

African Refugees in the Southern Mediterranean

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I. How Many African Refugees Are Arriving in South European Mediterranean Countries?

Between 1960 and 2000, most Africans travelling across the Mediterranean were North Africans by origin, that is, Algerian, Tunisian and Moroccan, moving first to France, and subsequently to Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, responding to European demand for low skilled and low paid labour. Legal Moroccan emigration between the 1960s and the 2000s had created a diaspora of 2.6 million former Moroccans in Europe. Meanwhile, 700,000 Tunisians were living in France in 2003 (Baldwin-Edwards, 2006, p. 312).

From the mid-1990s, northward migration flows across the Mediterranean began to include significant numbers of sub-Saharan and North-Eastern Africans seeking to claim asylum status in European countries, and travelling to Europe across the Straits of Gibraltar via Tangier in Morocco or the Spanish enclave territories in Morocco, Ceuta and Melilla. In 2003, Morocco and Tunisia in response to European pressure and inducements tightened their own immigration laws and the Spanish enclaves fortified their frontiers with electrified fences that 11,000 people tried to climb in 2005. Spanish interceptions at sea of illegal migrants crossing the Mediterranean peaked at 19,716 in 2003 (Baldwin-Edwards, 2007, p. 317). With joint Spanish Moroccan naval patrols and improved radar surveillance across the Straits, African refugee traffic across the Mediterranean shifted eastwards. Increasing numbers of trans-Saharan migrants began trying to

cross from Libya into Italian territory. In 2002, 1,686 “irregular” migrants arrived in Malta, a thirty-fold increase from the previous year (Mainwaring, 2012, p. 687). In addition, there was an expansion of direct sailings from West African countries through the Mediterranean to Sardinia, to Greece and much more occasionally, Cyprus. A more recent trend has been a shift westwards for West African migrants attempting to reach Europe, away from the Mediterranean altogether. Here migrants intending to reach the Canary Islands sometimes use Cape Verde as a transit point. Because of Economic Community of West African Countries (ECOWAS) membership, West Africans could enter Cape Verde, until recently, quite freely (Marcelino and Farahi, 2011, pp. 887-888).

Cross-Mediterranean refugee flows from Africa have expanded through the last two decades despite the closure of borders and the institution of fresh controls. Most of the refugees who enter Europe through Malta or Lampedusa (between Sicily and Tunisia) depart from Libya. Though the Libyans and the Italians began to cooperate in efforts to halt illegal migration to Sicily from Libya in 2004 the numbers of asylum claimers arriving on Italian islands and Malta or being rescued by Italian or Maltese naval patrols continued to increase. It was only when satellite based monitoring of the Libyan shoreline was introduced in 2010 and the Italians started paying for Libyan naval patrols that the boat traffic to Malta dropped (Mainwaring, 2012, p. 689). However, subsequent conflict and regime change in Libya disrupted this new control system and 15, 000 made landfalls in Malta (1,800) or Lampedusa (13,200) in 2012.

Before the civil war, about a million sub-Saharan Africans lived in Libya, a consequence of the Qadhafi administration’s encouragement of African immigration during the 1990s. Most of the people who travelled from West Africa to Libya in the 1990s and 2000s journeyed there to find work – mainly in low skilled occupations, as construction workers and domestic servants for example. They did not travel to Libya with Europe as an intended final destination. After the fall of Qadhafi’s government a majority

of these migrants returned home southwards, but smaller groups paid fishermen or purchased small boats to set sail for Southern Italy. Through the 2000s the size of vessels used by these travellers became steadily smaller to evade radar detection and they often sailed unaccompanied by experienced seamen – the boats were purchased and piloted by the asylum seekers themselves (Klepp, 2011, p. 543). By mid 2012, press reports suggest that 35,000 had arrived to claim asylum in Lampedusa since the beginning of the year. By 2013, Malta's population of refugees or asylum seekers totalled 8,248, according to UNCHRR statistics; for a small country, a very large population of forced immigrants. Most of these are people who were rescued by the Maltese navy from unseaworthy vessels in distress (Klepp, 2011, p. 551). In addition to this population, another 3,308 have been forcibly repatriated to their countries of origin (Mainwaring, 2012, p. 691). Overall, these numbers are small in absolute terms compared to asylum applications in the major EU states but as a proportion of the Maltese national population, they are very high indeed.

