



MEDITERRANEAN MIGRANT CRISIS: IMPACT OF IRREGULAR REFUGEE DEALS

On March 15, 2019, the civil war in Syria which started after Syrian armed forces used brutal force to crack down on protesters demanding the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad entered its ninth year. The escalation of the conflict between the government and the opposition forces has turned the country into one big battlefield forcing millions of Syrians to leave their homes. Currently, 13.2 million people, or 60% of the country's pre-war population by 2011 estimates, are displaced, among them 6.6 million relocated internally to safer regions of Syria, 5.68 million seek refuge abroad, and around 1 million illegally migrated to Europe. The war in Syria has triggered one of the largest migration flows in history after WWII. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees figures, as of March 2019, the majority of the Syrians who fled abroad are seeking refuge in the neighboring countries, with Turkey taking the lead as it accepted 3,651,635 people followed by Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt with 946,291, 670,238, 253,085, 132,165 people, respectively. Although the conflict started in 2011, the migration flow numbers reached its peak in 2015 as many Syrian migrants reached the European soil through the Turkey-Greece route. The majority of arrivals occurred between 2015 and April 2016 with 856,723 people arriving in Europe. In order to curb the irregular migration flow, the European Union and Turkey engaged in numerous negotiations and finally struck a deal aimed at reducing the migration flow from Turkish shores to Greek borders and exchanging migrants under the Turkey-EU Refugee Agreement of March 19, 2016. After the initiation of the deal, the Turkish forces strengthened control over the country's shores which had an immediate impact on illegal arrivals to Greece through the Turkey-Greece route, the number of which dropped significantly.

Due to the closure of the main arterial to Europe, migrants have shifted to a more dangerous Libya-Italy destination, which is also known as the Central Mediterranean route. They need to pass through Libya, another country in a conflict which is experiencing its second civil war in a

decade. Besides the instability issues in Libya, the sea journey through the Central Mediterranean route is also more dangerous compared with the Eastern Mediterranean one. It is due to a longer distance and the usage of small inflatable boats to avoid being caught by navy patrols of the Libyan and Italian forces. Consequently, the death rates on this route are higher. For instance, in 2016, 4,578 people were recorded as dead or missing in the Central Mediterranean Sea, while this figure was 441 people for the Eastern Mediterranean route. Due to a significant drop in the number of arrivals through both parts of the Mediterranean Sea in 2018, the number of dead and missing persons has also fallen to 1,279 people for the Central part and 187 people for the Eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea.

There are a number of reasons for the reduction in the number of arrivals through the Libya-Italy route. First, bilateral cooperation between the two countries on curbing the migration flow has had a certain effect. The Italian government has approved the transfer of €220 Euro to the Libyan side in order to strengthen the Libyan coastal forces, build refugee camps and increase efforts aimed at reducing the illegal migration flow. If refugees are caught in Libyan coastal waters, they will be taken back to Libya, but if they are caught in international waters, then, according to international laws, they need to be taken to Italy. However, a major effect on decreasing the migration flow has happened when the Tripoli government has agreed with Al Dabbashi, also known as Al Ammu (the Uncle), the top smuggler in the city of Sabratha, which is one of the major locations for people smugglers in Libya. The figures right after the deal show that arrivals to Italy dropped almost six times from 22,993 in June 2017 to 3,914 in August 2017 and stabilized around 1,000 people in the following months.

Throughout the recent history of migration to Europe, refugees who attempted to illegally migrate to the European soil have been forced to change their routes to reach Europe from one direction to another. Meanwhile, their attempts have also ignited a possibility for many labor

migrants and people who are escaping from poverty to try their own chances to reach Europe by illegal ways, which is the case for the Libya-Italy route. However, the Turkey-EU and Libya-Italy deals have blocked the main destination for illegal migrants and channeled them to different directions, but have not stopped or solved the illegal migration issue.

