Migrants and Refugees En Route Across the Mediterranean

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In 2015, the number of migrants smuggled across the Mediterranean into the European Union (EU) was more than one million, a figure that eclipses the previous peak of 216,000 recorded in 2014. While conflicts and political instability spreading throughout the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa contribute to a significant extent in explaining the scale of current migratory movements, the impact of socio-economic and demographic variables in some of the main countries of origin should not be neglected. After a general overview of the main trends and dynamics that shaped Mediterranean flows in the years 2014-2015, this contribution highlights some of the specific features that characterize African migratory movements. The remaining section provides an overview of the initiatives adopted by the EU to manage migration in cooperation with African countries and points to some issues that have been left unaddressed by the current policy response.

1.   TRENDS AND DYNAMICS OF MIGRATION FLOWS ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN

Migration across the Mediterranean Sea is anything but a new phenomenon. During the early 1990s, for example, Italy experienced the sudden arrival of tens of thousands of migrants from Albania as a consequence of the collapse of the communist regime in that country. In the same period, the Spanish government introduced visa requirements in order to halt migration from North Africa, a phenomenon dating back to the 1960s (Fargues and Bonfanti, 2014). A 2013 study collecting the statistical data provided by the European countries overlooking the Mediterranean estimates a yearly average of about 44,000 landings on European southern shores from 1998 to 2013 (Fargues and Bonfanti, 2014). The years 2014 and 2015, however, marked an unprecedented increase of trans-Mediterranean flows: 216,000 landings occurred in 2014 according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2015a). That is a number three times higher than the previous peak recorded in 2011 in conjunction with the Arab Spring events. The data regarding 2015 show a further steep increase in sea arrivals, which reached the impressive figure of more than one million at the end of the year (UNHCR, 2015a).

When focusing on the evolution of migratory routes across the Mediterranean during the past two years, we can observe the strong pressure experienced along the so-called Central Mediterranean route, which originates in Libya and ends on the Italian shores, and the East Mediterranean route, which starts from Turkey and reaches the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. The Central Mediterranean route, in particular, was the main channel used by migrants to reach Europe in 2014, with over 170,000 arrivals on Italian shores recorded during the year. In 2015, some 153,000 migrants landed on the Italian coasts, mainly nationals of Eritrea, Nigeria, Somalia, and Sudan. The Central Mediterranean route proved to be also the most tragic in terms of the number of people who perished at sea, with 2,892 estimated in 2015 (for the sake of comparison, 806 deaths were recorded on the East Mediterranean route in the same year) (IOM, 2015).

At the same time, the East Mediterranean route gained increased relevance over 2015. While during 2014 about 44,000 migrants landed in Greece, over 850,000 arrivals were recorded in 2015. These figures highlight the centrality acquired by this route as a privileged access to Europe for migrants that come from the Middle East and South Asia, mainly Syrians, Afghan, Pakistani, and Iraqis (UNHCR, 2015a).

According to Monzini (2007: p. 180), there are three interdependent variables that play a key role in shaping migration dynamics in the Mediterranean: the migration pressure in the countries of origin of migrants; the management and control policies adopted by transit and destination countries; and the strategies operated by organizations involved in migrant smuggling (which are, in turn, influenced by the effects produced by the first two variables).

Regarding the first variable, the perpetuation of the war in Syria, the expansion of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq, the unresolved conflicts in several African countries (such as in the case of Somalia, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Sudan) and the worsening of the repression in Eritrea have substantially increased the "forced" component of Mediterranean flows. In fact, the increase of flows across the Mediterranean has been accompanied by a parallel increase in asylum demands in the EU: in 2014, 626,960 asylum requests were lodged in the EU Member States, a 43 per cent increase compared to 2013, when 431,090 demands were presented. In 2015, the surge in asylum demands continued unabated: at the time of writing, provisional data from Eurostat report a total number well beyond one million applications (Eurostat, 2015). Looking at the main nationalities of asylum seekers in the EU, the nexus between migration and asylum becomes clear: Syrians, Iraqis, Afghan, Eritreans and Somali feature prominently both among asylum applicants in the EU and among migrants smuggled onto the Italian and Greek coasts (Eurostat, 2015; UNHCR, 2015a).

