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Jungle Justice: European Migration Policy Seen from the South

Paul Rogers

Summary

The causal link between food insecurity, climate change, conflict and migration is a contested one, not least because the driving forces of economic inequality and marginalisation are so strong both within and between states. However, with the world warming, much of the Middle East in flames and millions of Africans aware in real time of the gulf between their economic aspirations and reality, the pressures of migration to the rich North are only likely to increase. Whether or not its frantic attempts to close its gates succeed in the short term, the accompanying alienation of opinion in Turkey, the Middle East and Africa can only damage Europe's standing in the longer term.

Introduction

The TV pictures of the 'Jungle' migrant camp at Calais in flames are further signs of the deep-seated problems facing Western Europe, shown also be the razor wire, water cannon and other methods being used to keep people from moving westwards from the Balkans. Most of those seeking to move to Europe from the Middle East are fleeing current war zones or trying to move from countries wrecked by recent wars, but there is an even bigger problem facing Western Europe, the desire of far more people, especially but not only from sub-Saharan Africa, for a more than half-decent life in place of economic marginalisation and poverty. This is also at a time when the effects of accelerating climate change are only just beginning to have an added impact. None of this is new, and two events from a quarter of a century ago give a prescient view of what is to come if there are not radical and rapid economic and environmental changes.

The first was a ground-breaking European TV co-production, *The March*, a full-length feature film made at the end of the 1980s and shown on the BBC and other channels in summer 1990. It was remarkably prescient but came out just as the Soviet Union was collapsing and as the 1990/91 Iraq War was beginning. Its impact was therefore largely lost and recent attempts to persuade the BBC to show it again have so far failed. The second is what actually happened in Albania in August 1991 when many thousands of young men and women were sufficiently desperate to hi-jack a merchant ship to sail to Italy.

The March

The March sought to look ahead a decade or two to a time when climate change had kicked in and there were millions of displaced people seeking to survive in the face of severe famines. A charismatic teacher, played by the Malian actor Malick Bowens, persuades people in a camp in Sudan to start to walk across North Africa to Europe, with many thousands eventually joining what becomes a mass march as it gathers pace. Sometimes they are threatened and at other times they are helped by countries they

pass through, and as the march gathers strength it is left to an Irish EU commissioner for development, played by Juliet Stephenson, to try and persuade the EU to respond.

Towards the end of the film the marchers make it as far as the Mediterranean coast of Morocco and persuade enough sympathetic boat owners to ferry them across. With the world's media watching, Stephenson thinks she has got an EU deal to allow some to land and then negotiate some longer term solution. The film ends with thousands of them landing in a luxury resort in southern Spain which has been evacuated. It is now surrounded by thousands of heavily armed troops from a hastily created European Border Force, with the commander under direct orders from Brussels to repel the marchers. In the closing frames, Stephenson laments "we are not ready for you yet." That is equally true more than twenty-five years later which is why the significance of the second example, from Albania in 1991, needs to be recognised.

The Voyage of the *Vlora*

One of the indirect consequences of the coming apart of the Soviet bloc was that it exacerbated extreme instability in Albania, a country that had pursued an isolationist form of Stalinism during its four decades under Enver Hoxha, leaving the Warsaw Pact in the 1960s. As the post-Hoxha communist leadership attempted to control liberalisation, the country was in a state of political turmoil. By early 1991 the already weak economy was close to free-fall and there were serious food shortages. Many younger people saw no alternative to moving to other countries, and Italy just across the Adriatic was particularly attractive. In the early part of the year some managed to get across the sea and a people-smuggling operation quickly emerged.

By August and in the face of increasingly severe food shortages, many tens of thousands of young people were desperate, unable to pay the smugglers and looking for ways to escape. A freighter, the [Vlora](#), had just berthed in the port of Durres on 7 August 1991 intending to offload a cargo of sugar from Cuba. Instead, close to twenty thousand people forced their way onto the ship and demanded that the captain and crew take them to Italy.

