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Refugees in the MENA region: what geopolitical consequences?

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›› Over the past two years, a combination of security crises has caused a wave of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Middle East and North of Africa (MENA) region. Managing these new refugee movements poses a predicament to Maghreb countries and the European Union (EU) alike. This is one part of a complex set of political shockwaves of the Arab spring. Contrary to common belief, the main challenge is not so much the inflows of immigrants from the MENA to Europe, but rather the massive movements within the Middle East itself. These movements play into and may compound incipient political tensions between and within MENA states. Intra-regional flows risk further stirring up sectarian tensions and disturbing the fragile political alliances that exist among MENA powers. While the European Union and the US support many useful projects aimed at dealing with refugee flows and displaced persons, these tend to treat the problem as mainly a humanitarian one, when in fact a more holistic political response is required.

OVERVIEW

The security crises triggered by the Arab spring have created new epicentres of refugees and IDPs in the MENA. Yet it is important to assess with precision what the nature of this challenge is – and is not. A quick summary reveals how different the sources of these movements have been across different countries.

Political turmoil first led many Tunisians to seek refuge in neighbouring states. While by mid-February 2011 around 5,200 refugees had reached the

HIGHLIGHTS

• The new challenges of refugees and IDPs must be understood as part of the geopolitics of the post-Arab spring Middle East.

• If not managed correctly, refugee issues could also have an impact on the future of countries in transition.

• Funds and assistance programmes must be complemented by political solutions to the root cause of exodus.

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>>>>>> island of Lampedusa in Italy, the relatively stable security situation in Tunisia avoided a humanitarian disaster. Conversely, Tunisia quickly became a recipient country for refugees and asylum seekers in particular from Libya. By June 2011, violence had led around one million Libyans to leave their country, most moving into Tunisia, Egypt, Chad and Italy. With the fall of Gaddafi, many were encouraged to go back to Libya. Precise data are unavailable, but estimates put the number of Libyan refugees abroad at under 50,000. IDPs remain Libya's main concern. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), at the end of August 2012, the number of IDPs remained somewhere between 65,000 and 80,000 persons, a population composed mainly of minorities, such as the Tawerghas, who are unwilling or unable to return to their areas of origin for fears of reprisal.

Often forgotten, the number of IDPs in Yemen has increased to 500,000 people as a result of internal conflict and natural disaster, such as floods, drought and land erosion. The country also plays host to around 230,000 refugees, mainly from Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Syria remains the most important regional concern. As of June 2013, there was a total of 1,588,286 people thought to have left Syria due to the conflict, of which 206,895 were awaiting registration, according to UNHCR. Most of these have fled to neighbouring countries: Lebanon (503,558), Jordan (470,573), Turkey (372,326), Iraq (154,932) and Egypt (75,442), as well as to other countries in North Africa. In addition, around 2.5 million people have been displaced within Syria itself. Of these, only 700,000 have been assisted by UNHCR. In April 2011, the Syrian regime agreed to modify a five decades old policy towards Kurds by granting some of them citizenship. But the policy has yet to be extended to all Kurds. As of January 2013, there were still 150,000 stateless people living in Syria.

Based on available statistics, the EU has not received a large number of refugees. There is no entirely reliable official data on the issue. An assessment released by UNHCR in 2013 of the number of asylum applications lodged in 2012 helps to identify some important trends. So far, Syria was the country accounting for the third highest number of asylum demands (with 21,427 applications in 2012), just after Afghanistan (with 24,681) and Serbia and Kosovo (with 21,538). Egypt only came in 28th place (with 2,257 applications), while Libya ranked 40th (with 1,302 applications).

The five main destinations for Syrian asylum seekers were: Sweden (with 7,814 applications), Germany (6,201), the United Kingdom (1,289), Austria (922) and Denmark (907). Switzerland, a non-EU country, received 1,146 demands while France, one of the strongest supporters of groups opposing the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, only received 627 demands. Most European countries, however, have been reluctant to concede asylum. Germany is a relative exception, with a commitment to grant asylum to 13,000 Syrian refugees (but with a preference for Christians) by March 2013. Restrictive immigration policies have not encouraged Syrian refugees to seek asylum in the Netherlands. In the first four months of 2013, the Dutch government had received only 470 demands. Following a moratorium on decisions on asylum requests between July 2011 and July 2012, the Dutch government has started considering individual requests. Nonetheless, by April 2013 the Dutch government had donated approximately 35 million euros in aid to Syrian refugees, as it favours the reception of refugees in the region.

In sum, the largest part of the MENA 'refugee crisis' is a product of the Syrian crisis. The Arab uprisings have caused other movements of migrants between and within other states. However, these have tended to be for short periods of time and have been of far lesser magnitude that those associated with the Syrian conflict. This link to Syria's complex plight adds considerable risks to the already fragile stability of the entire region.

