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2015: The year we mistook refugees for invaders

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POLICY
BRIEF

On 15 December 2015 the European Commission proposed a European Border and Coast Guard to protect Europe's external borders and the Schengen area without internal borders (http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-6327_en.htm). As 2015 comes to a close, the annual numbers of migrants smuggled to Greece and Italy and asylum claims lodged in Germany have passed a million, as well as the number of additional displacements produced this year by the conflict in Syria. Moreover, Europe's Mediterranean shore has now the unchallenged title of the world's most lethal border. Not only this. The migrant crisis is also putting to the test some of Europe's most fundamental values, from the freedom of circulation within its territories, to international protection beyond.

The massive numbers of people risking their lives through a variety of sea-and-land routes to force their entry into Europe without a visa, raise three important questions.

– First, what is the nature of the crisis? Is it a migrant or a refugee crisis? Are flows of people entering Europe irregularly in search of economic opportunities or are they seeking international protection? In the first case, there is a consensus among governments that they must be returned. In the second case, as soon as they lodge a claim for asylum, there is a legal duty to keep them until claims are fully processed.



– Second, what triggered the crisis? Was it pull-factors in Europe or push-factors in the Middle East? Did we attract the migrants by opening our doors too wide or were they set on the move across EU borders by forces beyond our control? In other words, where should we search for a response: within or outside Europe?

– Third: how can we best get out of the crisis? Can we foresee future developments, gauge the sustainability of measures taken in a moment of great confusion and anticipate their possible outcomes, wanted or unwanted?

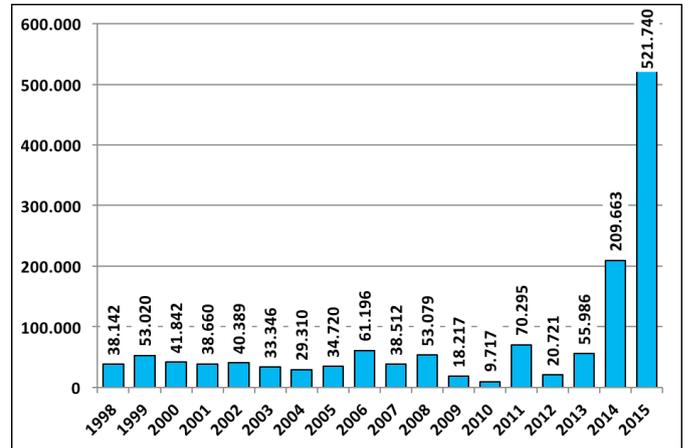
A close look at the facts brings some answers to these questions.

I - What do the facts tell us?

First, the crisis, which started in 2014, must be understood as a dramatic change in the course of a chronic disease. While unauthorised entries across the Mediterranean into Europe have been a large-scale phenomenon since the 1980s, their magnitude and pattern radically changed in the course of 2014. Irregular cross-Mediterranean migration was initially triggered by visa requirements imposed on third-country nationals in the wake of Europe's economic crisis of the mid-1970s. Numbers of crossers remained in the tens of thousands with no marked change until 2013 (Fig. 1). In 2014, though, they jumped to over 200,000, and in 2015 to over one million.

Why? Migratory routes gradually shifted from the high-risk, central Mediterranean to the less risky eastern Mediterranean- route. Migratory routes have actually changed many times as a result of the changing geography of conflicts breaking out in the EU's neighbourhood (Syria, Libya) and beyond (Iraq, Horn of Africa): as well as because of tightened state control in transit (e.g. Morocco) or destination (e.g. Spain) countries. Until 2014 each route closed by police controls was soon bypassed by a longer, more perilous route.

