

# Climate Change and Migration in the Mediterranean: Challenges for the Future

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Previously relegated to academic and policy circles, the issue of Mediterranean migration sprang dramatically to the public attention in 2015, as Europe faced an unprecedented influx of migrants<sup>1</sup> from the Middle East, the Maghreb, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The migrant crisis has led to widespread human suffering, severely strained European institutional capacities, and sparked tensions between and within countries across the Mediterranean and Europe. The influx of migrants continued in 2016, albeit at reduced levels, and indicators point to the possibility that the region is facing a “new normal” of human mobility. While securitized border responses were quickly cobbled together, less attention has been paid to the underlying drivers of these migratory flows, among them climate change and its complex secondary effects in migrants’ countries of origin. While climate is far from the only factor driving migration – or even the most important – it is undeniably playing a role in shaping the conditions that lead people to migrate. This article will discuss these underlying trends and sketch the contours of

what the future may look like along the Mediterranean littoral.

## A “New Normal” in the Mediterranean?

The migrant crisis has become a fact of life for governments and societies throughout the Mediterranean. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) registered 363,348 migrant and refugee arrivals to Europe via the Mediterranean in 2016, down dramatically from over 1,000,000 arrivals in 2015 but still higher than previous years. The 2016 arrivals were split almost evenly between Greece and Italy - referred to as the eastern and western routes, respectively.

The reduction from 2015 is due to a large drop in migrants along the eastern route through Turkey to Greece (from 853,650 to 173,561). But this overall decline in the number of arrivals should not overshadow the fact that larger numbers of migrants attempted the more dangerous western route across the open sea to Italy and Malta. Migration along this route increased by 15% to 181,436 – with a corresponding increase in mortality rates for migrants. Italy’s 182,000 arrivals in 2016 was the highest total ever recorded, driven by an increase from West Africa and the Horn of Africa – particularly from Nigeria and Eritrea. Over 5,000 migrants died at sea in 2015, despite the efforts of Frontex – the European Border and Coast Guard Agency – which managed to rescue some 90,000 migrants.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The International Organization for Migration defines a “migrant” as “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is.” This is the definition we will use in this chapter, though with a specific focus on those migrants who have crossed the Mediterranean into Europe through one of the major international routes. THE INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION, *Key Migration Terms*, (accessed March, 2017), available at: [www.iom.int/key-migration-terms](http://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms).

<sup>2</sup> THE INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION, *Mediterranean Migrant Arrivals Top 363,348 in 2016; Deaths at Sea: 5,079*, 6 January, 2017, available at: [www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-top-363348-2016-deaths-sea-5079](http://www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-top-363348-2016-deaths-sea-5079). See also: FRONTEX, *Risk Analysis for 2017*, 2017, available at: [http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk\\_Analysis/Annual\\_Risk\\_Analysis\\_2017.pdf](http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Annual_Risk_Analysis_2017.pdf).

Frontex attributes the drop in migration along the eastern route to the EU – Turkey migrant deal – wherein Turkey agreed to do more to prevent illegal crossings into Greece in exchange for financial aid, and in which a mechanism was set up to allow for the return of migrants to Turkey from Greece – and the heavily securitized border response in the Balkans, which contributed to the partial breakdown of the Schengen Area. The legality of the EU – Turkey deal has been questioned by human rights and international law experts and has contributed to a broader crisis in EU – Turkish relations. More broadly, the political fervor around migration has contributed to the rise of far-right political parties across the continent and led to deep tensions between EU Member States. With the domestic political stakes so high around Europe and in Turkey – host to an estimated 3,000,000 refugees (2,750,000 from Syria alone) – vulnerable migrants have been essentially used by all sides as a bargaining chip.

Setting aside the legal, political, and human rights concerns – a securitized response is simply unworkable. Caught off-guard in 2015, European governments and the EU quickly expanded and strengthened enforcement efforts in a systematic way. But efforts on the enforcement side alone will never get ahead of the challenge: Frontex oversaw 10,000 returns from EU to non-EU countries in 2016, up from 3,500 in 2015, but there is no way these efforts can keep up with the pace of migration. Meanwhile, the EU-Turkey deal and other bilateral arrangements are vulnerable to shifting political currents. Put simply, these responses are unsustainable and far from ideal. The one-dimensional and regressive response is typical of crisis decision-making, but over time it should give way to a more cooperative and forward-looking response.

