Policy and Politics of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Eastern Mediterranean States

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The Syrian refugee crisis began in 2011, when the Arab Spring reached that nation and the Bashar al-Assad regime sought to counter protests demanding social justice and democracy. The first wave of 5,000 Syrians fled the ensuing conflict to seek asylum in Lebanon at the end of March 2011. Syria's civil war resulted in the forcible displacement of about 13.2 million people, including 6.6 million refugees, 6.2 million internally displaced people, and 140,000 asylum seekers, to various countries around the world. Over time, European Union (EU) member states took in a share of those Syrian refugees. In 2015 alone, more than 1 million Syrian and other refugees from the Middle East applied for asylum in the EU, and approximately 3,770 of that number died while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to possible refuge.

The Syrian refugee crisis continues to have a large impact on European societies today and has sparked a dangerous rise in exclusionary populism, right-wing nationalist movements, and national security concerns. Anti-immigration and anti-asylum seeker sentiments have escalated in Europe since the outset of the Syrian refugee crisis. This growth stems from two sources. First, it arises from concerns that the national security in affected nations is being threatened by 'outsiders'. Those fears have resulted in the 'otherization' of emigres by nationalistic groups, particularly. Second, it stems from a post-9/11 linkage in the popular mind between Islam and terrorism in many Western countries, which has resulted in the framing of refugees from the Middle East for many Europeans as possible 'terrorists'. Due to the salience of these sentiments, various far-right political parties and groups in Europe have gained political power and recognition during the past decade, adopting harsh immigration rhetoric and successfully 'othering' migrants and refugees, making it very difficult for EU member nation governments to enact and implement policies seeking the integration of Syrian refugees into their societies.

This edited volume explores whether and to what extent the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean especially have sought to integrate refugees of the Syrian conflict into their national societies. To this end, each chapter examines the rhetoric of various political actors operating in those countries as well as the practices of their governments. Specific chapters ask how those forces securitized and de-securitized Syrian refugee flows and how effective national governments have been in addressing the national security concerns their exodus and influx have created. A share of our authors analyze the roles that international actors, such as the EU, the United Nations High Commission of Refugees (UNHCR), and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), have played in assisting the process of Syrian refugee integration into the societies of the Eastern Mediterranean countries.

The Geographical Context: Eastern Mediterranean

As we considered what nations to address in this volume, we first had to identify what constitutes the eastern Mediterranean. We have adopted Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to help us address that challenge (Buzan 1983 and 1991; Buzan and Waever 2003). Given the increasing significance of international relations in the

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eastern Mediterranean area during the past decade or so, scholars have taken it for granted that there exists an eastern Mediterranean regional security complex, but few have sought to demonstrate why that is so (Litsas and Tziambiris 2019). This is despite the fact that Buzan, the originator of this conceptualization, has rejected the idea that such a security complex exists and has instead placed the states of the south and eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea in the Middle East security complex and those of the north shore within the European security complex (Buzan 1983 and 1991).

Stivachtis (2019) has attempted to tackle this challenge by pointing to the need to revisit Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory. He (2021) has argued that there is a need to expand the range of factors that play an important role in defining a Mediterranean security complex and, as an extension, the Mediterranean region. Unlike Buzan, he suggests that security threats are not necessarily the product of enmity among states or the result of a state's foreign policy, but they can also arise from domestic political and economic instability. This assemblage of threats bind the Mediterranean countries together to such an extent that one may reasonably speak of a 'Common Security in the Mediterranean Region' (OSCE 2015). Such matters include, among other concerns that might be listed, violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism and arms proliferation; cultural and religious intolerance that necessitates the undertaking of interfaith and intercultural dialogue; irregular migrant and refugee flows that require the regulation of migration and the protection of refugees; migrant smuggling and human trafficking that demands enhanced regional cooperation in criminal matters; and economic sluggishness and stagnation that requires new models of development and creates demand for regional economic cooperation. Taken together, these factors help to define a Mediterranean security complex.

Indeed, according to Stivachtis (2021), the Mediterranean security complex includes three security sub-complexes. The first is an eastern Mediterranean sub-complex centered on three conflicts: Greek-Turkish enmity, the Syrian Civil War, and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian/Arab clash. This sub-complex includes Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Israel, the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Libya. The second group or sub- complex includes Italy, Libya, Albania, and Malta in the central Mediterranean. This security regime revolves mainly around migration, with Italy playing a dominant role due to its historical ties with Libya and Albania. The third sub- complex includes France, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Spain, and Portugal in the western Mediterranean and revolves mainly around migration and its perceived associated threats (i.e., terrorism, radicalism, human trafficking, etc.). Due to its significant power capabilities and its traditional ties (political, cultural, and linguistic) with the countries of northwest Africa (Algeria, Tunisia, and Moroco), France is the dominant actor in this sub-complex.