A CHALLENGE TO STABILITY?

Refugee issues in the Mediterranean have altered some aspects of the balance of power between and within different states in the region. While it is still

too soon to assess their effects in the middle and long runs, it is possible to identify some potential implications both for countries within the region and for Western states.

First, it is important to understand the perceptions of refugees among the MENA populations. The Lebanese have a generally negative perception of Palestinian and Syrian refugees; this fact is well-documented. Similar trends are now in evidence in Turkey, aggravated by the car bombings in May 2013 in Reyhanli. This town is one of the main Turkish crossing points for Syrian refugees. Suspicions of an implication of the Syrian intelligence services in this incident have engendered concerns among Turks of being caught up in Syrian-related rivalries.

There is a need to address the conflicts that lead to refugee movements and adopt a more comprehensive approach to the MENA

Throughout the region, negative attitudes towards refugees have been reinforced. Egyptians feel resentful towards Sudanese refugees. The Ethiopian decision in 2013 to build a dam on the Blue Nile provoked a harsh Egyptian reaction *vis-à-vis* Ethiopian refugees. Both examples demonstrate how inter-state tensions feed into social tensions linked to migration flows: these two levels interact to generate a fluid and worrying geopolitical context. The adoption of harsh measures against Syrian refugees and asylum seekers by the government that followed the fall of President Morsi also confirms this fact.

In Libya, clandestine Saharan refugees, as well as African migrants trying to reach European soil via Lampedusa, are often rejected by the population, while being the target of ill-treatment by Islamist militiamen and the police. There is also evidence of the Moroccan government's abusive methods towards African refugees, which even led a Spanish organisation (the Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado, CEAR) to file a complaint against Morocco to the UN Committee against Torture in April 2013. In Israel, tough migration policies generally dissuade African refugees (a total of 64,000, mainly Sudanese and Eritrean) from settling there.

Second, the high number of refugees and IDPs menaces the stability of host countries. At present, only Turkey seems to be able to cope with refugee inflows. Jordan seems to be encountering more difficulties and King Abdullah has referred several times to the burden imposed by Syrian refugees to his country. These have generated additional costs for the Kingdom, while Jordanians increasingly protest against poor economic conditions. Jordanians feel that the flood of Syrian refugees comes on top of the price they have paid in recent years for having admitted floods of Iraqi and Palestinian refugees.

Third, political considerations are also at play. In Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, governments are worried about the potential linkages between refugees and radicals. It is estimated that most Syrian refugees are regime opponents. A small number of these could even develop ties to local radical groups and organisations also interested in the fall of Bashar al-Assad. While there is no indication that significant numbers of refugees are tempted by the discourse and methods of radical violent groups, this nevertheless entails an additional burden to governments that wish to appear neutral vis-*à-vis* the Syrian crisis. Controlling regime opponents and their movements could lead to accusations of supporting the Syrian regime, while allowing opponents to move freely could foster trafficking and radical networks and considerably weaken hosting governments. The June 2013 deadly clashes in Saida between Sunni radical militants and the Lebanese army are an example of these implications. In short, attitudes towards refugees can be interpreted in domestic politics as signs of political allegiance, making the smooth management of inter-state relations more difficult.

Fourth, the refugee crisis resulting from the Arab spring has also contributed to spreading radical »»»»»

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>>>>>> ideologies. Refugees in Libya have not become combatants in Mali but camps tend to be potential sites of recruitment for jihadist and radical warriors, for example with a view to current instability in the Sahel region. The Libya conflict created a favourable environment for the spread of radicalism in the Sahel. Libyan as well as non-Libyan radicals try to take advantage of the lack of control of Libya's southern borders to foster instability and develop illegal trafficking across the region. The take-over of northern Mali by militant groups in 2012 led to the launch of Operation Serval by France in January 2013 to prevent the fall of Bamako in their hands. Malians fleeing the confrontations have become IDPs or refugees in neighbouring African countries, in particular Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. That said, Malian refugees *per se* have had relatively little impact on Arab countries, having preferred to settle in neighbouring states with which they can better identify.

Fifth, if not managed correctly, refugee issues could also have an impact on the future of countries in transition. The radicalisation of refugees and/or the burden they constitute to hosting countries is an element that Islamists and secularists could easily use to criticise each other. The way the Syrian crisis spilled over Lebanon is an indication of the impact refugees can have on political stances. The same can be said about the impact of both Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Jordan, and the consequences of the stateless Western Sahrawis on both the Moroccan and the Algerian scenes. If refugee issues endure in the MENA region, they could widen the divide between Islamists and secularists. Ultimately, their forced settling in their host countries could also nurture the prospects for territorial divisions and even a redefinition of borders, especially if strong central states do not emerge capable of commanding the allegiance of a broad range of the population. This is particularly the case for Syria (Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, Kurds), Lebanon (Christians, Sunnis, Shias), Egypt (tribes and Copts) and Jordan (Islamists and secularists).

