How the Escalation of Conflict Has Changed Migration: Four Things We Learned

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The last annual report from the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, was titled *World at War*. It paints a vivid picture of widespread geopolitical chaos, and of the disorderly migration flows which result. But it is also misleading. The world is not at war, at least not in any conventional sense. Rather, globalization is becoming contested (resulting in some vicious conflicts, and much else besides). Headlines such as 'world at war' paint migration as a sign of disorder and a loss of control. But it is important to look for the order behind the disorder. The contention in this chapter is simple: just like globalization followed a set pattern, so too will the current process of 'counter-globalization.' People and states are using migration to challenge order and create new systems of cooperation.[1]

The logic behind the current migration patterns becomes more obvious when compared to the period of relative stability which preceded it. Between 1991 and 2011, migration to the EU followed certain recognizable patterns (patterns which pertained not just to the heavily-regulated movement of migrant workers, but also irregular migration from conflict zones). Back then, analysts invented a whole language to describe the mechanics of this migration – 'push and pull factors' and 'flows' – which echoed broader processes of economic globalization. To European eyes, these flows appeared more or less naturally, occurring as they did when European in-

fluence was in the ascendant. But now, as Western influence shrinks, the EU needs a new understanding of migration.

Globalization was supposed to give people a reason to stay at home. The West's old strategic gamble, which has shaped its trade, aid and border policies, was that it could bring stability and prosperity to the rest of the world, so the rest of the world would not move in search of these things. This involved a delicate combination of global cross-border economic flows and classic state-building. The result today is widespread state failure, unemployment, resource-shortage and over-consumption – and vast numbers of people on the move. The global infrastructure, which carries goods, capital and people across borders, is becoming an object of geopolitical rivalry. And migration risks becoming 'weaponized' by powers competing to rewrite the international order.

Migration across the Med: a Picture of Chaos?

At first sight, the recent migration flows to the EU have seemed logical enough: as the conflicts in the MENA region have intensified, so too has the volume of irregular migration. And as the conflicts migrated northwards in the direction of the EU (like in Syria), so too have ever greater numbers of people. And yet, the EU has frequently been wrong-footed. In 2015, for instance, Syrian refugees abruptly abandoned routes to the EU across the Central Mediterranean, in favour of the Eastern Mediterranean and Turkey. Analysts had long predicted this

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[1] This chapter draws on insights from: Roderick PARKES, "People on the Move: the New Global (Dis)order," *Chaillot Paper 138*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, June 2016.

shift (since the Arab Spring in 2011, to be precise, when the EU pressed Tunisia to plug a gap in its border controls). But when the shift finally came, its timing and scale were unexpected.

The surprises continue. Now, at the time of writing, many analysts predict that the closure of the Aegean refugee route will simply redirect Syrian refugees back towards Libya and the Central Mediterranean route. In reality, the Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis who dominate the Eastern Mediterranean route are just a trace element of around 1% in the Central Mediterranean. The Central Mediterranean route is instead dominated by Somalis, Ivorians, Guineans, Moroccans and Egyptians (pretending to be Syrian). These East and West Africans had been prevented from accessing the Eastern route thanks to migration controls across Sinai. It seems that people smugglers across the MENA region have tailored their services to suit, leading to greater differentiation between the two routes.

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Unexpected changes are occurring on a smaller scale, too, in the volumes, makeup and routes of migration to the EU. In October 2015, the migrants arriving to the Greek island of Lesbos were predominantly male and just one in nine were children, but by February these were female-dominated and 1/3 children. The migrants had been steadily targeting the south of the island for months, but they suddenly shifted overnight (literally overnight, on 4 December) to target the north. In April 2016, the migrants crossing the Aegean suddenly began scuppering their own vessels, hoping for rescue by authorities. Here it seems that migrants were using social media to adapt to, or more usually pre-empting, official policy decisions which would affect their onward passage.

