Moving the Masses:
The Impact of MENA Migrants on EU Migrant Policy:
2014-2015

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Given the extent of the migration crisis coming from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the numbers of asylum seekers moving through the borders of European Union (EU) states, it is paramount that the extent of the impact of such a large movement of persons on EU member states migration policy be examined in detail. As millions of people from MENA countries (countries within the League of Arab States) seek refuge within the EU, member states have supported different migration policies to impede or block their arrival. These policies are rooted in various ideologies, including right-wing nationalism, xenophobia, and othering, in order to combatting or preventing individuals from MENA countries from residing or entering respective EU countries. Arguments surrounding demographics, identity, and central authority within the European Union have created chasms in European Union politics, and with the migrant crisis, those gaps came to light. This topic adds value to the field of international affairs for several reasons.

The first is that understanding the political impacts of migration in relation to reactionary immigration policy will provide a stronger understanding of how states might choose to deal with future migration crises, whether caused by conflict, climate change, or other factors. The second is that this topic analyzes the extent of the shift of EU state migration policies in relation to the European Union as a whole from 2011 to 2017. This begins with the period from the onset of the Syrian portion of the Arab Spring, which developed into the now internationalized Syrian civil conflict, the collapse of the Libyan state, and a respective increase in asylum seekers arriving in Europe. In essence, the reaction to such a major crisis related to the movement of people should be investigated for the purposes of crystallizing understandings of policy implementation during future international crises. Third is that this analysis explores why states decided to shift their immigration and migration policies during the migration crisis in particular and will seek

to highlight those decisions for a clearer expectation of reactions to future crises of similar natures.

Building on this need for study is the linkage to the European Union. Two of the central goals of the European Union are to "combat social exclusion and discrimination" and to "enhance economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among member countries." However, with member states of the EU distancing themselves and resisting EU migratory policy, threats to the actualization of these goals have become substantial to the point that cornerstones of the EU appear fragmented. For an institution seeking to unite peoples of various backgrounds and origins, the migrant crisis poses a litmus test to the real ability of the EU to stay true to its core values and missions. Identifying why certain states' governments within the EU are altering their migration policies in such a way which goes against the direction of the European Commission – the entity responsible for relevant migration policy – is key to preserving it. Subsequently, identifying the political and social elements which are weakening the EU as an institution, specifically through the lens of migration, serves as an especially valid purpose in a time when nationalism, xenophobia, and movements of people across borders are increasing, and using this topic as a smaller study of one regional exemplification of those variables can better assist the international community in understanding these components which oftentimes have led to ethnic conflict and instability in the past.

The linkage of migration and nationalism is one that warrants further investigation and development due to the rise in likelihood that more mass migration events will come about in the upcoming decades due to climate change, resource scarcity, and armed conflict. Migration of peoples has occurred throughout history and has brought challenges upon states in various instances. For reasons spanning economic opportunity, government stability, and quality of life, asylum seekers specifically have been drawn to the EU.

It is critical to note here that the question being asked pertains to the responses of states relating to the MENA migrant crisis. Therefore, the responses of states within the European Union matter most with regards to their adherence of policy proposed by the Council of Europe (COE). This means that while it is possible that states might have changed migration policy individually or in response to domestic sentiment, or, prior to the COE issuing directives respective to this policy, those changes made prior to official EU policy do not reflect the desire of EU states to resist any correlating policy. Those changes merely reflect national sentiment, irrespective of any influence from Brussels and the Council.

Information on this issue is available from a variety of sources, both qualitative and quantitative. Specifically, a great deal of information is generated by the European Union, including information regarding specific actions and policies of member states.

Additionally, data from the International Organization for Migration and the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, among other sources, will be utilized. Information regarding political parties and election results provides a window through which to glean a clearer picture of domestic sentiment within EU member states, thereby illustrating public opinion towards the migrant issue through voting results. It is crucial to note, however, that it would not be possible to analyze every country within the European Union within the scope of this paper, creating a limitation with regards to the scope of the data which can be analyzed here. To address this, a self-designed comparative chart to succinctly visualize an overview of differences between some EU member states' responses to the MENA migrant crisis is included (See Annex E). Moreover, because the information regarding national sentiment and backlash to the 2015 crisis is relatively new, most sources have come from EU and journalistic media for this reason, as opposed to journal articles and peer-reviewed research, which is mostly young at this point in time.

