Humanitarian aid has often been instrumentalised by States. But more recently, it may have been employed as a tool to manage the “refugee crisis” in Europe’s frontline Member States. Taking Greece as a reference, the author contends that humanitarian aid may not only be an instrument to address the consequences of EU’s restrictive migration policies, but could even be a component of a broader strategy to deter further arrivals to European shores. He argues that the emergency in Greece is a construct, which legitimises the presence of humanitarian actors, and by extension, validates the existence of substandard living conditions. Their disengagement being difficult to envisage, Arjun Claire proposes that humanitarian actors must mitigate the consequences of their implication by actively resisting attempts towards the sustenance of a discursive emergency.

In the face of unprecedented arrivals of migrants in Greece in 2015, the European Union (EU) struck a deal, which required that Turkey accept migrants who are deemed irregular. In exchange, Turkey would benefit from a series of incentives. Coupled with border closures in several Balkan countries, over 50,000 migrants came to be stranded in Greece, unable to continue their onward journey in Europe. Scenes of chaos ensued. In response, the EU, deployed humanitarian aid at a massive scale in Greece to address the needs of migrants stuck in the country. Several national and international humanitarian agencies were already responding to the needs of people on the move before the Balkan borders shut. But the new tranche of EU funding to several international agencies led to what some have called “the professionalisation of the humanitarian response” in Greece. It arguably also reaffirmed the emergency imaginary.

Images of stranded migrants along the border, EU’s desperate measures to stop the tide of migrants and the presence of humanitarians distributing essentials, all contributed to reinforce the idea of an emergency at the doorsteps of Europe.

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1 I use the term “migrants” to include all categories of people including refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless people, labour migrants. I take inspiration from the article by Jørgen Carling, “Refugees are also Migrants. All Migrants Matter”, University of Oxford; 3 September 2015, which advocates to embrace an inclusive meaning of “migrants” as persons who migrate but may have little else in common, respecting thus the uniqueness of each individual.


3 Under the EU emergency support instrument, the Commission has provided €198 million to respond to the refugee situation in Greece, of which €186 million had been contracted to UN-bodies, the Red Cross/Crescent and NGOs until January 2017.


5 Craig Calhoun refers to the emergency imaginary as a means through which the social world is simultaneously grasped and constructed. At its basis lies the assumption of emergencies as something natural as opposed to products of human action, emergencies as sudden, unpredictable and short-term rather than something that develops gradually, emergencies as a local phenomenon rather than resulting from a complex interplay of global and local factors. Craig Calhoun, “A World of Emergencies: Fear, Intervention and the Limits of Cosmopolitan intervention”, in Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi (eds.), Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions, Zone Books, 2010, p. 29-58.
I argue here that the conception of emergency⁶ in Greece came about as a discursive practice⁷. I trace the roots of this phenomenon to the gradual securitisation of migration in Europe over the last two decades. Framed thus, “irregular” migration became fertile terrain for security experts, aiming to curb threats arising from such movements. During 2015, when massive numbers of migrants arrived in Europe, the deployment of an emergency bureaucracy went uncontested as a means to confront the unprecedented threat. Exceptional security measures, asylum practices contravening fundamental protection guarantees and humanitarian aid, comprised essential elements of the bureaucracy.

This emergency imaginary, I contend, has been sustained by resisting attempts to dispel the emergency: a threshold of emergency or a certain level of suffering is allowed to exist, without letting it boil over. Migrant-hosting centres in Greece have thus come to symbolize this “catastrophic suspension”, leaving people in a precarious situation. This eventually serves the wider deterrence interests of the EU. Humanitarians are thus inadvertently implicated in the politics of migration.

**Securitisation of migration**

Migration was viewed favourable in the EU until the 1980s⁸. Then it increased rapidly, almost doubling by the close of the century to reach 110 million people⁹. This, coupled with the geographical expansion of the European Union, meant there was now comparatively lesser demand for immigrant labour in prosperous Western European countries. Even the developmental impact of migration was now being considered overstated: migration – according to some theorists – created widening inequality between sending and receiving States.

