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Who are the million migrants who entered Europe without a visa in 2015?⁽¹⁾

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In 2015, more than a million migrants were smuggled to Greece and Italy, and a similar number of asylum claims were lodged in Germany. Presenting an overview of available statistics, Philippe Fargues addresses three questions: Is this a migrant or a refugee crisis? What triggered the crisis? And last, how can the crisis be resolved?

Around a million people entered Europe in 2015 without a visa, via a range of land and sea routes, and at considerable personal risk. Europe's Mediterranean shore now has the unchallenged title of the world's most lethal border. The migrant crisis is also testing some of Europe's most fundamental values, from the freedom of circulation within its territories, to international protection beyond its borders. This crisis raises several important questions: What is the nature of the crisis? Is it a migrant or a refugee crisis? Are the migrants who enter Europe irregularly looking for economic opportunities or are they seeking international protection? In the first case, there is a consensus among governments that they must be returned. In the second, as soon as they lodge a claim for asylum, there is a legal duty to keep them until claims are fully processed. And last, how can we best get out of the crisis?

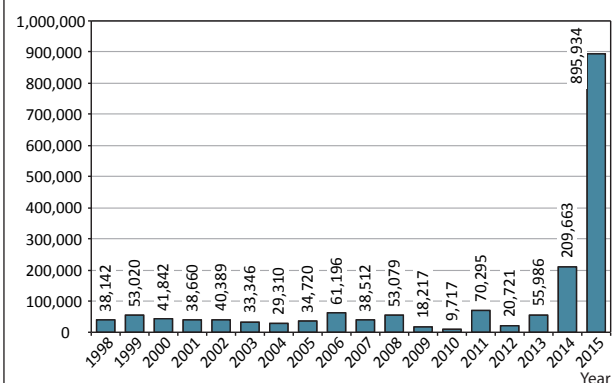
A shift in migratory routes across the Mediterranean

While unauthorized entries across the Mediterranean into Europe have been a large-scale phenomenon since

the 1980s, their magnitude and pattern radically changed in the course of 2014.

Irregular cross-Mediterranean migration was initially triggered by visa requirements imposed on non European Union nationals in the wake of Europe's economic crisis of the mid-1970s. Numbers of crossers remained in the tens of thousands with no marked change until 2013 (Figure 1). In 2014, though, they jumped to over 200,000, and in 2015 to over one million.

Figure 1. Unauthorized entries by sea into Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain, 1998-2015



P. Fargues, *Population & Societies* n° 532, INED, April 2016.

Sources: Greece: Police records; Italy: Ministry of the Interior; Spain: Ministry of the Interior; Malta: Frontexwatch and, for 2015, the UN Refugee Agency.

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(1) This article is an updated adaptation of a policy brief paper published in December 2015: "The year we mistook refugees for invaders".

In 2014-2015, migratory routes gradually shifted from the high-risk central Mediterranean to the less hazardous eastern Mediterranean route. Migratory routes have actually changed many times in response to the changing geography of conflicts breaking out in the EU's neighbourhood (Syria, Libya) and beyond (Iraq, Horn of Africa), and to the tightening of state controls in countries of transit (e.g. Morocco) or destination (e.g. Spain). Until 2014, each route closed by police controls was soon bypassed by a longer, more perilous one.

As a result, the Mediterranean has become, in the twenty-first century, the world's most lethal migratory route. Between 2000 and 2015, for 1,664,211 persons who made the crossing, 26,115 deaths were reported. In other words, migrants had a 1.5% probability of dying before reaching dry land (with a peak at 8.3% in 2009, Figure 2). While the year 2015 comes second in terms of absolute numbers of deaths (3,416) it appears to be the least lethal in terms of risks, with a 0.37% probability of death (Figure 2). This significant reduction in mortality at sea must be attributed to intensified search and rescue operations by the Italian navy and to a shift from the 250-500 km central Mediterranean route from Libya to Italy, to the 10-20 km crossing from Turkey to the Greek Dodecanese Islands.

Where do the migrants come from?

A variety of nationalities converge towards a limited number of entry points into Europe to form migration flows that are "mixed" in terms of both origin and status (refugees versus economic migrants). A rough idea can be drawn from a comparison of Greece and Italy over the last five years (Table).

The composition of refugee flows to Greece and Italy has changed rapidly in nationality terms. Changes can reflect the emergence of new refugee situations (e.g. the conflict in Syria), but also the sudden opening of new migration routes from countries in protracted conflict (e.g. Afghanistan, Eritrea). Most refugees now come from just a handful of countries, and the percentage of the total number of entries represented by the first largest nationality has increased over time. In Greece, the first nationality accounted for 66% of all entries in 2015 (Syrians) versus 28% in 2011 (Afghanistan), while in Italy it accounted for 25% (Eritreans), compared with 9% in 2011 (Nigerians).

Flows of Syrians, the largest overall group, changed direction in 2015. Before that year, they mostly took the central Mediterranean route from Libya (or Egypt or even Lebanon) to Italy, but have recently switched to an Eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey to Greece. The shift from a long and extremely perilous crossing to a shorter and safer one has allowed a much larger number of Syrian refugees to reach the EU's external borders and to seek asylum.