However, nothing prevents the analyst from addressing a particular security sub-complex in its own right. Therefore, the character and dynamics of the eastern Mediterranean security sub-complex can surely be studied, reuslting in a focus on Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

But what about Libya, Malta, and Italy in the central Mediterranean? According to Buzan and Waever (2003), nothing prevents an analyst from investigating two security sub-complexes at once, provided that they exhibit shared concerns that suggest the utility of considering them as a single security complex. There are two factors that bring Libya, Malta, and Italy within the eastern Mediterranean complex: the Syrian refugee flow of the past decade and the need for all ten coastal states to regulate their affairs and to manage potential or actual conflicts that have arisen due to the New International Law of the Sea, which has necessitated the definition of the sea zones (especially the Exclusive Economic zones) of those states.

Moreover, the eastern Mediterranean region constitutes a high-level security complex, which also includes France, a Mediterranean country which has significant power capabilities that extend beyond its immediate western Mediterranean security sub-complex neighbors. The eastern Mediterranean security complex also experiences a significant degree of 'overlay' through its member nations' involvement in regional affairs with the great powers, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, the EU, and lately, China, whose capabilities extend far beyond their immediate boundaries and whose power is sufficient to influence actors in the eastern Mediterranean region. Finally, as far as its essential structure is concerned, the eastern Mediterranean security complex is anarchic in character, as no state dominates it. Within the complex moreover, certain patterns of amity and enmity have

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remained relatively constant, while the distribution of power favors states such as France, Turkey, and Israel. Nevertheless, it is important to underscore the fact that, the Mediterranean security complex is very dynamic as there are states (i.e., Turkey) that seem eager and capable of challenging the *status quo* thereby contributing to a measure of fluidity in the complex's patterns of integration and organization.

We turn next to a discussion of the theoretical framework that has guided us as we have sought to understand and describe the rhetoric of various political actors operating in this volume's targeted countries regarding the Syrian refugees as well as the resulting constraints that the governments of those nations have encountered in efforts to integrate those individuals into their societies.

The Theoretical Framework: Comprehensive Security and Securitization

To understand how the issue of refugee flows can be perceived as a security issue, we need first to note that a perceived concern becomes a security issue to government actors and advocates alike when it is defined as posing an existential threat that requires immediate and extraordinary measures to address it. We employ the comprehensive approach to security associated with the Copenhagen School to help us explore this dynamic here.

Comprehensive Security

This security approach developed in the early 1980s and called for a redefinition of the concept of security, arguing that non-military issues may also constitute security matters and consequently should be considered part of the international security agenda. Thereafter, the concept of security came to include an array of political, societal, economic, and environmental dimensions (Buzan 1983).

In the military sector, the referent object of security is the state and military action usually threatens its territorial integrity and the function of various national institutions (Buzan 1991, 116–118). This is so because military action can repress the idea of state, subject its physical base to strain and damage, destroy its various institutions, diminish its basic protective functions, and damage the layers of social and individual interest that underlie its superstructure. Therefore, military threats, which mainly arise from the external environment, are traditionally accorded the highest priority in national security consideration.

In the political sector, relevant security threats influence or are perceived as potentially affecting, the organizational stability of the state. For example, such concerns may result from governmental actions that pose major threats to individuals or groups. In turn, resistance to the government, efforts to overthrow it or movements aimed at autonomy or independence may all threaten state stability and security (Buzan 1991, 119–122). Very often, political threats may result from actors and forces in both the domestic and external environments of a state and thus, it can become quite difficult to distinguish those from military threats. Consequently, state actors may fear political threats as much as overtly military ones.

In the societal sector, the referent object of security is collective identities that can function independent of the state, such as religions and ethnicities (Buzan 1991, 122–123). In relations between states, significant external threats are often part of a larger constellation of military and political threats. Such perceived threats can be difficult to disentangle from political or military ones.

The referent objects and existential threats in the economic sector are more difficult to identify. The main problem with the idea of economic security arises from the fact that the normal condition of actors in a market economy is one of risk, competition, and uncertainty. However, when the consequences of economic threat reach beyond the strictly economic into the military and political spheres, three potential national security issues may emerge. Those involve linkages between economic capability on the one hand, and military capacity, power, and socio-political stability, on the other hand (Schultz 1977).

