

Migration in the Mediterranean: Origins and Characteristics

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In 2015, migration by sea in the Mediterranean region made the headlines due to the massive increase in the flow of mixed migrants, mostly Syrian and to a lesser extent Iraqis and Afghanis, through Turkey and on to Greece and the rest of the Balkans. This is commonly referred to as the Eastern route, which itself consists of several entry points at sea and to a lesser extent on land. However, it is important to stress that migrants and refugees also cross other land borders, such as from Syria and Iraq into Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey and from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel into the Maghreb region. Indeed most of the Mediterranean states affected by the migration phenomenon are both transit and destination countries.

This article does not enter into all the issues connected to contemporary migration such as the motivations and push-pull factors that influence migrants' decisions. Nor does it analyze the plethora of human rights issues and political controversy that migration has whipped up. Unless otherwise stated, by 'migrants' we refer to both refugees fleeing danger as well as economic migrants. These are two different categories of people on the move. This text limits itself to the facts by assessing developments across the region in 2015 to provide a 'helicopter' view of a situation which is continuously and rapidly changing. From a Mediterranean and EU standpoint, 2015 was significant due to the enormous, record surge of refugees entering the EU through the southern corridors, as compared to previous years. A total of 1,046,496 entered the EU from the Mediterranean as opposed to 229,430 the previous

year. The year will also be remembered for breaking another record in the number of fatalities at sea: IOM estimates that 3,770 people drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean as compared to the 3,279 reported in 2014 – an increase of 15%. The Central Mediterranean route was the most dangerous, accounting for 77% of fatalities. One last word of caution: any figures quoted may be inaccurate depending on which agency is reporting and the cut-off date. What is more relevant is that the figures quoted approximate to each other and point towards the same trends.

The Traditional Routes

Most of the irregular migrants living in the EU have entered the Union through airports carrying regular travel documentation but have subsequently overstayed their visas. The Mediterranean region is a maritime conduit for irregular migration (Table 1a). Migrants and refugees enter Southern Europe from three directions labelled the Western, Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes. According to FRONTEX, last year, entry through the Western route remained stable, though slightly below the previous year's, and not far from the average annual entries and median for 2010-15. The same cannot be said of the other two routes: the Eastern one saw a dramatic increase from 50,830 to 885,386 – a fact well publicized by the media – while the Central route registered a slight decline from 170,760 in 2014 to 153,946 in 2015, probably because of a shift of movements to the much easier Eastern route. Nevertheless, the Central route is still very important.

The growth in importance of the Eastern route in 2015 is attributable to a number of factors, but pri-

TABLE 1A

Migration through the Mediterranean

Year	Mediterranean Irregular Migrant Routes			Total
	Western	Central	Eastern	
2015	7,164	153,946	885,386	1,046,496
2014	7,840	170,760	50,830	229,430
2013	6,800	40,000	24,800	71,600
2012	6,400	15,900	37,200	59,500
2011	8,450	64,300	55,700	128,450
2010	5,000	4,500	40,000	49,500
Average 2010-15 both years included	6,942	74,901	546,958	
Median	6,982	52,150	45,415	

Source: FRONTEX at <http://frontex.europa.eu/trends-and-routes/migratory-routes-map>

marily owes to the fact that the route through Turkey, Greece and the Balkans proved to be less hazardous and more direct for the thousands of refugees huddled in camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey who wanted to leave.

Aid to Block Migration

In 2015, the EU doubled its efforts to use its economic aid to secure the cooperation of neighbouring third countries in stopping the migratory flows. This approach is not without precedent. In the Western Mediterranean, following a slow growth in undocumented migrants from Morocco crossing into Spain (including the Canary Islands, Ceuta and Melilla) and from there to the rest of the EU, figures increased substantially leading to an agreement in 2004 for joint naval patrols between Spain and Morocco, tied to a Spanish aid package for Morocco in the region of \$390 million. The same happened in 2009 following the Italo-Libyan Friendship Treaty signed in Benghazi in August 2008, and which provided for joint Libyan-Italian sea patrols to push refugees back to the Libyan coast.

