The Arab Spring's Refugee Crisis
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The revolutions across the Arab world have been momentous. Regimes have been weakened, leaders toppled and chased out and new societies have begun to emerge. But the unrest now known as the “Arab Spring” has also had a tremendous effect on the stability of countries experiencing unrest and profound change. The instability has led to hundreds of thousands of people being uprooted and then forced to flee—temporarily in most cases, but more permanently in others.

In many countries, internal displacement has torn the fabric of communities. In Tunisia, refugees fled to Europe in search of better economic opportunities. Syrian refugees continue to stream into Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Libya still struggles with internal displacement and a battered economy reliant on the migrant workers that, in many cases, have been driven out. And the countries not experiencing destabilizing unrest, like Jordan and Lebanon, are still forced to confront the problem of refugees coming into their country in search of asylum. In sum, the challenges are immense.

The following report is a survey of some of the countries that have been convulsed by the “Arab Spring.” Specifically, this report focuses on the flow of people across borders as a result of the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and beyond. The paper also focuses briefly on internal displacement trends in some of these countries and the response of European countries to refugees crossing their borders. It seeks to offer a snapshot of the varied and complex refugee problems in these countries in order to further advocacy groups and policy makers’ understanding of these crises.
Tunisia

The birthplace of the Arab Spring has both received and been the departure point for refugees as a result of unrest in and around the country. Most of the refugees Tunisia has received have been from Libya. But Tunisians themselves have fled their country as well.

The civil unrest in Tunisia was sparked by the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, the 26-year-old produce vendor who, in protest of harassment by police, lit himself on fire in front of a government building. Protests against the dictatorship of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali erupted and grew in strength at the beginning of 2011, and Ben Ali was toppled on January 2011.

The uprising in Tunisia was primarily about achieving political rights denied under the Ben Ali regime. But one of the root causes of the regime’s eroding legitimacy among Tunisians was growing economic inequality. “For a long time, the regime was able to provide economic and social gains to large segments of the population and secure its legitimacy and political stability in return,” notes the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s Lahcen Achy. However, “the authoritarian bargain...broke down due to the growing inability of the economy to create jobs for educated labor, the proliferation of marginal and poorly paid jobs in the informal sector, and rising income inequality and regional disparities.”

The uprising in Tunisia marked the total breakdown of the regime’s legitimacy and a bid to change the state’s political and economic orientation. But the change did not come fast enough for some Tunisians.

By February, a month after the downfall of Ben Ali, reports of Tunisian refugees coming to Europe began to surface. At first hundreds came, then thousands, most of them to the Italian island of Lampedusa, which is off the North African shore. The Globe and the Mail reported that the refugees were a combination of “job-seekers,” people “genuinely in danger of violence” and some “otherwise well-off people who are ‘close to the entourage’ of Mr. Ben Ali.” It seems clear, though, that the vast majority were fleeing due to a lack of economic opportunity in Tunisia.

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At the peak of Tunisia’s refugee problem, the number of people who fled was about 28,000, according to the United Nations. Many of these refugees came by boat in a treacherous journey across the Mediterranean; the UN says that 1,500 people from a variety of countries drowned or went missing on the journey in 2011.³

Currently, reports indicate that the Tunisian refugee flow has slowed. In March 2011, the Tunisian and Italian governments agreed on measures meant to slow the flow of refugees entering Italy. The measures included “economic assistance for Tunisians now in Italy illegally who agree to return home” as well as “training and resources for Tunisian border control.”⁴

By mid-April 2011, Italy’s interior minister announced that the "acute phase" of the refugee crisis was over. Tunisian refugees were being sent home from Italy.⁵

**Libya**

In February 2011, the Arab Spring came to Libya. At first, the protests seemed to be similar to the ones rocking Tunisia and Egypt. But the Libyan uprising soon morphed into a deadly conflict, with rebel militias arming themselves to fight the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. Many characterized the fighting between anti-government forces and Gaddafi’s regime as a civil war. In March 2011, North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces began to intervene on the side of the rebel fighters. The fierce fighting, which lasted until October 2011, resulted in the injuries and deaths of thousands of people.