In the environmental sector, the range of possible referent objects is large. The basic concern, however, is how human beings are relating to their physical environment. These threats do not operate in isolation, but interact in

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several and often contradictory ways. Environmental threats, including military and economic ones, can damage the physical base of the state, perhaps to a sufficient extent to threaten its animating idea and institutions. As a result of this salience, environmental issues have increasingly moved into the political arena.

According to the comprehensive security perspective, the military, political, economic, societal, and environmental sectors are interdependent with the result that 'spill-over' effects afoot in one sector have the potential to affect, positively or negatively, other sectors. For example, migration and refugee issues are often associated with societal and economic security, but they often also have implications for the political and environmental security sectors (Stivachtis 1999).

The comprehensive security approach addresses relevant factors at three levels: first, for whom is security intended to be provided (i.e., individual, group, community, state, etc.); second, from what kind of threats are they to be secured; and, finally, by what means is such security to be obtained. These are critical questions because this approach is often employed by government actors to devise and press specific policy prescriptions. In this sense, it is noteworthy that its use may raise significant political questions that invite resistance from an initially unknowable share of affected parties.

Securitization

Securitization is the process whereby various actors operating within the domestic environment of a state seek to transform subjects from political issues into matters of security, thus enabling extraordinary means to be implemented to address them. Issues that become securitized do not necessarily represent concerns essential to the objective survival of a state, but rather matters that one or more actors have successfully constructed as existential problem(s) (Waever 1993 and 1995; Buzan, Waever and de Wilde 1998; Williams 2003).

Securitization theorists assert that successfully securitized subjects receive disproportionate amounts of attention and resources compared to concerns that do not, regardless of the objective significance of each. Securitization studies aim to understand who securitizes (securitizing actor), on what bases (threats), for whom (referent object), why, with what results, and not least, under what conditions (Waever 1993 and 1995; Taureck 2006).

Securitization typically begins with a 'speech act' concerning a particular threat, by an authoritative national leader, institution, political party, or political group. Such efforts attempt to shift an issue from normal politics into a security concern, thereby legitimating extraordinary measures to address it. To be successful, the securitization act must be accepted by the audience, regardless of whether the concern constitutes a legitimate threat (Balzacq 2005). The audience may be technical, bureaucratic, policymakers or the public. Different audiences can perform different functions by accepting a securitizing claim (Roe 2008).

Securitization involves four components: first, a securitizing actor/agent (the entity that makes the securitizing statement); second, a proposed existential threat (the object or idea that has been identified as potentially harmful): third, a referent object (the object or idea that is purportedly under threat and needs protection); and finally, an audience (the target population that needs to be persuaded to accept the issue as a security threat) (Waever 1993; Taureck 2006).

That a given subject is securitized does not necessarily mean that such must occur for the survival of a given state, but merely means that someone has successfully constructed an object or concern as an existential problem. The ability to securitize a given subject is, however, highly dependent on the status of a given actor and whether similar issues are generally perceived as threats.

A subject that has been successfully securitized will receive disproportionate attention and resources in comparison with matters that have not been securitized, even when other concerns cause more harm. Successfully securitizing concerns makes it possible for leaders to legitimize extraordinary means to address that matter. Such could include declaring a state of emergency or mobilizing the military and/or the police force. Furthermore, when an issue is labelled as a security problem, it can then be considered an illegitimate subject for political or academic debate.

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Thus, securitization can easily be viewed as a negative process that undermines democratic processes and diminishes necessary scrutiny that would otherwise be focused on political elites (Roe 2012).

Securitization affects all five security sectors identified by the Copenhagen School. However, due to interdependence, a securitization could involve more than one of those domains. For example, immigration and refugee issues are readily securitized as concerns of terrorist infiltration and that argument is regularly employed as grounds for tight control of borders (Faist 2005; Huysmans 2006; Adamson 2006; Gerard 2014). Because it is now generally easier to securitize an issue in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, a concern for safety and security has frequently taken attention away from the economic factors that have always been at play in international migration. In addition, leaders can seek to securitize migrants' countries of origin, diaspora, emigration, and citizenship (Waever et al., 1993).

Since securitized subjects receive disproportionate attention and resources compared to other concerns, some political strategists suggest that existing public policy issues can gain more salience with the public when advocates succeed in promoting such status for them. Daniel Deudney (1990) has criticized securitization as being too liable to unleash the emotive power of nationalism in unhelpful ways. Relatedly, and regarding the securitization of migration and refugees, Ainhoa Ruiz Benedicto (2019, 5) has warned of the adverse effects of such processes for forcibly displaced persons and argued that 'In this context of securitization of border regions, population movement is understood and treated as a suspicious activity that needs to be controlled, monitored and registered, while the migration of often forcibly displaced people and refugees is seen as a security threat that must be intercepted'.

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