The purpose of this narrative is to frame the issue of the MENA migrant crisis through the lens of policy responses from EU states which either were and remain destination countries, or, were transit states. In the form of a descriptive timeline, the accounts of flows of migrants through different routes, the respective responses by European states and the EU, and the corresponding resistances to certain policies through counter measures, elections, or public statements, outline the extent of resistance to European Union migration policy from member states is due to the MENA migrant crisis. While this narrative will not include every occurrence in the sequence of events from the MENA migrant crisis, it does convey information to an extent which shall provide a well-rounded summary of the elements eliciting responses from EU states, particularly as the narrative shifts to focus on the reaction of those respective states.

This narrative begins in early 2011. After numerous protests in Syria from the Arab Spring, violence erupted between forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in early 2011, eventually causing thousands of Syrians to flee to neighboring Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey, but not impacting EU member states.[1] Meanwhile the collapse of the Gaddafi government – and worsened by NATO intervention – led to the beginning of Libya's collapse as a state. However, numbers of migrants do not drastically increase to EU member states while provisional agreements for the state's advancement were developed.

In 2012, the League of Arab States banned the al-Assad government from the League for its failure to resolve the conflict peacefully, and a formal opposition group, known as the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, formed in Qatar. The National Coalition was subsequently recognized by the US, France, UK, the Gulf States, and Turkey as the true representation of the Syrian people. Lethal aid was discussed as a means to support the opposition.

The Italian government launched Operation Mare Nostrum in late 2013 after the wreckages of many migrant vessels near Lampedusa, beginning missions to rescue migrants on vessels in the Mediterranean fleeing Libya. The operations were particularly in response to the sinking of a migrant vessel near Lampedusa, where many women and children drown. Increases in migrants to Europe had begun to occur, and the operation was developed in order to augment Operation Constant Vigilance, and operation which previously had dealt with similar issues on a smaller magnitude.[2]

By the very end of 2013, thirteen European countries, notably Germany and Sweden, had pledged to take in roughly 10,000 asylum seekers, marking the first collective response by European countries in any fashion. Meanwhile, Libya teetered on the edge of all-out conflict due to rival militia factions' actions in various parts of the country, and chemical weapons were used against civilians in Syria, although the UN did not assign culpability. The US and UK pledged to halt some types of aid due to certain armaments reaching extremist groups.

In 2014, Libya fell into a state of civil war after the opposing military factions within the country, which are based in Benghazi and Tripoli, could not reach an agreement regarding governance of the state, following protests and failed peaceful resolution through elections. Islamists emerged as credible military forces in both Libya and Syria, and ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) proclaimed a caliphate from near Aleppo to Northern Iraq. Additionally, US-led forces, including Arab and European allies, launched air strikes on ISIS, adding complexity to the conflict.[3]

Soon after the US and its allies began launching strikes against ISIS, ISIS attacks within Syria pushed more individuals from the MENA region to flee the conflict.[4] At this point in time, asylum-seekers began turning to Europe as the ultimate destination, as conditions in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey had become dangerous and overcrowded.[5] Europe experienced a 123% increase in first-time applicants for asylum from 2014-2015.[6] Libya also saw hundreds of thousands flee its respective conflict to Europe.

Between 2014 and 2017, the following EU countries elected larger amounts of right wing and far-right parties to parliaments: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, and Slovakia. The parties elected in these elections based their policies and platforms on nationalism, autonomy from the European Union, limiting immigration, and domestic economic conditions, playing off fears and concerns of citizens who did not believe asylum-seekers will benefit society.[7]

As the conflicts in Syria and Libya raged on, driving millions of people from their homes and to seek refuge, Operation Mare Nostrum ceased in late 2014 to cooperate with the European Union on Operation Triton. Operation Triton not only provided

enhanced security to the southern periphery of the EU, but it also provided additional resources for rescue missions, human trafficking policing, and reconnaissance to find migrant vessels in distress. The operation aimed to prevent smuggling from Syria, as the largest increase in smuggled persons was of Syrian nationals. Similarly, Operation Poseidon was created in late 2014 to assist Greece in the Aegean region in conjunction with Frontex, the European Union's border agency, as well as in conjunction with NATO. These two operations marked a major shift in EU policy on the MENA migrant crisis, as these operations are the first of the EU to collectively act and address the situation across the Mediterranean.