Malta has a very large search and rescue zone, extending from Tunisia to Crete. This helps to explain why as many illegal voyagers as do, end up in Malta as asylum seekers, despite the island's reputation among African would-be refugees as offering relatively poor conditions for asylum seekers. Onward migration from Malta is blocked by the provisions of the 2003 Dublin II regulations for refugee determination. Thus, the island's policy of initially detaining asylum seekers and the lack of subsequent employment prospects, in a very restricted local labour market, make it likely that most of the asylum seekers who arrive were probably intending to reach Italy rather than Malta (Gerard and Pickering, 2012, p. 517-524; Mainwaring, 2012, p. 693). Significant numbers of refugees who leave Malta illegally to try to find livelihoods elsewhere in the European Union are returned to Malta every year under the provisions of Dublin II. As countries in the northern parts of the EU have been experiencing smaller numbers of asylum seekers, applications for asylum in countries that are closest to North African have been rising.

II. Who Are These Migrants? Where Do They Come From?

The largest numbers of African refugees who at present try to reach European territories cross the Mediterranean from Libya as a transit point and are interceded by Italian or Maltese authorities. Asylum seekers and other kinds of “irregular migrants” who try to enter Spain across the Straits of Gibraltar today represent a smaller group. Africans who seek entry through Greece or Cyprus are much more exceptional and often originate from Eritrea, travelling overland through Egypt, Israel and Turkey. Athens has a historic Eritrean Coptic community, which may initially have helped to prompt identification of Greece as a final destination for Eritrean refugees. More recently, though, West Africans have been trying to enter Greece by sea, after crossing the Sahara and travelling to Egypt (Bouteillet-Paquet, 2011, p. 27).

The Malta and Lampedusa asylum-seeking populations are mainly of North East African nationalities. In 2005, UN figures indicate that the main nationalities of asylum seekers and refugees were firstly Somalians, followed by Eritreans with the third largest national contingent from Sudan. The Somalians and Sudanese were the earliest to arrive, from 1996 onwards. The first Eritrean arrivals reached Malta in 2002. In the Italian islands, Eritreans, Ethiopians and Sudanese have predominated among asylum seekers. These groups have continued to represent the larger share of asylum seekers in both countries. For example, in 2008 half the asylum seekers accepted by Malta originated from Somalia. In Malta in 2013, in the first six months, UN statistics show that Somalians and Eritreans were the most common fresh arrivals with smaller numbers first travelling from Mali and Gambia. In Lampedusa in 2013, according to the Italian authorities, the largest African contingent of refugees arriving by boat were Eritreans (8,843) followed by 3,140 Somalians, and 1,058 Malians. The single largest group of arrivals by sea were 9,805 refugees from Syria, though (Frenzen, 18 Oct 2013).

West Africans tend to prevail among the migrants, accepted as asylum seekers by the Spanish authorities in Ceuta and Melilla.

Twenty three per cent of the Spanish detainees in 2005 were from Mali with most of the other sub-Saharan Africans travelling from a wide range of other West African countries (Baldwin-Edwards, 2007, p. 317). Ivorians began arriving in Lampedusa in significant numbers in 2003.

