

THE REFUGEE CRISIS,
ITS IMPACT ON MENA COUNTRIES
AND EU FOREIGN POLICY

Yulia Ilina

*Conflicts in the MENA region
and its humanitarian consequences*

The civil war in Syria was the main reason for mass migration to Europe. According to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Commission's data (October 2015), the largest proportion of refugees in Europe were citizens of the Syrian Arab Republic. The spring and summer of 2015 were marked by offensive operations by opposition groups, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, which have considerably increased the flow of refugees, mainly Syrians belonging to religious minorities (Alawites, Christians) from the territories ceded by Assad's forces. However, there were also many Sunni Muslims, exact figures are not known though due to lack of reliable statistics.

By the end of 2015, the flow of refugees had gradually decreased. It should be mentioned that government's offensives in Latakia and North Aleppo did not seriously affect this trend. The emigrated populations from Aleppo and Idlib provinces probably did not reach Europe for economic reasons and remained in the refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.

The largest refugee camps can be found in the following locations: Ceylanpınar (19,228 refugees), Akçakale

(24,688 refugees), Elbeyli Beshir (24,058 refugees), and Kahramanmaras (16,952 refugees). As of 19 May 2016, the total number of registered refugees in Turkey was 2,744,915. Additionally, in Lebanon the number of registered Syrian refugees is 1,048,275, i.e. approximately 22% of the country's population. Finally, in Jordan there are 651,114 refugees¹.

The massive influx of refugees has seriously affected the ethnic and religious composition of the population, especially in the southern parts of Turkey and Lebanon. In Turkey, the cramped quarters of refugee camps, located close to the Syrian borders, are simultaneously the rear bases of Syrian armed opposition, and the "battlefield" between the Turkish army and guerrillas of the PKK. Extremist groups, like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, have received an informal "carte blanche" to recruit fighters in refugee camps, using them not only against the Kurds, as in previous times, but also against the Turkish government itself (for example the attack in Suruc on 20 July 2015 and in Gaziantep on 1 May 2016)².

It is also necessary to acknowledge the existence of "unofficial" refugee camps, controlled mostly by the militants. These places serve as fertile grounds for recruiting fighters, including child soldiers for the radical opposition. The process of radicalization of the refugees and their involvement in the activity of extremist organizations is linked to unemployment, lack of opportunities to meet basic human needs, and the abilities to obtain education and work. The refugees have become both witting and unwitting participants of terrorist activities, both in Turkey and other countries, including the EU.

The situation is similar in Lebanon. Despite the policy of brutal suppression of the activity of terrorist groups, ISIS continues to recruit and train militants in the area. In addition, the transfer of two Syrian opposition groups – Al-Muthanna Islamic Movement and Jaish al-Thuwwar

– based in the West Deraa province under the banner of ISIS, has dramatically complicated the work of the Lebanese army and security services.

Jordan, from the beginning of the civil war in Syria, served as a base for training the so-called “moderate opposition” fighters, who were trained by US military personnel. Refugees from Syria were widely used for regular reinforcement of the Free Syrian Army because of a significant percentage of military-age men.

Subsequently, the United States has acknowledged the fact that the “Train and Equip” Program for Syrian opposition has collapsed. Contrary to intentions, the majority of trained fighters joined ISIS as militants. The Jordanian government—rightly fearing for the internal security of the country—adopted a policy to curtail its assistance to the Syrian opposition.

EU response to the migration crisis

The flow of migrants to Europe from the MENA region has risen sharply since the beginning of the Arab Spring. The total number of migrants from the MENA region to the EU was 284,975 in 2010 and 341,795 in 2011. It reached a peak in 2015, amounting to 1,393,285 people. According to statistical data of the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations, the composition of migrant arrivals to Europe is as follows: 41% from Syria, 21% from Afghanistan, and 13% from Iraq³.

According to Frontex, irregular migration flows are caused by sea arrivals, primarily through the central and eastern Mediterranean routes. The eastern Mediterranean route is the most popular among immigrants from the Middle East because of the proximity of Turkey, which also serves as a transit point to Greece. The distance between the Turkish coast and Greek islands can be as little as 4 nautical miles (7.5 km), as in case of Chios, or 5.4

nautical miles (10 km), as in case of Lesbos. The central Mediterranean route from Libya to Italy is now mainly used by migrants from the Horn of Africa and Western African countries⁴.