In an emergency meeting of the European Commission, the plan for a quota system was debated and supported by a majority of states, but with noticeable dissent and disagreements on the implementation of such a policy, particularly by Eastern European states. The European Commission decides that in order to address the stress being placed on Greece and Italy, a quota system for reallocation must come into effect.

In the summer of 2015, amidst extremely large influxes of asylum seekers passing through the Balkan route from Greece into Central and Eastern Europe, Hungary began erecting a barbed wire border fence in order to limit the amount of asylum seekers arriving in Hungary. This action marks one of the earliest rejections of EU migration policy, as the Hungarian government acted in this way to avoid receiving additional asylum seekers as a part of the proposed quota system.

Hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers poured into Italy and Greece during the summer of 2015, with more than 1 million passing through Greece and Italy combined. This added immense strain on the two countries, prompting the European Commission to plan for a more elaborate resettlement program across European Union member states. Moreover, the resources of Italy and Greece, in particular, were stretched thin in regards to registering asylum seekers in each country due to the pace at which individuals were moving northward.[8]

Germany subsequently suspended the Dublin Regulation for Syrians, and Chancellor Merkel stated, "Wir schaffen das" or "we'll manage it," referring to the number of Syrians seeking entry into Germany for asylum. Chancellor Merkel's statements came in conjunction with her belief that the Dublin Regulation was impractical and not in the best interest of resolving the humanitarian crisis at hand, as the Dublin text specified that asylum-seekers must apply for asylum in the first EU country of entry, placing unbalanced pressure on Italy and particularly Greece.[9] This spurred thousands of asylum seekers to head to Germany, contributing to what would end up being a 155% increase in first time applicants for asylum in Germany compared to those of 2014.[10] Additionally, many European Union member states joined Germany's call for reforming the Dublin

Regulation, as it would enhance and unify EU migration policy in a more comprehensive manner.[11]

In September 2015, the European Commission met twice and instituted two decisions without unanimous consent regarding the quota system. As a result of its decisions, 120,000 asylum seekers would be allocated from Italy and Greece to member states of the European Union. This was subsequently changed to 160,000 to include 40,000 newly arriving asylum seekers. Opposition to the plan was vocalized by eastern and central European countries. Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Romania all voted against the plan. Hungary subsequently tried to enforce the Dublin Regulation, the provision stipulating that individuals seeking asylum must file in the country of the EU which was their first point of entry, but it was largely unsuccessful and weak in doing so, as most asylum seekers were no longer arriving in Hungary as a result of its barbed fence. This point in the MENA migrant crisis encompassed the most buildup of dissent through the no votes of the four aforementioned states.[12]

In November 2015, the Paris Attacks and the fact that some ISIS perpetrators might have arrived in Europe through the asylum-seeking process created pushback from both Poland and Bulgaria, as well as with Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Romania. States called for additional resistance to the European Union's quota system, which was viewed as insecure and unverifiable on such a massive scale.[13] The issue of migration very drastically shifted to one of terrorism and security, and the European Commission's quota plan seemed unrealistic to implement on the same scale as a result.[14]

In March 2016, the European Commission released numbers of asylum seekers coming to Europe for the previous two years, which were noticeably higher in 2015 than in 2014, reaching 1.2 million firs- time applicants. Of those 1.2 million applicants, about 40% were from Syria and Iraq, marking a doubling of Syrian's applying for asylum within the EU and an increase of seven times the number of first time Iraqi asylum applicants.[15]

An EU-Turkey Deal was created in March of 2016, and there were noticeable decreases in migrant flows during the following summer as a part of the program which directly settled individuals to the EU on a one-to-one basis of individuals being returned to Turkey from Greece, with the goal being to discourage the dangerous sea routes through the Aegean. The European Commission once again touted this policy agreement as a success that would alleviate some of the tensions of member states of the European Union through its enactment. Tensions between Greece and Turkey over the deal came up intermittently, as Greece noted that Turkey could have been more helpful prior to the deal as a good neighbor through the practice of limiting asylum seekers from making the crossing prior to being offered a deal.[16]