The distribution of smuggled migrants by nationality has dramatically shifted from a minority to a majority of people with a high probability of being granted refugee status. Refugees are estimated to be a majority in the most recent flows of irregular migration to Italy and Greece, and their proportion has spectacularly increased in the last five years, from 33% to 76%. There is now even less truth to the allegations that people smuggled across the external border of Europe are mostly economic migrants disguised as asylum seekers trying to cheat their way into the EU.

Most of the people whose nationality suggests that they are fleeing war, persecution and life-threatening

conditions do not apply for asylum in the first country they reach in Europe (despite this country being a safe place). This fact has been used by some observers to argue that these are not true refugees but economic migrants, not asylum seekers but welfare seekers.

In reality, most refugees are smuggled to Europe after a long stay in countries of first asylum where they had no access to livelihoods. Once their savings dry up, or in anticipation of the moment when this happens, they need to earn an income in order to see a future for themselves and their families. They have little choice but to move.

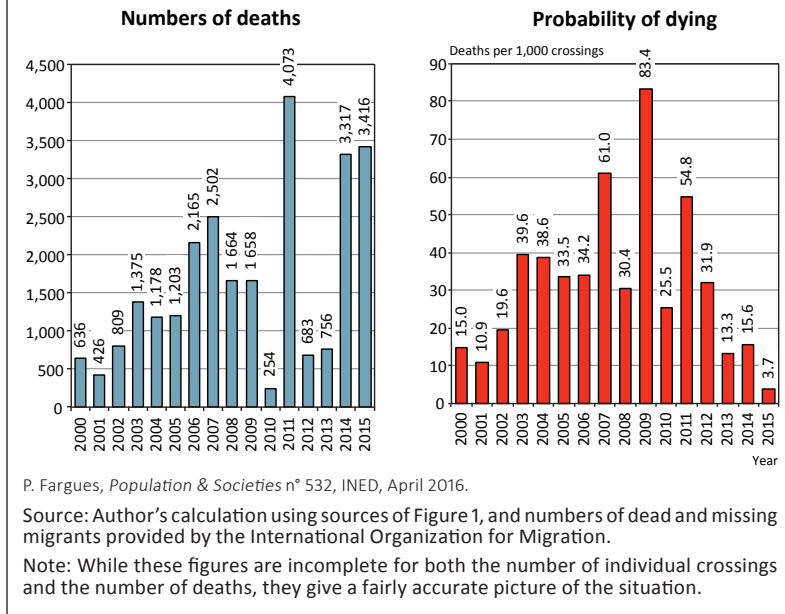
The question of what triggered the crisis – pull or push factors – has stirred much debate in Europe. On the pull-hypothesis side, when numbers of irregular entries

Table : Top ten nationalities of migrants smuggled into Greece and Italy, 2011-2015

Country of declared nationality	Acceptance rate of asylum requests (%)*	Number of migrants entering Greece and Italy				
		2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Syria	94.6%	947	8,507	18,972	74,461	462,689
Afghanistan	53.3%	17,841	18,323	6,924	13,685	186,617
Eritrea	86.6%	1,060	2,351	10,406	34,470	37,815
Iraq	66.8%	4,514	8,485	1,721	5,522	64,417
Albania	4.4%	11,982	12,374	5,497	7,299	16,077
Pakistan	21.4%	5,960	807	2,835	8,834	25,044
Nigeria	29.0%	28,827	2,874	925	1,674	22,044
Somalia	62.7%	1,834	2,355	739	1,701	16,499
Bangladesh	10.9%	2,486	417	1,723	9,535	9,090
Tunisia	8.4%	2,429	3,944	4,205	7,520	1,023
All countries		119,635	90,145	82,684	247,262	952,246
Percentage of asylum requests granted**		33.5%	47.9%	62.9%	70.9%	75.7%

* Acceptance rate of asylum requests submitted by refugees to EU-28 in 2011-2015.
 ** Estimated annual acceptance rate of asylum requests submitted to EU-28 by migrants smuggled into Greece and Italy.

Figure 2. Mortality at sea during the cross-Mediterranean journey to Europe 2000-2015



started to boom in 2014, the Italian search and rescue operation at sea was soon blamed for encouraging more people to come.

The push interpretation must be considered more seriously if a response is to be found to the crisis. Far from abating, the level of violence in war-torn zones of the Middle East reached new peaks from 2014 through 2015. The Islamic State has consolidated its position in Iraq and seized most of central Syria. In doing so it has added new waves of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees to those already created by the protracted conflict. Moreover, with the passing of time, the situation in countries of first asylum neighbouring Syria has deteriorated, with humanitarian aid becoming rarer and tensions rising between refugees and their hosts.

There is little doubt that the refugee movements will continue in Europe's neighbourhood. Not only will the wars and conflicts that produce forced migration – in Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Libya – likely continue for some time, but further migration of refugees sheltered in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey will also gain momentum.