With more than a million migrants arriving on the Greek and Italian shores in 2015, the necessity of emergency procedures for managing the flow of refugees became evident. On the other hand, these measures can jeopardize the freedom-of-movement principle within the European Union. European leaders realized that even in theory the EU cannot accept all the asylum seekers. By early 2016, with increasing hostility towards migrants entering the political discourse, certain countries along the migrant route began to close their borders.

In May 2015, the European Commission adopted the European Agenda on Migration and the EU Action Plan against migrant smuggling. The key points of these documents are: (1) strengthening of border control; (2) cooperation with third countries aimed at “reducing the incentives for irregular migration”; (3) new “legal migration policy” that allows relocation of migrants and enforcing of “return measures”; (4) new “asylum policy”; and (5) new policy to discourage human traffickers⁵.

The goal of the new “border policy” is “to encourage more secure borders” and “to strengthen the capacity of countries in North Africa to intervene and save lives of migrants in distress. It previews: strengthening Frontex’s role and capacity, adopting a Union Standard for border management, strengthening EU coordination of coast guard functions, a revised proposal on Smart Borders, strengthening the capacity of third countries to manage their borders”⁶.

According to these “key actions” of the Agenda, the EU started to conduct operations such as Operation Triton to intercept illegal migrants in the Mediterranean on a regular basis. The so-called “hotspots”, set up in Greece

and Italy, function to identify, register, fingerprint the incoming migrants, and redirect them either towards the asylum or return procedures. At the same time, according to the Amnesty Report, this system does not work very well, mostly because of legal gaps and lack of qualified staff (interpreters, doctors, etc.)⁷.

The EU's policy for "reducing the incentives for irregular migration" has two main components: financial support for refugee camps in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, established by the UN in order to reduce the influx of migrants from Syria. The second is "EU external cooperation assistance" with MENA governments.

The support of UN-run refugee camps looks like one of the most effective tool to resolve the refugee crisis, but it faces serious trouble. According to UNHCR data, the required funding for Syrian refugees in 2016 was \$4.6 billion. On 2 May 2016, the funds were disbursed with Turkey receiving 25%, Lebanon 22%, and Jordan 19%. As of 19 February 2017, the gap is around \$1.9 billion (41% of total requested)⁸. The populations of the camps in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan are approximately 10% of registered Syrian refugees, while in Iraq, the population is approximately 16% of registered Iraqi refugees⁹. Therefore, around 90% of Syrian and 84% of Iraqi refugees are potential asylum seekers in the EU.

At the same time, the EU plans to spend around €96 billion between 2014 to 2020 to "tackle global issues like poverty, insecurity, inequality, and unemployment, which are among the main root causes of irregular and forced migration"¹⁰. Brussels is trying to reach a deal with border countries to manage migrants' problems. In March 2016, the EU announced a deal in which Turkey would try to stop people from moving onward into Europe; in return, Turkey was promised financial assistance, visa-free travel to the EU for Turkish citizens, and faster negotiations for EU accession. Other deals are being approved with a

number of third countries including Libya, Egypt, Sudan, and Nigeria. This “Partnership Framework” with third countries in the Middle East and Africa led to criticism by non-government organizations (NGOs) for deal-making with countries with poor human-rights records¹¹.

According to analysis of the Open Source Foundations: “the EU-Turkey deal failed to close the border, and thousands of migrants continued to travel irregularly using smugglers. Since the deal, only 750 asylum seekers have been sent back to Turkey from Greece because Greek officials and courts consider Turkey to be an unsafe country”¹². Moreover, it is obvious that Turkey cannot and does not intend to seek opportunities for integration and naturalization of Syrian refugees nor providing them with social benefits, housing, and jobs.

According to Frontex intelligence data, it is estimated that human smuggling networks made more than €4 billion from their criminal activities. It is unknown how much refugees spend to reach Europe, but according to Frontex intelligence, each “ticket” to Europe can cost up to \$10,000.