The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland refused to implement relocation measures and requirements as specified in the COE Directives 1523/2015 and 1601/2015,

specifically choosing not to take any individuals from the quota allocation system as outlined in late 2015. Slovakia, while not in agreement with the decisions, originally decided to adhere to them, but then rejected the plans, instead choosing to file a suit in the European Court of Justice for a violation of sovereignty and national jurisdiction over migration policy. Hungary joined Slovakia in the suit, and in the meantime, both countries, in addition to Poland, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic, pushed back against the quota system. Additionally, the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orban, stated that "migration...is poison," eliciting heaving criticism from many leaders within the EU for his statements.[17]

The European Commission launched legal proceedings against Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic over their refusal to take in asylum seekers, threatening the three countries with financial sanctions should they not comply with the Council of Europe's decision to implement the quota system. Germany additionally decided not to send asylum-seekers back to Hungary, technically violating parts of the agreement, but did so in the spirit of ensuring the well-being of asylum seekers throughout the European Union, which Germany felt it could not guarantee in Hungary. Moreover, funding cuts where were threatened against Hungary for its anti-migration stances.

The European Court of Justice dismissed the claims of Slovakia and Hungary that the quota allocation process was based on faulty procedure and was inadequate or unnecessary in September of 2017. This marked the end of official challenges in the European Court of Justice by member states of the European Union on the quota system, but the European Union noted that the success of the quota system had been severely hindered.

No state in the European Union, save Hungary, a country having a negative policy reaction to the MENA migrant crisis, had met its obligations as specified by the EU's quota system as outlined in Directives 1523/2015 and 1601/2015 by September 1, 2017. This however, is not to say that Hungary responded in a positive manner, and that other EU states responded negatively, based on the percentage of the allotment which was obtained, but rather, it illustrated three realities:

A. Hungary experienced increased levels of asylum applications due to its early status as a destination country for asylum seekers, given its geographic proximity to the Balkan route.
B. While all countries had indeed taken in some number of asylum seekers from Greece and Italy, the speed at which applications were being processed was not quick enough in the majority of EU countries to meet the obligations specified by the quota system.
C. A division between former Soviet and Yugoslav bloc countries and states of the EU which were not formerly in either bloc occurred, in large part

due to the differences of freedom of movement under respective governments, where social and political traditions of free movement did not exist as strongly, leading to more cultural homogeneity and isolation.

The third reality in particular points to a hypothesis regarding non-Christians as not being acceptable asylum seekers based on religion and ethnicity in many of the eastern European states. Further evidence of this arises from statements of the Slovakian Interior Minister and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who stated that there are "no mosques" in Slovakia and that migration was a "poison" in Hungary, respectively.[18] Furthermore, other statements from Orban, such as that Europe needs to be kept Christian and that Muslim refugees would not benefit Europe, directly point towards a sentiment religious identity and restricting others from entering European society, which, in part, can be attributed to nationalism and poor economic conditions, aside from xenophobia. There has not been a history of movements of people in the Eastern European states, while their Western European counterparts have experienced that very occurrence, driving a definitive wedge between many of the member states of the EU, at least on a level regarding the identity of Europe and how it should proceed to move forward with persons of differing religious identity.

Political swings within EU countries only supplement the sentiments of ethnic exclusivity and nationalism within certain states of the EU, such as in Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary. These states, which are largely white and Christian, also have a strong tie to ethnic identity and the preservation of it through difficult economic experiences and social tensions of the past, such as during the Cold War. In each of those states, economic downturn and distrust of the European Commission, which was and continues to be seen as overreaching and unnecessarily in favor of bringing in 'tides' of non-Europeans, meaning Muslims who are not compatible with European society and customs who subsequently would add to economic difficulties of individuals living within the EU already.[19] That said, the issues at hand here, with economic opportunity, religious compatibility, and education levels being issues of contention for more right leaning individuals in these countries, are not typically barriers to integration or assimilation into a new country. Generational differences may be present, but the elections data presented does not represent the reality that migrants tend to blend into new societies.[20] Specifically, when looking at the election data, one sees a noticeable level of support, and in most cases, an uptick in it, across many European countries as well, ranging from support for France's National Front, Germany's Alternative for Deutschland, Austria's Freedom Party, and Slovakia's People's Party-Our Slovakia to various others.[21] The success of these parties demonstrates a level of dissatisfaction with the European Union's handling not only of the economic and MENA migrant crises, but also of national sovereignty in response to these issues. While far-right parties did make gains in numerous countries' parliamentary

elections, very few were victorious outright, sending an equally important message from many more countries that the views of a few countries' right-wing parties were not representative of the vast majority of European Union member states, and by extension, the citizens who inhabit them.