It would be the wrong response to focus only on building barriers to migration. The EU has begun efforts to address the root causes of migration, but not yet at the scale the problem will likely require. This is largely a problem of budgets and, therefore, of political will in a Union facing tremendous political pressure in the wake of the debt crisis and Brexit.

## Examining Root Causes

The eastern and western migratory routes are often considered together; there are good reasons for this, as routes are flexible and do shift to some extent in response to conditions, including enforcement mechanisms. But looking at the countries of origin along the two routes and thinking about root causes, important distinctions emerge. The eastern route is truly a “war route” dominated by refugees and migrants from the war zones of Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan (though there is a growing body of scholarship on the climatic drivers of the initial unrest in Syria<sup>3</sup>).

The western route is more varied in its composition and its causes; it is dominated by migrants from a broad swathe of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel. The primary drivers of this flow are economic underdevelopment and demography. Countries like Nigeria, Niger, and Mali are extremely poor and rank among the fastest growing populations in the world – indeed, Niger has the highest fertility rate in the world. The desire to escape extreme poverty and seek economic opportunity in North Africa and, possibly Europe, is undeniably the biggest factor driving migrants from these countries.

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But environmental change – including the effects of climate change – represents another important underlying driver among many. Wide swathes of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel – particularly northern Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Mali – face extreme water-stress and are heavily dependent on seasonal rains to maintain subsistence farming, herding, and fishing. This water scarcity and reliance on basic rural livelihoods leave these areas

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: KELLEY, et.al., “Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 112, No.11, January, 2015, available at: [www.pnas.org/content/112/11/3241](http://www.pnas.org/content/112/11/3241)

very vulnerable to climate change (as well as natural seasonal variation and non-climate change related environmental issues like contamination).

Indeed, the effects of climate change are already being felt in these areas; average temperatures across the Sahel have increased by almost 0.7 degrees Celsius since 1975. The rains on which people rely have become more unpredictable and extreme (both droughts and seasonal flooding), and Lake Chad – on which some 25 million people rely to survive – has shrunk to one-twentieth of its 1960s size. Desertification has slowly pushed the line at which rainfall and groundwater can support agriculture further south in recent decades, rendering whole villages and thousands of square kilometres unsuitable for human habitation.<sup>4</sup>

Undoubtedly, differentiating the exact impact of man-made climate change from natural fluctuations is extremely difficult. The causality of migratory decisions is also deeply complex, making detailed analysis of the climate's exact role difficult. But the anecdotal evidence is overwhelming, and the scholarly research is rapidly fleshing out the picture.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, climate change influences numerous other push factors and often “masquerades” under other guises – for example, a farmer's economic desperation due to unpredictable rains is the result of many factors, among them climate.<sup>6</sup>

Despite this complicated causality, it is clear that demography and environmental changes – including climate change – are combining with insecurity and poor governance to undermine rural livelihoods and contributing to decisions to migrate. These factors squeeze the margins of life at the family, community, and often regional level. In places with extremely weak governance and limited state capacity

to react to crises or organize adaptive responses, people are left with few good options – many turn to the ancient adaptive mechanism of migration.

These trends also interact with and are worsened by conflict. Persistent droughts have ravaged farmers and herders across the region. But it is no coincidence that the most acute food insecurity is currently found in northern Nigeria, the Lake Chad basin, Somalia, and South Sudan – areas which have faced both dire environmental conditions and persistent conflict. Indeed, conflicts across the Middle East and North Africa have left 30 million people facing food insecurity, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

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In parts of Nigeria, Mali, and Sudan (as well as Syria) the climate–migration nexus has contributed to tensions over resources and undermined the socio-economic pillars of communities, overwhelmed state responses, and exacerbated political, ethnic, and religious tensions. Neither climatic factors nor demography or migration “explain” these conflicts – there are no simple causal connections to be made in complex crises like that facing Nigeria or

<sup>4</sup> For more detail see, for example: Michael WERZ and Laura CONLEY. *Climate Change, Migration, and Conflict in Northwest Africa*, Center for American Progress, April, 2012, available at: [https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2012/04/pdf/climate\\_migration\\_nwafrica.pdf](https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2012/04/pdf/climate_migration_nwafrica.pdf). *The New York Times* has recently published several excellent anecdotal accounts of these phenomena, as well: Somini SEN-GUPTA. “Heat, Hunger and War Force Africans Onto a ‘Road on Fire’,” *The New York Times*, 15 December, 2016, available at: [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/15/world/africa/agadez-climate-change.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/15/world/africa/agadez-climate-change.html?_r=0). Also: Jeffrey GETTLEMAN. “Drought and War Heighten Threat of Not Just 1 Famine, but 4,” *The New York Times*, 27 March, 2017, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2017/03/27/world/africa/famine-somalia-nigeria-south-sudan-yemen-water.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/27/world/africa/famine-somalia-nigeria-south-sudan-yemen-water.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur).