The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, can be singled out as the event that produced the most relevant impact on the dynamics of migration flows across the Mediterranean. According to the UNHCR, the number of people who needed humanitarian aid because of the conflict exceeded 12 million in 2015, out of which 7.5 million are internally displaced within Syria and more than 4 million remain hosted in the neighbouring countries, mainly Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Compared to the magnitude of the phenomenon, it is important to remember that EU states have welcomed so far only a limited quota of Syrian refugees, just over 10 per cent of the total by the end of 2015 (UNHCR, 2015b).

North Africa and specifically Libya was the main point of departure chosen by Syrians to reach Europe in 2014, when 42,000 arrivals were recorded. However, in the last part of 2014 and during 2015, the majority of Syrians migrants were recorded along the East Mediterranean route, where they became by far the most represented nationality (UNHCR, 2015a). The large part of Syrians arriving in Greece did not stop there but continued the journey along the so-called "Western Balkan" route, through Macedonia Serbia and Hungary, in order to finally reach a northern European country, Germany and Sweden being among the most favoured destinations.[1]

The evolving role of Libya as a hub for migrants from different regions headed to Europe draws attention to the role of migration policies (or the lack of) enacted by transit and destination countries. Accordingly, several policy-related factors can be brought to account for the shifting relevance, in numerical terms, between the Central and the East Mediterranean routes, even if it is currently difficult to assess the relative importance of each of these factors.

First, while in early 2014 the lack of effective state authority able to assure control of external borders acted as a pull factor towards Libya, the deterioration of the security environment in the country during 2015, along with repeated accounts of violence and exploitation perpetrated by armed militias and unaccountable police officers towards migrants, contributed to shifting migratory pressure towards other safer routes (Monzini, Pastore, and Abdel Aziz, 2015: p. 28). Second, the imposition of visa requirements for Syrian passport holders by neighbouring countries such as Algeria and Egypt made it increasingly difficult for Syrians to reach Libya in the first place (Altai Consulting, 2015: p. 102). Finally, another central factor that has to be taken into consideration when accounting for the redefinition of migratory movements towards Europe in 2015 is the deterioration of the living conditions of the more than two million Syrians refugees hosted in Turkey (Monzini, Pastore, and Abdel Aziz, 2015: p. 28). More generally, the shrinking of the "asylum space" across the main countries of first asylum, which usually implies restrictive residence policies as well as limited

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[1] According to the European Agency Frontex (2015), about 760,000 migrants transited along the Western Balkan route in 2015. Among them, Syrian and Afghan were the two most represented nationalities.

possibilities for socio-economic integration, is a circumstance that is likely to push an increasing number of refugees to consider reaching Europe, where they can usually be recognized with the full set of rights associated with refugee status (Aleinikoff, 2015: p. 4).

The evolution of the Mediterranean routes used by immigrants is strictly connected to the third variable mentioned above, which points to the activity of the smuggling organisations that operate along these routes.[2] This aspect acquired central relevance in the agenda of the European leaders in 2015, as testified by the launch of the military operation "EUNAVFOR Med", whose objective is to disrupt the "business model" connected with the human smuggling and trafficking in the South Mediterranean Sea (Mananashvili, 2015). However, empirical evidence on the smuggling organizations active along the Mediterranean routes reveals that those organisations rely on informal and flexible networks that are deeply embedded in the local economies of the countries of origin and transit (Monzini, Pastore, and Abdel Aziz, 2015: p. 34).[3] Thus, while increasingly restrictive policy responses and the persistent demand for crossings are likely to contribute to the professionalization of the smuggling business, the pervasive character of such business challenges the validity of a mere restrictive approach to the problem. Instead, as pointed out by several analysts, it would be beneficial to tackle the root causes of migration by means of comprehensive partnerships with the countries of origin and, at the same time, to envisage legal channels for entering EU territory, first and foremost for migrants in need of international protection (de Haas, 2015).