One of the current main routes is Spain, with migrants aiming to reach Europe through Gibraltar. In 2018, 58,569 people arrived in Spain, which is 36,466 people, or 2.6 times higher, than in 2017. Another known route is using Greece as an entry point again and through the Balkan countries trying to reach the Western part of Europe. The registered figures of detentions of illegal migrants by transit countries for the January 2017-2019 period indicate that Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have the most rapid increase. The numbers of arrests grew from 225 people in January 2017 to 731 people in January 2019 for Croatia, while for Bosnia and Herzegovina these figures are 237 and 711 people, respectively. In addition, these figures in Serbia, Slovenia, North Macedonia and Montenegro have also been on the rise over the years.

Taking into consideration that the bulk of the illegal migration flow is occurring through the Central Mediterranean Sea, the main docking destination of Syrian refugees is Italy, which closed its ports to the NGOs' humanitarian rescue ships. For instance, the Italian authorities refused to accept the Aquarius ship that carried 629 migrants in its ports. This event created another problem as it showed that there was a need for a systematic approach to accepting illegal migrants arriving in the ports of the European Union member countries. Nevertheless, in June 2018, Spain welcomed this ship in its port of Valencia. However, due to the shift in the migration flow from Italy to Spain, the attitude of the Spanish government to similar incidents has changed. It could be said that the rapid increase in arrivals to Spain through the Gibraltar route and the results of the May 2019 elections will have an influence on the decisions of the Spanish government.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- President Nursultan Nazarbayev announced his resignation in an appeal to the people of Kazakhstan broadcasted on national TV channels. He remains the chairman of the Security Council of Kazakhstan. In accordance with the constitution, Senate Chairman Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev took the oath of office as Kazakhstan's acting president. At his suggestion, the country's capital Astana was renamed Nur-Sultan in honor of President Nazarbayev.
- The U.S. State Department issued a statement saying that the United States deeply values the contributions of Kazakhstan's first president in "establishing and promoting enduring, dynamic relations" between the two countries. Acknowledging Nazarbayev's role in the formation of present-day Kazakhstan and his leadership in global affairs, Washington expressed readiness to work with President Tokayev for deepening U.S.-Kazakh enhanced strategic partnership.
- Following the terror attacks against two mosques in New Zealand's city of Christchurch that left 50 worshippers dead, Turkey convened an emergency ministerial meeting of the executive committee of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Istanbul. At the meeting, Muslim nations condemned the resurgence of racism and xenophobia around the world and called for tough international action to combat Islamophobia.
- During his state visit to Turkmenistan, King of Bahrain Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa met with President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. Following the talks, the parties signed a number of bilateral intergovernmental documents on cooperation in the fields of transport, e-government, culture, education, tourism and sports, as well as between the central banks of the two countries.
- The CSTO Permanent Council held its meeting in Moscow. The parties reviewed and agreed upon the draft plan of collective action by the CSTO member states on the implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy for 2019-2021, as well as the regulations for informational interaction of the CSTO Crisis Response Center.
- The military personnel of Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan participated in a joint command-staff training exercise held in Yekaterinburg. Under the scenario aimed at resolving a hypothetical crisis situation in the Central Asian region, the exercise participants gained practical experience in joint planning and use of military units in the fight against terrorist groups.
- The joint command of the Belarus-Russia regional force grouping held a staff exercise aimed at strengthening military security of the Union State of the two countries. To improve interoperability, the exercise involved both staff officers and operational teams of the Air Force, Air Defense, special operations and territorial defense units, and representatives of Belarusian central government agencies.