The Libyan refugee crisis dwarfed Tunisia’s by a large amount due to the fact that the conflict was much more lengthy and intense in Libya. In fact, many refugees fleeing Libya crossed the border into Tunisia and set up camp there. According to the UN, “Tunisia responded to the Libyan crisis by opening its border to all nationalities, and mounting a relief effort that was reinforced and supported by UNHCR and other partners.”⁶

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In total, the United Nations High Commissioner estimates that 900,000 people left Libya since February 2011, when the unrest started. While many were third-country nationals in Libya, hundreds of thousands were Libyan themselves.7

According to a Brookings Institution paper, “the largest single category of people who have been forced from their homes over the last year during the Arab Spring has been migrant workers.” This is especially the case in Libya. “Between March and June 2011, over half a million migrant workers left Libya for Egypt and Tunisia – more than the number of Libyans who fled the country during all of last year and more than the number of internally displaced Libyans or Syrians,” the paper reads. The majority of the migrant workers were Egyptian and Tunisian but “about 250,000 were from other countries, in particular sub-Saharan Africa.” The reason Libya hosted a large number of migrant workers was due to its oil industry.8

An International Organization for Migration report on Libyan migrant workers provides more details on the flow of migrant workers out of Libya. They report that while “Libyans also crossed the borders in large numbers, they mostly engaged in circular movements for short periods of time, either to buy goods (including gasoline, due to a shortage in Libya) or to bring their families to a secure location.” Other destinations included Egypt, where 63,000 Egyptians crossed into Tunisia on their way to Egypt after the crisis in Libya broke out; Tunisia, which accepted 43 percent of the total number of migrants fleeing Libya; Algeria, which received about 14,000 people; and Bangladesh. But special attention needs to be paid to sub-Saharan Africans, “one of the largest groups of migrant workers affected by the Libya crisis, totaling approximately 212,000 returnees.” The main countries where the migrants left to, include Niger, Chad, Ghana and Mali. Additionally, a small number of migrants3.9-- percent of the total movement--fled to Italy and Malta.

Migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, who mainly worked in Libya’s oil sector, were particularly targeted due to their perceived association with the Gadhafi regime. Gadhafi reportedly hired fighters from Africa to protect his regime, and migrants suffered a backlash. The weakening of Gadhafi, and the takeover by the rebels of some of eastern Libya, did not bring any relief to the migrants who remained in Libya or to sub-Saharan Africans wishing to return to Libya to work. Human Rights Watch reported:

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“When the Gaddafi government retreated from the east, tens of thousands of sub-Saharan African foreign workers came under threat of violence and arbitrary arrest, forcing thousands to flee.” The reason was that “these migrants, along with dark-skinned Libyans, were widely accused without evidence of having fought as mercenaries for Gaddafi, although mercenaries from some countries did come to fight.” The same pattern held when rebel forces took control of western Libya.

As the fighting in Libya has subsided since the fall of Gadhafi, the vast majority of Libyans who fled have returned home. According to the IOM, by August, as the Gaddafi regime fell, only “4,500 of the 247,167 Libyans who had crossed the Egyptian border were reported to have remained in Egypt for a longer period of time.” Over 600,000 who had fled to Tunisia returned to Libya. In Sirte, for instance, a Libyan city that tens of thousands fled from, the UN estimates that “more than 70 per cent have returned.”

Still, challenges remain. According to the UN, “some 20,000 residents remain displaced, unable to return to their homes in a city that probably suffered more material damage than any other in Libya last year.” Discrimination against sub-Saharan Africans remains, slowing the flow of those returning. And the countries around Libya that have received refugees are, in many cases, undergoing crises of their own. The influx of newcomers is a strain on those societies.

Egypt

The Egyptian revolution was the center of the world’s attention from January 25 to February 11, the date Hosni Mubarak stepped down. It pitted a broad cross-section of Egyptian society against the Mubarak regime. While the revolution was largely peaceful, clashes did break out between security forces and protesters, resulting in hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries.

The revolt in Egypt had massive economic consequences and implications. But the vast majority of Egyptians stayed put in their own country. Some Egyptians did flee, like members of the Coptic Christian minority, but there was no large-scale refugee crisis that saw Egyptians head for the borders.

Egypt did receive refugees from other parts of the Arab world, though. Most notably, Egypt was the destination for many Libyan refugees fleeing the unrest in their own country.

“Egypt is a refugee-receiving as well as transit country, often for irregular movements, particularly from sub-Saharan countries through the North Sinai,” according to the UNHCR. During Libya’s unrest, “close to 475,000 people have entered Egypt through Saloum...To date, it is estimated that some 238,000 Libyans have returned home, while 15,300 Libyans who entered through Saloum are still living in Egypt.”