This accord also included annual transfers of US\$200 million from Rome to Tripoli for 25 years through investments in infrastructure in Libya under the guise of a belated reparation for Italy's colonial misdeeds. Apart from providing patrol boats to the depleted Libyan navy, Italy also undertook to construct a radar system to monitor Libya's desert borders and stop migrants entering the country. The agreement reached with Turkey in March 2016 and the creation of the European Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) during the Valletta summit easily tie in to this pattern of behaviour.

Migrant arrivals in the Southern Mediterranean countries of the EU during 2015 are laid out in Table 1b.

The Eastern Route is Holding

The main assumption is that the Agreement signed between the EU and Turkey in March 2016 will have a similar effect to the 2004 Spanish-Morocco accord and the 2008 Italy-Libya Friendship Treaty. It is being anticipated that as Turkey stops migrants from reaching Greece, smugglers and human traffickers will shift to the Central Mediterranean route.

TABLE 1B

Migrant Arrivals in Southern EU Member States in 2015

Country	By Sea	By Land	Total
Greece	853,650	3,713	857,363
Bulgaria	0	31,174	31,174
Italy	153,842	0	153,842
Spain	3,845	0	3,845
Malta	106	0	106
Cyprus	269	0	269
Total	1,011,712	34,887	1,046,599

Source: IOM, *Mixed Migration flows in the Mediterranean and Beyond, Compilation of Available Data and Information*, 2015, (Cut-off date for the data 21.12.2015) at <http://doe.iom.int/docs/Flows%20Compilation%202015%20Overview.pdf>

TABLE 2

Irregular Migration in the First Five Months of 2016

	Country	Arrivals	
		1 Jan-25 May 2016	1 Jan-25 May 2015
Eastern Route	Greece	156,157	40,297
Eastern Route	Cyprus	28	269
Central Route	Italy	37,363	47,449
Western Route	Spain*	1,063	3,845
	Total	194,611	91,860

* Figures up to end of March. Source: International Organization of Migration

Austria is taking special precautions in case this were to happen by strengthening its borders around the Brenner Pass, provoking a serious dispute with Italy.

The data released so far for the first five months of 2016, shown in Table 2, indicate that the situation on both the Central and Eastern routes remains critical. However, on the Eastern route, FRONTEX reports that, “the number of migrants arriving on the Greek islands in April plunged by 90% compared to the previous month, reaching fewer than 2,700.”¹ This drop in migrant flows occurred after the EU-Turkey Agreement. The figures in Table 2 show an increasing trend in migrant movements in the first five months of 2016, but as long as the Eastern route remains locked, the pressure on the Central route will increase. IOM assessments show that the presence of Syrians in Libya is increasing and human smugglers and traffickers may take advantage of the absence of rule of law to operate with impunity. This is another crucial reason why Libya needs to be stabilized.

Fatalities in the Mediterranean

According to IOM, 3,770 fatalities were reported in the Mediterranean in 2015, a 15% increase on 2014. Of these, 2,892 or just under 77% of all fatalities, occurred in the Central Mediterranean, 806 in the Eastern part and 72 in the Western Mediterranean. April was the deadliest month of the year with 1,244 fatalities.

Composition of Migrants Arriving in the EU

The composition of the migrants arriving in the EU via Italy (Central route) and Greece (Eastern route) in 2015 are very different. Table 3 shows that the nationality of the migrants moving through both routes are very different. African migrants predominate in the Central route, particularly from the Sub-Saharan countries, while Syrians and to a lesser extent Afghanis and Iraqis predominate along the Eastern route.

