

MIGRANT CRISIS TRIGGERS FEARS OVER INCREASE OF TERRORISM THREAT IN WESTERN EUROPE

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In these recent months a record number of hundreds of thousands of migrants escaping violence and political instability across North Africa and the Middle East has entered into Europe. **This flow of refugees into European countries has prompted concerns, fomented especially by far-right parties such as Italy's Northern League, France's National Front and UK's UKIP, about the possible infiltration of Islamist terrorists, particularly Islamic State members, among the asylum seekers.**

Actually this possibility cannot be totally ruled out as a mere political exploitation. In fact in May, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that terrorists could try to blend in among the migrants. In February, the British Daily Telegraph, quoting alleged letters written by an IS propagandist using the name Abu Arhim al-Libim, reported that IS supporters at least were taking into account the possibility of using the migrant flows to infiltrate Europe and carry out attacks. This alleged terrorist based in Libya would have written, regarding the phenomenon of migrants across the Mediterranean Sea, that "if this was even partially exploited and developed strategically, pandemonium could be brought in the southern European states and it is even possible that there could be a closure of shipping lines and targeting of Crusader ships and tankers." To avoid such risk police checks and controls on the migrants have to be thorough and effective.

However there is still no evidence that IS or other Islamist terrorists would have used the recent refugee flows to reach Europe. It is also worth mentioning that many asylum seekers, especially the Syrians, are the very victims of the Islamist terrorist groups present in their countries. It should be also recalled that several terrorists who have carried out attacks in the European countries in recent years were not refugees but European citizens.

A factor that makes unlikely, even if possible, for terrorists to enter into Europe mixing among the refugee flows, is the fact that the migrant routes are not only expensive but also very dangerous. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 2,500 migrants have died or gone missing trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea since January to July this year. At the end of August, 71 bodies, including those of 4 children, were found in an abandoned refrigeration truck in Austria after the people inside it had died suffocated. It seems pretty dangerous then for a terrorist to take these routes when he could use used forged papers and stolen passports to infiltrate into a

European country. Furthermore, most of the migrants who have reached Europe have the prospects of screening from police on their arrival and even detention in refugee centers.

What makes several security analysts skeptical about the possible use of the migrants by the terrorists as a cover is that thousands of European citizens already radicalized have joined jihadists in Syria and Iraq. Other thousands of European residents are under surveillance as possible “lone wolves” who could carry out terrorist attacks. As ESISC’s CEO Claude Moniquet has emphasized in a recent interview to Reuters, **“Islamic State has no need to export fighters to Europe because it imports fighters from Europe.** There are five to six thousand Europeans who are, or have been, in Syria, and others are leaving all the time. So it's hard to see the advantage for Islamic State to export Syrians or Iraqis, people who speak Arabic, who know Iraq and Syria, and who they need over there.”

According to a report published by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, titled “Libya: a growing hub for Criminal Economies and Terrorist Financing in the Trans-Sahara”ⁱ, the Islamic State terrorist group could benefit from the refugees both as a source of increasing destabilization for the European states and as a source of income. The report highlights that “the high number of migrants along the North African coast has enabled the development of a far more lucrative coastal migrant trade, valued now at US\$ 255-323 million per year in Libya alone”. Human traffickers in Libya charge up to \$2,000 to cross the Mediterranean and there is the high risk that IS jihadists could take charge of the human traffic to collect funds. Given the money at stake, **the possibility that the Islamic State could tax or facilitate the smuggling routes has increased, especially in Libya.** Even some attacks by IS fighters on refugee camps in Western Syria, according to the report, could be part of a strategy intended to increase the flow of migrants along routes controlled by the terrorist organization.

However there is no evidence, at the moment, that Islamic State extorts money from the refugees. The terrorist group in Syria and Iraq uses, as a major source of income, extortions on local businesses, kidnappings for ransom, smuggling of oil and antiquities, and human trafficking, by selling women and children of ethnic and religious minorities as slaves, to finance its activities.

It is in the interest of this terrorist organization to present itself as a real state, better as “The Islamic State”. To see thousands of Syrian and Iraqi Muslims risking their life in order to escape from them is something unbearable for these jihadists pretending to build a “caliphate” for all real Sunni Muslims. **Thus IS terrorists have started a big propaganda campaign against the asylum seekers.**

In the latest issue, the 11th one, of their English magazine, Dabiq, published on September 9, there is an article blaming Muslim refugees fleeing Syria and Libya. **The jihadist magazine claims that these migrants commit “a dangerous major sin” by seeking shelter in the West.** “Sadly, some Syrians and Libyans are willing to risk the lives and souls of those whom they are responsible to raise upon the Shariah – their children – sacrificing many of them during the dangerous trip to the lands of the war-waging crusaders ruled by laws of atheism and indecency”.