Egyptian migrant workers in Libya at the time of the Libyan uprising also crossed back into Egypt. According to the IOM “up to 63,000 Egyptian nationals made their way to the Tunisian border in just four days at the start of the crisis.” A survey conducted by IOM indicated that the vast majority—75%—of Egyptians who fled Libya would stay in Egypt. This is likely to have consequences for an Egyptian economy already reeling under the pressure of falling currency reserves and unemployment. The IOM notes that Egypt’s economy may be further battered because of the lack of remittances from Egyptian migrant workers being sent home. “The vast majority (93.7%) of Egyptian returnees surveyed by IOM also sent remittances home and 77.8 per cent reported being the sole breadwinner for their respective families.”

Apart from Libya, though, refugees already living in Egypt before the revolution broke out also faced difficulties. These refugees include people from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia and Sudan. The UN reports that asylum seekers from these countries continue to enter Egypt every day.

The Egyptian publication Al Ahram reports that “many complain that security for refugees in post-revolution Egypt is a major concern, as crime has risen.” As the revolution was ongoing, UNHCR was forced to temporarily suspended services in Egypt, though the agency has since returned.

12 International Organization for Migration, Migrants Caught in Crisis: The IOM Experience in Libya.
Refugees have been forcibly evicted from their homes. Harassment, discrimination and violence have become urgent concerns for refugees living in post-revolutionary Egypt. And refugees cannot report these crimes because under Egyptian law, they are not recognized citizens. They are also prohibited from working legally.

Some attribute the problems for refugees to an increased sense of nationalism among Egyptians. This sense is inflamed by officials warning of foreign meddling in Egypt during the political transition. This state fueled nationalism has also been a factor in the crackdown on non-governmental organizations in Egypt.

In December 2011, Egyptian security forces raided the offices of a number of nonprofit groups in Egypt, accusing the groups of breaking Egyptian law and of fomenting unrest in the country. The NGOs were targeted due to alleged foreign funding of their organizations. 43 individuals are now facing criminal charges. Additionally, the Egyptian government has moved forward with a bill that would “prevent NGOs from getting foreign funds or working on projects considered a threat to state sovereignty.” The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has come out against the proposed bill.14

Even for NGOs not particularly targeted by the Egyptian authorities, the new climate is troublesome—and this includes NGOs that work with refugees in Egypt. Many of those groups, like the refugee rights group AMERA, rely on foreign funding. It has led to a “chilling effect” where “groups are now afraid to conduct their activities. A number of them have instructed staff to stay at home. The implications go far beyond political groups,” according to Kareem Elbayar, an Egypt expert at the Washington-based International Center for Not-for-Profit Law. 15 One news report indicated that the crisis could affect up to 40,000 NGOs operating in Egypt, the Arab world’s most populous country. 16 Any closure of NGOs dealing with refugees in Egypt could be particularly harmful, due to the precarious social and political climate refugees are dealing with currently.

Syria

The crisis in Syria, still an extremely volatile one, has affected many countries in the region. The outflow of Syrian refugees has mainly hit Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.

The revolt in Syria against the regime of Bashar al-Assad began in January 2011, inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. The uprising quickly spread throughout the country, and the Assad regime has responded brutally. To date, according to United Nations figures, over 9,000 people in Syria have been killed since the start of the uprising. The Syrian army has responded to the revolt by indiscriminately shelling cities like Hama and Homs, epicenters of the uprising, as well as arresting and torturing political opponents and shooting soldiers who refuse to fire on civilians.

In turn, elements of the Syrian opposition have responded by taking up arms and fighting Syrian security forces. A recent Human Rights Watch report says that Syrian government forces have committed war crimes in the form of “extrajudicial executions, killings of civilians, and destruction of civilian property.” A separate UN Human Rights Council report released on April 2012 states that even with a recent ceasefire agreement, there were reports of “shelling of the Khalidiya neighbourhood and other districts in Homs by government forces and the use of heavy weaponry, such as machine guns in other areas.” The Human Rights Council also noted “reports of human rights abuses committed by anti-government armed groups engaged in fighting against the Syrian army before and after the ceasefire, including extra-judicial killings of soldiers captured during armed confrontations.”

This is a disastrous situation for civilians in Syria. And Syria, which has a population of Palestinian and Iraqi refugees that have also been affected by the crisis, now has its own refugee crisis.

Turkey has the largest amount of UNHCR-registered Syrian refugees at 23,298. According to the UNHCR, “The Government of Turkey has established a de facto temporary protection regime for all Syrians (open border policy, no forced return, no limit of duration of stay in Turkey, possibility to get assistance in the camps in Hatay province, etc.”