Fig. 1: Unauthorised entries by sea into Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain 1998-2015 ((Nov 13)



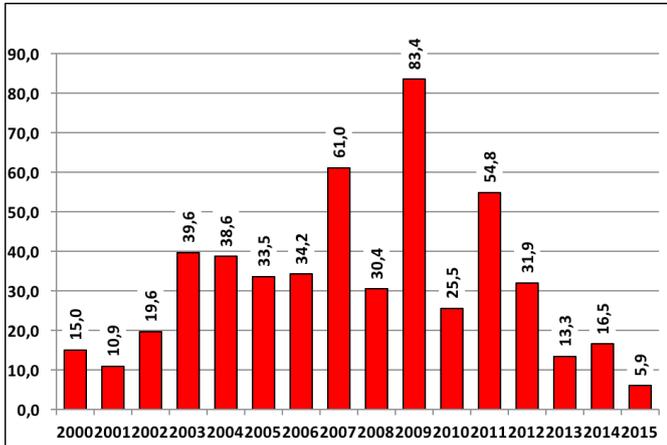
Sources: Greece, Police records (special MPC request); Italy, Ministry of Interior (MPC special request and unimonitoraggioimmigrazione@interno.it)

As a result, the Mediterranean has become, in the twenty-first century, the world's most lethal migratory route. Between 2000 and 2015 (Nov 13), 26,018 deaths were reported for 1,277,399 persons crossing, meaning a 2.0% probability of death during the journey. While the year 2015 (till 13 Nov) comes third in terms of absolute numbers of deaths (3,121) it appears to be the least lethal in terms of risks, with a less than 0.6% probability of death (Fig. 2). This significant reduction in mortality at sea must be attributed to intensified search and rescue operations by the Italian navy and to a shift from the 150-300 miles central Mediterranean route from Libya to Italy, to the 5-10-mile crossing from Turkey to the Greek Dodecanese Islands.

It should be noted that the Mediterranean crossing is only part of the journey. The rest is by land, both before crossing the sea (through Turkey or North Africa) and after crossing the sea from the first point reached in Southern Europe to the intended destination where asylum is claimed in North-Western Europe. The whole journey can take anything from a few days to several years.



Fig. 2: Probability of dying at sea during the cross-Mediterranean journey to Europe (Deaths per 1,000 crossings) 2000-2015



Sources: Author's calculation using sources of Figure 1 and dead and missing migrants provided by (https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1YNqIzy-QfEn4i_be2GGWESnG2Q80E_fLASffsXdCOft1/edit?pli=1#gid=1085726718)

Second a variety of nationalities converge towards a limited number of entry points into Europe to form migration flows that are 'mixed', both in terms of origin and status (refugees vs. economic migrants).

A rough idea can be drawn from a comparison over time (2011-2015) and space (Greece and Italy) (Tab. 1).

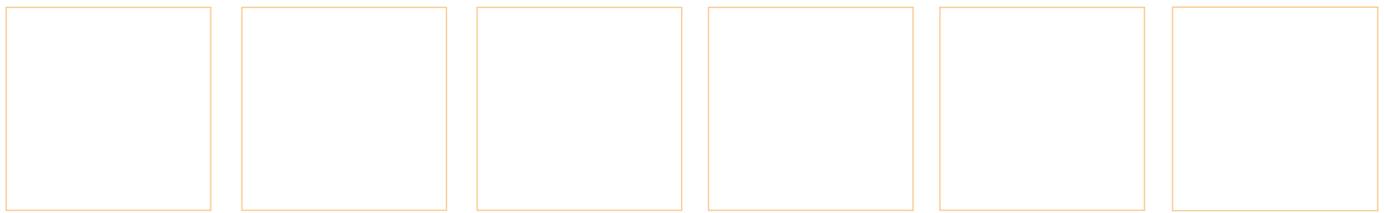
- Refugee flows to Greece and Italy have had a rapidly changing composition in nationality terms. Changes can reflect the emergence of new refugee situations (e.g. Syria), but also the protracted character of other situations (e.g. Afghanistan) when doors that were shut suddenly open.

