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## Migration to Europe – is North Africa Europe's boarder guard?

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# The Current Column

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## Migration to Europe – is North Africa Europe's boarder guard?

Bonn, 8 June 2015. Over 1,800 refugees have lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea since the beginning of 2015, a statistic which shows that Europe should have taken decisive action far sooner. Many of the refugees making this perilous journey to Europe to escape poverty, war or repression come from sub-Saharan African countries such as Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. Relatively few of them are from North African nations. Migrants often stay in North Africa for several months or even years awaiting an opportunity to travel on to Europe.

Transit countries have considerable problems of their own, such as socio-economic issues, political crises and civil war. At the same time, the lack of consistent asylum, immigration and integration policies and inefficient policing in these countries creates opportunities for migrant smugglers to operate. The situation varies greatly from one North African country to another, as do the responses of each country to the challenge posed by migration. In Libya, for example, political confusion and a lack of border controls are leading to an increase in human trafficking and the cruel treatment of defenceless refugees. And "border crossing services" and human trafficking have also become lucrative business activities in the Sahel and other regions of North and East Africa due to a dearth of other economic opportunities.

It is especially shocking to note that **refugees and human trafficking victims** are often detained at random in the **North African transit countries** and, in some cases, held in camps and prisons alongside traffickers and other criminals. Moreover, they are rarely granted access to the asylum process, and little or no provisions are made for medical treatment, psychological counselling for victims, legal advice and protection. Additionally, refugees are sent back to their countries of origin time and again, despite the fact that these countries are unsafe and that this violates the principle of non-refoulement laid down in the Geneva Refugee Convention.

The externalisation of EU immigration control (e.g. through EU push-back operations at sea or on land) is serving to intensify this practice. A better approach would be to raise awareness among police forces in the transit countries of how to deal with refugees, and for these forces to step up their criminal investigation activities and impose smart sanctions on smugglers. There is also a need for broad-based information campaigns in the countries of origin to make citizens aware of the dangers of this kind of migration (scams, drowning, human traffick-

ing, enslavement, torture in prison camps), the living conditions of immigrants in Europe and the (lack of) options for legal entry to EU states. Added to this, many refugees have a distorted view of Europe and unrealistic expectations of living there.

The priority for **Europe** should be to counteract the **causes of migration** (poverty, war and repression being the central push factors) and **avoid encouraging a further framing of its migration policy in security terms ("securitization")**. However, this security emphasis is being reinforced with military activities such as EUNAVFOR Med, an operation to combat human smugglers that is due to commence under Italian command in June 2015.

Even leaving to one side the debatable issue of whether smugglers can be stopped by using military means, this operation still gives cause for concern in the way it equates migration with a military threat. Rather than reverting to re-establishing borders between EU member states and engaging in a demeaning war of words about refugee quotas, **Europe, a 21<sup>st</sup> Century continent of immigration**, should think ahead and see **migration as an opportunity**, a win-win situation for the extremely young populations of the countries of origin and transit countries on the one hand, and its own ageing population on the other.

Migration flows will always find a way. The more the EU prohibits migration, and adopts a fortress mentality, the wider the socio-economic gap between Europe and Africa will grow. The wider this gap grows, the more of a pull factor Europe will have and the greater will be the resolve of migrants to risk their lives to overcome the obstacles to reaching the European continent.

The **EU cannot delegate to others the task of upholding human rights on its external borders**. A greater degree of humanity and solidarity could be injected into the EU's admission policy for those seeking protection by relaxing visa requirements and facilitating family reunification. Humanitarian visas could be offered to refugees staying in transit countries (e.g. Syrian refugees) to afford them safe and legal entry to European countries.

The EU could also do more to assist transit countries with developing humane asylum, migration and integration policies. **After all, it is the North African transit countries that bear most of the burden** in terms of the economic, social and cultural consequences of the appeal of a prosperous Europe to those in sub-Saharan African countries.