2. AFRICAN MIXED FLOWS: A LONG-TERM CHALLENGE FOR EUROPE

Migration flows across the Mediterranean are usually characterized as mixed, which means that refugees and other categories of migrants (economic migrants, unaccompanied minors, other vulnerable people) move alongside each other, making use of the same routes and means of transport and engaging the services of the same smuggling networks (UNHCR, 2007). While the mixed nature of flows is an attribute that relates to some extent to all the major regions of origin of migrants transiting through the Mediterranean, it is nevertheless a particularly prominent feature of sub-Saharan flows,

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[2] A clear conceptual distinction should be made between smuggling of migrants, which requires the consent of the individuals concerned, and trafficking in human beings, which implies transporting migrants by coercive means and for the purpose of exploitation. It is, however, important to remember that, in many real situations, these two forms of illegality are often connected and not easy to distinguish (Monzini, Pastore, and Abdel Aziz, 2015: p. 11).

[3] In a news story on human smuggling in Libya, the British newspaper *The Guardian* reports the following account recorded in the city of Zuwara: "No one has the name 'smuggler' written on their chest. Anyone here who has no money can sell their apartment, buy a boat, and organise a smuggling trip. By the time of the next trip you'd already have regained half the cost of the apartment. It's a very easy formula." (Kinsley, 2015)

in particular of the countries of the Sahel region and the Horn of Africa (Fargues and Bonfanti, 2014). Moreover, a more fine-grained analysis of the socio-economic and political context in some of the main countries of origin reveals how the characterization of those flows as "mixed" extends beyond the presence of different categories of migrants as defined by the legal regimes of destination countries. In particular, migrants may be impelled to leave by a plurality of reasons (both of economic and non-economic nature) that may be difficult to disentangle in practice. This circumstance calls into question the dichotomous distinction between refugees and voluntary migrants that is often assumed in policy discourses (Van Hear, 2011: p. 6). Indeed, while current asylum legislation in the EU assigns the right to be granted international protection only to individuals fleeing state persecution or other serious violation of their human rights, a number of migrants transiting through the Mediterranean may nevertheless have been "forced" to move due to economic and political collapse. In addition, as stressed by Betts (2013), the weak or almost non-existing governance system that characterizes many countries of origin of forced migrants, such as Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, exacerbates the impact on population displacement of a range of environmental factors, such as water scarcity, food insecurity, drought, environmental degradation, natural disasters and climate change.

The challenges posed by African flows are further compelled by demographic trends that characterize the countries in the region, which predict a sustained migratory pressure from that area towards Europe in the following decades. While currently about 962 million people live south of the Sahara, this number will become 1.2 billion in the next 10 years and 1.6 billion in the next twenty years. According to the latest United Nations estimates (United Nations, 2015), the population aged 20-39 in that area will grow by 203 million within the next two decades. It seems, thus, reasonable to predict that if that large population of young people won't be able to find adequate job opportunities in their native country or in the neighbouring region, they will consider migrating to Europe as the only feasible alternative to escape dire economic and social conditions (Blangiardo, 2015).

3. The EU Response: In Search of Comprehensive Solutions

In light of the dynamics outlined in the previous section, it appears clear that the effective management of migration flows in the Mediterranean Sea, and specifically from the African continent, is related to the further development and coordination of various interconnected policy areas. Necessary components of a comprehensive approach to the challenges posed by migration flows include well-functioning asylum and reception systems, admission policies that can maximize immigration benefits for both countries of origin and destination, and policies to tackle illegal immigration, which, at the same

time, can guarantee the respect of the human rights of migrants. This section aims to explore a specific component of EU migration governance, the so-called "external dimension" of migration policies, with a specific focus on initiatives addressed to the African continent.

The external dimension includes all those EU initiatives aiming to expand the scope of migration policies outside EU borders by ensuring the cooperation of the countries of origin and transit of migration flows. Since the inception of EU action in this field in the early 1990s, and in line with the preferences of the Member States of the EU, priority was accorded to tackling irregular migration, and EU action was thus geared towards the establishment of cooperation with third countries on readmission and joint border controls (Boswell, 2003). Moreover, initiatives undertaken at the EU level were generally meant to complement rather than replace the pre-existing dense web of bilateral agreements between EU Member States and African countries, which touch upon a multiplicity of other issues such as labour migration, trade and development (Betts, 2011: p. 37).