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As an April 2012 report published in the Fahamu Refugee Legal Aid Newsletter states, “the Syrians arriving in Turkey have been Sunni Arabs exclusively, mainly from towns near the Turkish border.” Almost all the refugees are officially registered, since “all newly arriving Syrians are required to report to the authorities in Hatay, register with the Foreigners’ Police in the province and go into the camps. Living outside the camps by their own means is not an option, nor are they given the option of living in any location other than Hatay.”

The Turkish government has been one of the leading regional powers responding to the Syrian crisis. The government is considering the establishment of a “buffer zone” inside Syria to further protect refugees fleeing.

There are approximately 24,000 refugees in Lebanon, including 14,000 of whom are registered with the UNHCR. A situational overview published by the UNHCR is a good snapshot of the situation. “Beginning in April 2011, Lebanon witnessed an influx of some 10,000 Syrians into north Lebanon. Many subsequently returned to Syria, while others relocated within Lebanon,” the UNHCR report explains. There’s also 3,000-2,000 people who have not been registered living in the Tripoli area and “concentrations of displaced Syrians residing in east Lebanon.” Many Syrians reside with host families in Lebanon. Most of the Syrians in Lebanon have come from Tal Kalakh and Homs. The UN also states that since the arrival of refugees in Lebanon, the “Lebanese government has taken a humanitarian approach allowing displaced Syrians to enter Lebanon. There have been very few cases of arrests for illegal entry/stay in the past many months.”

Jordan has also hosted Syrian refugees. UNHCR statistics say that over 14,000 individuals have been registered. Additionally, over 4,000 are awaiting registration, and 30,000 more are estimated to be in need of assistance. Government estimates of the amount of Syrians in the country are even higher. The majority of Syrians in Jordan have taken up residence within Jordanian cities. The Amman-based journalist Nicholas Seeley explains that “Syrians still appear to enjoy free entry to Jordan, without need for a visa.” Seeley writes that “some Syrians try to cross into Jordan illegally -- perhaps fearing being denied exit by their own government. So far, those who have been caught are temporarily detained at a government ‘guest house’ in the north, until they pay a fee and normalize their status.”

Jordan has long generously hosted refugees from Palestine and Iraq. But the recent arrivals of displaced Iraqis, and now displaced Syrians, will add to the strain on Jordanian society.

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23 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Lebanon Update: Support to Displaced Syrians,” UNHCR.
Europe

The European response to the Arab Spring has been much criticized by human rights groups. As noted above, Tunisia and Libya are the main countries that saw refugees flee to Europe. The response in Europe has been characterized by fears of immigration that have mixed in with anti-Islam sentiment. Refugees have been detained and sent back to their countries of origin. The refugee flows into Europe came at a time when Europe's economy was reeling. Anti-immigrant sentiment has also been on the rise due to the negative economic situation, and the refugees from Libya and Tunisia were seen in that light.

Italy detained many Tunisians upon arrival at the island of Lampedusa. Amnesty International criticized Italy for doing so. The human rights group reported that Italian authorities “reportedly shot at a boat carrying Egyptian migrants and asylum seekers, wounding the vessel's pilot.” The group’s Europe director, in response, said, “(a) 'humanitarian emergency' demands a humanitarian response, not a law and order one. This means that boats carrying migrants and asylum seekers from Tunisia, Egypt or other North African countries must not be pushed back. Everyone arriving is entitled to be treated with dignity, to be granted assistance and access to a fair asylum procedure.” Beyond detention, Italy’s border patrols stepped up activities in the Mediterranean. And they reached an agreement with Tunisia to slow the flow of refugees entering Italy. The measures included “economic assistance for Tunisians now in Italy illegally who agree to return home” as well as “training and resources for Tunisian border control.”

Italy also gave out thousands of travel permits to encourage Tunisians to flee beyond Italy to other parts of Europe, particularly France. French authorities reacted by detaining many Tunisian refugees. France and Italy have had diplomatic disputes over the problem of Tunisian migrants. In April 2011, France “barred an Italian train loaded with Tunisian migrants and European activists from entering its territory.” Great Britain has also expressed alarm at the prospect of any migrants fleeing North Africa crossing into their territory.

The Libyan crisis has also produced refugees who have fled to Europe. But in that case, too, human rights organizations have criticized the response of European countries. Amnesty International said that the European Union has “shamefully failed” to help thousands of refugees stranded near Libya's borders.