Finally, some migration flows have turned out to be 'phantom,' and have not materialized at all. At least 400,000 Libyans have been displaced by fighting since the middle of 2014, according to the 'Displacement Tracking Matrix,' Despite assumptions to the contrary, few have come to the EU. And, despite the common perception that Syrians have been coming to the EU via camps in Lebanon or Jordan, a poll by UNHCR showed that nearly half of the Syrians who arrived in Greece in January 2016 had come direct from Syria via Turkey. Syrians previously living in Lebanon made up a fractional 2% of arrivals and Syrians already living in Jordan a further 2%. The 'mass flows' to the EU from Lebanon and Jordan are largely phantom: people there are not moving on.

Four Lessons

These migration patterns appear chaotic and surprising, but there is a logic to them. European analysts will find it difficult, and perhaps rather controversial, to try to draw out this logic: how to distil these very raw and incredibly human events into something more abstract? When analysts draw out abstract migration patterns, there is also a risk of them replicating precisely the kind of technocratic and Western-centric thinking which lies at the heart of Europe's long mismanagement of the issue. Nevertheless, Europe's policymakers inevitably have to think in more abstract terms if they are to provide strategic clarity to their migration policies. Policymakers looking to understand the timing, volume and routes of migration from conflict zones, can draw four lessons:

1. 'Push' and 'Pull' Factors Are Only Part of the Story

For the last 25 years, the world was said to be integrating politically and economically around a Western model, albeit at different speeds. When the disparity between the West and the Rest grew too large, migrants would be pushed out of home by unemployment or state failure, and pulled by the political stability and job opportunities in the developed West. Western governments could readily modulate these 'push' and 'pull' forces. They could

spread liberal governance standards abroad, or reduce their own attractiveness through welfare and labour market restrictions. Today, most commentators still explain irregular migration to the EU in terms of a basic 'push' and 'pull.' But the migration flows themselves no longer fit that simple model. When predicting the timing and routes of irregular migration, the most important factors are the *intervening* variables – those forces which affect people between the original 'push' at home and the 'pull' of Europe. This is about migrants' 'choice architecture' – the way refugees negotiate the various options open to them each step of the way to Europe: whether, say, the families of the 500,000 Syrian children who have yet to find a school place in Turkey will try to move on to the EU. This new focus reflects a growing awareness that mobile people share certain individual qualities such as resilience, adaptability and professional training – and that the situation awaiting them in neighbouring states has become hostile and unpredictable.

It means we can no longer talk about migration *flows*. Much more, there is a stop-start pattern or series of smaller flows. Take the case of the delay between the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011, and the eventual materialization of mass migration into the EU. Despite predictions, people did not immediately flee the chaos in the MENA region for the EU. Rather, many North Africans already in the EU returned home again, hoping for a better future. These return flows probably had a destabilizing effect on the region. Even more disruptive was the way local migrants left Libya and Egypt for Sub-Saharan Africa, often leaving possessions behind. This disrupted remittance networks and fuelled demand for smuggling. These complex patterns created the recent pressure to migrate.

It is also worth mentioning that the 'push' and 'pull' of migration are also becoming more complicated, even when they appear basic and self-evident. Of the Syrians surveyed upon arrival in Greece in January 2016, an overwhelming 94% gave 'conflict' as the 'push' for leaving Syria (with just 1% reporting economic reasons). But in reality, 'conflict' covers a range of drivers related to a souring of development. Inflation has surged in Syria, with the cost of 1kg of flour in Aleppo rising from 100 SYP in December 2015, to 350 SYP three months later. By February 2016, one in four schools in Syria had been damaged in the fighting. A lack of electricity is cited as the third major cause of flight behind the immediate threat of violence and joblessness.

