Border Management in the Euromed Region: Between Upgrade and Collapse

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Ever since the first revolutionary spark in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia in December 2010, the Euromed region has been going through turbulent times – with no end in sight. The regime changes in North Africa, the civil war in Syria, and the severe economic crisis in the southern Member States of the European Union had, and have to this day, dramatic consequences on the political, economic and security level of the whole region, which in turn influences migration patterns and routes. It has also brought about a shift in paradigm for the border management of several Mediterranean countries, even though, at first glance, one might be tempted to conclude that not too much has changed in this particular field.

When the European Commission called upon the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) at the end of 2011 to brief a team of EU experts on the border situation in Libya, this task was initially met with some hesitation: the country had been ravaged by war, Gaddafi was history, and a new power, or rather, taking the clan system into account, new *powers* were in place. How relevant could information collected in 2010[1] possibly be? Still quite relevant, as it turned out: the structural problems were exactly the same as before, including poorly demarcated border lines, overlapping mandates of the border agencies, insufficiently trained and equipped officers, as well as the absence of standard operating procedures,

profiling, and any form of operational risk analysis which deserved the name.

The novelty lay elsewhere, as a closer look revealed, namely in the breakdown of communication lines. In the case of Libya this was particularly severe, where personnel changes and the differing allegiances of the responsible ministries further undermined the already limited inter-agency cooperation which had previously existed. Other North African states face this problem, predominantly in their external dimension, where – despite their readily declared willingness to work together – the loss of trusted counterparts and the cessation of international agreements is seriously hampering formal as well as informal cross-border cooperation and information exchange.

Breakdown of Cross-Border Cooperation and Shift of Focus towards Fighting Terrorism in North Africa

The transition in Tunisia could not be more different to the one in Libya – although it also reduced its national border management system to a shadow of its former self. Having already had to cope with modest means in terms of equipment and infrastructure, the situation got significantly worse after the revolution, when numerous cars, buildings and even two radar stations were set on fire. An outsider might consider this collateral damage of the general unrest, but Tunisian border guards attribute it to the machinations of criminal groups, who used the public upheaval to expand their activities and undermine the work of the law enforcement agencies.

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[1] ICMPD, *A Comprehensive Survey of Migration Flows and Institutional Capabilities in Libya*. Vienna, 2010.

This directly points to the second important development in North Africa in recent years: a substantial increase in organised crime and terrorist activities, facilitated by the hardly controllable desert border of the Sahara and fuelled by the revolutionary unrest in the region, the weakening of governmental authorities in some countries, as well as the massive influx of heavy weapons after the Libyan war. This deterioration of the overall security situation led to a shift in focus from migration control to the fight against terrorism among the border agencies of several North African states.

Middle East: Extremely Permeable and Highly Politicised Borders in a State of Emergency

Border management in the eastern part of the Mediterranean is currently dominated by the civil war in Syria, with its massive cross border movements of Syrians looking for protection in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, as well as the spill-over effects of its military operations. In general, the borders of the Middle East must be described as highly politicised, poorly demarcated, partly contested, partly UN-defined, and at the same time very permeable, all of which turns border management in this region into an extremely challenging task – even outside of an emergency situation.

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If one takes centrally-located Lebanon as an example, one finds its northern and north-eastern border with Syria characterised by "ant-trade," the regular small-scale smuggling of everyday commodities and consumer goods. Since the border communities depend on this trade for their livelihood, attempts of border agencies to introduce tighter controls are usually met with fierce resistance and sometimes even violence. The eastern border is dominated by

the biggest land border crossing point of the Middle East, Masna'a, situated on the trading route between Turkey, Damascus and the port of Beirut. Like most of the other legal crossing points (several illegal ones exist) it is currently still located a few kilometres inland, with some 3,000 people living between the checkpoint and the actual border line. Upgrades in infrastructure, equipment and control procedures are foreseen and highly necessary, because, as one expert puts it: "Why should anybody today go through the trouble of physically smuggling goods like weapons or drugs over the land border, when Masna'a is actually wide open?"

"Wide open" is also the right term to describe other borders in this sub-region, including the situation in the Lebanon's Bekaa area, where Palestinian camps lie directly at the border line and where it is therefore hard to tell who or what enters on one side of the camp and exits at the other.

EU: Fight of Irregular Migration through Technological Upgrades and Facilitation of Legitimate Travel

The borders of the European Union (EU), with their Schengen regime, the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (Frontex), and their capacity to deploy Rapid Border Intervention Teams (RABIT) in urgent and exceptional situations, are characterised by uniform procedures, state-of-the-art equipment and overall high standards. Nevertheless the EU is making sizeable efforts to further enhance border controls and step up its fight against irregular migration. Here the European Commission puts particular emphasis on its southern Mediterranean coast, where the "mass influx" of migrants arrived after leaving North Africa during the revolutions of 2011.

An important pillar of these efforts is the European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR), which not only aims at reducing the number of irregular immigrants entering the EU by enhancing and linking intelligence and surveillance tools, but also at saving more lives at sea by increasing the border agencies' monitoring and search and rescue capacities. EUROSUR goes hand in hand with a massive investment in technology, including networks and

databases, but also hardware like radar stations and possibly even – though very controversial – unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), aka "drones."

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Also the Smart Borders Package, which was presented by the European Commission at the beginning of this year, has at its heart the fight against illegal immigration, e.g. through the planned Entry/Exit System (EES), which registers 3rd country nationals when entering and leaving the EU. But at the same time it also supports the second important goal of the border management system of the EU: facilitating the border crossing procedure for legitimate travellers, including those who are not nationals of an EU Member State. To this effect the development of a Registered Traveller Programme (RTP) is foreseen, which will allow certain groups of frequent travellers to enter the EU via simplified border checks.

Very Diverse, but Strongly Interrelated Systems, with a Renewed Focus on International Cooperation

A bird's eye view of border management in the Euromed region reveals inhomogeneous systems with varying interests and very different challenges to address. Overshadowed by armed conflict and marked by the consequences of the Arab Spring, the systems in North Africa and the Middle East are today significantly more vulnerable than only a few years ago, with an increase in terrorism and organised crime being one of the primary concerns. At the same time the EU, its focus remaining firmly on the fight against irregular migration, is trying to compensate for the loss of control on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea, by heavily investing in technology and working towards an improved coordination and communication among its Member States.

Different as the current situation and circumstances may be, there is however common ground. Changes in the migratory situation in the South or East invariably impact on the North, and an economic downturn in the euro region, for example, could push a Mediterranean state, which so far has predominantly been a country of origin or transit, towards becoming a country of destination. In other words: as far as migration is concerned, the countries of the Euromed region have a common destiny.

In practical terms, in the case of border management, this means that the EU wishes for reliable partners who have a functioning border management system in place and can share relevant information in a timely manner. The other states of the region, on the other hand, can profit from the EU's experience as well as its high technical and operational standards. It is therefore no wonder that the interregional cooperation in the field of border management, which had suffered during the Arab Spring, is high on the international agenda again, and, as the coming years will show, about to be considerably increased.