

MIGRATIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: OLD AND NEW CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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1. Introduction

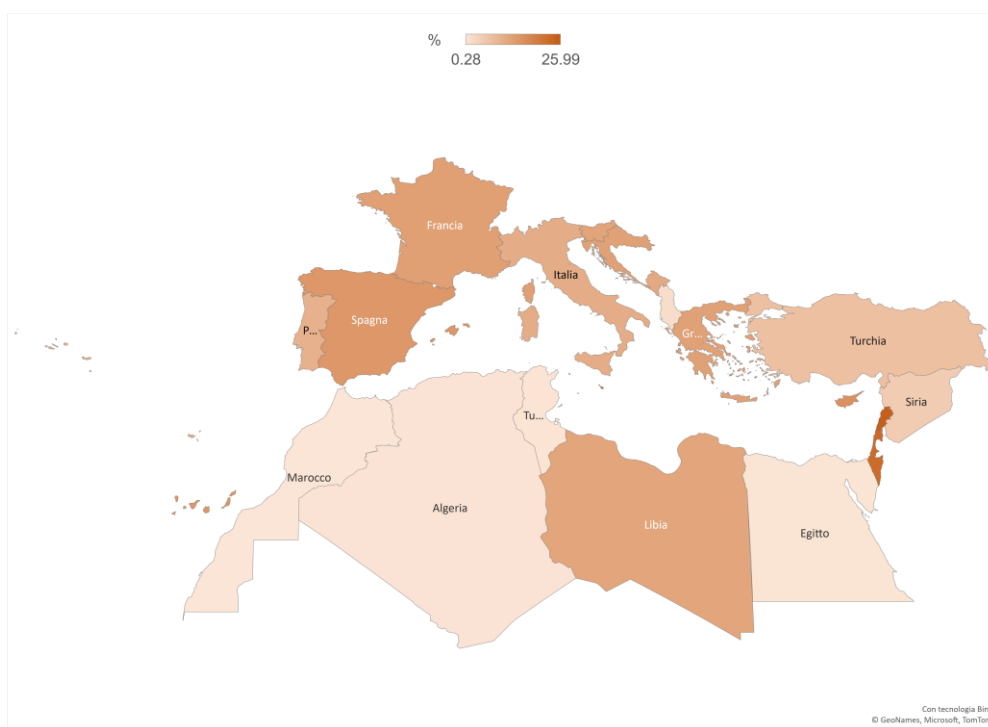
The Mediterranean region represents the largest migration area in the world together with the border between the US and Mexico. According to the UN in 2020 around 523 million of people lived in the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. In 2019 the number of immigrants resident in the Mediterranean countries was 37.9 million while 40 million people emigrated from these countries. Migration flows within the region are quite relevant: nearly 15.8 million emigrants moved from their home country to another country bordering the Mediterranean Sea (Map 1).

From the demographic point of view the Mediterranean countries are at different stages of the process of demographic transition: while the countries of the northern shore have ended their demographic transition, most countries of the southern and eastern shores are still in the third stage of the transition. That stage is characterized by a sustained population's growth because of the delay of the decline of birth rates, which occurs after a certain time of the decline of mortality rates. As a result of this process, the two regions have a different population age structure: while in countries of the North of Mediterranean, where population ageing is already evident, the median age is over 40 years (except Albania and Montenegro), in the Southern and Eastern shores, the age structure is much younger, and the median age is less than 30 years. These results, in the so-called youth bulge, show a positive situation from the demographic point of view, as the number of working age population is particularly high, thus it has great potential from the economic point of view: according to the demographic dividend theorists, it may cause rapid economic growth due to higher level of education and labour market participation (Bloom *et al.*, 2017). However, the benefits of the demographic dividend are yet to come for this region. Indeed, even if the young population is more educated and qualified compared to the generations of their parents, they have few economic opportunities resulting in a labour supply higher than the demand, and high unemployment rates. Inflation rates are high, feeding rising inequalities. As a consequence of their broken dreams and aspirations, the young generations belonging to the youth bulge, were at the hearth of the so-called

Arab Spring, at the beginning of the second decade of the 2000's (Martín and Bardak, 2011). Political and economic problems affecting the Arab Mediterranean countries act as a major driver of migration to European and Middle Eastern countries (Etling *et al.*, 2020).

