

# *Imagining Refugia:* thinking outside the current refugee regime



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Half day conference  
hosted by FAFO

Is the European asylum system  
out of date?

Oslo  
26 January 2018

# Limits to traditional 'durable solutions': local integration, resettlement and return



## **Economic/ecological limits**

Livelihoods, water, land and degraded environment

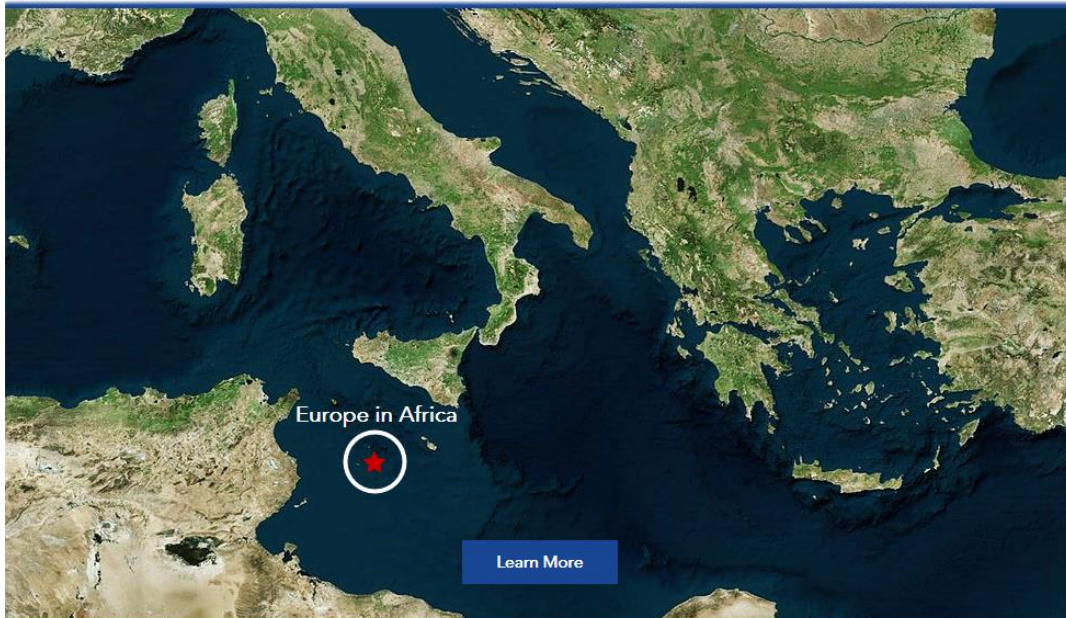
## **Institutional limits**

intergovernmental bodies  
nation-states  
regional entities  
municipalities

## **Political limits**

Varied but ultimately limited  
level of tolerance

# 'Europe in Africa'



Europe in Africa

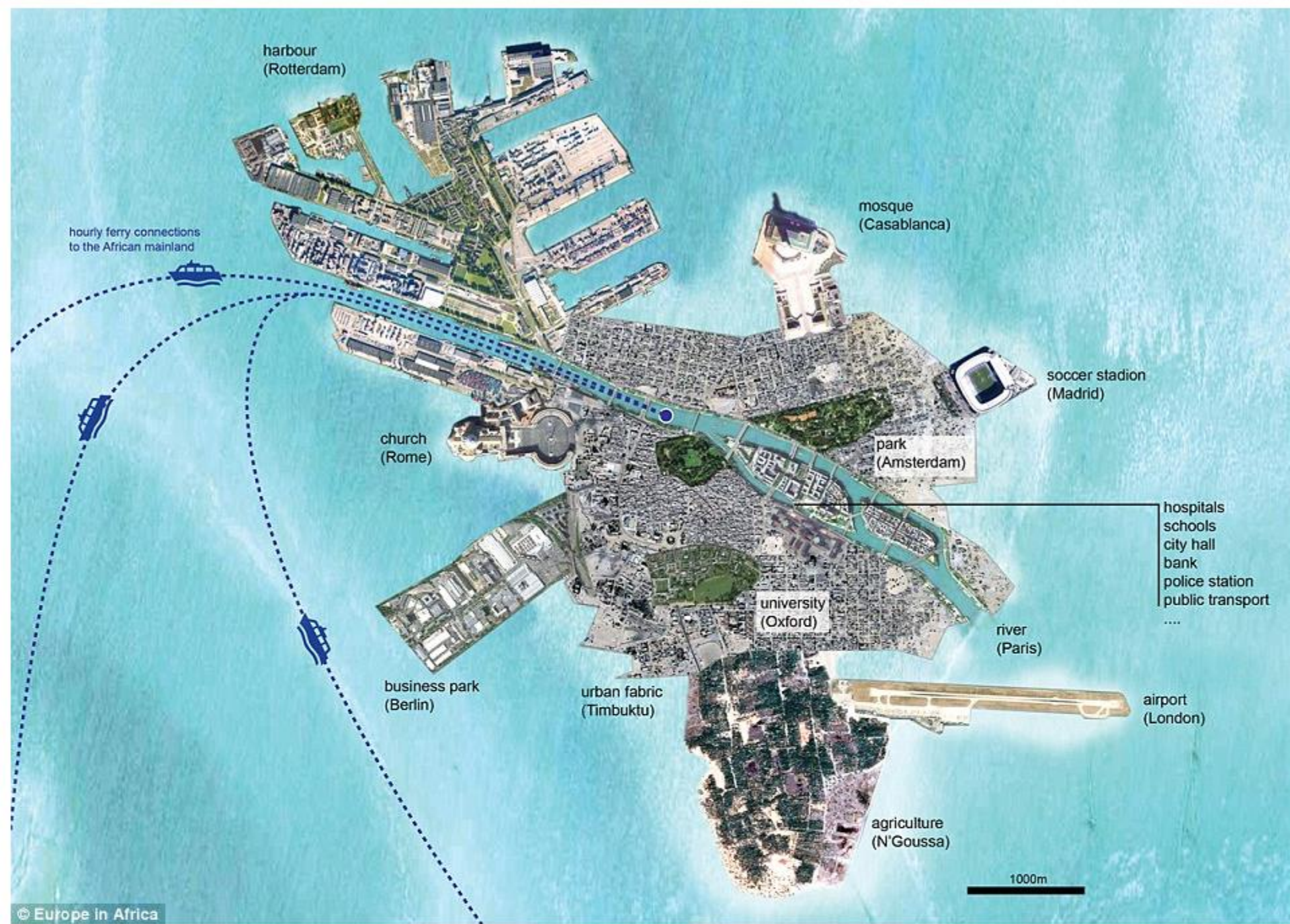
Learn More

Europe in Africa (EIA) is a proposal for a **new city - state** founded on an artificial island built on the shallow Tunisian Plateau right between the Exclusive Economic Zone of Tunisia and Italy. The aim of EIA is to provide a **secure place** for people that have to flee their country and want to reach Europe.

The seabed on which the island will be erected and its surrounding territorial waters will be rented for 99 years from Tunisia and Italy, by the European Union.

*Credit:* Europe in Africa <https://www.europeinafrica.com/>  
Theo Deutinger, Spuistraat 272, 1012VW, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.





harbour  
(Rotterdam)

mosque  
(Casablanca)

soccer stadium  
(Madrid)

park  
(Amsterdam)

church  
(Rome)

university  
(Oxford)

river  
(Paris)

hospitals  
schools  
city hall  
bank  
police station  
public transport  
....

business park  
(Berlin)

urban fabric  
(Timbuktu)

airport  
(London)

agriculture  
(N'Goussa)