2. States Are Ready to 'Weaponize' Migration

One of the major 'intervening variables' affecting migrants' stop-start patterns has been transit states themselves. Once upon a time, EU policymakers looked at the spaces in between a conflict zone and a wealthy Western economy as nothing but dead space. These were transit spaces which migrants crossed to escape a 'push' and respond to a 'pull.' No longer. If flows from Syria have changed direction or stopped and started again, then it is often because of the actions of rival geopolitical players – such as Russia. Moscow stands accused of forcing people to flee Syria, and pushing migrants on towards Nordic states, perhaps in a bid to undermine these countries' political cohesion, perhaps to exacerbate fault lines between different Western clubs like the EU and NATO.

Iran too is said to be instrumentalizing migration to the EU in a concerted manner. Many of the Afghan refugees coming to the EU in 2015 began their journey not in Afghanistan but in Iran where they had fled to decades earlier. There has been speculation in Brussels that Iran was nudging out these refugees in a bid to increase its influence over rival Turkey and signal its readiness to drop its reputation for soft power, as well as reminding Western governments that it bears the burden for their previous interventions in the region. Incidentally, such behaviour marks a complete reversal of the old hope of globalization: as Iran becomes wealthier and better integrated into the global economy, it is actually becoming less cooperative on migration matters and more assertive.

That said, much of the evidence of this kind of 'instrumentalization' is circumstantial at best. Take Turkey's case. There has been talk about how Turkey has used the flow of migrants across its northern borders in order to wring concessions from the EU. When Turkey secured the perspective of visa-free access to the EU, the flows across the Aegean dipped from a daily average of 4,400 last October to about 30, only to spike again after the German Bundestag agreed its critical 'resolution on the Armenian genocide.' Yet, Turkey itself has a strong in-

terest in controlling its borders and integrating the refugees, and when policymakers in Brussels speculate about whether Turkey will 'turn the tap back on,' they risk creating a false sense of Turkey's hold over the EU.

Perhaps more interesting is the way states use migration for purposes of internal ethnic and political engineering. Southeast Asia has had a long history of this – be it Indonesia, which has moved certain minority groups to other parts of the country in order to provide stability ('transmigration'), or Singapore, where the ruling party is accused of increasing the immigrant population to gain a permanent voter clientele. Now there is speculation not just that states like Turkey or Lebanon are doing something similar, but that so too are players like Islamic State. Most of the focus has been on how terrorist groups like IS 'weaponize' migration flows to the EU, but it is worth exploring how these entities use migration to combine their nation-building and commercial priorities.

3. Migrants Are Becoming Masters of Their Destiny

Western governments have long talked about how globalization has been 'shrinking time and space': for the past 25 years, they have rolled out transport and communications networks designed to channel capital and goods to people in less developed parts of the world. These economic flows were meant to bring the world goods, jobs and prosperity, so people did not have to move in search of them. What they did not do was carry labour migrants from the developing world to the rich Western core of the global economy. Until now, that is. Today, Western governments fret that 'time is shrinking, but space is growing': as people from the periphery give up hope of a better life at home, they are using communications technologies and infrastructures to access the core.

The heavy focus of the European media on abusive people-smuggling networks has obscured the focus on the way migrants are taking things into their own hands. Migrants have smartphones and GPS systems. They use wire transfer firms in order to pay small sums to smugglers and avoid exploitation. They coordinate on social media (the same tool, incidentally, by which Syrian rebels coordinate their military operations). Admittedly, polling from Greece

in February suggested that as many as 20% of arrivals had relied on smugglers. But a sizable 60% got their information from an ordinary tourist company, 28% from a colleague or acquaintance who had already made the trip, 23% used social media. (Incidentally, just 3% relied on official websites and EU social media.)

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Migrants are increasingly masters of their own destiny. OECD figures collated from 2000 to 2014 suggest that those who flee first and furthest are usually the best educated. Those people fleeing to the EU from recent conflicts (Syria) are highly-educated, whereas those coming from places with protracted conflict (Afghanistan) tend to be young unaccompanied minors with little education. It is also worth pointing out that the migrant-smuggling networks into Europe appear to be becoming more 'Latin American' in style, and less 'Southeast Asian': increasingly, the smuggling networks are being run cooperatively by a diaspora community within Europe and local communities in sending countries such as Afghanistan or Nigeria. Migrants control the means to cross borders.