Historically, the Mediterranean basin has been characterized by the movement of people within the region. The focus of this paper will be the period after World War II till today (1948-2022). This period has been characterized by several changes in the migration system in the Mediterranean: the main reasons behind those changes are due to economic and political factors (de Haas, 2011: S60). Through a chronological approach, in the following sections we will identify and describe five periods providing a synthesis of the evolution of migration in the Mediterranean region during this period, highlighting the new and old challenges and opportunities.

Map 1 – Stock of international migrants in the Mediterranean countries in 2020 (% of the total population).



Source: UN.

2. Migrations in the Mediterranean: from 1948 till the mid of the Nineties

During the first period (1948-1963) the countries of North and Western Europe proceed to the post-war reconstruction. Shortage of labour force in these countries is compensated by emigration from Southern European countries. In the early 1960s, there were 7.6 million of resident migrants in Western Europe while population movements in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries were mostly internal.

During the following decade (1963-1973) there was a decline of migration from Southern European and an increase in migration from Southern and Eastern Mediterranean to Western European countries, particularly France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium and Austria. France and Germany were the main receiving countries in Europe during this phase: migration to France, due to the colonial past, were characterized by a strong presence of migrants from the Maghreb while in Germany there was a strong increase in the presence of Turkish migrants, who replaced migrants from southern European countries, particularly Italy.

The beginning of the 1970s are characterized by the 1973 energy crisis which marks a break in international migration trends in the Mediterranean and the opening of the third period (1973-1995). In Europe, the traditional receiving countries of migration are affected by the economic crisis and are no longer able (or do not have the political will) to receive foreign workers. They adopt restrictive entry policies hoping that migrants will return *en masse* to their countries of origin. This policy reversal results in a change in the nature and destination of migration flows. Migration to this region continues, however in different forms than in the past. From the 1980s onwards the flow of refugees and asylum seekers to Europe increases significantly. Family migration becomes very important because it allows to circumvent the restrictive entry regulations. A second major change of this period is the reversal of flows from the countries of southern Europe. Those countries for a long time were exporters of labour to other European countries and to America and Oceania. During this period, they became host countries for migratory flows from the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, from sub-Saharan Africa, from Latin America and, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, from Eastern Europe. A third change occurred during this period is the emergence, due to strong economic growth, of the Persian Gulf countries together with Libya as a major of attraction for international migration, particularly for migrants from South-East Asia and the Arab countries. Last but not least since the 1970s, Egypt has become one of the main suppliers of labour in the region because of the opening to emigration decided by Anwar Sadat and the strong demographic growth.

The end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s were characterized by major political changes: the fall of the Iron Curtain and the first Gulf War generated new migratory flows while in part weakening the existing ones.

During this period two countries of Southern Europe, Italy and Spain, have become the preferred destination countries for the Maghreb countries.

The year 1985 with the signature of the Schengen Agreements by the member countries of the European Union marked an important breakthrough in migration in the region: a zone of free movement was established within Europe (the effective implementation of the agreements only began in 1995). The internal borders of the Union no longer exist (except for the United Kingdom and Ireland): the internal space of the EU thus became a migratory system that includes 26 countries (including non-EU European countries: Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein). While an EU without borders became a reality, paradoxically the EU's external borders are increasingly controlled and inaccessible to all those subject to the new Schengen visa regime, particularly the countries of the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean (Wihtol de Wenden, 2019). As a direct consequence of the entry restrictions from this period onwards important flows of irregular migration followed by massive regularizations develop.

Additionally, there is an increase of high skilled migration, characterized not only by the mobility of highly skilled workers but also by the increasing mobility of students.

3. Migration in the Mediterranean: the first two decades of the XXI century

A new phase of migration in the Mediterranean region characterizes the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s (1996-2010): this period opened up a new migratory sequence, strongly influenced by a positive economic situation. In the Northern shore of the Mediterranean, Spain and Italy maintain their role of poles of attraction of unskilled workers, especially from the Southern shore, employed in agriculture, family services, food services, small retail trade and construction. Since the 1990s these countries have been the major pole of attraction of migration, particularly for the Northern Africa countries. The traditional European receiving countries continue to welcome family migration and highly qualified migrants.

The countries on the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean are also experiencing important changes of migratory trends: part of them, such as Turkey, are assuming the role of host countries for migration, while others are among the major transit countries for migration flows from sub-Saharan Africa and Asia to Europe. Migration to the Arab countries of the Gulf and to Jordan continues to be very relevant, especially for Egypt and the Palestinian territories.

