



Migration update – Exodus from Syria

The Syrian conflict has triggered the world's largest humanitarian crisis since World War II. By the end of 2015, an estimated 250,000 people had been killed and 1.2 million injured. Humanitarian needs continue to rise, population displacements are increasing, and an entire generation of children is being exposed to war and violence, increasingly deprived of basic services, education and protection.

- Firstly, this article will outline the causes and nature of the conflict.
- Secondly, it will comment on the involvement of regional powers in the conflict. Thirdly, it will map out the impact of the crisis on inter-regional and extra-regional migration.
- Lastly, it will assess the response of host nations to this migration.

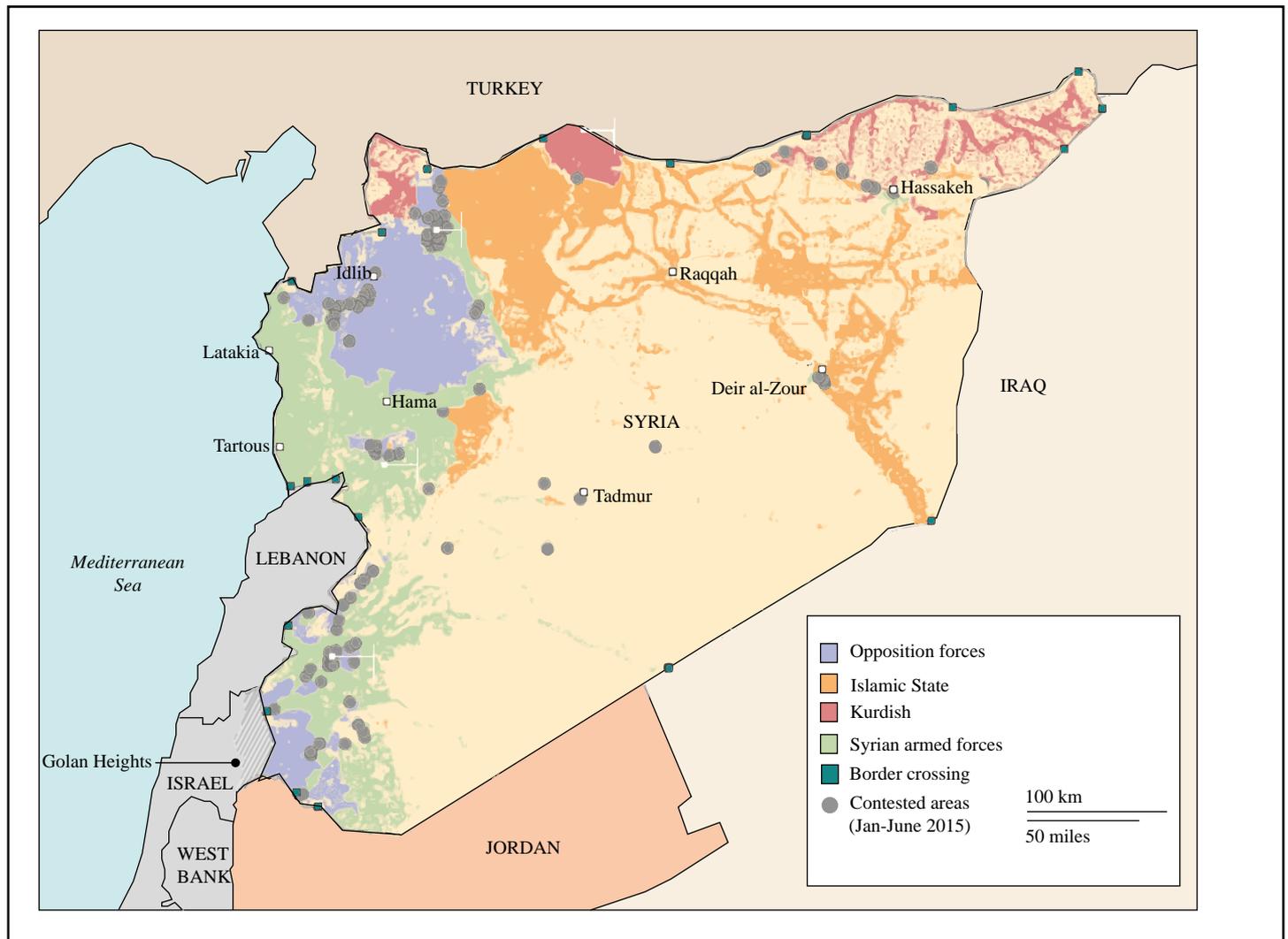
Syria – a country in crisis

The violence in Syria began in March 2011 in the city of Deraa with subsequent demands for President Bashar al-Assad to resign. By July 2012, the International Red Cross said the violence had become so widespread that the country was in a state of civil war.