- The percentage of the total number of entries represented by the first largest nationality has increased over time. In Greece the first nationality comprised 28% of all entries in 2011 (Afghanistan) against 66% in 2015 (Syrians); in Italy percentages were 9% in 2011 (Nigerians) against 25% in 2015 (Eritreans).

- Syrians, the largest overall group, changed direction in 2015. Before 2015, they mostly took the central Mediterranean route from Libya (or Egypt or even Lebanon) to Italy when they suddenly changed to an Eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey to Greece. The shift from a long and extremely perilous to a shorter and safer crossing has allowed a much larger number of Syrian refugees to reach the EU's external borders and to seek asylum.

The distribution of smuggled migrants by nationality has dramatically shifted from a majority of people with a low likelihood of being granted refugee status to a majority of people with a high probability of receiving a positive answer to their asylum claim. Certainly refugees are estimated to be a majority in the most recent flows of irregular migration to Italy and Greece, and their proportion has spectacularly increased in the last five years: from 30.3% to 78.9%. The allegations that people smuggled across the external border of Europe would mostly be economic migrants disguised as asylum seekers trying to cheat their way into the EU are less and less relevant.

Third, most of the people whose nationality suggests that they are fleeing war, persecution and life-threatening conditions do not apply for asylum in the first country they reach in Europe (despite this country being a safe place). The fact has been used by some observers as an argument that these are not true refugees but economic migrants, not asylum seekers but welfare seekers. To quote an official in the European Commission's Directorate General for Trade who shares these views: "the situation [that] countries like Hungary, Croatia, and Austria, are facing is that of an unprecedented quantity of (unarmed) invaders who do not have, and do not ask for, refugee status. Their intended destination is Germany, where they believe a new life in wealth and social security awaits them" <http://www.ejiltalk.org/moving-beyond-the-asylum-muddle/>



Tab. 1: Top Ten Nationalities of Migrants Smuggled into Greece and Italy 2011-2015

Country of declared nationality	Refugees % (*)	Numbers of migrants / Year				
		2011	2012	2013	2014	2015 (13 Nov)
Syria	94.1%	947	8,507	18,972	74,461	285,084
Afghanistan	59.9%	17,841	18,323	6,924	13,685	76,735
Eritrea	86.0%	1,060	2,351	10,406	34,470	37,954
Albania	23.8%	11,982	12,374	5,497	7,299	15,898
Pakistan	25.4%	5,960	807	2,835	8,834	20,050
Nigeria	9.0%	28,827	2,874	925	1,674	910
Tunisia	61.6%	2,429	3,944	4,205	7,520	13,947
Somalia	71.8%	1,834	2,355	739	1,701	22,550
Iraq	10.1%	4,514	8,485	1,721	5,522	7,341
Bangladesh	36.1%	2,486	417	1,723	9,535	5,333
All Nationalities		119,635	90,145	82,684	247,262	564,675
Refugees % (**)		30.3%	48.9%	68.5%	74.0%	78.9%

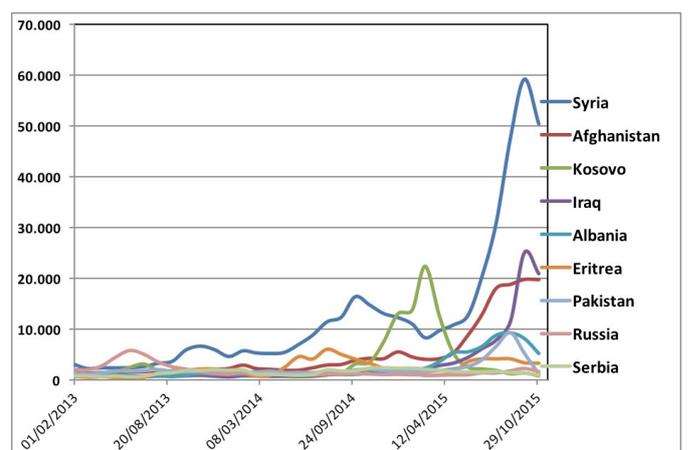
(*) Rate of positive answers to asylum claims lodged in the EU28 in 2011-15

(**) Expected rate of positive answers to asylum claims lodged in the EU28 by migrants smuggled into Greece and Italy 2011-15
 Source: Author's calculation based on EUROSTAT (Rate of positive answers to asylum claims) and Greece and Italy Police (smuggled migrants).

