Irregular migration in the Mediterranean: four key principles for solving the crisis

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With over 1,000 migrants in the Mediterranean feared dead following a series of incidents in recent weeks, EU Foreign and Interior Ministers agreed on an action plan on 20 April for addressing the crisis. **Anna Triandafyllidou** *writes on the factors underpinning the problem and outlines four key elements that a new strategic approach should consist of: strengthening the EU's search and rescue capabilities, enlisting the support of neighbouring countries, tackling the smuggling networks active in the region, and reforming the system that assigns responsibility for asylum seekers between EU states.*

While the problem of irregular crossings and the tragic loss of human life witnessed recently is not new in the Mediterranean, the geopolitical context within which this happens is quite different from what it was in 2006 when the Canary islands crisis took place, with 26,000 arrivals in one year. Since then arrivals along the western Mediterranean route (via Morocco to Spain) have decreased while the central Mediterranean (via Libya to Italy) and the eastern Mediterranean routes (via Turkey to Greece) have fluctuated significantly, with peaks of arrivals in Italy in 2007-08 and peaks in Greece in 2010-12.

The crossings, the associated smuggling businesses, and the overall flight of both economic migrants and asylum seekers now takes place in a completely different context. The map of North Africa has changed: Libya has collapsed into internal chaos, Egypt has restored authoritarian (secular) rule, Tunisia has democratised, and Morocco is also gradually democratising. Indeed the latter two countries promise to be the most reliable allies of the EU in efforts to manage asylum seeking and irregular migration in the Mediterranean.

At the same time, however, several states in the Middle East have imploded, with Islamic State controlling parts of Syria and Iraq, creating huge instability in the region. Islamic State have spread violence across borders through taped beheadings and executions of 'infidels' of all kinds, as well as of Muslims who do not align (whether it is the captured Jordanian fighter pilot or its own followers that smoke cigarettes or are deemed to have offended the Prophet).

This new geopolitical context of violence, insecurity and outright war has huge repercussions for irregular migration and asylum seeking flows. It generates new flows of people in search of basic human security. It also pushes the middle classes of North Africa and the Middle East out of those countries which have failed to democratise and transform, while opening up 'business opportunities' for both smuggling and

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trafficking networks. Finally it provides illusory opportunities to cross into Europe for people fleeing poverty and political instability from countries like Somalia, Eritrea, or Nigeria. The escalation of IS violence and its spreading through guerrillas or infiltrators in Libya, through terrorists in Tunisia, and into other states, further exacerbates these

trends.

The current pressures stemming from both asylum seekers and irregular migrants will not cease any time soon. There will not be a massive exodus, but the numbers will continue to be sustained. The European Union cannot manage this situation with the toolkit of the 1990s, notably the Dublin Regulation (that despite reforms remains pretty much identical to its initial concept drafted in 1990) and the emphasis on returning failed asylum seekers and apprehended irregular migrants. The approach that is needed is one that is more strategic and multi-faceted.

Irregular migration in the Mediterranean: a four point plan of action

Some commentators have called for a naval blockade of Libya, arguing that this would discourage the smuggling networks and provide relief to immediately neighbouring countries, notably Italy and Greece, while stopping the deaths of innocent people. However such an operation would risk transforming Libya in the short run into a quasi-concentration camp. Until word spread that the route was blocked, people from sub Saharan Africa would continue to arrive and, with the cost of securing safe passage rising, these individuals would be at risk of being jailed, tortured or exploited by the smugglers, militias and other groups active in the area.

Instead, the EU needs to work with a combined toolkit. First, it must intensify its search and rescue operations, chiefly by implementing a European 'Mare Nostrum' operation before the end of this year. This would need to be on a larger and more ambitious scale than the current 'Triton' operation led by the EU's external border security agency Frontex, which has proven to be under staffed and under financed. Ignoring the situation would not tame the flow of migrants, but rather simply increase the loss of human life in the Mediterranean (which is now by far the deadliest sea crossing for migration or asylum seeking worldwide).

Second, in addition to this enhanced search and rescue operation, the EU needs to enrol the support and cooperation of neighbouring countries in the Mediterranean, notably Egypt and Tunisia, as well as Turkey. It should also seek to win the support of countries of origin and transit outside of the region, notably in southeast Asia, and West and East Africa. Development aid as well as technological assistance and training is needed to boost the border guard capacity and ability to fight organised crime in these countries.

Third, alongside these approaches, there is a need for further sophistication in the fight against organised crime, notably smuggling networks which usually collide with drug trafficking and the underground arms trade. Working locally in cooperation with transit countries, particularly in Turkey and Syria, to dismantle the operations of the smuggling networks that make the smuggling business so dynamic and flexible, should be an area of priority.

Last but not least, there is a need for essential reform of the Dublin system. The so called 'first safe country' principle, under which the state in which an asylum seeker entered the EU is usually responsible for their claim, can no longer hold. This system only creates returnees and further exacerbates tensions within the EU between the 'first safe countries' of arrival in the south, and the 'safer' countries in the north, that still nevertheless face significant asylum seeker inflows despite the Dublin safeguards. A more efficient system of asylum quotas is required for a fairer sharing of responsibility that would do justice both to the efforts of the "frontier" states like Italy, Malta, and Greece, but also to the northern countries that receive the highest number of asylum applications.

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