Internal Displacement

Apart from the Arab uprisings producing refugees, defined as people who flee their country across an international border, the revolts have led to massive internal displacement. The following information on internal displacement is taken from the Norwegian Refugee Council’s Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, which produces a yearly overview of internal displacement.

Over 800,000 people have been internally displaced by the violence and instability that arose during the Arab uprisings. Libya is the country that has, by far, seen the most internal displacement, at 500,000 people. While most Libyans displaced have since returned, about 154,000 people remained internally displaced at the beginning of 2012.

Syria has also seen internal displacement. “Overall, at least 156,000 people were displaced during the year. Most cases were temporary, with people fleeing their villages and cities before or during an attack and returning after government forces left,” the overview explains. “However, some people’s homes and property were destroyed by heavy weaponry, and they were forced into lengthier displacement.”

Yemen was the other country in the region that experienced substantial internal displacement. In 2011 alone, “at least 175,000 people had been newly displaced across northern, central and southern Yemen.”

Political Considerations and Refugees

The responses of governments in the Middle East to the myriad refugee crises that have broken out as a result of the Arab Spring have been largely determined by political considerations. The differing responses of governments add up to a jumbled calculus for refugees in the region fleeing unrest. Below is a brief survey of some of the different reactions from these governments.

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Turkey has been a generous host for Syrian refugees who continue to enter their country as a result of the ongoing crackdown and unrest in Syria. Turkey has been the regional leader on the Syrian crisis and has largely aligned with the Western position against the Assad regime. The anti-Assad stance has led to its welcoming of refugees and to a push for the creation of safe “buffer zones” for refugees fleeing Syria. However, Turkey has refused to formally consider the Syrians entering their country as refugees. According to a European government report, “the Turkish authorities referred to the Syrians as ‘guests’ and never as ‘refugees.’” The report further explains that Turkey maintains a geographical exception to who they consider refugees. “Persons coming from outside of Europe cannot be recognised as refugees by Turkey...The Parliamentary Assembly has frequently called upon Turkey to lift this limitation, which blocks access to international protection.”

Jordan is in a similar camp with Turkey on the issue of Syrian refugees. Jordan has also generously received many Syrian refugees. However, much like the Iraqi refugees that came before them, Syrian refugees are considered “guests,” not refugees. The Jordanian government is not a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, nor to the 1967 protocol. Some analysts attribute the government’s refusal to sign on to the convention to the fear that Palestinian refugees in Jordan would become permanent residents if the 1951 convention went into effect. Regardless, this policy has a negative effect on all refugees residing in Jordan. The lack of concrete policy often results in poor assimilation of those refugees into Jordanian society, often leaving them impoverished.

Other countries’ internal political situations have also dictated their response to refugees as a result of the Arab Spring. In Egypt, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces continues to rule the country. In order to deflect from popular anger at their rule, foreign hands are often pointed to as the culprit behind the country’s woes. This can easily turn into attacks, both rhetorically and physically, on refugees inside Egypt. Anti-Gadhafi sentiment in Libya bled into anti-black racism due to Gadhafi’s reported hiring of African mercenaries to fight against Libyan revolutionaries. This drove out many refugees and migrant workers in Libya.

The countries that have experienced unrest due to the Arab Spring have internal political problems that are exacerbated by the arrival of refugees. Political considerations, for the most part, have trumped humanitarian ones, although Tunisia has been a regional leader in accepting refugees. Still, the situation in the Arab World is best described as a patchwork of confusing rules and regulations for refugees.
Conclusion

The refugee and internal displacement problems that resulted from the Arab uprisings have been momentous. While the international community has mobilized to assist refugees, it has not been enough. More resources and coordination are needed. This is especially true in countries where intense conflict is ongoing.

In Syria, daily battles between the armed opposition and the regime continue, leading to a situation where many people cannot return to their communities and where new people are being pushed out. The UNHCR has warned of a funding shortfall for the services required to assist Syrian refugees. The funding will be crucial to UNHCR’s continued operation in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

Libya’s economy needs displaced migrants to return, but discrimination against sub-Saharan Africans persists. Meanwhile, Egyptian migrants who were displaced from Libya are returning to a country with deep divisions and still in upheaval.

All in all, the refugee crisis the Arab Spring produced has touched nearly all countries in the region. This process will likely continue. In a region that has already experienced the refugee crises of Palestine and Iraq, the Arab Spring refugees pose an enormous test. The international community should mobilize further to pass that test.