As for gender, UNHCR reports that 58% of the 2015 arrivals were men, 17% women and 25% children (gender not specified). The arrival of predominantly male migrants may indicate that many of them may be blazing the trail to Europe alone, for the rest of their families to join them later. UNHCR figures appear to support this, for they show that in the first quarter of 2016 the gender composition of the flows began to change: 47% of the 130,110 arrivals by sea were men, 20% women and 34% children.

Asylum data shows that between 2014 and 2016, more men than women applied for asylum across the EU. According to UNICEF, more than one in five refugees who arrived in Europe through the Mediterranean in 2015 were children, who are considered to be the most vulnerable category in such flows. There is also a growing trend of unaccompanied and separated children (UASCs) but “it is very difficult to obtain accurate numbers for unaccompanied and separated children, as formal registration procedures in some countries in Europe do not allow for their identification.”²

¹ FRONTEX Press Release, “Number of migrants arriving in Greece dropped 90% in April,” <http://frontex.europa.eu/news/number-of-migrants-arriving-in-greece-dropped-90-in-april-6e7oBw>

² IOM and UNICEF, November 2015.

TABLE 3 Country of Origin of Migrants Arriving in the EU by Sea through Greece and Italy in 2015

ITALY		GREECE	
Country of Origin	As a Percentage of the total	Country of Origin	As a Percentage of the total
Eritrea	25.5	Libya	0.4
Nigeria	14.5	Burkina Faso	0.3
Somalia	8.1	Guinea Bissau	0.3
Sudan	5.8	Benin	0.3
Gambia	5.5	Togo	0.2
Syria	4.8	Algeria	0.2
Senegal	3.9	Sierra Leone	0.2
Mali	3.8	Comoros	0.2
Bangladesh	3.3	Chad	0.1
Morocco	3.0	Congo	0.1
Ghana	2.9	Niger	0.1
Ivory Coast	2.5	Liberia	0.1
Ethiopia	1.7	Iran	0.1
Guinea	1.7	Afghanistan	0.1
Egypt	1.7	Other (26 countries)	0.3
Pakistan	1.3	Unidentified	4.6
Occ. Palestinian T.	1.1		
Iraq	0.6		
Tunisia	0.6		
Cameroon	0.4		
Total	153,842		853,650

Source: International Organization for Migration

Where migrants' qualifications are concerned, very little is known yet about the 2015 arrivals. According to the OECD, contrary to public perception, refugees tend to have higher skill levels than the population they left behind. However, there are variations across countries of origin and destination and across migration waves. Among the recently arrived Syrian nationals, the share of people with a post-secondary diploma appears to be much higher. In 2014 in Sweden, more than 40% of Syrians had at least upper secondary education, compared to 20% of Afghans and 10% of Eritreans. Germany does not systematically record the qualifications of asylum seekers, but they are asked on a voluntary basis about their education and occupational skills during the application procedure. On average, of those who arrived in 2014, 15% had a tertiary degree, 16% had upper secondary education (*Gymnasium*), 35% lower secondary education, 24% attended only primary school and 11% had not attended school at all.

Syrian refugees, however, were on average better educated: 21% of those arriving in 2013 through to September 2014 said that they had attended university, 22% had received upper secondary education and 47% had obtained either lower secondary or primary education. Data for France (ELIPA), in 2010, show that 14% of all refugees had attained tertiary educational level and 43% at least secondary education. The percentage of tertiary educated was slightly higher for those coming from Europe (20%) and lower for those originating from Sub-Saharan Africa (10%). From this perspective, while Europe may have gained from migration, the countries of origin have lost.³

EU Action

The 2015 migration surge raised a lot of debate in the EU, particularly after the April fatalities off the Libyan coast, which intensified in September when

³ OECD, *Migration Policy Debates*, No 7, September, 2015, www.oecd.org/migration/Is-this-refugee-crisis-different.pdf

the German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced her 'open door' policy. Commission Proposals for burden sharing were resisted and some Member States invested a considerable amount of energy in securing borders to stop the migrant flows, particularly secondary movements from Greece and Italy through the Western Balkans. Internal dissonance weakened consensus in the EU and undermined the Schengen Agreement. In September, Hungary sealed off its border with Serbia, and the Council of the EU approved a relocation plan for 66,000 migrants from Italy and Greece, despite opposition from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania.

