The growing instability and insecurity in parts of the Middle East and North Africa has increased the number of people trying to reach the European Union (EU). There are currently two main routes of entry to the EU: the “Southeastern Mediterranean Route” from Turkey to Greece, and the “Central Mediterranean Route” from Egypt and Libya and across to Italy. The journey to the EU through either passage is extremely difficult; it entails significant risks and important amounts of money in order to pay the smugglers. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 613,179 migrants and refugees have arrived in the EU by sea in 2015 (as of 14 October). However, Greece is the country that has received the most important number so far, with 472,754 maritime arrivals recorded already. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there has been an 850% increase in arrivals in Greece from January-August 2015, compared to the same period in 2014. It is important to keep in mind that these figures are changing considerably on a daily basis, as it is estimated that approximately 4,500 migrants and refugees are crossing into Greece every day.

As a result, in the last months Greece is experiencing an unprecedented refugee emergency with the number of arrivals reaching record levels. The reception infrastructure, services and registration procedures are falling far short of needs, while the congestion on the islands has further increased. Debt-stricken Greece is unable to provide even for the basic needs of the people arriving every day on its shores. In fact, it is mainly volunteers, activists, and other civil society actors that are greeting and providing help (e.g. food, water, blankets, and directions to the identification centers) to these people. Clearly overwhelmed by the sheer size of arrivals, the Greek authorities, similarly to other European ones, were not prepared for this emergency situation. As a matter of fact, this situation has evolved into an “emergency crisis” due to the absence of a national and a European response and the lack of a common comprehensive EU policy on migration and asylum.

A long & difficult journey

Most of the people arriving to Greece are refugees from deadly conflicts, such as in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, or have fled repressive governments, such as in Eritrea. The largest group arriving on the European shores is from Syria. During the period 1 January – 30 September
2015, out of about 393,000 arrivals in Greece, the most represented country of origin was Syria (277,899), followed by Afghanistan (76,620), Iraq (21,552) and Pakistan (14,323). Last year, in the same period, arrivals registered in Greece totalled 31,000 – a significantly lower figure.\(^4\)

As mentioned earlier, the journey to the EU is arduous. Fatal incidents occur almost on a daily basis, as the transition route is being done under unfavorable circumstances with the use of rickety boats and adverse weather conditions. According to IOM’s Missing Migrants Project, in 2015 (as of 16 October) 3,117 deaths have been recorded in the Mediterranean Sea, of which 278 in the Aegean Sea. However, the difficult journey does not end for the luckiest once they reach the European coasts. Then an often lengthy and degrading procedure of identification, registration, detention and/or relocation begins.

The majority of the migrants and refugees crossing to Greece have used the South-eastern Mediterranean sea route and arrive on the islands of the north-eastern Aegean Sea, particularly Lesvos, Kos, Chios, Samos and Leros. Lesvos has received the highest number of arrivals, approximately 96,000 in 2015 (as of 28 August) – almost half the total arrivals in Greece by that time. The island of Kos has received approximately 31,000, Chios 30,700, Samos 20,000 and Leros 11,000 (as of 28 August).\(^5\)

Once they have reached the Greek islands, migrants and refugees walk several kilometers or take a bus to reach a registration center. Groups of people (including children) walking on the side of the roads have now become part of the scenery on many of those islands. Until September 2015, they often had to walk up to 60 kilometers, since there were no buses provided, and car and taxi owners were afraid to transport people, as they could be charged with smuggling. Now the screening process is faster; but according to a UNHCR worker in Lesvos, it is often random and police authorities keep on changing the rules and procedures. For some people, the registration process can take only a day, but sometimes it can take over a week. Meanwhile, until they are allowed to board ferries to the port of Piraeus, migrants and refugees spend the days in “reception sites,” or on the streets and on the beaches. This congestion has created unbearable and unhygienic living conditions within the reception sites, but also in various locations around the islands.

The increasing congestion on the islands receiving migrants and refugees, together with the abhorrent conditions of reception, has often led to clashes with the police, particularly on Lesvos and Kos. The Greek authorities have deployed, after a three-month delay, special ferry services in order to reduce temporarily the number of migrants and refugees present on some islands. However, the situation remains critical as thousands continue to arrive daily, while no long-term solution is being implemented yet.

Once they arrive in Piraeus, they take trains and busses to the north of Greece and continue their long journey through the land border onwards, to FYROM, Serbia and Hungary. The Balkan transit route has become the new pathway to northern Europe, replacing the Greek-Italian sea passage.\(^6\)

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Seeking asylum in an undignified environment

The number of asylum applications received by the EU member states in 2015 has already reached the 698,055 – the last time the number of applications was almost as high (but not as high) as in 1992 after the breakup of Yugoslavia (672,025). Among the most popular asylum destinations are Germany, Hungary and Sweden. While Greece is a country of passage, it is not the chosen country for asylum. The difficult economic situation, the lengthy asylum application procedure and the lack of any meaningful benefits once the asylum in Greece has been granted discourage the new comers from applying. Nevertheless, between January and September 2015, 7,315 have applied for asylum in Greece. During the summer of 2015, a reduction in the number of applications has been observed. For example, in July 1,250 asylum applications were submitted, while in August only 1,050. Given the dramatic increase of refugees arriving in Greece, one would expect the exact opposite. According to the director of the Greek asylum services, Maria Stavropoulou, this decrease is probably due to the agony of the refugees to cross Hungary before it closes its borders. She believes, however, that if Hungary and other EU countries maintain their borders closed, there will be an increase in the number of asylum applications in Greece.