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- During his visit to Tajikistan, First Deputy Prime Minister of Russia Anton Siluanov met with President Emomali Rahmon. The parties discussed the implementation of bilateral agreements aimed at expanding mutual economic relations, underlining the role of the intergovernmental commission for trade and economic cooperation. In particular, Rahmon proposed to simplify the mechanism of delivery of Tajik goods to the Russian market.
- The 8th meeting of the Kazakhstan-Korea Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation was held in Seoul. The parties discussed the development of bilateral cooperation in such areas as industry, energy, subsoil use, transport, construction, agriculture, information and communication technologies, science, health, and education, and confirmed their mutual interest in expanding economic and investment ties.
- According to the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations of Uzbekistan, South Korea increased the employment quota for Uzbek citizens to 3,200 people for 2019 from 3,100 for 2018. Uzbekistan is a member of the Employment Permit System that exists in South Korea, which grants equal rights to foreign workers on a par with local workers.
- During the 13th meeting of the OPEC+ Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee held in Baku, the participants discussed the current state and existing problems of the oil market, as well as the next steps needed to stabilize oil prices. Iraq, Kazakhstan, Nigeria and the United Arab Emirates were accepted as new members of the committee.
- BP and Azerbaijan's state oil company SOCAR are holding consultations and considering proposals on the possibility of geological exploration at two investment blocks in the Aral Sea's water area in Uzbekistan. In May 2018, Uzbekneftegaz, BP and SOCAR signed two memorandums of understanding to explore the possibility of conducting joint exploration and development of Uzbek oil and gas fields.
- Two Turkish companies, Yildirim Enerji Holding and Cengiz Enerji Sanayii ve Ticaret, will build two combined-cycle thermal power plants operating on natural gas in Uzbekistan. The first plant with a capacity of 900 MW will be constructed in the Surkhandarya region, and the second plant with a capacity of 240 MW will be built in the Bukhara region.
- According to the International Monetary Fund, the growth of Kyrgyzstan's economy in 2019 will be at the level of 3.8%, exceeding the 3.5% growth registered in 2018. At the same time, inflation is expected to reach 2.2% and the fiscal deficit will increase to 3.4% of GDP, which is higher than 1.5% of inflation and 1.3% of the fiscal deficit recorded in 2018.

Society and Culture

- The scientific council of the International Turkic Academy (TWESCO) held its regular meeting in Bishkek. The council members reviewed the activities of TWESCO in 2018 and its plans for 2019, approved the list of important dates of the Turkic World in 2019, and discussed issues of cooperation in the field of education and science.
- The Ministry of Higher and Secondary Special Education of Uzbekistan and Elsevier signed a strategic agreement on creating a platform of peer-reviewed scientific journals of the country's universities. Under the project, Elsevier will create a unique platform, using a double-blind peer review configuration, which is expected to improve the quality of Uzbek research journals and form a digital archive of Uzbek science.
- The first stage of the Second Central Asian Research Forum on Sustainable Development and Innovation was held at the UK's Loughborough University. During the forum organized by the Kazakhstan PhD Association in the UK, young Kazakh scholars presented their scientific projects aimed at helping to achieve the sustainable development goals in the Central Asian region.
- Women's organizations of Kazakhstan set up an association called the ARUANA Women's Kurultai. The entity, consisting of heads of these NGOs, will help solve vital problems of women, families and children by compiling the list of their pressing issues, analyzing national programs aimed at their settlement and elaborating common mechanisms for their implementation, as well as by opening counseling centers.
- The Turkish company Kanimed Alles Sag'lik Cozumleri plans to create a modern hemodialysis center and a diagnostic laboratory in the Uchkurgan district of Uzbekistan's Namangan region. The same company is already working to establish a laboratory and diagnostic center in the city of Termez of the Surkhandarya region.
- According to the Russian Ministry of Health, mortality from tuberculosis in the country has decreased by 67.6% over the past 10 years, from 17.9 cases per 100,000 people in 2008 to 5.8 per 100,000 in 2018. The average annual rate of the decrease was 15%, but the incidence and mortality rates in Russia still remain higher than in Europe and the United States.
- To mark the Nowruz holiday, the leaders of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan Ilham Aliyev and Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov announced amnesties. In Azerbaijan, 399 people were released from serving the remainder of their prison terms, while the sentences of 32 people were mitigated. In Turkmenistan, 2,028 prisoners were pardoned, and local administrations were charged with taking care of their future employment.