Separately, where the number of applicants for asylum which had been relocated from Greece and Italy respectively illustrated different insights into the handling of the MENA migrant crisis. Through a largely collective effort by member states of the European Union, states cooperated on an increased basis for the benefit of states burdened with a disproportionate amount of asylum seekers. While it is easy to point out that there are states which did not take any of the asylum seekers from Greece or Italy, such as Austria, Hungary, and Poland, it is more profound that the European Union was able to construct a framework to address such a large humanitarian and logistical crisis for specific member states. Additionally, while the system was not perfectly implemented, as the data clearly show, it does represent a step away from the aforementioned Dublin Regulation and toward a more cohesive union, as is a central mission of the European Union. With states taking in up to more than 800% of previous first-time applicants, and in some instances taking in hundreds of thousands of applicants in a year, the scope of action needed by the European Union could not understated.

So, to what extent has the migration crisis from the MENA region driven EU states to resist or refuse to abide by official European Union migration policy? By and large, this was relatively limited, as only a few specific countries which were required to abide by publicly refused to do so (Poland, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, Finland). That said, even from those states, only Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia resisted the implementation of EU policy, most notably the quota allocation system, at different points in its existence. Meanwhile, Finland and Romania vocalized opposition, but did not mount true challenges to the EU's directives. Evaluating the true nature of widespread resistance to EU policy on the MENA migrant crisis, it is fair to say that the extent of noncompliance was indeed limited.

Additionally, these countries resisted for a variety of reasons, spanning national jurisdiction, ethnic identity and demographics of the host state and the arriving asylum seekers, economic conditions, and others. Hungary and Slovakia alleged not enough respect to national sovereignty and domestic jurisdiction, as the vote to institute the quota program was not unanimous. With issues of sovereignty and jurisdiction at the forefront, this ties neatly in with more right-wing governments seeking to lessen the power of the European Commission, as it is not seen as truly democratic or representative of all its member states. Furthermore, in the case of the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, and Poland, political parties of right-wing ideology were already largely present in respective parliaments, and as such they satisfy the hypothesis in that the treatment and attitude to asylum seeking individuals was quite negative. Finland, a country which

possessed a large right-wing presence in its government, abstained from supporting the quota system, hindering some effectiveness of the program and delaying its eventual complete implementation. However, other states with a right-wing presence such as Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Switzerland supported the measures taken by the European Commission, proving this hypothesis seemingly less valid. In short, states which elected more right-wing ideological parties to national parliaments in the span of 2014-2017 did experience increased domestic resistance to accepting asylum applications in some instances, especially when considering Hungarian Prime Minister Orban's comments. These responses created backlash within the European Union as it attempted to implement migration policy, but it did not occur on a widespread scale.

Rather than creating widespread dissonance and conflict between member states of the European Union, the MENA migrant crisis pushed EU member states to be more closely integrated and cooperative regarding EU migration policy. The multiple missions organized by the European Commission, beginning with Operation Triton, Operation Sophia, and Operation Poseidon, involved serious cooperation between not only Greece and Italy, but also between the other member states. Moreover, the utilization of Frontex in targeted locations in Greece and Italy represents a second area of cooperation regarding the land routes of passage, most notably by the desire of multiple states to reform the Dublin Regulations and its eventual suspension by Germany and other states to facilitate the alleviation of the MENA migrant crisis. Finally, the cooperation of the European Union in the implementation of its quota allocation system for applicants of asylum is the most important policy of note. While the system was not perfected, the fact that the system was created under such short notice and pressure illustrates the capacity of the European Union to cooperate and become flexible in times of crisis, as opposed to breaking apart from various viewpoints and national agendas. These policy actions and stances to address the MENA migrant crisis promoted stronger European integration in the face of crisis for the bloc, and the actions and responses of EU member state governments, while at time contentious, largely adhered to and supported EU migration policies. However difficult the MENA issue remains, the EU has demonstrated it can act in a cooperative manner, and the extent to which the MENA migrant crisis drove states to resist or refuse to abide by EU migration policy was limited and isolated.

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