During the Special Meeting of the EU Council of 23 April, which met a few days after the incident off the Libyan coast and the death of around 800 migrants, a number of decisions were taken affecting the Central Mediterranean. It was decided to launch Common Security and Defence Policy - CSDP operations to disrupt smugglers' networks, to triple the budgetary aid to the Triton (started 2014) and Poseidon (started 2006) missions respectively in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean and to seek stronger cooperation with third countries and the EU's partners. An EU-Africa summit on migration was convened, which eventually met in Malta on the 11-12 November 2015. At this summit the €1.8-billion EUTF was launched to finance projects in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel in order to address the root causes of displacement and irregular migration. At the Valletta summit, the EU sought African agreement to accept returned migrants in exchange for projects financed from the Trust. This proposal was strongly criticized by the African leaders.

In line with the European Agenda on Migration, an extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council adopted the decision on 14 September to relocate 40,000 asylum seekers from Italy and Greece to other EU Member States. Eight days later, another Extraordinary Home Affairs Council added a further 120,000 refugees for relocation.

These decisions followed the European Commission's May and September 2015 proposals, which for the first time were based on Article 78(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).⁴

Operation Sophia

The EU's Operation Sophia in the Central Mediterranean operates along the lines of the FRONTEX led Operation Triton which replaced the Italian Operation Mare Nostrum, (2013-14) which had become too expensive to be handled by Italy alone. Triton was launched on 1 November 2014, but the level of naval assets placed at its disposal were much lower than what Italy had deployed in Mare Nostrum. Notwithstanding this, when Triton was launched, FRONTEX declared that "We are very satisfied with the response of the Member States which contributed generously with their technical equipment and experts..."⁵

Following the April 2015 migrant tragedy off the coast of Libya, with the loss of 800 lives at sea, the EU Council decided to triple the budgets of Triton and Poseidon until 2016 to upgrade Triton to the level of Mare Nostrum.

Then, on the 18 May 2015, the EU Council decided to launch EUNAVFOR-Med or Operation Sophia. Its main objective was to disrupt smugglers and not to rescue migrants, though this was also included in its mandate. 21 countries contributed naval forces to this operation. This was the first operation that expressly linked the internal and external EU security agendas. Due to the absence of an effective government in Libya, Operation Sophia can only operate in international waters and enter Libyan territorial waters when permitted by Tripoli. Sophia has been strongly criticized in a 2016 report published by the British House of Lords as having failed to reduce the flow of migrants, and the number of arrests made have largely been of low-level operators.

⁴ Article 78(3): "In the event of one or more Member States being confronted by an emergency situation characterized by a sudden inflow of nationals of third countries, the Council, on a proposal from the Commission, may adopt provisional measures for the benefit of the Member State(s) concerned. It shall act after consulting the European Parliament."

⁵ FRONTEX Launches Joint Operation Triton, <http://frontex.europa.eu/news/frontex-launches-joint-operation-triton-JSYpL7>

TABLE 4

People of Concern and Migrant Stock in Southern Mediterranean Countries

	People of Concern 2016 (UNHCR)				Migrant Stock IOM 2015
	Refugees	Asylum Seekers	Others	Total	
Mashreq and Turkey					
Egypt	217,000	32,000	24	249,024	0.49m
Lebanon	1,368,000	29,000	7,000	1,404,000	2.0m
Iraq	3,000,000 IDPs 386,151 refugees	18,550	667,000*	4,071,701	0.35m
Jordan	730,709	48,491	0	779,200	3.11m
Syria	8,420,786 IDPs 99,252 refugees	8,569	160,000	8,969,061	0.88m
Turkey	2,794,002	314,157	1,086	3,109,245	3.0m
Maghreb					
Algeria	94,155	10,535	0	104,690	0.24m
Libya	200,000 IDPs 100,000 Returned IDPs 15,000 refugees 15,000 returned refugees	31,300	0	361,800	0.77m
Mauritania	50,980 refugees 26,000 refugee-like 1,500 returned refugees	120		78,600	0.14m
Morocco	na	na	na	na	0.09m
Tunisia	1,779	80	0	1,859	0.06m