There is no clear single group of rebels, united against President Assad. The opposition, who all want the president to step down, is split between groups of rebel fighters, political parties and people living in exile. It is thought that there could have been as many as 1,000 groups opposing the government since the conflict began, with an estimated 100,000 fighters.

The war is now more than just a battle between those for or against President Assad. In early 2014, in neighbouring Iraq, an extremist group called Islamic State (IS) began to take over large areas of the country. IS is a radical militant group which has used violence against anyone who doesn't agree with their extremist views. They have also persecuted other groups, including Christians and Yazidis. IS moved into eastern Syria and in the chaos of war they have been able to gain land and power there too.

Figure 1. A map to show the main combatants and contested areas in the Syrian Civil War (BBC, July 2015)



As shown in Figure 1 the conflict in Syria is very confused. The Assad government holds territory in the West of Syria, including the capital of Damascus, much of the border with Lebanon and the Mediterranean coast. The main Syrian opposition forces are located directly north and south of Assad's forces. Opposition strongholds include Dara in the south and Idlib in the north. There are also Kurdish forces and territory in the north of Syria; in particular, in the north-western province of Halab and the north-eastern province of Al Hasakah. Islamic State have a stronghold in the central Syrian city of Raqqa. Their forces dominate the eastern approaches to Iraq and are in conflict with Kurdish and Syrian opposition forces in the north of the country. They are also fighting President Assad in Hamah province in the west of Syria.

Syria – international crossroads of conflict

In spite of efforts from the UN, it is unlikely that the fighting will end soon. There is a bloody stalemate between the combatants; the government forces and the rebel groups are unable to defeat each other. Furthermore, both the Syrian government and rebel groups are now also having to fight back against the terrorist group Islamic State. The Kurds are neither willing nor able to intervene beyond their strongholds. As a result, the conflict in Syria has drawn in neighbouring countries as well as inflaming sectarian conflict. This has widened the conflict.

Iran & Lebanon

Assad has been able to maintain his war due to the strong support of Iran. Iran has aided the regime in Damascus logistically, militarily, and financially. Iranian Revolutionary Guard troops have been reported fighting and advising in Syria. Iran has also lent the support of Hezbollah militants from Lebanon and Iraq. It is considered to be the most highly-trained and strongest armed Shia power outside of Iran. On a strategic level, Iran has used the war in Syria as an instrument to advance its nuclear negotiations with the US and the West.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar

Saudi Arabia and its regional allies, such as Qatar, oppose Iranian influence in the Middle East. In particular, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain. Partly, this is due to Saudi Arabia following the Sunni branch of Islam and Iran following the Shia branch. Saudi Arabia has therefore supported the downfall of the Assad regime and put its support behind opposition and Islamist rebel groups.

US, UK & France

The USA has supported rebel groups since the beginning of the conflict. However, their support to armed rebels has been weak, given that the moderate rebels are fighting on three fronts: Assad, Al-Qaeda, and IS. Moreover, the US strategy has been unclear and noncommittal at times. Their focus has been an air campaign against IS. This has been supported by French and British air power.

Russia

Russia has long held influence in Syria. It owns and operates a naval base on the Syrian Coast and provides military and diplomatic support for the Assad regime. Russia has used its veto in the UN Security Council, along with China, on four consecutive occasions to protect the Assad government from international intervention. Its aircraft began air strikes in Syria on 30 September 2015, as well as launching missiles from warships in the Caspian Sea. President Vladimir Putin insists his forces are targeting IS fighters.

Turkey

Turkey has declared a fight with the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in northern Syria, which Turkey views as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a terrorist group it has been in conflict with for 30 years. In turn, the Kurdish fighters in Syria have

accused Turkey of siding with IS. This complicates US and UK intervention as Turkey is a crucial ally in NATO. Nevertheless, the US and UK would like the Kurdish fighters to see greater success in Northern Syria against IS.