But this mobile group are a small percentage of the overall population of vulnerable people in the MENA region. Massive 'trapped populations' are emerging. This is the term coined by the UK Government Science Office when forecasting the extent of climate-based migration. It discovered that the problem was, instead, people unable to move – people who (like the Syrian farmers displaced by drought in 2006) had sold up their possessions, headed to nearby cities and were now stuck there to face resource shortages and electricity outages. Analysis from the MENA region shows that those able to move are often single males with a

strong transferrable skill set. They leave behind not just poor families with young children, but also asset-rich individuals that have too much invested in Syria to leave.

4. Migration Flows Create Their Own Migration Dynamics

It is not just the transit states or the migrants which must be considered the variables that affect the nature of migration flows, but also the flows themselves. A large migration inflow, far from satisfying a receiving country's labour market needs, may exacerbate them, creating new demand. Take a country like Jordan. It has comparatively little demand for immigration due to its poor record at job creation and because it is one of the few countries in the region that is poor in natural resources. Indeed, it has been a labour-exporting country, relying for 10% of its GDP on remittances. Its small labour market has been swamped by 1.3 million Syrian refugees (many of whom formerly created jobs in the tourist economy). Yet these massive inflows actually create demand for new flows.

The dynamic is straightforward: Syrian refugees are finding themselves funnelled into Jordan's low-wage sector, fuelling new jobs unattractive to native workers. This is creating artificial demand for new waves of immigrant workers ready to fill low-paid positions, and Egyptian and Ethiopian migrants are, in turn, nudging out the refugees themselves. The same is the case in Lebanon: today, Lebanon must find work for a further 1-1.5 million people despite a poor job-creation record. In both Jordan and Lebanon, moreover, it is Syrian labour migrants who arrived decades ago who are now being squeezed out by the new arrivals. The more settled Syrians are being undercut by the new arrivals, and have been expelled from the country as the authorities increase their scrutiny of the labour market.

Whole refugee economies are emerging. Refugees are becoming trapped in a massive captive economy in Jordan and Lebanon. These refugees, subsidized by international food and housing aid, will work for low wages often in an agricultural sector which has been revived precisely in order to feed them. This artificial agricultural sector is, in turn, draining water and other scarce local resources from the native population. Of course, aid organizations are aware of this risk, and are moving away from emergency humanitarian and food aid programmes towards a more sustainable developmental approach. And yet, their ideas for creating Special Economic Zones to provide favourable employment conditions for refugees may also end up creating artificial refugee economies.

It is also worth mentioning that the traditional labour-receiving economies of the MENA region continue to draw in labour, and that more mobile ways of life have begun to flourish there. Take Libya. Despite the chaos and fighting there, Libya continues to provide a labour market for large numbers of West Africans involved in menial household work. Filipino health workers too have been braving the worsening conditions, ignoring calls from their government to return home. And many of Libya's more mobile ethnic groupings have managed to brave the violence and turn their traditional way of life into something of an advantage – keeping them safe, and giving them a role in smuggling networks. This, and traditionally low levels of emigration from Libya, may help explain the surprising lack of Libyan refugees in Europe.

Summary

For the past 25 years, European analysts have thought in terms of a 'push' in a conflict zone, and 'pull' in Europe, and a steady flow of people in between. This conditioned their thinking regarding policy responses. Through trade, aid and liberal state-building, the push would be reduced. By labour market and welfare restrictions the pull would be restricted. And by building up governance standards in transit states, the flows would be mitigated. This thinking reflected a broader system of Western-led economic globalization. With Western-led globalization now increasingly contested, ideas of 'push,' 'pull' and 'flow' are being consigned to history. New patterns are emerging, of which this paper has identified just four.