It is likely that many of the West African migrants when leaving their home countries did not originally intend to seek refuge or livelihoods in Europe. Libya's opening of its labour markets to West Africans at the beginning of the 1990s fostered the development of what were to become well-established migration routes across the Sahara, with the main routes towards the Moroccan and Libyan coastlines beginning in Agadez, in Niger. Travel to Agadez is relatively simple; it can be undertaken through scheduled regional bus services, but onwards travel through Libya requires help from professional smugglers who need to be paid for their services and for the bribes they pay at Libyan checkpoints (Malakooti, 2013). Within the West African ECOWAS region, citizens can travel quite freely. Consequently, a significant proportion of the voyagers intercepted by Maltese and Italian search and rescue efforts will have spent several years in Libyan and Moroccan towns. Obtaining a place on a boat is expensive and whatever their intentions are, migrants often need to accumulate savings by working en route to their final destination. In general, sea-based crossings are more costly than overland routes to Europe and tend to attract migrants who can draw upon larger savings. As with other categories of irregular migrants, the investment their journeys require tends to mean that among these refugees who finally reach Europe, there is a high proportion of people who are comparatively well educated and may have originally been relatively well off (De Haas, 2008, p. 1308). The Eritreans and Somalis who travel via Libya have often spent time in refugee camps in or around Khartoum after leaving their countries (Malakooti, 2013).

What about the Sudanese refugees? Fieldwork among the Sudanese refugee community in Cairo conducted in 2011 suggested that a high proportion had fled areas affected by civil

warfare with a quarter of the sample interviewed by the fieldworkers being Darfurians and slightly smaller proportions coming from what was then southern Sudan as well as South Kordofan (Jacobsen, 2014, p. 7). Darfurians and South Kordofans made up the largest proportions encountered by researchers in Libya in 2013 (Radio Dabanga, 1 Sep 2013). Sudanese used to enjoy dual nationality rights in Egypt and northwards migration from Sudan to Cairo is historically routine; for this reason, many of the Sudanese who attempt the Mediterranean crossing from Libya have spent prior periods in refugees' settlements in Egypt.



Source: Schmitz, 2013

III. The Push Factors That Drive Refugee and Other Migrant Flows Across the Mediterranean

The refugees that originate from North Eastern African countries are people who have been affected either by exceptionally repressive governments or by conflicts in which governments are unable to restore or maintain order and security. Most migrants of Eritrean, Sudanese and many of Somali origin who depart to Europe by sea from Libya conform with traditional conceptions of refugees. Research in 2006, among migrants from these countries in Libya, concurred that mostly their original decision to leave their home country was prompted by warfare or political repression (Hamood, 2006, pp. 26-29).

Eritrea is considered by the UNCHR to be a major refugee-producing country. A 700,000 strong diaspora of Eritreans settled in neighbouring states during its war of liberation from Ethiopia, between 1974 and 1993. However, today's Eritrean refugees are not fleeing from hostilities. During the re-ignition of warfare with Ethiopia at the time of a border conflict, in 1998-2000, mass conscription was introduced.

Large-scale warfare ended in 2000 though there have been sporadic border skirmishes since then. However, the government has maintained and indeed expanded conscription. All adults between the ages of 18 and 49 are subject to national service under military discipline. On paper, full time service is meant to last 18 months but in practice, it is often extended long beyond this through compulsory engagement in supposed development projects, for which people are paid survival level wages. Some tens of thousands of Eritreans are imprisoned for trying to evade national service and are held under appalling conditions in fifty special prisons where they are treated very harshly. National service evaders make up the larger share of refugees, though the regime also imprisons adherents of non-recognized churches such as Jehovah Witnesses and, more frequently, political critics.

