

Middle East wars drive refugee flows, Mediterranean migrant deaths

By Robert Stevens
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Rescuers have ended their search for the bodies of the migrants who died in the October 3 Lampedusa boat sinking. Only 155 of the 545 people, including Eritrean, Somalis, and Syrians aboard the vessel which sank in the Mediterranean survived the tragedy. Just 359 bodies have been recovered.

These deaths were followed by another boat sinking in Maltese waters, south of the island of Lampedusa, on October 11. Of the more than 200 Syrians and Palestinian men, women and children on board, at least 34 died. The boat was apparently fired upon by a military vessel carrying a Libyan flag.

Speaking to “Channel 4 News”, a survivor said, “They followed us for an hour. Then they asked the captain to stop and then started to shoot in the air. They were trying to turn the boat upside down. Then they started to shoot at the boat. They shot at the engine. They managed to hit four people as well.”

The United Nations refugee agency’s Maurizio Molina said, “Because of the hole caused by the shooting... the water started entering into the boat, causing a lot of tension among the Syrians that were on board. At a certain point the ones that were (below), around 100 people, were obliged to go upstairs, creating this unbalancing and then at the end finally causing the capsizing.”

At least 500 more migrants had to be rescued Saturday in separate incidents near the Italian island of Sicily. In another incident, on Friday, 12 migrants drowned in a shipwreck off Alexandria’s coast. Egyptian state media reported that 116 survived the sinking.

The toll of deaths in the Mediterranean since October 3 will be added to the staggering figure of 25,000 who have died trying to enter “Fortress Europe” in the last two decades.

By the beginning of October, some 30,000 people had attempted to cross over the Mediterranean into Italy this year alone. Many are attempting to flee war and persecution in countries like Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria.

The vast majority of refugees, upwards of 95 percent, never get anywhere in Europe. Officially 1.6 million Syrians are now refugees, far beyond the one million predicted by the United Nations by the middle of 2013.

The UN’s Syria Regional Response Plan of December 2012 calculated that 515,061 Syrian refugees had arrived in surrounding Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt. The refugee crisis has escalated this year, with the UN confirming in June that an additional one million refugees had arrived in these countries.

In January 5,000 per day were fleeing Syria, and by March this had reached an average of 10,000. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees stated, “Based on arrival trends since the beginning of the year, it is estimated that the number of Syrian refugees in need of assistance across the region may reach 3.45 million by the end of 2013, hosted in camps and, for the most part, in local communities.”

According to the latest figures, a further five million people have been displaced inside Syria. All told, more than seven million Syrians have been displaced from their homes—around a third of the country’s 22 million people. That figure is expected to reach 50 percent in short order.

António Guterres, the UN’s high commissioner responsible for refugees, stated, “Syria has become the great tragedy of this century—a disgraceful humanitarian calamity with suffering and displacement unparalleled in recent history.”

What Guterres will not and cannot acknowledge is

that the tragedy befalling millions of Syrians is the result of a civil war engineered by the United States, Britain, and France with the assistance and funding of Turkey and the Gulf monarchies.

Even prior to the outbreak of the imperialist proxy war in Syria, sanctions against the country had wrought a devastating impact. In 1979 the US designated Syria a “state sponsor of terror” and began imposing numerous economic sanctions. In August 2011, the Obama administration imposed additional sanctions on Syria's energy sector and froze all Syrian government assets in the US.

Last month Britain's *Independent* noted that sanctions had hit Syria's “once excellent under-fives vaccination program and brought to a standstill the MDG [UN Millennium Development Goals] targets on maternal and infant mortality, which Syria was well on the road to meeting by 2015. They have collapsed the production of essential medicines for which the country was near to self-sufficiency. Medicines for the treatment of cancer, diabetes and heart disease not produced locally are not available except at huge cost in neighbouring countries. The cost of essential food, cooking, and heating oil has increased several-fold, putting it out of reach for the majority whilst gangster-led smuggling and profiteering thrives. All this alongside the raging horrors of a war.”

Masses of Syrians are now being held in refugee camps, denied basic freedoms and citizenship. Some 520,000 Syrians are now in Jordan, increasing its population by eight percent in two years. One camp, Zaatari, houses 130,000 people in appalling, overcrowded conditions. When it was established in July 2012, it contained just 100 families. It is now growing at a rate of 2,000 residents each day. Another camp, Azraq, is under construction and will also have the capacity to host up to 130,000 people.

Turkey only allows Syrian refugees to enter when there are spaces in refugee camps.

The Lebanese government allows Syrians entry, but only on the basis of recognising them as “visitors” not refugees. Around 1.3 million Syrians are now in Lebanon, with 780,000 registered as refugees by the UN.

Further tens of thousands remain in perilous conditions camped on the Syrian-Jordan border, waiting to cross over.

Many of the ships containing refugees seeking to enter Europe via Lampedusa are forced to begin a hazardous journey via Libyan ports. After the 2011 overthrow of the regime of Muammar Gaddafi, in another imperialist-inspired “humanitarian” civil war, Libya was hailed as a model for regime change and the “democracy” that Syrians could expect. What has emerged is a criminal regime, fractured by rival armed militias, under which thousands remain imprisoned without charges and subjected to systematic torture.

In order to clampdown on this means of entry, the European Union is working with the Libyan regime via a €30 million-a-year deal operation named Eubam Libya. Central will be the creation of a “border management strategy” to “improve the legal and institutional framework of border management.”

Last year Amnesty International reported that Italy signed an April 2012 secret agreement with the then Libyan National Transitional Council to “curtail the flow of migrants”. Commenting on the agreement, Amnesty's Nicolas Beger said, “For the EU, reinforcing Europe's borders clearly trumps saving lives.”

The 34 refugees killed on October 11 as a result of being fired on by a Libyan ship will not be the last to die as a result of EU collusion.

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