

Europe grapples with North African Refugees

Unrest in North Africa forces Europe to debate changes to immigration policy

By per Concordiam Staff



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

Unlike thousands of other Tunisian migrants crowded onto the rocky Italian island of Lampedusa, Rabah Lajnaf had papers allowing him to live and work legally in the European Union. Why then, would Lajnaf risk a three-day, late-winter voyage in an overcrowded fishing boat, crossing the Mediterranean Sea to land illegally on this remote outpost of Europe?

Displaying his identity documents, Lajnaf explained that his wife Zaineb was pregnant and unable to obtain a visa to join him in France, where he worked. And Tunisia, which had recently undergone a wrenching change of government, no longer felt safe for the couple. “I took a risk and saw death at sea,” Lajnaf told a Euronews video crew in March 2011.

African refugees by the tens of thousands have flooded into Europe, escaping across the Mediterranean from North Africa and generating a refugee crisis that threatens passport-free movement provided by the Schengen agreement. While the Arab Spring brings hope of democratic reform and increased freedoms to the peoples of largely authoritarian North Africa, it has also brought economic upheaval and social unrest, prompting multitudes to brave the dangerous sea-crossing in search of both safety and jobs in Europe. EU members have struggled to find a common position on how to deal with the inflow.

Human wave, humanitarian crisis

Lampedusa, dubbed the “door to Europe,” is a tiny island of 5,000 inhabitants whose main industries are fishing and tourism. It lies just 113 kilometers (70 miles) off the Tunisian coast, closer to Africa than the rest of Europe. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), an intergovernmental organization that promotes humane and orderly migration, more than 21,000 refugees had arrived in Lampedusa by mid-July 2011.

The shore is littered with capsized boats, shipwrecks, blankets and children’s toys. Though hit hardest by the refugee crisis, Italy is not alone. Because accurate data is lacking, estimates of the total number of migrants are hard to come by, but it is certain that tens of thousands have landed elsewhere along Europe’s Mediterranean coast, including France, Spain, Greece, Malta and Cyprus.

Thousands more are feared lost at sea. According to the United Nations, 1,400 people drowned at sea over one week in May 2011, trying to escape unrest in Libya. Some survivors say they were forced into boats at night by supporters of former Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, a phenomenon backed up by U.N. reports. When NATO began bombing Libya in enforcement of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973, Gadhafi pledged to use migration as a weapon, saying he would “unleash an unprecedented wave of illegal migration” on Europe.

European leaders worry about the continent’s ability to absorb this new wave of immigrants. According to *The New York Times*, “the surge comes at a time when Europe is increasingly divided over immigration, with right-wing parties gaining traction.” But the flow of desperate migrants is expected to continue as new governments in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia struggle to stabilize their societies. “We’re sitting on a ticking time bomb,” Massimo Russo, head of the regional Sicilian Health Authority, told Euronews in March 2011. Frontex, the EU border-control agency, has predicted movements of as many as 1.5 million people before the situation in North Africa stabilizes.



Thousands of Tunisians flee unrest in North Africa and flood the southern Italian island of Lampedusa in April 2011. Despite the landfall in Italy, many view France as their final destination.

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Promise of a better life

Most of the early arrivals, in the first months of 2011, were Tunisians escaping unrest and searching for economic opportunity in Europe. However, as spring moved into summer, a growing majority of migrants were sub-Saharan Africans arriving via Libya and Tunisia. Many had been guest workers in Libya. The IOM estimates that 500,000 to 1.5 million



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A Tunisian migrant sleeps under a makeshift shelter on the southern Italian island of Lampedusa in March 2011. The island's immigration center, which accommodates 800, was swamped by the unexpected number of refugees.

migrants can be sent back to their home countries. According to *Newsweek*, more than half of the Tunisian migrants were deported to Tunisia after the new government reached an agreement with Italy in April 2011 to curb economic migration.

France's ruling party attributes most of the migration to economics. Jean-François Copé, current president of the Union for a Popular Movement group in the French National Assembly, said that France cannot afford to take in North Africans looking for jobs, according to an April 2011 Associated Press article. Unemployment in France is nearly 10 percent and government debt is more than half of its gross domestic product.

Who is responsible?

The refugee crisis has precipitated disagreement – and some angry words – among EU members. Italian government officials suggest Italy should not have to bear the brunt of the cost of accepting these recent immigrants just because it is geographically closest to the source. They contend that this surge affects the entire EU since immigrants are traversing borders and moving across Europe, and the EU as a whole should share the burden. Some news reports support that contention. “Italy does not interest us. It’s just a stopover. We want to go to France but they don’t want us there,” a refugee said in a March 2011 Press Europe article.