Peace Process

There are ongoing attempts to end the conflict. This is known as the Vienna Peace Process, which began in October 2015. The participants in the peace process are known as the International Syria Support Group (ISSG). It consists of the Arab League, China, Egypt, the European Union, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United Nations, and the United States. They agreed to start "a political process leading to credible, inclusive, non-sectarian governance, followed by a new constitution and elections" to be administered under UN supervision. In November 2015 they agreed that Islamic State as well as the Jabhat al-Nusra Front, and "other terrorist groups, as designated by the UN Security Council" must be defeated. Furthermore, in December 2015 the UN Security Council unanimously passed a resolution endorsing the ISSG's transitional plan. However, the major powers remain divided on who should represent the Syrian opposition. No mention was made of the future role of Syrian President Assad.

Migration

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has estimated that the conflict has resulted in 13.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria. Of this number 4.5 million are located in hard to reach or besieged areas. Furthermore, 6.5 million are estimated to be internally displaced. As of December 2015, 4.6 million have fled Syria and are registered as refugees or awaiting registration as refugees abroad. The greatest number are in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Turkey is currently hosting 2.2m, which is the greatest number of any country in the region. Lebanon is hosting over 1 million, Jordan has registered over 600,000, Iraq 250,000 and Egypt and other North African countries over 120,000.

Case Study: Lebanon

A country of 4.4 million inhabitants, Lebanon is hosting more than 1.1 million Syrian refugees, 44 000 Palestinian refugees from Syria, 17 000 Iraqi refugees and 250 000 refugees from Palestine. This makes it the highest per-capita concentration of refugees worldwide, where one person out of four is a refugee. 75% of the migrants are children and women. Over 75% of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon are without any form of education exposing them to physical and psychological violence, child labour and exploitation, early marriage, and recruitment by armed groups. As time goes by, competition for jobs and resources is also fuelling tension between Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees. In the absence of formal refugee camps, refugees in Lebanon have to pay for food, rent, clothes and medicine. However, the migrants do not have the legal right to work. They either work clandestinely or rely on external support to meet their needs. The EU has provided over 500m Euros in humanitarian support for this refugee population since the start of the crisis. However, this funding is not sufficient. On January 13, 2015, the Government of Lebanon announced that all Syrian refugees wishing to enter Lebanon had to justify the purpose of their visit. This is a 'de-facto' closure of the border for people fleeing violence.

The greatest burden of this migration is therefore felt within Syria and its near neighbours. As a result, UNOCHA, UNHCR and UNDP appealed to UN member states in January 2016 for US\$7.73 billion in new funding to help 22.5 million people in Syria and across the

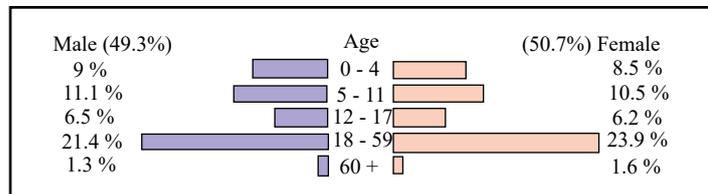
region. The appeal comprises two main elements: help for an anticipated 4.7 million refugees in neighbouring countries by the end of 2016 as well as 4 million people in communities hosting them, and support for 13.5 million displaced and conflict-affected people inside Syria itself.

Figure 2. Emigration from Syria (Source: UNHCR)

Year	Number of Emigrants from Syria / million
2012	0
2013	0.5
2014	2.3
2015	4.6

Figure 2 above shows the rate of growth of emigration from Syria. It is clear that the number of migrants began to increase in 2013. Figure 3 below shows an abridged population pyramid for the emigrant population. The majority are young and middle aged adults. There are also many more children than elderly persons. If the conflict continues, it is likely that the numbers wishing to leave will increase. However, the demographics suggest that those best placed and most able to leave will already have done so. Internally displaced persons, the old and infirm in particular, may not have the same capacity to leave. Therefore, migration from Syria is likely to continue so long as the conflict continues, but the rate of increase in emigrant numbers is almost certainly likely to decline.