The EU Action Plan against migrant smuggling (2015–2020) says: “The existence of an informal labour market is a pull factor for irregular immigration and an enabling environment for exploitation of non-EU nationals. EU States have agreed rules to address this problem. In addition to preventive measures and stricter inspections, the Employer Sanctions Directive envisages penalties for employers that hire and employ irregular migrants”¹³.

However, we can see that the EU’s fight with human trafficking lacks efficiency. According to a report of the International Organization for Migration: “nearly three-quarters (71%) of migrants taking the Central Mediterranean routes connecting North Africa to Europe have experienced exploitation and practices which may amount to human trafficking, based on anonymous surveys taking place at arrival locations in Southern Italy”¹⁴.

The process of integration of migrants is becoming significantly more complex. The massive influx of refugees has caused a rise in the national and religious tensions. We can also see the rise of popularity of marginal far-right parties in almost all European countries.

On the other hand, the integration of migrants is not only a question of politics but also of economics. The funding allocated to the EU migrant integration has recently decreased from €4 billion in 2007–2013 to €3.1 billion in 2014–2020¹⁵. More than €3 million was granted in 2012–2015 to NGOs that help to “integrate” migrants into the European society. Nevertheless, the social conditions of their life remain very hard. This is believed to be a causal factor in their committing crimes¹⁶.

Conclusions

- The EU failed to develop a comprehensive approach to the migrant crisis.
- The current EU migration policy exacerbates the social crisis in Europe as well as the economic and cultural contrasts between the indigenous people and migrants, which results in rising hostility towards Muslims;
- This, in turn, creates a breeding ground for extremist organizations such as ISIS and ultimately complicates the resolution of civil conflicts in the Middle East;
- The resettlement of refugees in UN camps across the MENA region seems to be the most effective measure, however, it lacks funding and regular control.

NOTES

1. The Migration Policy Institute. Asylum Applications in the EU/EFTA by Country, 2008–2015 <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/asylum-applications-euefta-country-2008-2015>

2. Al-Jazeera. Timeline of attacks in Turkey. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2016/06/timeline-attacks-turkey-160628223800183.html>
3. UNHCR. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>
4. EU Frontex Agency, Profiting from misery – how smugglers bring people to Europe, 2016. <http://frontex.europa.eu/feature-stories/profitting-from-misery-how-smugglers-bring-people-to-europe-tQtYUH>
5. European Commission. The European Agenda on Migration, 2015 https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/communication_on_the_european_agenda_on_migration_en.pdf
6. Ibid., p.12.
7. Amnesty International. Hotspot Italy. How EU's flagship approach leads to violations of refugee and migrant rights, 2016, pp. 13–31. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/11/hotspot-italy>.
9. UNHCR. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php> (date of access – 19/02/2017).
9. UNHCR. Iraq – CCCM Settlement Status Report, 2016. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/52233>.
10. European Commission. “European agenda on migration”, 2015, p.8. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/communication_on_the_european_agenda_on_migration_en.pdf
11. Joint NGO statement ahead of the European Council of 28–29 June 2016 NGOs strongly condemn new EU policies to contain migration. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/27/joint-ngo-statement-ahead-european-council-28-29-june-2016-ngos-strongly-condemn-new>
12. Open Society Foundations. Understanding Migration and Asylum in the European Union, 2016. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/understanding-migration-and-asylum-european-union>
13. European Commission. The EU Action Plan against migrant smuggling (2015–2020), 2015. https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/eu_action_plan_against_migrant_smuggling_en.pdf
14. IOM .Abuse, Exploitation and Trafficking: IOM reveals data on the scale of the danger and risks that migrants face

on the Mediterranean routes to Europe, 2016. <http://united-kingdom.iom.int/abuse-exploitation-and-trafficking-iom-reveals-data-scale-danger-and-risks-migrants-face>

15. European programme for integration and migration. <http://www.epim.info/what-we-do/grant-making>

16. Reuters. Migrants linked to 69,000 would-be or actual crimes in Germany in first three months of 2016: police, 2016 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-germany-crime-idUSKCN0YT28V> .