The above-cited research in Libya indicated that most of the Eritrean refugees had left after their detention or after escaping from detention (Hamood, 2006, p. 27). Amnesty reported in 2013 that 10,000 people were being held without trial for political offences. By 2009, 100,000 new refugees inhabited Sudanese encampments and around 900 people were crossing the border into Ethiopia every month (Human Rights Watch). Human Rights Watch believes that between 1994 and 2014, 200,000 people left Eritrea for political reasons, or to evade national service (Human Rights Watch, 2014, p. 18). People who are caught while attempting to leave are punished severely as are refugees deported back to Eritrea by unwilling host governments. For example, Malta returned 232 Eritreans in 2002 all of whom were subsequently imprisoned and many tortured (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 72). Since then, Malta has ceased repatriating

Eritreans. With collusion from government officials, traffickers in Sudan and Egypt this year were reported to be holding Eritreans in camps and torturing them as well as forcing them to work while holding them until receiving ransom payments from relatives (Sherwood, 11 Feb 2014). In general, the treatment of Christian Eritrean refugees in North African countries has deteriorated in recent years from both officials and the general public; this has been especially the case in Egypt and Libya.

It is likely that Sudanese arrivals in Malta and Lampedusa are mainly people displaced by warfare, which has disrupted routine social life in Darfur in the Western Sudan for the last eleven years. The conflict is very complicated in its origins, evolving from competition for land and water between Arab pastoralists and African cultivators. Tensions over land were accentuated by persistent droughts in the late 1980s and by legal changes, which eroded the status of local traditional authorities who had customarily allocated land. An Arab militia, the Janjaweed, began supporting landless nomads who had been invading cultivated holdings. African groups, the Fur and Zaghawa, set up village self-defence groups and sought support from Southern Sudanese rebels who had been fighting the Khartoum government from the previous decade. After these local militia attacked police posts, the government armed the Janjaweed. Full-scale fighting began in 2003 and despite two peace agreements in 2005 and 2011 violence has persisted and continues today. These hostilities are very difficult to halt because the adversaries are internally divided and operate under very localised and fragmented command structures. There was a steep rise in conflict in 2013 because of fighting between rival Arab militias. The old connections between the Fur/Zaghawa groups and the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM) continue to be important, as well, in fuelling warfare despite the Southern Sudan secession of 2011.

The new Southern Sudan state's boundaries did not accommodate all the participants in the southern rebellion against Khartoum and a residual group of SPLM rebels in the Khordofan provinces (still in Sudan proper) have bases and support networks

in Darfur. Altogether, the Darfur conflict has displaced about two million people – a third of the original population. In the last year alone, 380,000 were forced to leave their homes. Most of these people inhabit encampments within Darfur but there are 300,000 still in refugee settlements in Chad (with which Darfur shares its longest border) and Libya, which over the years has also accommodated comparable numbers of refugees. This year, the outbreak of warfare between armed forces embodying two of Southern Sudan's major ethnicities is likely to prompt a further northwards exodus of refugees.

Somalian migrants in Egypt interviewed in 2006 were less likely to cite conflict as the reason for their departure than the Sudanese and Eritrean ex-patriates encountered in the same study. Many gave reasons that suggest that “the search for a better life” was the main consideration; in other words even if they apply for asylum, Somalis might more accurately be classified as “economic migrants” (Hamood, 2006, p. 28). However, the distinction between refugees whose departure is a direct effect of warfare and danger and people who seek livelihoods because none are available in local settings destroyed by warfare is a fine one. Extensive warfare in southern Somalia followed the collapse of the Barre dictatorship in 1991 and continued on a wide scale between 1991 and 1995. A second phase of extensive fighting developed between 2005 and 2012, by which time a sizeable proportion of the area at one time or another had been affected by hostilities was now at least more or less under the control of an African Union backed government in Mogadishu. A broad arc of territory around Mogadishu is in fact not under government control but is rather administered by a patchwork of Islamist militias some of whom play host to the Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Shabaab. More peaceful than it has been for a decade – despite Al-Shabaab terrorism – Somalia remains unstable and volatile. Most of the productive economy is concentrated in the countryside – Somalia's main exports are livestock and sesame seeds and most urban people, especially younger men, are unemployed. Somaliland is a self-declared independent republic in the north of the territory and an area which has largely been peaceful for the

last two decades. Between August and October 2011, around 3,500 young men left home in Somaliland to travel through Ethiopia and Sudan with the intention of making the sea crossing from Libya to Europe (IRINnews, 22 Nov 2011; Young, 12 Aug 2013).