The situation was hugely dangerous because the ship had serious engine problems and could only sail on auxiliary power. Even so, the captain had no alternative and the *Vlora* set off on a very slow voyage, ending up initially offshore of the Italian port of Brindisi. The city was already struggling to handle thousands of Albanians and the captain then sailed to Bari, desperate to dock his grossly overcrowded ship, with many of the Albanians close to collapse in the summer heat. He berthed it at an isolated dock on 8 August and the stowaways surged down on to the dock or jumped into the water, catching the city authorities by surprise.

Within hours, most of the Albanians had been detained and were moved to the only location in the city able to handle such numbers – a football stadium. A very few were able to escape and melt into the city's population but most were forcibly deported back to Albania in the following days. The Italian authorities did then provide some millions of dollars of emergency food aid and, according to some reports, Italian Army units helped with the shipment of the aid within Albania. The authorities there eventually restored a degree of order and the migratory pressures eased somewhat by the end of the year, at least until the post-communist Albanian economy crashed again in 1997.

Lessons from these two migrations – one fictional, one real – are many, especially as there is a far greater issue of migration now than then, not least with over ten million

people subject to trafficking. The pressures may currently be most extreme from Syria into Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, with each country facing problems out of all proportion to the small numbers going into wealthier Western European states. Lebanon, for example, has a population of four and a half million and has had to absorb over a million Syrian refugees so far. Jordan, with less than seven million citizens, hosts approaching 700,000 Syrian refugees as well as over two million resident Palestinians and over 100,000 displaced Iraqis.

The Wider Context

The issue extends far beyond the Middle East, not least with increasing pressures from Africa into Southern Europe, Central America into the United States and parts of South East Asia towards Australia. In almost all cases, the domestic political reaction is antagonistic and underpins much of the mood behind Brexit, the growth in popularity of right-wing parties in Europe and elements of the US presidential election campaign. Politicians seeking popularity systematically invoke fear, both among poorer sectors of society fearing job losses but also among more affluent middle classes fearing the “swamping of our way of life”.

ORG has long argued that the greatest challenge facing the world community stems from the combination of the widening socio-economic divide, the evolving impact of climate disruption and a security outlook rooted in the control paradigm of “liddism” (keeping the lid on the pressure cooker of social, economic and political unrest). In that context, two elements of *The March* and the voyage of the *Vlora* stand out.

One is that *The March* is rooted in the idea that migration would increasingly relate to famine brought on by food shortages and leading to desperate responses. The other is illustrated by the actual experience of the *Vlora*, coming to a head through sudden food shortages but most notably because of the sheer unpredictability of what happened as a result of desperation. In both cases it is the suddenness of the crisis, not unlike the recent use of hastily constructed border defences and the use of police and water cannon in South East Europe, or the use of EU and NATO navies to ‘defend’ the shores of Greece, Italy and Malta against rubber rafts of migrants.

The actual experience in Syria over the last decade has been comparable but perhaps less linear and its impact on conflict and migration less proximate. Since the beginning of this century, northern Syria is reckoned to have suffered its worst drought in several centuries, with a major fall in agricultural production and food supply. At least several hundred thousand Syrians are reckoned to have been internally displaced by the drought in the five years before the civil war started in 2011, largely moving into cities like Aleppo, Hama and Homs. As in Albania, the inept economic management of a closed, corrupt and oppressive regime may have compounded shortages, channelling an economic crisis into further political grievance.

The View from the South

What is missing in all of this, though, is the impact of the responses not within Europe but across the Middle East and beyond. Whatever the many faults of regional autocracies and rich elites, there is now an overlying anger at the European response to refugee flows, especially as it is regional countries such as Lebanon and Jordan which are currently bearing by far the greatest burden. Western interventions, especially but not only in Iraq, are seen as core elements in the instability that has gripped the region in the

past fifteen years, with the television pictures of desperate people repelled from precisely those countries seen as largely responsible for the chaos.

It is impossible to predict how, when or where there might be renewed violent reactions – “revolts from the margins” – but they will happen and in all probability intensify unless the underlying issues are addressed. Although from more than a quarter of a century ago, *The March* and the voyage of the *Vlora*, are powerful messages of the need to act and an inspiration to work harder to that end.

About the Author

Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His [‘Monthly Global Security Briefings’](#) are available from our website. His new book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* will be published by I B Tauris in June 2016. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please **consider making a donation to ORG**, if you are able to do so.

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