The global economic downturn of 2008 was very different in terms of its impact on migration compared to the 1973 crisis: the decline in migration flows was rather small, affecting mainly labour migration. In particular to Southern European countries, especially Spain.

A major disruptive factors of migration flow in this period are the political changes in the countries on the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean: the season of institutional transition, known as the “Arab Spring”, began in 2010, has radically changed the institutional landscape of the area. It has triggered non-linear and on-going regime-change processes and structured the essence of the so called “refugee crisis”. The main drivers of the crisis were the war in Afghanistan in Syria and Iraq, as well as continuing violence and instability in Eritrea.

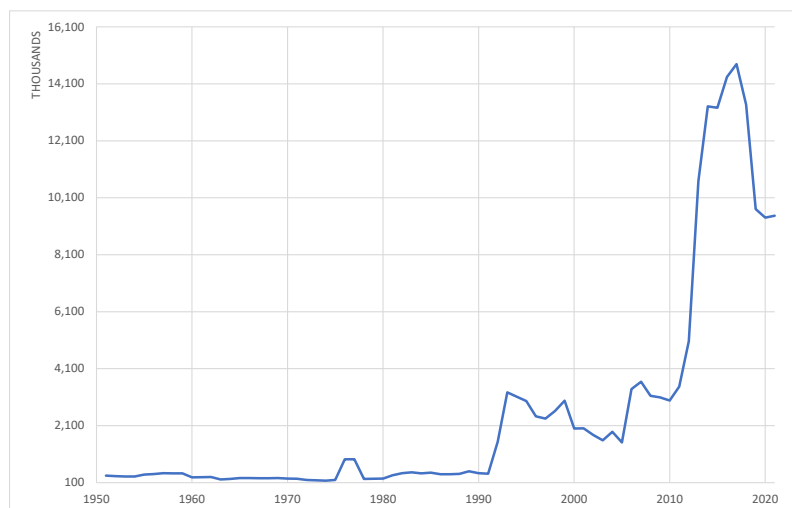
The new political setting of the region marks the start of the ongoing new era of migration (2011-present). In 2010-2011 thousand of Tunisians (60,000) and Libyans (26,000) escaped to Europe fleeing their home countries facing a period of political instability. The Italian Island of Lampedusa become the main entry channel to Europe. The so-called “refugee’s crisis” has shaken the entire region. Between 2011 and 2014, the significant reduction of the state’s control on the socio-economic settings of most of North African countries has acutely affected regional and international migratory flows’ dynamics, nourishing the growing relevance of the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) that is the itinerary referred to irregular migration coming from Northern Africa towards Italy and Malta across the Mediterranean Sea. In the first stage of the new period, Italy and Malta in the CMR have been at the front line for rescuing and welcoming refugees.

In 2014, at the end of Operation Mare Nostrum (OMN), a year-long naval and air search-and-rescue operation initiated by the Italian government in October 2013, the CMR lost its predominance for irregular-migration and asylum-seeker flows. In 2015, the main portal of entry to Europe became Greece. Migrants entered Europe mainly via the Eastern Mediterranean route (EMR), the route heading from Turkey through Greece and the Western Balkans, either by land via Macedonia and Serbia or across the Aegean Sea (UNHCR, 2016).

The 2015 flow of migration into Europe (going far beyond EU countries bordering the Mediterranean) was unprecedented, producing a massive humanitarian crisis and posing the European governments in a political and moral impasse. The International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix flow-monitoring system counted the record figure of 1,005,504 irregular arrivals across the Mediterranean in 2015, including migrants journeying by land or sea to Greece, Bulgaria, Spain, Italy, Malta or Cyprus. This figure is enormous especially when compared with 280,000 arrivals by land or sea for the whole of 2014. refugee flows, which had been declining since 2005, have increased from 2011 onwards: the European countries most affected by this new wave of

refugees have been Germany, Sweden, Italy and France. According to UNHCR data the main countries of origin of asylum seekers in 2019 were Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Serbia, Kosovo and Eritrea. Unfortunately, migrants are most often taking unsafe journeys to Europe: according to UNHCR estimates, more than 22,000 people died in the Mediterranean Sea between 2014 and 2021 in the attempt to reach Europe (UNHCR, 2022).

