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The Middle East Visits Europe: The Ramifications of the Refugee Crisis

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Even before it processes the next installment in Greece's euro saga, the European Union finds itself in the throes of a far-reaching humanitarian crisis, as waves of refugees and asylum seekers flock to its gates in numbers not seen since the end of World War II. The hundreds of thousands who have already arrived and the hundreds of thousands who are expected to reach the shores of Europe before the end of the year have taken EU member states, individually and collectively, by (incomprehensible) surprise and consequently, found them unprepared to deal with the influx. Was the phenomenon of "mass migrations" inevitable? What are the short and long term problems that EU societies and their institutions will face? And, what effect will the massive presence of refugees from the Middle East, especially Syria, have on the relations between EU members and Israel?

In November 1995, as part of the Barcelona Process and following the pressure exerted by the Mediterranean EU members (France, Spain, and Italy), the EU formulated an ambitious program designed to preempt the prediction, "Unless Europe visits the Middle East, the Middle East will visit Europe." This program was meant to help the southernmost nations of Europe survive structural changes and economic, social, and government reforms, thus ensuring that the EU would in the future not have to face the situation it is actually facing now. The principle that guided EU members consisted of insuring the income of the farmers in the Maghreb and the Mashriq so that they would not migrate to the cities and, from there, in the absence of employment, cross the Mediterranean to one EU member or another. The Barcelona Process, like other ambitious programs for the nations to Europe's south, failed not only because of the inability and unwillingness of the rulers of those nations to institute the required changes that might have resulted in their own ousters, but also because, alongside the ambitious program, EU members continued to maintain give-and-take relations with those regimes. In practice, EU nations thereby contributed to the outbreak of the Arab Spring, which caught them by surprise despite the fact that the writing was on the wall. The looming question was not if but when the crisis dismantling the Middle East arrangement (the Sykes-Picot agreement) would occur and form the background to the waves of refugees.

Since the start of the upheavals in the Middle East, the programs designed to stabilize the region have been very limited, and all have failed. Federica Mogherini, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, announced a reassessment of the policy scheduled to expire at the end of 2015. The recurring call (most recently by the foreign ministers of France, Italy, and Germany, in a letter sent to Mogherini) is that in order to handle the waves of refugees from the Middle East and Africa (especially from Eritrea, Somalia, and Nigeria) it is necessary to deal with “the root of the problem.” Even if correct, the probability of implementing the directive is low because of the enormous scope of the task and the resources needed, as well as the political commitment to make a multi-year effort, when the success of the effort is highly in question. A relatively easier task – though it, too, requires massive resources – is increasing the EU aid to improve the conditions of the Syrian refugees who have crossed the borders into Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Action of this kind could reduce the flow of asylum seekers into Europe.

As part of the effort to cope with the rising number of asylum seekers who want to cross the Mediterranean, and especially given the thousands of refugees who have already drowned, the EU has formulated a three-stage program designed to deal with the phenomenon of smugglers from the Libyan coast. The full implementation of the program, which depends on the willingness of EU members to provide military assistance (aerial and naval reconnaissance, intelligence, interception of smugglers on the high seas, and at the last stage, action in Libya itself), will presumably help reduce the number of refugees crossing the Mediterranean and also prevent many drownings. The full implementation of the program, especially what relates to activity in Libyan territorial waters, involves a UN Security Council resolution that has not yet been taken, due to Russian opposition. Even if the program is implemented, it is doubtful that it will be sufficient to deter refugees from continuing to try to cross the Mediterranean on their way to Europe.

The dramatic increase in the number of asylum seekers in recent months is explained by the lack of any chance of stabilization of the situation in the refugees’ countries of origin – Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Somalia – in the foreseeable future, especially in Syria, where the ongoing destruction has led to the uprooting of more than 10 million Syrians and the flight of many to neighboring countries (Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan), which are collapsing under the strain. Concomitantly, the situation in the refugee camps in Syria itself and the neighboring countries has grown worse. Some 40 percent of asylum seekers in Europe are from the Balkans (Kosovo, Albania, Serbia, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Macedonia), which are considered “safe countries.” Thus, their chances of being granted asylum in order to improve their economic situation is nil.

In addition to Sweden and Austria, the asylum seekers’ other destination is Germany. The German government has all but completely opened its doors – more than it should have,

as is evident from what is involved in the process – while the local population has shown a surprising measure of desire to help the new arrivals. Some 800,000 asylum seekers can be expected to arrive in Germany by the end of the year, and hundreds of thousands of others will probably arrive in the next few years. Central and eastern Europe, as well as Great Britain, have exhibited a far lower level of enthusiasm – to say the least – to absorb asylum seekers.

In the short term, the main effort is initial intake of the asylum seekers, but the absence of a joint policy on the issue, the lack of willingness to achieve a fair and balanced distribution of the burden (some 90 percent of asylum seekers are divided among nine of the EU's 28 members), and the lack of enforcement of agreements regulating defense of the EU's border, freedom of movement within it, and responsibility for taking in new arrivals all emphasize the absence of EU solidarity in a crisis. In an attempt to change this, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who described the acceptance of asylum seekers as the biggest challenge the EU has had to face since its inception, announced the division of 120,000 asylum seekers among EU members to ease the burden on Italy, Greece, and Hungary. He also announced the allocation of 4 billion euros in humanitarian aid for the nations bordering Syria that have already welcomed refugees. Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and the Baltic states hurried to announce their opposition to his proposals for imposed quotas. The Hungarian prime minister pointed his finger at Germany, charging that its open door policy was an invitation to more refugees, which would threaten Europe's Christianity and values. In response, Juncker complained that there isn't enough of either Europe or unity in the European Union.

The flow of refugees will not stop any time soon. Even as they overcome the difficulties in welcoming the current wave, the members of the EU will have to deal with the no less – and probably more – complex issue of the refugees' integration. In the absence of a change in their countries of origin, the refugees' temporary stay in Europe will become permanent. As German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, the overwhelming number of refugees will change Germany in the years to come. German President Joachim Gauck went further: speaking of the asylum seekers' background, he noted that it would be best if more people were to abandon the familiar notion of a homogeneous nation where most people speak German, profess Christianity as their religion, and have light skin. What is needed, he said, is a new definition of the nation as a community of differences united by shared values. His statement kicked off a debate over Germany's future identity, and one may assume that similar questions will be discussed in those countries accepting many asylum seekers.

Indeed, as a consequence of the waves of refugees, the EU is in the throes of a deep identity crisis. The lack of solidarity and willingness to share the burden is a

manifestation of the societies' deep dissimilarities stemming from cultural, political, economic, and historical differences that are difficult to weather in a crisis. The dilemma the nations will have to face as they try to formulate a pan-EU strategy will pit the interests of each EU member against basic moral principles. Other than Germany, which in its response to the refugee crisis has stressed the moral aspect, most EU members have so far chosen to react on the basis of their particular national interests. As one observer put it, one's national shirt is closer to the body than one's European overcoat.

A European acceptance of Syrian and other Middle Eastern nationals who for years experienced anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic indoctrination will also affect the refugees' ability and willingness to adopt the historical lessons and sociopolitical meanings of World War II already internalized by European societies. Will the new Europeans feel the same moral, historical commitment? Current experience with the positions of EU's Muslim residents toward Jews and Israel does not bode well for this outcome.