It deprived poorer nations of valuable work force, precipitating out-migration¹⁰. Moreover, they reasoned, migrants rarely ever came back and remittances were mostly spent on unproductive assets such as housing¹¹. And as the Cold War drew to an end, even political exiles from communist States were stripped of their privileged status. Meanwhile, the number of refugees and asylum seekers had spiked and they were now coming from all over the world. These circumstances were to prove propitious for those wanting to frame migration as a security threat.

At this stage, two trends emerged: associating asylum with migration, and linking migration with security. These would eventually be used as justifications for curtailing international protection. As EU immigration policies became restrictive, it was assumed that migrants were now

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⁶ Emergency is understood here as an abrupt, unpredictable, abnormal event, which causes immense human suffering and overwhelms existing capacities.


⁸ Following the Second World War, labour shortages led several Western European States to welcome guest workers. Asylum seekers equally enjoyed unfettered international protection, which was willingly granted by Western industrialised countries, especially to those fleing communist States. This may have been guided by human rights concerns, but also carried political undertones. Welcoming political exiles served the interests of western States, vindicating their characterisation of communism as a spur to widespread suffering.


¹¹ This view has since been nuanced, suggesting that migration does offer developmental gains, provided the right social, political and economic conditions exist.
increasingly resorting to asylum as a legal means of entry into Europe. This prompted the EU to harmonise Member State migration policies, which eventually led to EU institutions playing a far greater role in devising policies on asylum and immigration, authorised under the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam.

At the same time, migration was increasingly framed as a threat to domestic stability. Huysmans argues that it was not necessarily any real threat posed by immigration that led to its securitisation. He rather claims that, as internal border controls were gradually abolished within the EU, it was presumed that for its internal market to function, it had to be robustly secured from transnational flows of goods, people, capital and services. Thus external frontiers needed to be reinforced. As such, a range of institutions were mobilised including the police, customs and border control agencies, which implicated asylum and immigration in a security discourse.

Didier Bigo has shed light on the process of securitisation. He claims that securitisation occurs when an issue is presented as a threat by professionals of threat management. Its success depends on how well the different agents – military, police, intelligence services – are able to arrive at a consensus around the meaning they give to the threat. Migration thus represents that consensus or catchword incorporating a range of diffused threats, “that are at once heterogeneous but designated by the same word”. According to some scholars, the securitisation of migration allows the implementation of emergency measures as a means to counter threats associated with it. However, others suggest that exceptionality of securitisation measures would depend on the consistency of threats. On the one hand, persistent threats would lead to a gradual institutionalisation of threat management and would be brought under legal and democratic processes.

On the other hand, episodic threats are likely to provoke emergency measures beyond the normal operating procedure. As such, control of migration in the EU – which represents a perennial threat – has been gradually institutionalised in the form of standing bureaucracies that regulate the movement of third country nationals. In summary, the conflation of asylum with migration and its subsequent securitisation has led to the construction of migration as a threat, which in turn has resulted in the institutionalisation of its control.

Taking Watson’s categorisation of securitisation measures as a continuum between institutionalisation and exceptionalism, the unprecedented arrival of migrants to Europe in 2015 veered close to exception. The bureaucratic structures to deal with the influx were not yet in place, so the EU and respective Member States took a raft of exceptional measures such as brokering the EU-Turkey deal, setting up internal border controls, establishing hotspots and introducing the relocation scheme.

Similarly, Greece deployed the army to build camps and distribute food once it was clear that tens of thousands would be stranded in the country following border closures up north. Such exceptional measures, Watson contends, are exposed to contention from various quarters.

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including the political opposition, media and civil society and thus need to be legitimised. Legitimisation occurs through speech acts intended to convince the target audience. While EU Member States attempted to legitimise measures to prevent migrant flows, Greece’s discourse emphasised a burgeoning crisis in the country in order to ensure it was not left alone to care for migrants who would be cornered in the country. The Greek Prime Minister, for example, said the refugee situation constituted a problem that surpassed the powers of the country. In this respect, calling for emergency assistance was in itself a signifier of exceptionality.