In recent years, under the steer of repeated external shocks, such as the migration inflow that followed the Arab Spring events in 2011, action was taken to expand the reach of EU external action, by integrating into the EU strategy the so-called "root causes approach", which aim at tackling the push factors of migration flows in countries of origin. In particular, the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM), first adopted in 2005 and then substantially revised in 2012, lays down a comprehensive strategy for the development of the external dimension of EU migration policy (Council of the European Union, 2012). The main goal of the GAMM is to face all relevant aspects of migration in a balanced and comprehensive way, in partnership with third countries. To achieve that aim, the GAMM is structured on four pillars: i) legal migration and mobility; ii) irregular migration and trafficking in human beings; iii) international protection and asylum policy; iv) maximizing the development impact of migration and mobility (European Commission, 2011).

The comprehensive approach laid down in the GAMM is also the basis for the European Agenda on Migration adopted by the European Commission in May 2015, which aims to define the main lines of action in the field of migration to be adopted by the EU in the coming years. The Agenda, which is strongly influenced by the dramatic situation unfolding in the Mediterranean Sea, emphasizes: "To try to halt human misery created by those who exploit migrants, we need to use the EU's global role and wide range of tools to address the root causes of migration" (European Commission, 2015: p. 2).

With specific regard to the African continent, the Agenda underlined the importance of strengthening existing regional dialogues, such as the Rabat and Khartoum processes, and announced the organization of a dedicated summit with partners of the African Union to be held the following autumn. The summit, which was then held in La Valletta, Malta, on 11-12 November 2015, resulted in the approval of an Action Plan (AP), structured around five priority domains: i) the development benefits of migration; ii) legal migration and mobility; iii) protection and asylum; iv) prevention and fights against irregular migration and migrant trafficking; iv) return, readmission and reintegration.[4] The implementation of the Valletta AP is backed by the EU Trust Fund for Africa, launched in September 2015 and initially endowed with €1.8 billion. The rationale for the creation of this financial instrument is that of gathering resources from both the EU budget and Member States' donations, and setting in place a comprehensive strategy aimed at managing the plurality of migration challenges that originate in the African continent (D'Alfonso and Immenkamp, 2015).

The outcome of the Valletta Summit has been criticized by European and African civil society organizations due to its "asymmetry": in other words, for putting excessive emphasis on readmission and irregular migration compared to the other domains included in the AP, notably legal migration. So, the most concrete initiative in the legal migration and mobility basket is the doubling of the number of scholarships for students and academic staff supported by EU funding. Instead, the objective of launching pilot projects that pool offers for legal migration by some EU Member States or associated countries to selected African countries is stated in quite vague terms in the AP and is not backed by any specific commitment. In the field of asylum, the EU strategy centres on strengthening the capacities of the countries of first asylum in dealing with refugee communities, including through a targeted use of development assistance. No reference, however, is made to opening new channels for asylum seekers and refugees to reach Europe safely, except for the confirmation of the commitment to resettle 22,000 refugees from priority regions taken by Member States in July 2015.

Besides an analysis of the programmatic statements laid down in the Valletta Summit AP, an assessment of the potential impacts of EU action towards African partners requires considering the "operationalization" of that strategy, which implies taking into consideration the governance instruments, financial resources, and the actors that concur with their implementation. In this regard, two frameworks of cooperation developed at the EU level are mentioned in the Valletta AP: Mobility Partnerships and Regional Development and Protection Programmes.

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[4] See "Valletta Summit, 11-12 November 2015. Action Plan", online: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2015/11/11-12/.

The Mobility Partnerships (MPs) were launched in 2007 and, according to the Commission, represent one of the privileged tools to translate the GAMM into practice (European Commission, 2009). The goal of MPs is to establish partnerships with the countries of origin and transit of migration flows through concrete initiatives in the field of legal immigration, the migration and development nexus, international protection and illegal immigration. MPs have been signed so far with three African countries: Cape Verde, Morocco and Tunisia.