Migrants and refugees in Greece often face systematic detention. In this way, Greek authorities aim to pressure on detainees to join the programme for voluntary return, but also to limit the migration flow. However, this tactic has proven to be of limited or no success. There are no official statistics on the amount of migrants and refugees that are being detained by Greek authorities. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) estimated that in 2014, this number was more than 6,000, in addition to thousands held in various police stations around the country. Of course, given the dramatic increase in the number of arrivals this year, the number of detainees has probably also increased.

The living conditions in the registration and detention centers do not meet international standards; they are rather characterized by overcrowding, unsanitary environment, and inadequate access to food and healthcare. In other words, people in these centers are treated in an inhuman or degrading way. Mariam, a woman who came from Syria with her family and was waiting in the registration center in Kara Tepe (Lesvos), said in despair “we escaped death in Syria and we are now afraid that we will die here.”

Despite the considerable efforts of doctors, activists, and foreign aid workers, it has been impossible to fill the needs. Moreover, “the shortage of interpreters makes communication about asylum or any other subject extremely difficult.” Many migrants and refugees are angry and disappointed by international organizations and NGOs, whose work is insuffi-
cient and inefficient given the scale and urgency of the situation. One of the main reasons for this inefficiency is the extremely small number of personnel and volunteers, which is not proportional to the demand. Youssef, a Kurdish refugee from Syria, who was waiting with his family in the registration center of Kara Tepe (Lesvos), was very critical of the Greek police and international organizations. In particular, he said that “all these people wearing UN uniforms, it is as if they don’t exist; they are full of empty words.”

In addition to the registration and detention centers, several “hospitality centers” have been established around the country. These are mainly run by non-governmental and voluntary organizations or by the Greek authorities. Among the more recent ones, is the “accommodation site” in the neighborhood of Eleonas/Votanikos in Athens that was established in August 2015 and can accommodate around 700 persons. In these centers people are provided with essential services, such as food, clothes, a place to sleep and take a shower. However, due to overcrowding and a lack of personnel, often even these centers cannot meet the needs of all the migrants and refugees.

**Conclusion**

The situation of migrants and refugees arriving in Greece is indeed very difficult, mainly due to a lack in efficient reception mechanisms, infrastructure, and qualified personnel. Unfortunately, the days to come do not look gloomier for many of these people arriving on the European shores after having fled violence and repression. In the coming months it is expected that the number of migrants and refugees trying to cross the EU borders will decrease because of the winter season. However, as long as the conflict in Syria continues, it is very likely that in the spring of 2016 an even bigger migration wave will arrive at the borders of the EU, and repatriation will not be an option.

While there is a progress in the amounts of “talks,” “summits” and “plans” at EU and state levels, more and more people are desperate to find security in what has become Fortress Europe. As this article was being written, the EU leaders held an EU summit focused on the refugee crisis and agreed on an EU-Turkey Action Plan in order to deal with the situation in a more efficient and coordinated way. The core objective of this Plan is to prevent uncontrolled migratory flows from Turkey to the EU. While this recent negotiation development seems positive, and one needs to remain optimistic, it is too early to assess what real impact it will have. Often these plans, take a long time to be implemented, and even longer to be mastered, as they need to be constantly re-adjusted, especially in the beginning. Moreover, the large number of States and organizations involved in the implementation of this plan, adds to the delay and difficulty of its execution.

It remains to be seen what the results of this plan will be, and how the EU-Turkey relations will change. However, one needs to keep in mind that Turkey has a different policy on migrants and refugees than the EU. According to Human Rights Watch, while some elements of the Plan are positive, Turkey cannot be considered a safe third country. “It retains a geographical limitation of the 1951 Refugee Convention to refugees from Europe, making it impossible for Syrians, Afghans, or Iraqis to be granted refugee status in Turkey. While it has been generous in hosting Syrians under a temporary protection regime, the situation for non-Syrians is much more precarious, and even Syrians are protected as a matter of discretion rather than as a matter of law.”

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13 HRW (2015), ‘EU: Shifting Responsibility on Refugees, Asylum Seek-
The principle reason for the current emergency situation with migrants and refugees is the lack of a common EU policy on migration and asylum. Each EU member state had its own policy on this issue, or, as in the case of Greece, did not have a comprehensive migration policy at all until recently. As a result, Greece and the EU are now taking action on a reactionary manner, rather than preemptively. As long as this does not change the situation will remain the same, if not exacerbate. On the meantime, the death count in the Mediterranean Sea continues.

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