Suspending the emergency

The philosopher Adi Ophir refers to this phenomenon as “catastrophization”, a process, he claims, that unfolds in two related planes. One is the objective reality of a catastrophe or event, for example, widespread deaths or a significant deterioration in living conditions. The second is the discursive formation of a catastrophe, which gives it meaning by, for example, classifying the catastrophe as an accident or a systemic failure, defining the subject of concern, elaborating the consequences and associated response measures. Thus while a disastrous event may occur, unless it is presented as such, it may go unnoticed. Similarly, such an occurrence may be explained in a way that belies its true causes. Discursive catastrophization plays an equally crucial role in giving meaning to a series of successive events that may or may not lead to a larger catastrophe, for example, droughts. Here, discursive catastrophization attempts to mobilise preventive action, but also defines the threshold of emergency, or at what stage does a protracted condition qualify as a disaster. Such thresholds, Ophir claims, are also used to function as a means of governance, where underlying conditions that lead to a catastrophe are allowed to prevail, but kept reined in so that the catastrophe never actually takes place. He refers to this phenomenon as “catastrophic suspension”. Ophir points to the system of blockades in Palestine as a prime example, where they are used to regulate the conditions of catastrophe, maintaining a tenuous balance between normality and emergency.

In Greece, the balance between normality and emergency is calibrated through reception conditions, or hotspots and formal and informal camps, where over 50,000 migrants have been corralled, after the Balkan route closed and the EU-Turkey statement took effect in March 2016. The emergency discourse and the subsequent encampment of migrants succeeded in converting a complex issue—which traces its origins in multiple factors, including EU’s internal divisions over migration—into a simple narrative of a humanitarian crisis.

Once framed as such, the response inevitably leaned towards the humanitarian, which tends to be minimalist despite an expansion in its scope in the last two decades. As such, humanitarians were enlisted to support the management of the reception sites, where they now provide services

18 Helena Smith, “Up to 70,000 migrants may soon be stranded in Greece”, The Guardian, 28 February 2016.
20 Ophir describes catastrophes as large-scale or mega-disasters that affect multitudes or entire populations and leave their marks on many people’s space and time.
22 Ibid., p. 66-67.
23 Ibid., p. 67.
24 Ibid., p. 81.
ranging from healthcare, water and sanitation to protection and legal aid\textsuperscript{25}. The presence of humanitarians underscores two contradictory tendencies: on the one hand, it reinforces the impression of an emergency; on the other, it contributes to suspending the emergency. Interjecting themselves in this delicate environment – between the enablers of the emergency and the emergency itself – humanitarian actors have attempted to push the boundaries further towards normality by advocating for better living conditions. Camps, they contend, were an immediate response to the closure of borders. But as the situation has become protracted, humanitarians argue dignified housing solutions are needed. In short, a lingering tension persists between the enablers of the emergency – who strive to maintain the fragile balance – and the suspenders of the emergency – who attempt to tilt the balance towards a normalised situation.

Attempts to winterise the camps brought these tensions to the fore. Discussions among the Greek authorities, the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations of the European Commission (ECHO) and humanitarian agencies on winter preparations had been underway since September 2016. But living conditions in many of the reception sites – particularly on the Islands – remained substandard up until January 2017, when cold waves swept through Greece causing widespread suffering among migrants\textsuperscript{26}.

Humanitarian actors point to the responsibility of the State in ensuring dignified living conditions for migrants and claim that the government’s lack of planning and coordination hindered winterisation efforts. The State’s failure to publish a final list of camps that would remain functional meant many humanitarian agencies could not prepare. Moreover, coordination between the government and humanitarian agencies has remained a challenge: government representatives do not participate in humanitarian coordination mechanisms, so coordination is either done bilaterally or mediated by ECHO, which leads to confusion and delays. Meanwhile, the Greek Ministry of Migration Policy, which coordinates the humanitarian response, argues that it has limited capacity to act as it does not have funds of its own: the European Commission’s funding is spread across a range of state departments and humanitarian actors\textsuperscript{27}.

