

POLICY CONVERSATIONS ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN: EUROPE AND LEBANON IN THE SPOTLIGHT

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This paper has been written by Gemma Aubarell and Carmen Geha following an open conversation about the next decade of policies on migrants and refugees in the Mediterranean, the new governance trends and the role of decentralised actors in the field with a focus on the Syrian refugees' situation in Lebanon. It expands the horizon of the conversation drawing on trans-disciplinary insights from both academia and practice to propose new bridges and learning that can advocate migrant protection and guard against policies of exclusion.

The Euro-Mediterranean framework

Migration policies in the Mediterranean region have recently been confronted with major crises that substantially and simultaneously affect all dimensions of migration strategies. The fundamental change in the last stage was brought about by the migration crisis of 2015 with an avalanche of refugees caused by the conflicts in the region. From this moment on, mobility management and its consequences have opened new parameters of response, also requested by a citizenship and public opinion that demands different solutions to a human drama of the first magnitude. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has made the extreme situation even more relevant for those on the frontline of migration movements.

At European regional level, in the European Union (EU), the refugee and migration crisis highlight the shortcomings of the EU's own capacity to provide an effective and coordinated response to migration in asylum management. **The New Pact for Migration and Asylum** launched by the EU in September 2020 puts forward its vision in this complex and common policy area. This framework seeks more involvement of stakeholders, including regional and local authorities and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), and, at the same time and mainly in terms of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, by facilitating the development of partnerships with third countries. More recently, the **Mediterranean Agenda** was proposed by the European Commission (EC) in February 2021, and one of its five main objectives is about the challenges of forced displacement and irregular migration and facilitating safe and legal pathways for migration and mobility. However, this basic approach of easing restrictions on legal migration is in return for better performance on controlling the illegal variety through more effective return and readmission arrangements.¹

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¹ <https://www.ceps.eu/how-new-is-the-eus-new-agenda-for-the-mediterranean/>

The deployment of these policies is **involving many public and civil society actors** who increasingly feel more legitimised to contribute with their voice to this traditionally state-wide field of action. **Regional and local actors** have become part of the agenda of existing networks that embrace the issue of migration in their agendas. These groups do not always bring together actors from the North and South of the Mediterranean, while many of them are initiatives structured around lobbying in European policies with an impact on the region.

The initiatives promoted by regional and local networks have been positioned as an immediate result of being confronted at the forefront of this situation, demanding more resources and instruments to make their inclusion programmes more effective, either in terms of the **right to the city** (urban agenda) as well as referring to **social cohesion** (intercultural agenda) or the best management **of social demands** (services agenda). On the other hand, their proposals address the field of solidarity responsibility to be able to manage the problems arising from the European crisis in a global sense, making proposals for open management to solve a problem facing other territories dealing with the human drama of refugees. Finally, there is the interest in the field of **policy cooperation** and outsourcing since, with the cooperation programmes undertaken in many cases, they also represent a demand for complementarity in foreign action and migration management.²

The Lebanon situation

Lebanon is home to the highest number of refugees per capita worldwide. That is not the news; the story is how Lebanese society and local communities responded to the waves of refugees, and most recently the Syrian refugee crisis since 2011. Lebanon is not signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention and as such does not recognise refugees as refugees but rather as displaced persons. According to the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres, “Lebanon is a key pillar in the international framework for the protection of Syrian refugees, and without it, that entire system would collapse.”

The Government of Lebanon considers individuals who have been crossing the Lebanese Syrian border since 2011 to be “displaced persons”, citing the reservation of its sovereign right to determine their status according to Lebanese domestic laws and regulations. This is a deliberate use of the word “displaced” by the Lebanese government in place of the word “refugee” as both terms are legally charged with state responsibilities under international law; in this instance, the Government of Lebanon successfully dodges the “refugee label”.³ This sovereignty argument is maintained by the fact that Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention. Restrictive policies in Lebanon and Jordan may force refugees to return to an unsafe environment in Syria while Syrian public policy makes it difficult, undesirable and, in some cases, fatal to return.

² Some of the regional and local networks dealing with migratory programmes with an impact on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation are the World Organization of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the peripheral and maritime regions (CPRM), the Assembly of European Regions (ARE), and the refugee cities network Solidarity Cities.

³ Janmyr Maja (2017). No Country of Asylum: ‘Legitimizing’ Lebanon’s Rejection of the 1951 Refugee Convention. *International Journal of Refugee Law*.

Syrian refugees in Lebanon have survived thus far despite state policies and not because of them. While the UN has championed a narrative around the resilience of local communities, this masked a darker reality where the Lebanese state traded reform for resilience.

Today, the risk of forced repatriation also looms over the risk of the Lebanese state and politicians exploiting the plight of refugees to force the EU to make concessions in funding and aid. But there can be another story and angle here. While the government and politicians have failed miserably, local institutions and individual advocates have risen to the occasion. If the EU is looking for local partners to truly advocate refugee protection, then they will find a typology of actors and private institutions, from schools to hospitals. Even universities have expanded scholarship programmes up to MA levels to help young Syrians who have student visas. Civil society actors staged protests and sit-ins with “Refugees Welcome” signs as their counterparts in Europe did. During the October 2019 revolution, activists carried slogans demanding equal rights and legal protection for refugees, some of whom lost their lives in the protests due to police violence.

A call for action: new framework of cooperation

We propose a new decentralised approach of cooperation linking cities, municipalities and CSOs together. This has two aims: first, it strengthens local capacity and transforms actors from victims into agents for refugee protection and, second, it mobilises support and solidarity at the local level to a hegemonic state-led narrative against refugee settlement and integration. Some relevant examples of regional and local actions involving actors from the northern and southern area should be supported.

We propose here a new framework built on solidarity and building pockets of resistance through institutional collaboration around refugee health, education, civil liberties and mobility in the Southern Mediterranean.

Support the local and regional actors in their actions to promote solidarity in response to the crisis, receiving and assisting refugees and guaranteeing their rights by driving actions in countries of origin and along the route and coordinating and collaborating with other cities and international NGOs and bodies working on the ground.

Active local and regional support to refugee inclusion, such as scholarships for refugees in European universities and relocation through redistribution of asylum-seekers for voluntary relocation at the regional level of refugees, unaccompanied children or vulnerable migrants in an irregular situation based on transparent criteria.

Face shared challenges in terms of inequality that have to do with social discontent and revolts, populism, hate narratives and authoritarianism. This framework should build on European cooperation and Mediterranean neighbourhood alliances, allowing common challenges for all to be stressed in our more global and interconnected space. The need for social inclusion policies, with everybody in and nobody outside this society, should be reiterated. The exchanges of education and citizenship practices, schools, professionals and students can

become particularly good preventive measures by preparing citizens in the North and South to combat all hate ideologies. At this stage, activating external cooperation instruments, also to profit from the current networks, can offer the possibility to work on preventive measures in a collaborative North-South perspective.

The view **of cities and regional spaces as laboratories of innovative social ideas and spaces for intercultural encounter** in which it is necessary to work. It is becoming increasingly important to provide policies with a **comprehensive view of mobility** that considers the different and increasingly complex dimensions of human flows. When we talk about mobility, we refer to challenges that are not merely economic development but also the need to support transformational processes through civil networks, immigrant communities and local governments, supporting processes of opening the southern shore societies, highlighting the importance of a multi-level governance and multi-sectoral approach to migration management, and raising awareness of the needs and added value of regional action in all areas in which they have either formal competence in the field or where regional action is needed to implement EU and national objectives.