1000m

# Refugia: key elements

- A transnational polity...
- ...rather than a new nation state....
- *Refugia* comprises *all* its constituent elements worldwide
- the outcome of a grand bargain ...
- sovereign states licence tracts of territory to *Refugia*
- self-governing, self-sustaining, but subject to law of host
- supports *Refugians* in conflict regions (with remittances and other transfers)

# Refugia: governance and economy

- Governed by a transnational assembly elected by *Refugians* worldwide...
- ....with some host representation and participation...
- component *Refugia* territories are based on affiliation wider than ethnicity or religion
- eventually self supporting through economy part-linked to 'host' societies

# Refugia now, prefigured

- Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey as proto *Refugia*...
- ...likewise Iran, sub-Saharan Africa.....
- ...likewise neighbourhoods in world cities
- *Transnational governance*: imperfect examples already exist
- *Finance*: remittances today as a form of global redistribution of wealth and welfare
- *Culture*: art, dance, music, sport



# Culture and sport



Credit: <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/6/575154624/10-refugees-compete-2016-olympics-rio.html>. Photo in public domain.



# Refugia prefigured

## Cities and havens:

- Refugee cities
- Sanctuary cities
- Charter cities
- 'Free havens', free zones



## Mini Refugias:

- Hotel Oniro, Greece
- Riace, Italy

## Enclaves:

- The Bekaa Valley
- Rojava autonomous region, N Syria



# Refugee cities

## *Neoliberal:*

- SEZs Betts & Collier
- Romer 'charter cities'
- [refugeecities.org](http://refugeecities.org)

Refugee cities would be special-status settlements in which refugees would be legally allowed to engage in meaningful, dignifying, and rewarding work.

## *Communitarian:*

- Barcelona
- Sanctuary cities
- Camp Domiz
- Riace

# Refugia now, prefigured



- *Mobile commons*: community creation and reproduction through mutual aid among migrants en route, aided by supportive host citizens
- Collective action by migrants and refugees across ethnic/national groups which has transformed EU policy, with host citizen support
- .....all of which add up to Refugia (imperfectly) prefigured



Photo and text: Qusay Loubani

After hundreds of refugees turned their backs on Idomeni, totally disillusioned due to the closed borders and the evacuated wild camp, many of them headed to the Athenian harbour of Piraeus, favouring a place on the dockside, in the unbearable blazing heat of June within the view of the tourist liners to other places. Frankly, many of us had no other place to go to anyway.

Since life in a tent near the docks in another wild camp was not to be regarded as a picnic, and since harbours are not built to accommodate fugitives in rising numbers, some Left-wing Greek activists decided to help us look for a solution, and they made a good find: The *Oniro* hotel. A hotel at a 500 metre distance to the Victoria underground station at the centre of Athens, that has been closed due to tax debts for about four years now.

The building was somehow abandoned but it had all the necessary simple, but comfortable furniture and each room had its own bath. For every one of us the latter was a dream come true! The long lines at the refugee camps seemed all of a sudden like an almost forgotten nightmare compared to the new situation of total independence by using a bath.

About 200 – 250 refugees are staying here now. As in other occupied camps in Athens, the meals for the inhabitants are prepared in the hotel while some of us, supported by Greek and foreign volunteers, take care of getting the supplies.

“It’s the dream itself“, described one of the new Oniro residents regarding his life there. He wishes that “every refugee could somehow experience the same luck we had.”



# The mobile commons consists of

- knowledge of mobility that circulates among people on the move
- infrastructure of connectivity distributing these knowledges
- a multiplicity of informal economies that cover activities and services than cannot be accessed easily through the public sector or privately
- diverse forms of transnational communities of justice
- a politics of care and mutual cooperation

(Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013: 191)



Men wait for the opportunity to stow away on a lorry: Matt Sprake



Migrants walking out of Budapest in the direction of Vienna:  
Frank Augstein/AP



‘A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.’ Oscar Wilde (1912/2007, p. 147)

‘No nation but the imagination’, Derek Walcott

# Refugia: a pragmatic utopia

For additional reading (free access), search for:  
**visions of refugia planning**