Field evidence shows the limits of this view. Most refugees are smuggled to Europe after a long stay in countries of first asylum where they had no access to livelihoods. Once their savings dry up, or in anticipation of the moment when this happens, they need to earn an income in order to see a future for themselves and their families. They have little choice but to move. After all, refugees are human beings.

Fourth, the question of what triggered the crisis — pull or push factors — has stirred much debate in Europe. On the pull-hypothesis side, when numbers of irregular entries started to boom in 2014, the Italian search and rescue operation at sea and into Libyan waters to prevent those crossing from drowning, was soon blamed for encouraging more people to come. The British Foreign Office was particularly vociferous in this respect <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/oct/27/uk-mediterranean-migrant-rescue-plan>. Why, then, would have the main route shifted from Italy to Greece?

Fig.3: First time asylum applicants in the EU28 by citizenship - Monthly data



Source: EUROSTAT



The push interpretation must be considered more seriously if a response is to be found to the crisis. Far from abating, the level of violence in war-torn zones of the Middle East reached new peaks from 2014 through 2015. The Islamic State has consolidated its position in Iraq and seized most of central Syria. In doing so it has added new waves of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees to those already created by the protracted conflict. Moreover, with the passing of time the situation in countries of first asylum neighbouring Syria has deteriorated, with humanitarian aid becoming rarer and tensions rising between refugees and their hosts.

Looking at monthly flows of first-time asylum seekers into the EU28, one can clearly see that the movement started with Syrians in the fall of 2013 (Fig. 3). It is only months later that other flows — mostly refugees from Eritrea and Afghanistan and mostly economic flows from Kosovo, rose in turn. In a sense, Syrians have unlocked the door for other nations.

II - What next?

There is little doubt that the refugee movements will continue in Europe's neighbourhood. On the one hand wars and conflicts that produce forced migration — Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Libya. — will likely continue for some time. On the other hand, the further migration of refugees sheltered in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey will gain momentum.

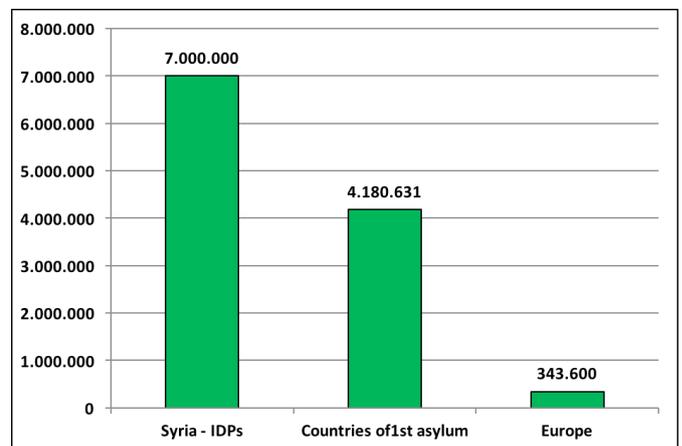
The MENA region is host (and source) to 50% of the world's 20 million refugees (UNHCR and UNRWA). Many of these countries are not signatories of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. They initially welcomed refugees and continue to tolerate their presence, but they do not offer them refugee status. They have a charity-based, rather than a rights-based, approach to the question.

Refugees are 'guests'. As such, they enjoy few or no rights. Once their entry visa expires, they become unauthorised migrants and find themselves fated to exploitation and destitution, or they must leave.

