How *not* to think about the Mediterranean 'refugee crisis'

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Summary

What is currently being debated as the Mediterranean 'refugee crisis' has been in the making for a long time. Portraying the latest developments by reducing them to an 'influx' of refugees into 'Europe' does not allow us to understand the crux of the problem: persistent insecurities in the Mediterranean. This essay traces the evolution of EC/EU policies toward the Mediterranean, suggesting that if the EU's attempts at practicing common security vis-à-vis the Mediterranean failed, this was not because the model is not fit for a different geography occupied by a different 'culture', but because the model was not applied fully in the Mediterranean context. Put differently, what we are currently experiencing is not a 'refugee crisis' but the culmination of a series of policy choices by EC/EU policy-makers and their authoritarian Mediterranean partners.

Key Words

Key words: immigrants, refugees, Mediterranean, European Union.

About the Author

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Analysis:

Introduction

What is currently being debated as the Mediterranean 'refugee crisis' has been in the making for a long time. If we take the end of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (mid-2000s) as the beginning of the unfolding of events, this is a 'crisis' that has been in the making for almost a decade. If we take the European Community's initial diagnosis of its Mediterranean problem as the beginning, the 'crisis' has been in the making since the mid-1970s (for almost 40 years). Whichever date we take as the 'beginning', what is difficult to deny is that what we are experiencing is a not 'crisis' that has emerged from out of the blue. Furthermore, debating the latest developments by reducing them to an 'influx' of 'refugees' into 'Europe' does not allow us to understand the crux of the problem: persistent insecurities in the Mediterranean. Put differently, what we are currently experiencing is not a 'refugee crisis' but the culmination of a series of policy choices by EC/EU policy-makers and their authoritarian Mediterranean partners

The 1970s and 1980s

To begin from the beginning, the European Union's precursor, European Community (EC) was among the first to diagnose the problem of 'persistent insecurities in the Mediterranean'. They did so during the 1970s, when EC policy-makers adopted a new and coordinated policy toward the Near East and North Africa, those parts of the Middle East that are geographically closer to 'Europe'. As such, EU policy-makers defined the region they were interested in as the 'Euro-Mediterranean' in accordance with insecurities they experienced. The point being that, amidst all the grand-talk about 'our shared Mediterranean heritage' and the need for solidarity and development, EC's Mediterranean policies were designed to prevent problems in the south from turning into problems in the north (see Bilgin 2004).

That being said, southern problems were expected to arrive not on boats but via the diaspora. This was a time when EC-member states were still receptive to immigrants for economic development needs. It was also still the Cold War years, and the EC, by virtue of belonging to the 'West', was receptive to refugees, the bulk of whom were arriving from the Eastern Bloc. As such, throughout the 1970s and until the end of the Cold War, accepting immigrants and refugees was not an economic, political or security problem but a solution for the European Community.

The 1990s

Explicit problematisation and securitisation of refugees and immigrants in the European Union (EU) began during the 1990s. This is also the time when EU policy-makers decided to make a concerted effort to address 'persistent insecurities in the Mediterranean'. This took the form of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), also known as the Barcelona Process, after the Barcelona Declaration of 1995. The tri-fold set up of the Barcelona Declaration covering 'politics and security', 'economics and finance' and 'social, cultural and human affairs' revealed that what was at stake for the EU was still the same: preventing southern problems from becoming northern problems.

The rationale behind the set-up of the tri-fold structure of the EMP rested on past practices of the European Community/Union towards the former Eastern Bloc. The Helsinki Final Act and the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe), on which the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was modeled, were designed to generate people-to-people diplomacy and exchanges at various levels so as to build confidence and enhance security cooperation between the eastern and western parts of 'Europe'. Both institutions contributed to the relatively peaceful end of the Cold War. Notwithstanding the Reagan administration's claim to having won a 'victory' over the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War was made possible by the efforts of various state and non-state actors who operated through official and non-official channels.

The common security understanding behind the CSCE model was underlined by the construction of a 'Euro-Mediterranean 'we' that could be the foundation of 'a Euro-Mediterranean security community'. Security through non-military means (even though it was not explicitly identified as a 'security policy') became a trademark of European policy-making, which gave it a different stance in world politics.

There is agreement on both shores of the Mediterranean that seeking to transfer the CSCE model to the 'Mediterranean' context has failed. Arguably, this is not because the model is not fit for a different geography occupied by a different 'culture''. This is also because the model was not 'applied' fully in the Mediterranean context. Let me make two quick points about how the CSCE model was applied.

1. During the Cold War, the 'West' considered (and insisted on) human mobility and the right to leave one's country as 'human rights'. Throughout the Cold War years, the two 'rights' were utilised as a way of contesting the legitimacy and/or efficiency of Eastern Bloc regimes. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, on the other hand, denied that very right. People-to-people diplomacy and cultural exchanges were designed to keep southern people in the south. Whereas CSCE sought to work with people in the attempt to influence governmental behavior,

the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership emphasised cooperation with governments to influence people's migratory behavior. There is no mistaking the differences in the philosophical outlook of the two efforts.

2. CSCE rested on the assumption that peoples could work together only if the obstacles put on by the governments could be overcome. A similar pattern did not emerge in north-south interactions in the Mediterranean in that in EU actors' interactions with their southern counterparts, the very identity and value system of the 'south' emerged as a major part of the problem. It is not only the southern governments (as was the case with the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War) but also the southern peoples (or their 'Muslimhood') were viewed as contributing to the tension between the two shores of the Mediterranean. In the CSCE framework, when 'Western' citizens looked to their 'Eastern' counterparts, they saw potential partners. Now, the northerners when they looked to the south, saw people who were impossible to co-exist with and therefore must be kept where they were. When southerners looked to the north, in turn, they saw former colonial actors who speak about the virtues of 'European values' while failing to uphold them when the referent of security happens to be located in the south of the Mediterranean, and not the north.

