for refugees, workers, or students; more circular mobility; more investment in integration and social cohesion; access to labour markets and livelihoods and development-based approaches, to mention a few. Any response should also include an honest examination of the impact of other European policies towards the Middle East and North Africa, especially in the realm of trade. Lastly, it does not diminish the suffering of migrant men, women and children to say that there is an inherent opportunity in the challenge and choices European societies and leaders have to face: whether to revert to defensive and anachronistic reflexes or to face up to a more diverse, more mobile future.

The author

Karoline Popp is the Regional Liaison and Policy Officer at the regional office for the Middle East and North Africa of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Cairo, Egypt.

The views expressed in this article are the author’s and do not represent an official position of IOM.