The situation of refugees in the MENA region will deteriorate, but the situation of their hosts will also suffer. Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan (and to a lesser extent Iraq) have undoubtedly been the most generous states in opening their borders and offering protection to more than four million Syrian refugees since 2011 (Fig. 4). They accepted the burden of sheltering the vast majority of those fleeing Syria, but a great strain was put on their economies, and even on their political stability and security. Since 2014, Jordan and Lebanon have taken measures to make it almost impossible for new refugees to arrive. They restrict the stay of those already in their countries, leaving Turkey as the only haven left at the border of Syria. Cases of return to Syria and departure for Europe have been increasingly frequent since then. Social equilibrium, political stability and security are now being put at risk: it is no longer just an economic matter. Shutting the door on refugees and locking them up on Europe's doorstep may seriously destabilise these countries and indirectly endanger Europe's security.

In Lebanon the government set three priorities in October 2014: reducing the number of refugees; providing more security to citizens; and preventing Syrians from working unlawfully and creating unfair competition to citizens. It barred the way to new refugees and soon tightened the procedures for

Fig. 4: Syria's Displaced Population by Country or Region (1 October 2015)



Sources: UNHCR for Syria and countries of 1st asylum; EUROSTAT for Europe



registered refugees to renew their residence permits. This resulted in many Syrians losing their legal status who now risk being told to leave the country. A vulnerability assessment of the Syrian refugees reveals an increase in the proportion of households below the poverty line, from 50% in 2014 to 70% in 2015. Another survey in 2015 shows a shift in the perception and reception of Syrian refugees by their Lebanese hosts, from initial sympathy to mounting hostility.

In Jordan, the situation is equally precarious. Administratively, UNHCR-recognised refugees are granted a one-year stay during which the UN agency must find a durable solution (in practice, resettlement in another country). As there is no durable solution, the vast majority of Syrians risk becoming illegal, and some of them have apparently been forcibly returned to Syria. Economically, the conditions of Syrians have deteriorated. In September 2015, half of the refugees in urban settings stopped receiving aid from the World Food Program. In increasing numbers, refugees in camps tend to settle in cities, which they can only do under the guarantee of a Jordanian sponsor, in application of a rule reminiscent of the sponsorship system in force in the Gulf States.

Turkey, a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention, is rather different. The country still has the geographical limitation by which non-European refugees are eligible only for temporary asylum. But a new Law on Foreigners and International Protection (2013) provides them, at least on the paper, with rights close to those guaranteed by the Convention. While the government has so far maintained the door relatively open to Syrian refugees, cases of unlawful detention and deportation by the Turkish authorities have been reported (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur44/3022/2015/en/>). Moreover, tensions have been mounting in the population, with anti-refugee demonstrations and attacks on refugees. For many Syrians, Turkey is not the safe haven Europe would like it to be. Since 2014,

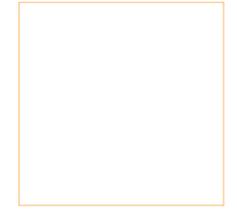
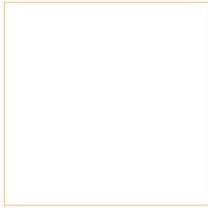
though, it has become the main country of transit for Syrian (and other) refugees to Europe.

How is Europe responding to current challenges and anticipating those to come? After a period when EU Members States were divided between two opposite stances – keeping the door open vs. erecting wire fences – a convergence of views began towards the end of 2015. Keeping refugee movements away from Europe has become their leitmotiv. Efforts to better control the two main routes of unauthorized migration have, thus, been made.

The Eastern Mediterranean route may be better controlled with the collaboration of Turkey. On 29 November 2015, the EU and Turkey passed an agreement to support the Syrians under temporary protection and their Turkish hosting communities, and to strengthen cooperation to prevent irregular migration from Turkey to Europe. The objective for Europe is to keep as many Syrian refugees as possible within Turkey (i.e. away from Europe). For Turkey, it is to obtain, in exchange, increased financial assistance and, perhaps more importantly, to negotiate visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens travelling to Europe and to keep alive Turkey’s accession negotiations to the EU.