West Africans who attempt to enter Europe across the Mediterranean are less likely to have travelled from warfare settings or indeed from especially oppressive national governments, though of course increases in migrant flows from Ivory Coast after 2002 and from Mali more recently are certainly partly prompted by the out-break of civil wars in those two countries. Research undertaken for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) indicates that the largest proportions of West African irregular migrants “detected” in Spain, Italy, Malta and Greece between 2008 and 2011 are from Senegal (31%) and Nigeria (29%) (Bouteillet-Paquet, 2011, p. 26). In the West African region, Senegal stands out for its political tranquillity. On the other hand urban joblessness in Dakar and the other principal towns has sharply increased in the last decade. This is partly a consequence of an escalating urbanisation (Dakar’s population has doubled in ten years), which itself is a reflection of growing land-shortages and the removal of traditional subsidies for peanut farmers. Contributing to the number of Senegalese boat people has been the sharp contraction of opportunities for legal emigration to France.

A sample of Nigerians was surveyed by the UNODC in Nigeria who were about to travel to Europe across the Sahara. The survey found that 63 per cent were high school graduates and that 13 per cent had university degrees. More than half were not poor and had livelihoods of some kind or another – as taxi drivers for instance or petty traders. Most would be joining family members already established in Europe. For them migration was not enforced flight but rather “...a conscious choice ... to enhance their livelihoods” (Bouteillet-Paquet, 2011, p. 26).

Both with respect to the Nigerians and the Senegalese, the illegal migrants are following well-established trajectories through which successive generations have attempted to improve their life prospects through responding to cheap labour demands in northern Europe. However, they do this in a world that has become much less hospitable.

IV. Does the Upward Trend of Recent Arrivals in Malta and Italy Represent a Long-Term Development that Will Result, if Unchecked, in Much Higher Numbers?

Is the flow into Southern Europe of African refugees likely to continue to expand? Will it result in much higher numbers of illegal sailings from Africa being intercepted by the Italian and Maltese authorities as well as the other governments in Southern Europe?

As we have noted, there are two main drivers that are pushing the flows of irregular migration. On the one hand, there is long standing violent conflict as well as the political repression that accompanies such conflict: these are concentrated in North East Africa. They show no sign of abating in Sudan and the activities of the Eritrean government that generate refugee departures remain unchecked. Somalia remains volatile and in many areas impoverished and insecure. The considerations that prompt people from this region to undertake the dangers and risks of voyages across the sea to Europe are likely to remain compelling. As are the second set of more general drivers of livelihood-enhancing emigration, especially from West African settings. In this region increasing numbers of increasingly well educated people live in cities in which formal employment has remained level for two decades or has actually diminished.

That does not necessarily mean that the boat traffic to Malta, Italy and other Mediterranean destinations will expand. European efforts to “sub-contract” the task of regulating and confining migrant flows to North African administrations have been

effective in Morocco and Tunisia and cut sharply the sea-borne smuggling from Libya in 2010, though the subsequent war and ensuing administrative collapse disrupted Libyan controls. Italian policy has been to link development aid to commitments by North African countries to readmit failed asylum seekers deported from Europe (Baldwin-Edwards, 2006, p. 320). The Libyan controls will certainly be re-established, though, once effective bureaucracy is restored.

Would this be a good thing? I am not so sure. Such controls as are sought from North African governments by the EU hardly represent a humane outcome and indeed they have prompted North African officials and politicians to mistreat refugees, in so doing abandoning well established Islamic conventions of accommodation and solidarity (Marcelino and Farahi, 2011, pp. 884-885). Excluding refugees from conflict safe havens is a violation of both moral and legal conventions, and in effect the harsh extension of controls on irregular migrant movements through North Africa make refugees and other migrants all the more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

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