However, despite the large attention received by the new and unprecedented situation faced by European countries, in reality the countries on the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean were the most affected by the crisis. Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Egypt have received the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers from neighbouring countries. These countries, which in the past were among the most important receiving countries of refugees from Palestine, Iraq and Sudan, are now receiving Syrians, Palestinians and Somalis. Overall, over the last 10 years in the Mediterranean region, there was a steady increase in the total stock of refugees and asylum seekers: in 2010 they were around 3 million, while in 2017 they reached the record figure of 14,8 million (figure 1). As already stressed, the top receiving countries are those of the Southern and Eastern shore of the region: most of the refugees and asylum seekers are internally displaced in Syria (7 million) or hosted in Lebanon (over 1 million), Turkey (almost 4 million), Egypt (almost 300 thousand) and Libya (around 375 thousand). Contrary to the common perception, only a minor part of them succeeded in reaching the richer countries of the Northern shore of the Mediterranean: France (400 thousand) and Italy (354 thousand) being the major hosting country. The top sending countries of refugees are mainly Syria, Iraq, the horn of Africa (through Libya), Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Albania. With the current crisis, Ukraine should be also added to the list of top sending countries at least for Northern Mediterranean receiving countries.

Figure 1 – Stock of refugees in the Mediterranean countries 1950-2017.

Source: UNHCR.

3.1 The emerging phenomenon of irregular migration

Among the characteristics of the "Southern European model of migration" (King, 2000) there is the presence of a large undocumented component. Irregular migration is a phenomenon largely widespread and debated in the Mediterranean region. Given the growing interest of the media and public opinion by this type of migration, accompanied by the use of *imaginary* figures, the European Commission has funded between 2007 and 2009 the Clandestino project. The project was aimed to harmonize data sources and methodology used to study irregular migration, to build a database on undocumented migration and to guide policies on that topic in Europe.

The European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union better known by its acronym Frontex, was created in 2004 by the European Council and it is operational since October 2005. Frontex has the tasks to promote, coordinate and develop European border management. Frontex collects data on flows of irregular crossings of external borders and flows of irregular migrants' detections reported within European borders. Irregular crossing the external borders have been stable between 2009 and 2013 (around 100,000 passages). In 2014 because of the worsening of the Syrian crisis, approximately 283,000 irregular crossings were spotted by Frontex, 60% (170,000) crossed the maritime border of the CMR (Italy and Malta) (Frontex, 2015). It should be stressed that the data provided by Frontex

refer to detections of irregular border-crossing rather than the number of persons as the same person may cross the external EU border several times. Since 2015, with the worsening of the so-called “refugee’s crisis”, the European Commission and international organizations such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), put additional efforts in the data production in the Mediterranean region. Nowadays these agencies are more systematically collecting data on death at seas and on flows of individual crossing the borders. From 2015 arrivals by sea and land borders in the Northern shore of the Mediterranean are collected by UNCHR and available on their portal, broken down by country of origin, age and gender. 2015 was, as already mentioned in the previous section, a record year for irregular border crossing: more than 1 million. From 2016 there has been a continuous decrease on border crossing because of the agreements of the EU member states with Turkey and Libya.

4. Conclusions

The region's migration scenario in the future could be characterized by a strong migratory pressure, particularly by young adults from the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries to Europe. To face such challenge, an alternative for the European countries to the migration policy paradigm based on securitization and solidarity with the poor, may be to (re)open the legal channels of migration, for both humanitarian and economic migrants, in order to avoid economic and political conflicts in both the receiving and sending countries that may cause crisis-related migration movements. At the European level, the (re)opening of legal immigration channels would help receiving countries to cope with their domestic labour shortages, in particular with the segmentation of the labour market and the need to find care workers to respond to structural demographic aging. Furthermore, it would help to recognize the phenomenon of immigration as a structural and not a transitory one and, above all, to mitigate negative attitudes towards migrants, which have generally been exacerbated by a political discourse and policy actions dominated by security and emergency issues.

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SUMMARY

Aim of this paper is to provide an analysis of the main migratory flows that occurred in the Mediterranean area during the last seventy years. The analysis provides a synthesis of the main population movements in the region divided into five broad periods. In the first period (1948-1963) the countries of Northern and Western Europe hosted migrants from Southern Europe to help in the after-war reconstruction effort. In the fifth and ongoing period (2011-onward) the “Arab Spring”, has radically changed the institutional landscape of the area, triggering non-linear and ongoing regime-change processes and structuring the essence of the current refugee crisis. This new political configuration marks the beginning of the ongoing new era of migration. The periodization will allow to disentangle the main drivers behind international migrations in the area: economic, political, social and demographic factors. Those factors affect not only of the scope and the direction of flows but also of the typology of migrants.