Living in the West would mean that “they are under the constant threat of fornication, sodomy, drugs and alcohol”.

IS terrorists released last week a series of videos and statements urging Syrians fleeing the country to seek refuge in Europe to migrate instead into the IS “caliphate”. The terrorist group claimed that instead of migrating towards the land of Islam, the Muslims “who have sold their dignity and whose faith has been weakened” prefer to take refuge in the countries of “disbelief”. They said that these Muslims are “deviant” because they refuse to perform jihad, considered an obligation for every Muslim. The terrorist group also claimed that those who fled the countries of Islam and died at sea or on their way trying to reach the countries of disbelief, “will go to hell.”

The Yemeni IS branch, Wilayat Hadramaout, has published a 6-minute-long video to deliver the same message to Muslim migrants, particularly to the Syrian ones. It claimed that to migrate to the West is “a capital sin”, harshly punished by God. The group emphasized that “to settle in the land of the infidels is illicit” and encouraged to migrate into territories controlled by IS. IS Iraqi branch, Wilayat Al-Kheir, published a 21-minute-long video to say that those who migrate in Europe would follow “Satan’s voice”. It is worth mentioning that, according to British media, the terror group has put up billboards in Syria showing a picture of a life-jacket next to one of a bomb vest, accompanied by the question: “What would you rather wear on judgement day?”

In another 10-minute-long video, a French terrorist claimed that “to leave the land of disbelief is an obligation for every Muslims” and said that he has been living since a year in the “land of Islam”. The terrorist urged the refugees to go back to their countries because Europe would be for them “an illusory paradise”. He claimed that “Europe will not bring to you neither security nor freedom, you will sleep in the parks and will empty the garbage of the miscreants”. **Given the attention given to bring back the migrants in the “land of Islam”, it is possible then that the refugees, due to their double refusal to live in the territories controlled by IS and to carry out jihad, could be attacked or extorted by the jihadists who could consider them as traitors and potential apostates.**

The European border agency Frontex recorded 340,000 illegal entries into the European Union between January and July, but several other thousands entered in August. Given into account the astonishing numbers of the current migration, the presence of some criminals or even radical islamists among those migrants cannot be ruled out. However **the most compelling security threat coming from the refugee flow seems to be the risk of civil unrest in the near future in the countries which will host them.** About 110,000 migrants have reached Italy this year and German authorities said their country will receive a record number of 800,000 asylum-seekers in 2015, four times higher than the number in 2014 and more than any other nation in Europe.

The head of the German domestic intelligence agency (BfV), Hans-Georg Maassen, in a recent interview, said that German intelligence services had thoroughly investigated the possibility that Islamic State could send squads disguised as refugees to Germany. However they had found no concrete element that this actually has happened so far. Maassen pointed out another more plausible and even more worrying scenario, the fact that “Salafists act like philanthropists and helpers, deliberately seek contact with refugees and then invite them to the relevant mosques to recruit them for their

cause.” Thus **the real threat is that the Muslim refugees could be targeted in the future as potential recruits by ultra-conservative Islamists already living in Europe.**

Some refugees in the future could join radical Islam if they will experience a lack of economic opportunities, and a failure in social and cultural integration. Another factor to not underestimate is the increase in far-right violence, as it is shown by the emblematic case of Germany. From January to early July, 2015, the Federal Ministry of Interior registered 202 attacks on shelters for asylum-seekers, compared with 198 during all of 2014. To recall, the anti-Islam Pegida movement, the German acronym for Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West, organized demonstrations that attracted thousands to marches in Dresden, Leipzig and Munich. This movement has attracted not only far-right supporters but also ordinary Germans and plans to become a political party.

The surge of far-right movements could contribute to the future polarization of the European society making integration more difficult for Muslim refugees. Therefore they could become an easier target for Islamist recruiters.

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¹<http://www.globalinitiative.net/download/global-initiative/Libya%20Criminal%20Economies%20in%20the%20trans-Sahara%20-%20May%202015.pdf>