Notes: *Stateless, Returned IDPs and Returned refugees. Source: IOM migrant stocks from DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS, *International Migration Report 2015 – Highlights*, published, UN, New York, 2016 at www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2015_Highlights.pdf Table in the Annex, pages 28-30; UNHCR statistics from the Agency's "Global Focus."

The Agreement with Turkey

On the 16 October 2015, the EU announced the main principles of an agreement with Turkey to seal off the Eastern borders. This was followed by a 17-point action plan for the Western Balkans, agreed by EU leaders on 25 October, which included a decision to refuse entry to third country nationals who did not qualify for or refused to apply for international protection.

The EU-Turkey agreement, eventually announced on 18 March 2016, bound Turkey to adopting measures to close sea and land routes to the EU, in return for which it would be provided with an initial €3-billion aid package for 2018 to help it cope with the pressure of migrants on its territory. The EU promised a visa liberalization roadmap for Turkish citizens by June 2016. The stalled EU-Turkey membership negotiations were reopened. From the 20 March, new irregular migrants and asylum seekers crossing from Turkey, whose applications were declared inadmissible, were to be returned to Turkey. For every Syrian returned to Turkey, another Syrian would be resettled in the EU from Turkey.

Situation in the Southern EU Neighbours

Migration strongly impacts all the EU's southern neighbours. The scale of the challenge is captured in Table 4 which shows the number of refugees and the migrant stock recorded by IOM and UNHCR in this region. UNHCR refers to people of concern while the IOM published migrant stocks in the countries. The lack of a solution to the Syrian conflict is the most important source of refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. From this 'pool' of people came the migrants who reached Europe in 2015. The situation in the Maghreb is different, except for Libya where the population of concern and migrant stock remains relatively high in comparison to its population and the other countries of the Maghreb.

The link between the longer-term effects of migration and economic growth has been illustrated several times. But there is no doubt that by supporting Syrian refugees on their territories, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey are incurring huge costs in terms of the provision of essential services such as education and healthcare. The World Bank estimates

that the influx of more than 630,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan has cost it more than US\$2.5 billion a year.⁶ This amounts to 6% of GDP, and a quarter of the government's annual revenues. The Turkish government has spent an estimated €7 billion on hosting refugees since the start of the Syrian crisis. This figure does not include the refugees who live in urban areas outside government control. A World Bank study claims that the "overall costs borne by the respective governments (hosting refugees and asylum seekers) continue to be very high."⁷

The societies of the host countries feel the pressure in other ways such as increased competition in the labour and housing markets. In these societies, where unemployment rates are already high, competition in the labour market leads to lower wage rates and the exploitation of the local and migrant work force and contributes to stabilizing unemployment at a high rate. In Lebanon and Jordan, migrants find it difficult to work legally. Lebanon is reluctant to issue work permits and in Jordan a work permit can only be obtained if the applicant can produce a legal passport – which many Syrian refugees cannot. Hence, many refugees are forced to work illegally.

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⁶ WORLD BANK, *By the Numbers: The Cost of War & Peace in the Middle East*, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2016/02/03/by-the-numbers-the-cost-of-war-and-peace-in-mena>

⁷ VERME, P. et al. *The Welfare of Syrian Refugees: Evidence from Jordan and Lebanon*, World Bank Group and UNHCR 2016.