The MPs are concluded as non-legally-binding political declarations between the European Commission, the concerned third country and those EU Member States that have voluntarily agreed to take part. Besides the Joint declaration, each of the partnerships includes an "Annex" that lists the concrete projects that the parties commit themselves to carrying out in the different areas of cooperation. In spite of what their name would suggest, MPs concluded so far include only limited initiatives aimed at increasing mobility in the EU, in particular through the creation of new labour migration channels. On the other hand, following the long-standing conditionality approach adopted by the EU towards its neighbourhood, the partnerships commit the parties to strengthening their cooperation on readmission, usually in exchange for visa facilitations to the benefit of the citizens of the third country concerned (Lavenex and Stucky, 2011).[5] Regarding asylum, in 2005 the EU launched the Regional Protection Programmes (RPPs), which are conceived as flexible and multi-dimensional frameworks of cooperation with the main regions that host refugees (European Commission, 2005). In the framework of RPPs, a series of projects have been implemented with a view to strengthening the asylum systems of target countries, in particular by creating new infrastructure and training public officials and NGOs' personnel dealing with refugees. In the following years, RPPs were launched in the Great Lakes region (Tanzania), the Horn of Africa (Kenya, Yemen and Djibouti), and North Africa (Egypt, Libya and Tunisia) (Papadopoulou, 2015).

In 2013, the EU initiated a Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP) in the Middle East targeting Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, with the objective of supporting those countries in coping with the high number of Syrian refugees they host. This last programme is different from the former programmes because of its focus on development: in particular, the initiatives therein-envisaged aim to benefit both refugees and the host communities by targeted use of development assistance

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[5] The fact that the link between readmission and visa facilitation constitutes the main bargaining chip played by the EU on the negotiating table of MPs is confirmed by the introduction of a lighter framework of cooperation, called Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility (CAMM), which is proposed to those countries that are not considered ready to embrace the readmission and visa commitments foreseen in a MP. CAMMs have been concluded so far with Nigeria and Ethiopia. For an overview of MPs and CAMMs currently in force, see the EU webpage: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/international-affairs/global-approach-to-migration/index_en.htm.

(Papadopoulou, 2015: p. 14). The European Agenda on Migration mentioned above includes among its objectives the establishment of RDPPs also in North Africa and in the Horn of Africa and provides additional resources to this aim (European Commission, 2015, p. 5). The aim of the Commission is thus that of trying to address some of the issues that were identified in previous programmes, in particular the lack of coordination between development, humanitarian and refugee policies and the limited financial resources provided for their implementation (Papadopoulou, 2015: p. 15). In this regard, as stressed by some observers, it will be of paramount importance to assure increased support to RDPPs from available financial instruments, first of all the Trust Fund for Africa (Collett, 2016).

More broadly, the further development of both MPs and RDPPs into substantive partnerships with countries of origin and transit is linked to two essential conditions. First, the successful integration of the expanding development-oriented activities financed in the fields of asylum and migration into the larger development programmes that the EU and its Member States operate in the African continent. Second, the strengthening of the mobility component of those instruments, in particular by envisaging new schemes allowing citizens of partner countries to enter the EU for work, study, or for seeking international protection.

4. CONCLUSION: A TRULY GLOBAL APPROACH?

The aim of this contribution was to describe some of the main geopolitical and socio-economic dynamics that characterize the migration scenario in the Mediterranean Sea. In particular, attention was paid to the effects of three interdependent variables: the push factors in countries of origin; the migration and asylum policies implemented in countries of transit and destination; and the strategies of smuggling organizations that operate along the Mediterranean routes. Focusing specifically on migration from Africa, it was argued that protracted political instability in many African countries together with long-term demographic trends that characterize, especially, the sub-Saharan region are likely to sustain migratory pressure towards Europe and to reinforce the "mixed" character of migration flows. This circumstance highlights the necessity of creating appropriate governance instruments in order to face the inherent complexity of those flows.

In this respect, the EU has committed itself to developing the GAMM, whose aim is to create long-term partnerships with the countries of origin and transit of migrants. When looking at the concrete trajectory taken by this approach by analysing the outcomes of regional dialogues, such as the Valletta Summit AP, and policy tools such as MPs and RDPPs, however, a basic asymmetry becomes evident. In fact, EU priority has so far been accorded to initiatives aiming to limit migration and combat irregular migration. In contrast, less effort has been taken to maximize the impact of

migration on development and, possibly even less effort, to create new channels of legal access to the EU, for both asylum seekers and other categories of migrants. However, a long-term strategy to manage migration in the Mediterranean requires balancing this asymmetry by adequately covering all the main dimensions involved in the governance of migration.

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