Countries of first asylum under strain

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is host (and source) to almost half of the world's 20 million refugees (UNHCR and UNRWA). Many of these countries are not signatories of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. They initially welcomed refugees and continue to tolerate their presence, but they do not offer them refugee status. They have a charity-based, rather than a rights-based, approach to the question.

Refugees are “guests”. As such, they enjoy few or no rights. Once their entry visa expires, either they become unauthorized migrants and find themselves fated to exploitation and destitution, or they must leave.

The situation of refugees in the MENA region will deteriorate, but the situation of their hosts will also suffer. Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan (and to a lesser extent Iraq) have undoubtedly been the most generous states in opening their borders and offering protection to 4.7 million Syrian refugees since 2011. This has placed a great strain on their economies, however. Since 2014, Jordan and Lebanon have taken measures to block the entry of new refugees, and they restrict the stay of those already in their countries, leaving Turkey as the only haven left at the border of Syria. Cases of return to Syria and departure for Europe have been increasingly frequent since then. Social

equilibrium, political stability and security are now being put at risk; it is no longer just an economic matter. Shutting the door on refugees and locking them up on Europe's doorstep may seriously destabilize these countries and indirectly endanger Europe's security.

How is the European Union responding to the crisis?

How is Europe responding to current challenges and anticipating those to come? After a period when EU member states were divided between two opposite stances – keeping the door open versus erecting wire fences – a convergence of views began towards the end of 2015. Keeping refugee movements away from Europe has become their leitmotiv, and efforts have been made to better control the two main routes of unauthorized migration.

The Eastern Mediterranean route may be better controlled with the collaboration of Turkey. In late November 2015, the EU and Turkey signed an agreement to support the Syrians under temporary protection and their Turkish hosting communities, and to strengthen cooperation to prevent irregular migration from Turkey to Europe. The objective for Europe is to keep as many Syrian refugees as possible within Turkey (i.e. away from Europe). For Turkey, it is to obtain, in exchange, increased financial assistance and, perhaps more importantly, to negotiate visa liberalization for Turkish citizens travelling to Europe and to keep alive Turkey's accession negotiations to the EU. In mid-March 2016, cooperation was further strengthened under an agreement whereby Turkey agrees to readmit all migrants who crossed

illegally into Europe via its territory on condition that Europe admits an equivalent number of Syrians whose refugee status has been determined in Turkey.

In the absence of credible state interlocutors in Libya, the departure country of most people smuggled into Italy, the central Mediterranean route cannot be controlled in collaboration with the Libyan government. Europe will do the job alone via “Operation Sophia”, an initiative endorsed by the United Nations Security Council to board and seize on the high seas vessels used by migrant smugglers operating from Libya.

Progress will only be made if the problem itself is tackled. If the goal is to check irregular migration, visas must be made available to refugees in transit countries before they resort to smugglers. European embassies in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, etc., could use procedures that already exist on paper, such as humanitarian or asylum visas. This would not only work for the security of the refugees by short-circuiting the perilous journey, it would also contribute to the security of European states by ensuring that travellers’ identities are checked before they reach Europe.

A new system of “hotspots” is now being established in Greece and Italy to fingerprint and debrief smuggled migrants. Their purpose is to separate those in need of protection whose claims for asylum must be processed from those who are not refugees and must be returned. The hotspot approach is intended to speed up the screening process and to avoid crowds crossing in a disorderly fashion from Mediterranean Europe to north-western Europe. But for this new system to curtail the cross-Mediterranean smuggling business, hotspots need to be installed not in Europe but in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, etc. This brings us back to the long-recommended implementation of humanitarian or asylum visas in the countries where the refugees find themselves before embarking on their illegal journey.

Finally, one should remember that the refugee crisis is unfolding against the backdrop of two other crises: a protracted economic downturn which generates unacceptably high rates of unemployment amongst Europeans, and a looming demographic crisis with

unprecedented prospects for population decline. At the same time, migrants can be regarded not only as a problem (they compete with natives for scarce job opportunities) but also as a solution (they will eventually replace the missing natives). While the economic crisis will pass, the demographic crisis is set to gain massive momentum and will take decades to resolve. Replacement migration will have to be part of Europe’s response to its demographic predicament.

In anticipation of future needs, creative policies should be designed to turn the burden of refugees into an asset. There are signs that the additional public expenditures linked to the massive flows of refugees have already generated an 0.2% increase in GDP. In the medium-term, a greater positive impact on growth is to be expected from the increase in labour supply, on condition that appropriate policies are put in place to facilitate refugees’ access to the labour market.

Abstract

The Mediterranean has become, in the twenty-first century, the world’s most lethal migratory route, with a 1.5% annual probability of death during the sea crossing between 2000 and 2015. The majority of the most recent migrants are refugees. Their proportion has risen from 33% to 76% among migrants smuggled into Italy and Greece over the last five years. The “refugee crisis” is taking place against a backdrop of a looming population crisis across Europe. Replacement migration might thus be one of the solutions to Europe’s demographic predicament.

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