The central Mediterranean route cannot be controlled in collaboration with Libya from where most people smuggled into Italy depart. Indeed, there are no credible state interlocutors in Libya. Europe, therefore, will do the job alone and tackle, at high sea, the migrant smugglers operating from Libya through the “Sophia operation” endorsed by the United Nations Security Council on 9 October 2015 (<http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12072.doc.htm>).

But make no mistake, shutting the door on those fleeing persecution and life-threatening conditions by confining them to Turkey or to Libya (one of the unsafest places on earth) will not deter them from finding protection. It will simply make their journey more difficult and perilous, and raise



the price requested by new smugglers, who will quickly resurface. Eliminating the smugglers is not a response to the crisis. Smugglers are the wrong and criminal solution to a real problem: that of people in need of international protection who cannot reach the European Union through legal channels. Were smugglers to be completely eliminated, unknown but probably large numbers of refugees and migrants would find themselves trapped in Libya for lack of a way out. They would be left at the mercy of uncontrolled militias and exposed to abuse, persecution, and death.

Progress will only be made if the problem itself is tackled. If the goal is to check irregular migration, visas must be made available to refugees in transit countries before they resort to smugglers: in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, etc. European embassies (or, EU delegations?) in these countries could use procedures that already exist on paper, such as humanitarian or asylum visas. It would not only work for the security of the refugees by short-circuiting the perilous journey. It would also be positive for the security of European states by checking traveller identities before they reach Europe in big crowds that can hide terrorists: see the 11/13 terrorist attack in Paris.

A new tool – the “hotspots” – designed to fingerprint and debrief smuggled migrants in order to separate those in need of protection whose claims for asylum must be processed from those who are not refugees and must be returned is being established in Greece and Italy (http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/2_hotspots_en.pdf). The hotspot approach is intended to speed up the screening process and to avoid crowds crossing in a disorderly fashion from Mediterranean Europe to North-Western Europe.

But for this new system to contribute to eliminating the cross-Mediterranean smuggling business, hotspots should be installed not in Europe but in neighbouring countries: In Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan,

etc. This brings us back to the long-recommended implementation of humanitarian or asylum visas in the countries where the refugees find themselves before embarking on their smuggling journey.

Finally, one should remember that the refugee crisis is unfolding against the backdrop of two other crises: a protracted economic crisis which generates unacceptably high rates of unemployment amongst Europeans; and a looming demographic crisis with unprecedented prospects for population decline. At the same time, migrants can be regarded as a problem (they compete with natives for scarce job opportunities) and a solution (they will eventually replace the missing natives). While the economic crisis will pass, the demographic crisis will gain massive momentum. It will take decades to overcome. Replacement migration will have to be part of Europe’s response to its demographic predicament.

In anticipation of future needs, creative policies should be designed to turn the burden of refugees into an asset. There are signs that massive flows of refugees have already produced a net benefit for European economies. The European Economic Forecast of Autumn 2015 (http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/publications/eeip/pdf/ip011_en.pdf) indicates that additional public expenditures have generated an 0.2% increase in GDP. In the medium-term, a greater positive impact on growth is to be expected from the increase in labour supply. The condition is that appropriate policies are put in place to facilitate the refugees’ access to the labour market.

The problem is that politicians are better at dealing with the very short-term (essentially the next election) than with the mid- and long-term. They are better at addressing public opinion about present hardships than at informing them about additional difficulties waiting around the corner. They find it difficult to address those structural changes that are barely felt in daily life, such as demography or climate change. Political courage is needed for this and there is little to go around.



Migration Policy Centre

The Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute, Florence, conducts advanced research on global migration to serve migration governance needs at European level, from developing, implementing and monitoring migration-related policies to assessing their impact on the wider economy and society. The Migration Policy Centre is co-financed by the European Union.

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