My point being that if the CSCE model designed to seek security in 'Europe' did not work in the context of the Mediterranean, this had to do not only with southern lack of willingness in democratisation but also northern indecisiveness regarding the best way to address the problem of persistent insecurities in the Mediterranean (Bilgin 2008).

The 2000s

EU's ambivalence vis-à-vis the Mediterranean crystallised in the mid-2000s, when EU policy-makers dropped the CSCE model of common security. EMP's replacement was called the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and was launched in a political context characterised by the shortcomings of the EMP, a heightened sense of insecurity in the EU in relation to immigration within the context of the 'global war on terror', and the global ambitions of the Union. The ENP became the new framework for addressing these issues. This process of transition from more multilateral EMP to the bilateral ENP was also marked by a transformation in EU security policy-making referred to as 'externalisation', 'outsourcing', 'subcontracting' or 'remote control'.

Externalisation of EU security involved pursuing European internal security through policies that are realised in the EU's immediate neighbourhood. While externalisation of EU security did not begin with the ENP, it reached new heights with the demise of mul-

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tilateralism vis-à-vis the Mediterranean. As noted above, through the EMP, the EU had sought to utilise the instruments of the CSCE model such as Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) and Partnership Building Measures (PBMs). The notion of security behind the EMP was comprehensive and common. While the EMP was not about securing the Mediterranean per se, but creating security in the Mediterranean region for the purposes of the EU, a comprehensive security approach characterised EU rhetoric and, to a certain extent, action.

The ENP differed from the EMP in terms of security thinking, rhetoric and action. Through the ENP, the EU no longer sought to export the CSCE model to the Mediterranean (or other neighbouring countries). The focus on multilateral CBMs and PBMs disappeared in the ENP. The common security perspective of the EMP was put aside by adopting a security understanding that was linked to a less inclusive construction of identity. This less inclusive identity sometimes turned out to be an indicator of a dichotomy between the EU ('us'), which must be secured against particular threats, and the Mediterranean countries ('them'). Notwithstanding the language of 'neighbourhood', southern Mediterranean countries were viewed as producing these threats and were also allocated the duty of addressing them. Furthermore, through a variety of policies, the EU and its member states sought to address challenges externally through highly technologised and sometimes militarised means before they became internal challenges. Far from protecting the human rights of immigrants, the EU's increasing reliance on means such as border guards has resulted in immigration being stripped of its political and social character and reduced to risk analysis. That said, the more questionable practices have been adopted not through the ENP, or by FRONTEX, but through country-to-country cooperation.

Such country-to-country cooperation did not go through official EU channels and was not always explicitly discussed in EU fora. What we have as evidence is mostly non-governmental actors' testament. What we learn from their reporting is that southern regimes such Egypt, Libya and Tunisia proved only too eager to cooperate with their northern partners, which resulted in increasing insecurities for individuals and social groups. On the one hand, the level of political cooperation between the EU and southern Mediterranean countries in the area of counter-terrorism was not very intense (for example, in comparison to EU–USA cooperation). On the other hand, there was intensive bilateral 'operational' cooperation between some EU member states and some southern regimes. Indeed, non-state actors on both shores of the Mediterranean grew increasingly concerned that the southern regimes were doing the north's 'dirty work'.

What seems to have happened during the 2000s is a convergence of the security agendas of some states and regimes in the south and the north. The Directorate-General for the External Policies of the Union (2006) characterised this convergence as involving a

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'"you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" logic'. Some EU member states cooperated with regimes, such as Egypt, that engaged in the kinds of practices that the EU had been critical of in the past. In the run up to the Arab uprisings, and in spite of the European Commission's concerns, some anti-democratic practices on the part of the Egyptian government were overlooked by the EU, including the state of emergency, which was renewed in 2006 and again in 2010. Amnesty International reported that in other southern Mediterranean countries, such as Tunisia, the torture and ill-treatment of human rights defenders and the imprisonment and torture of Sahrawi activists were reported as having been overlooked (2009).

By the end of the 2000s, externalisation policies and allying with authoritarian regimes through country-to-country cooperation diminished the significance of the European good deeds from the 1990s. Writing in 2011, I raised this issue as a potential insecurity for the European Union—that EU policy-makers had eaten into the credit and good will it had garnered through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and that this could have consequences for its relations with regional peoples as well as their own diaspora citizens. Southern problems have indeed become northern problems as a culmination of a series of policy choices by policy-makers on both shores of the Mediterranean (Bilgin et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Thinking about the recent developments as 'Europe's 'refugee crisis' does not help us understand the crux of the problem at hand. Even before the Arab uprisings, insecurities in the Mediterranean had reached new heights. While the Mediterranean has been riddled with insecurities for a long time, what was different this time was that regional peoples had nowhere to turn to. Not their governments that prioritised regime security. Not the EU which had promised so much by seeking to practice common security with the Mediterranean but during the 2000s turned toward seeking security against the Mediterranean. Not the United States following the revelations of Abu Gharib and continuing utilisation of drone attacks in Afghanistan and beyond.

Finally, the influx of refugees into 'Europe' in the past year is often portrayed as one of 'them' wanting to come 'here' because of better life opportunities. This is only part of the picture. Another part is that if life has become unbearable in their own countries, this is also because of persistent insecurities in the making, of which actors on both shores of the Mediterranean have played a role. No matter how successful the CSCE model may have proven in helping to secure 'Europe' during the Cold War, seeking its transfer to the 'Mediterranean' context has failed. I have suggested that this is not be-

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cause the model is not fit for a different geography occupied by a different 'culture', but because the model was not 'applied' fully in the Mediterranean context (Bilgin 2013).

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