The realities of aid-implementation in Greece defy clear distinctions between enablers and suspenders of emergency. But the complex bureaucracy put in place to manage migrants, favours the perpetuation of emergency-like conditions, where diffused responsibilities across a wide range of State and humanitarian agencies result in inertia at best and shirking accountability at worst. The inertia only comes to an end when the drivers of emergency are manifesting again. Attempts to improve conditions, however, are piecemeal and limited. Winterisation of reception centres in Greece is a case in point. As winter started to set in and fear grew that deplorable conditions of the reception sites were likely to attract negative media attention, Greek authorities and humanitarian agencies mobilised to put in place basic infrastructure\textsuperscript{28}. In November 2016, old containers were brought to some sites to replace tents, albeit with considerable delays as the delivery had to be coordinated with the Ministry of Transport. Many of these containers however did not have in-built heating or washing arrangements. So people still had to go out to access camp facilities, and when temperatures are freezing, simple chores like washing clothes could be arduous. Heating became a source of considerable tension: while humanitarians insisted on providing heaters to families, camp authorities resisted, wary that these may cause fire outbreaks.

\textsuperscript{27} Patrick Kingsley, “Thousands of refugees left in cold, as UN and EU accused of mismanagement”, The Guardian, 22 December 2016.
\textsuperscript{28} Regional Bureau Europe, Weekly Report, UNHCR, 2 November and 30 November 2016.
The tension was resolved in some sites by setting up communal heating facilities. Despite sufficient time and resources to prepare for the winter months, State authorities and humanitarians have only rushed to put in place measures that, at best, only ensured people surviving the cold.

The true role of humanitarians
I have argued that humanitarians are implicated in a deterrence strategy in Greece, that they are part of a wider system, managing migrants using tools and mechanisms characteristic of emergencies (camps, hotspots). The articulation through a complex emergency bureaucracy (Ministry of Defence, humanitarians) reigns in tendencies that push towards normality, creating a self-perpetuating emergency. These conditions, along with a slow asylum processing and the conversion of reception islands into de-facto detention centres, have had a strong deterrence effect, dramatically reducing the number of arrivals to Greece in 2016. Humanitarian actors assert their independence from the deterrence bureaucracy by decrying poor living conditions and obstacles in the asylum process. These have resulted in piecemeal changes, but conditions that sustain the so-called emergency remain stubbornly in place.

Taking a cue from Greece, many other countries are likely to implement similar policies to pushback migrants from their territories. Indeed, the EU itself is keen to replicate Turkey-like arrangements with Libya and other North African countries, and foresees a role for humanitarian agencies to manage detention centres. Humanitarians need to reflect how they can effectively respond in such contexts and the Greek experience can offer key lessons. From an operational perspective, humanitarian agencies could negotiate minimum conditions for engagement, both with donor and host governments, essential for a principled humanitarian response. This could include the ability to independently assess needs and access all vulnerable groups irrespective of nationality and status, a flexibility in allocation of funds; and guarantees that reception sites fulfil international humanitarian standards. Beyond the service delivery aspects, however, effective humanitarian action in response to migration, according to Tim-Scott Smith, also involves taking a political stand. Some agencies may be more predisposed to political advocacy than others.

What is important however is that humanitarians take a strategic view of their presence in the context of migration. This strategy could fall anywhere between public advocacy to change migration policies with a view to making them more humane to sustained bilateral dialogue with authorities aimed at improvements in living conditions, enhanced safety or better access to services.

Biography • Arjun Claire

Most recently, Arjun Claire was humanitarian adviser for the British Red Cross, supporting the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) response in Greece. Arjun has worked in humanitarian action for over seven years, holding positions in communications, advocacy and humanitarian affairs for a number of organisations including Médecins Sans Frontières. He also holds a Masters of advanced studies in humanitarian action.

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