In April 2011, Italy issued six-month residency permits to 8,000 immigrants, allowing them free movement through the EU. This caused France to re-establish border control with Italy, threatening the Schengen agreement’s guarantee of passport-free travel. France even suspended train travel between the two countries for a day in April to stop a refugee train from crossing the border. Under Schengen rules, border checks can only be established under “grave threat to public order or security.” French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi jointly wrote a letter to the European Commission calling for the suspension of Schengen in large refugee situations.

Denmark re-established border spot checks from Germany and Sweden in July 2011, despite being 1,500 miles from Libya. The EC warned Denmark in May 2011 that it risked Schengen membership by its unilateral decision to initiate permanent border checks. Denmark says the move is intended to stop smuggling and illegal economic immigration and argues that it has only “intensified spot checks” by customs officers, a practice allowed under Schengen. The move sparked tensions with Germany, as German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle warned that border checks would be bad for freedom in Europe.

sub-Saharanans worked in Libya when conflict erupted in February 2011. IOM data show that while many returned to their native countries, almost 200,000 had crossed into Tunisia, thousands more fled to Algeria and Egypt and a significant number have attempted, or plan to, seek refuge in Europe. The numbers also show that while Europe quarrels over what to do with the refugees, the vast majority have ended up in neighboring African countries, much poorer countries already straining to stabilize their economies.

The U.N. Refugee Agency reports that sub-Saharan Africans came under attack in rebel controlled eastern Libya, accused of being mercenaries for Gadhafi. Some have been beaten, tortured, murdered and raped, and forced to flee their jobs without pay or even personal possessions. “This is the second time that these people have been forced to become refugees. Having fled to Libya to escape conflicts or persecution in Darfur, Somalia, Ethiopia or Eritrea, they cannot return home,” Geneviève Jacques of the International Federation for Human Rights said.

Many landing on European shores are economic migrants. The Geneva Convention stipulates that signatory countries are obliged to accept political refugees, but economic



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Tunisian migrants at the Lampedusa reception center protest against repatriation in April 2011. Economic migrants are not entitled to refugee status and can be deported.

Frontex has responded to the surge of migrants into Italy by deploying operation “Hermes,” which assists the Italian authorities with naval and aerial border surveillance and managing North African migrants, particularly Tunisians, arriving in Lampedusa. “Frontex is closely monitoring the developments of North Africa and stands ready to assist the Member States operationally, if requested. We are also cautiously developing additional operational responses for potential rapid deployment throughout the Mediterranean if needed,” Frontex executive director Ilkka Laitinen said in a March 2011 press release. Greece is receiving assistance from Frontex in Evros, the district that abuts Turkey that has become the main entry point for illegal immigrants into the EU. Greece has gone as far as to build a trench along its border with Turkey, the *Deutsche Welle* reported. Built primarily to relieve flood waters from the Evros River, it is also intended to stem the flow of illegal migrants.

The recent influx of migrants from North Africa has also called attention to the varying asylum policies among EU member states. EU home affairs commissioner Cecilia Malmström has proposed the creation of a common asylum policy, asserting that asylum seekers face the same procedures regardless of which EU state they first enter. “The European Union must stand up for its values and provide protection for those coming here to seek refuge from persecution and conflict. This is why we must respect our commitment to establish a common European

asylum system by 2012,” Malmström said in a June 2011 statement to EU interior ministers. Discussions to revise such regulations go back to 2008.

Opportunity out of crisis?

There may be a silver lining to the influx of refugees. Some of the would-be immigrants have skills demanded by European employers, but can’t find good jobs in the stagnant economies at home. As Giui Nicolini, director of Legambiente Lampedusa, a group working to help migrants passing through their island, said: “Europe needs this workforce. Why do these people need to risk their lives at sea? Why not regulate [immigration] flows in a consistent way to fill the needs of our continent?”

Ultimately, the solution to the refugee crisis lies at the source, in North Africa. Only by building societies with sustainable economic growth and inclusive political and social opportunities – societies based on freedom and democratic principles – can the people of North Africa complete what the Arab Spring started.

In helping them to reach those goals, Europe simultaneously helps to control immigration flows and protect its borders. As Malmström said in February 2011: “The Tunisian people are demanding democracy as well as economic and social development. Tackling these issues would decrease irregular immigration.” The sentiment is relevant to Libya, Egypt and other countries on Europe’s doorstep where people hope to build free and prosperous societies. □