<sup>5</sup> An excellent recent survey: WILSON CENTER AND U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, “Navigating Complexity: Climate, Migration, and Conflict in a Changing World,” November, 2016, available at: [www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/navigating-complexity-climate-migration-and-conflict-changing-world](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/navigating-complexity-climate-migration-and-conflict-changing-world). See also the Center for American Progress' series on *Climate Change, Migration, and Security* available at [www.americanprogress.org/projects/climate-migration-security/view/](http://www.americanprogress.org/projects/climate-migration-security/view/).

<sup>6</sup> See for example: P. Krishna KRISHNAMURTHY, Kirsty LEWIS, Richard J. CHOULARTON. *Climate impacts on food security and nutrition: a review of existing knowledge*, World Food Programme and Met Office's Hadley Centre, 2012. See also: Nina VON UEXKULL; Mihai CROICU; Hanne FJELDE and Halvard BUHAUG, “Civil conflict sensitivity to growing-season drought,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 113., No. 44, (2016), available at: [www.pnas.org/content/113/44/12391](http://www.pnas.org/content/113/44/12391).

Darfur – but these underlying trends undeniably deserve greater attention.<sup>7</sup>

### Western Tools – Rusty and Out of Date

Unfortunately, these underlying drivers go largely unaddressed, and developed countries too often focus on managing the consequences. In fact, the tools to address the root causes of such complex crises are being weakened in many areas. The new administration of President Donald Trump has sought deep cuts to the budget of the State Department, USAID, and wants to reduce US contributions to the UN and other international organizations. Trump also has sought to reverse US commitments on carbon emissions and fuel standards and questioned continuing adherence to the Paris Climate Agreement. With the full effects of a changing climate coming to bear and the Mediterranean littoral facing unprecedented humanitarian crises, these cuts could not come at a worse time.

Of course, both the US and Europe have numerous aid efforts and pilot programmes aimed at helping vulnerable communities adapt to climate change and at providing basic economic viability in marginal areas. But even without further cuts these efforts are hampered by budget shortfalls and a complete inadequacy of scale. Without yielding to Malthusian alarmism, the demographic and climate indicators – of young and rapidly growing populations with few economic options and increasingly inhospitable rural conditions – are very concerning.

Yet the margins to alleviate the most desperate suffering, extreme poverty, and stark climate vulnerabil-

ity are actually quite small and can be addressed with a sustained devotion of resources. By focusing on root causes, coordinating programmes, and shifting to cash giving enabled by technology rather than in-kind aid, big improvements can be made. On the question of migration and Europe's response, border enforcement is not a sustainable solution. The efforts to address root causes must be bolstered by moves to improve the economic and social integration of migrants; after all, remittances far outweigh government assistance to developing countries (furthermore, these cash transfers are the most effective form of assistance).

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In reality, given the political stakes, the EU must take an all-of-the-above approach. And, given the political context in the United States, Europe must lead the way. While governments and civil society should understand the political and security implications if these trends go unaddressed, state responses and the corresponding public discourse should be de-securitized. With luck, a coordinated response focused on root causes and integration can get ahead of the worrying trends facing the Mediterranean community.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: U.S. NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL, *Implications for US National Security of Anticipated Climate Change*, 21 September, 2016, available at: [www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Reports%20and%20Pubs/Implications\\_for\\_US\\_National\\_Security\\_of\\_Anticipated\\_Climate\\_Change.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Reports%20and%20Pubs/Implications_for_US_National_Security_of_Anticipated_Climate_Change.pdf). See also: Nina VON UEXKULL; Mihai CROICU; Hanne FJELDE and Halvard BUHAUG, "Civil conflict sensitivity to growing-season drought," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 113., No. 44, 2016, available at: [www.pnas.org/content/113/44/12391](http://www.pnas.org/content/113/44/12391).