Last but not least, the question of IDPs and refugees in the MENA region has also aggravated sectarian strife. In Syria, as well as in Iraq and Lebanon,

fighting between Sunnis and non-Sunnis is becoming more acute. In the Arabian Peninsula (Bahrain, Yemen), as well as in Egypt and Morocco aggressive proselytising increasingly targets Shiite migrants. Most refugees are Sunni. This reinforces the global perception that mass movements of people are due to the conflicts between Sunnis and non-Sunnis. The reality is often slightly more complex: most refugees and IDPs are fleeing a political problem, which is then expressed through increasingly sectarian logics, superimposed on these underlying systemic pathologies.

INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The international community has committed considerable financial resources to the refugee problem. UNHCR's 2013 budget for refugees in the MENA region is $593 million and it is expected to increase by the end of the year (2012's budget was higher with $709 million, but it was still not enough to attend to the needs of all the refugees). The US remains the most important donor to MENA refugees and IDPs. Total USAID and other state humanitarian assistance to Syria and neighbouring countries for 2012 and 2013 amounts to over $814 million. The European Commission committed $377 million for the same period, adding a further $524 million (approxi-mately €400 million) in June 2013 to cover the needs of Syrian refugees. Other important national donors are Kuwait, the United Kingdom, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Australia and Canada.

Nonetheless, financial aid has yet to be backed up by an adequate and stronger political response to the challenge. The refugee problem poses considerable risks for Western and European interests in the region. Extremist groups among the refugees are contributing to the spread of radical beliefs, and refugees living in dire conditions and sometimes hostile environments can be vulnerable to radicalisation. The international community must focus more attention on solving the root causes of exodus. As long as the political and geopolitical questions are

not properly addressed, the problem will continue and Western interests will remain at risk.

The international community appears to have decided to deal with the issue of MENA refugees as mainly a humanitarian issue. At the same time, many programmes seem to have one particular focus: how to limit refugees to the region itself, while trying to prevent the spread of radical anti-Western ideologies. The humanitarian focus is important and understandable. However, political and humanitarian issues are intimately linked. While funds and assistance programmes are necessary, political solutions are imperative. There is a need to address the conflicts that lead to refugee movements and adopt a more comprehensive approach to the MENA. The failure to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example, is one of the reasons why so many Palestinian refugees are unable to return to their 'country'. In Syria, while the regime has been regularly targeting the civilian population in rebel-held areas or combat zones, the harsh tactics of some groups within the rebel constellation are also responsible for civilian casualties and people's displacement.

International actors must eschew partisan approaches to the region's crises. In the Syrian crisis, there is a need for a more pragmatic approach that guarantees that members of regime and the opposition alike can be part of the Syria of the future, based on the population's choice and vote. While helping to defuse tensions, such a commitment would also encourage refugees to return to their country. The regional landscape will also benefit from the international community's commitment to work with leaders that have been chosen by their populations, particularly in the case of countries in transition. Regional agendas (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran) and their interference in the evolving situation in MENA countries (Libya, Egypt, Syria, Palestine) also lead to movements of refugees and IDPs. Therefore, they should be criticised strongly by international actors as long as they continue to generate negative effects.

CONCLUSION

The consequences of the deepening problem of refugees and IDPs in the MENA region are serious. Growing resentment among the population (especially in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey) due to the burden on their countries' economies is weakening governments and leaders. The spread of radical ideologies could create new and threatening counterweights to state institutions. Some of these are tribal and clan-based (Libya), others confessional (Syria). This does not mean that traditional national borders will necessarily change or be erased. But refugee flows will cause new instability. The case of Iraq proves that even when countries retain their official territorial integrity, centrifugal forces can easily provoke federalist and/or autonomist tendencies that could ultimately lead to partition, as has recently happened with Sudan.

The EU should continue to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees but needs to focus on the political and security implications for refugee flows and on addressing the root causes of such displacements. A more pragmatic approach is needed, based on welcoming more refugees to European soil while providing efficient conflict-resolution responses to the region's violent epicentres, Syria and Palestine. Standing as a fortress will only generate additional financial costs but without bringing security, either in the MENA region or in European countries. The new challenges of refugees and IDPs must be understood and treated as part of the geopolitics of the post-Arab spring Middle East.

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