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The «Arab Spring» and its Consequences on the Euro-Mediterranean Migration Flows

Evangelos Diamantopoulos

Migration is as old as the history of humanity and migrants have been and will always be a permanent reality with a potential to transform countries and regions around the world. Europe and the Middle East have always had population transfers between them through the passing of centuries but during the last years they have been trying to regulate these movements. The “Arab Spring” added a new pressing factor on that process. Hence, decision-makers should work hard to formulate a pragmatic and fair migration strategy that would give benefits to all the Euro-Mediterranean sides.

* Researcher of the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies of the University of Peloponnese.

The picture of a Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire in December 2010¹ and that of tens of thousands of migrants trying to reach the European coasts after a few months² could constitute the beginning and the end of a short album about the recent events in the EuroMed region. During the last year, several Arab autocratic governments, such as those of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria, have either fallen or come under immense pressure by popular uprisings. The response of the decades-long ruling regimes to their people's demand for change varied from violent crackdowns on their protesting citizens up to civil wars. In most cases such unexpected turmoil pushed many of the unemployed or underemployed, war-ridden Arab citizens to look for a better future in the neighboring EU. The outcome of those recent events, frequently called the "Arab Spring", have alarmed the EU concerning the increased migration inflows to its member-states by the turbulent MENA (Middle East North Africa) region³. From the cooperation with the fallen or trembling dictators to a hasty policy of support for reform and regime change, Europe is still in search of a pragmatic formula to regulate Euro-Mediterranean migration traffic⁴.

The European concerns, multiple voices and political disagreements about the common migration policies surfaced just after thousands of Tunisians reached the coast of the Italian island Lampedusa. The southern member-states of the EU, such as Italy, Spain, Malta and Greece, have expressed repeatedly to their allies their concerns about the uneven burden of dealing with irregular immigration. Factors such as the economic, social and political imbalances between the two shores of the Mediterranean combined with their geographical proximity with MENA have made those countries popular destinations for migrants. Colonel Gaddafi knew these facts and played with European fears during his last days of rule when he stated "We don't know what will be the reaction of the white and Christian Europeans faced with this influx of starving and ignorant Africans" and asked for five million euros to stop it⁵. However, past bilateral agreements with the Arab regimes to safeguard their own borders have been put aside by the current volatile and unpredictable political situation. As Moussa Ibrahim, Gaddafi's spokesman, had put it "There will be illegal migration. It is a very lucrative business and the government had taken action against it, but it cannot anymore."⁶ The slow and weak response of the EU institutions to this uncontrollable flow of people prompted the reaction of the Italian authorities that threatened even the very existence of the common European immigration policy.

Italy has been one of the most vulnerable states by the incoming migrants seeking a better future and running away from Tunisia, Libya and even Egypt after the "Arab Spring". Indeed, by the end of July 2011, 24.769 Tunisians and 23.267 Libyans had reached the Italian soil⁷. Thus, a decision by the Italian government to issue them permanent permits purported to encourage immigrants to leave Italy, on the one hand, and the EU to review its stance⁸ towards them, on the other. The trains from Ventimiglia (Italy) to Nice (France) started getting packed with desperate North African immigrants causing a fierce reaction by the French authorities⁹. The Schengen agreement¹⁰ was under threat, when various European states, such as Italy, Malta, France and Germany, demanded to discuss the possibility of reintroducing national borders control among the 25 member-states¹¹. In April 2011 French President Nicolas Sarkozy stated: "We want Schengen to survive, but to survive Schengen must be reformed" while his Italian counterpart, Silvio Berlusconi, added "we both believe that in exceptional circumstances there should be variations to the Schengen treaty."¹² Furthermore, the issue of managing migration after the "Arab Spring" dominated the G-8 talks in May 2011 pointing out the importance of the matter for world leaders¹³. However, that area was not the only one to feel pressure on its borders after the Arab uprising.

Bashar al-Assad's troops have targeted during the last months every city, town or vil-

lage that has shown any sign of resistance against his autocratic rule.¹⁴ The Syrian armed forces have stormed entire villages close to the Turkish borders causing waves of refugees towards their Northern neighbor¹⁵. Several thousand of Syrian civilians were fleeing areas such as Jisr al-Shughour, Khirbet al-Jouz, Shighr and Armala seeking help at Turkish refugee camps¹⁶. The brutality of Assad's forces leave little space for hope that those people will get back to their homes any time soon. Meanwhile, the situation is becoming more complicated by the Turkish authorities' failure to prevent migrants without permits from exiting their borders, more so since neighboring Greece is in extremely difficult economic situation. Greek minister of Public Order stated: "In a time when the Greek government is asking its people to make sacrifices, which reduce massively their income in order to save the country from the financial crisis, it would be a paradox, and practically impossible for Greece by itself, to fund the improvement of reception conditions for illegal immigrants in the country"¹⁷ Indeed, Greece has been one of the main gateways to the EU for irregular migrants during the last years and the number of incoming desperate people could increase drastically after the "Arab Spring"¹⁸. Unfortunately, Europe's voice is still divided and uncertain on that issue¹⁹.

There are two main trends dominating the academic and political debates about immigration across Europe that are ideologically colored and practically impossible. The two extreme trends in the EU which are often addressed are on the one hand the "no borders" group and on the other the "no immigrants" one²⁰. In reality, restrictive policies and tight controls seem to be inadequate as sole policy initiatives. In addition, calls for an opening of all borders can be characterized as, at least, utopian under the current circumstances. Indeed, as Adam Smith had put it before, "Man is of all sorts of luggage the most difficult to be transported"²¹. Bold political decisions, pragmatism and cooperation are the minimum prerequisites for the formation of a successful migration strategy in an area of dynamic changes. After all, a successful migration controlling framework might be the bond that would connect the developed and developing nations of the region in a mutually beneficial relationship free from stereotypes and distrust.

NOTES

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