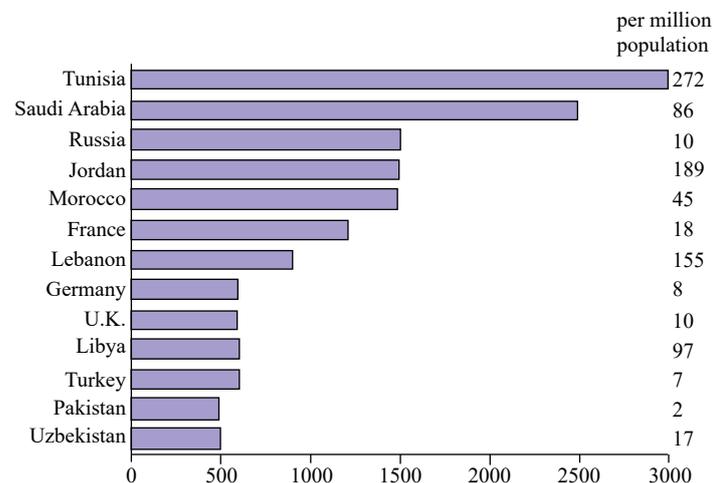
Figure 3. A population pyramid for the Syrian emigrant population (Source: UNHCR)



Migration to Syria

The conflict is also attracting migrants to Syria to fight for the different sides. In particular, extremist groups such as IS have been able to recruit from the region and the wider world. Figure 4 below shows the main sources for this migration into Syria and Iraq.

Figure 4. Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq by country of origin (Source: BBC)



It is clear that the greatest number of migrants to Syria come from regional countries. However, it is important to note the significant number going to Syria from European countries too. In the UK there have been several high profile cases of Muslim girls going to become IS brides and of men fighting as Jihadis for IS.

Syrian Asylum Applications in Europe

Over 1 million Syrians have arrived in Europe seeking international protection, approximately 10% of those who have fled the conflict. However, this number is increasing. In 2014, 137,947 Syrians registered for asylum in European countries. In 2015 a further 675,652 applications for asylum were made.

57% of these asylum applications were made in Serbia and Germany (the expectation being that applications made in Serbia would result in asylum in Germany). 31% of the applications were made in Sweden, Hungary, Austria, Netherlands and Bulgaria. The remaining 12% were spread across the other 30 European countries that report to the UNHCR. Due to the sometimes chaotic nature of this migration, the UNHCR attempts to limit these figures to first time asylum applications only. However, some of the statistics are likely to include repeated applications in the same or different countries.

Migration routes

Migrants have been crossing to Europe across the Mediterranean for decades. The most popular route in the early 2000s was from West Africa to Spain, including its North African territories of Ceuta and Melilla, and the Canary Islands, with some 32,000 irregular arrivals in 2006. This figure had dwindled to just 5,443 by 2011.

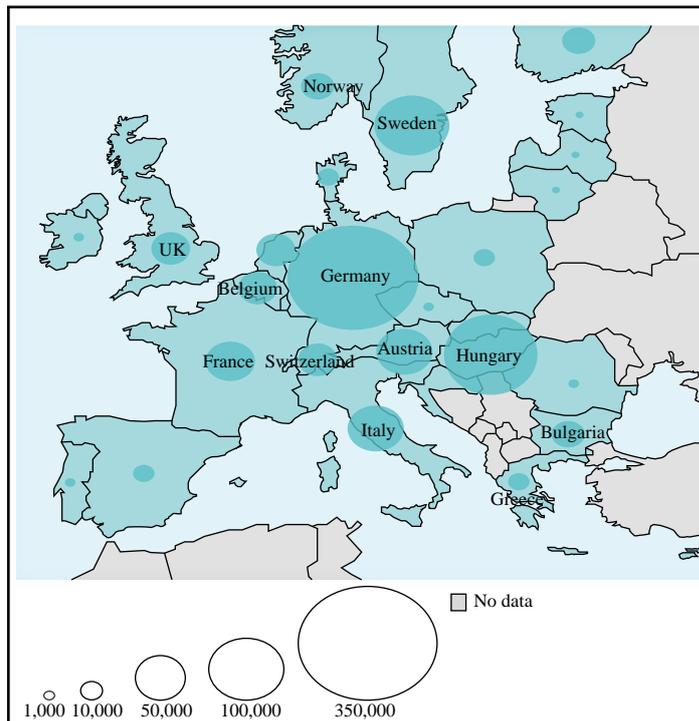
The central Mediterranean route experienced a surge in traffic after the 2011 conflict in Libya. UNHCR estimated 61,000 irregular migrants used this route in 2011 alone. However, since the escalation in the migration from Syria, the main route has become from Turkey to Greece by sea, and onwards to Europe through the Balkans. This route is shown in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5. Balkan migration route to Europe (Source: UNHCR)



In 2015, 1,014,836 migrants arrived in Europe by sea. Of these, 856,726 came via the Balkan route. Migrants make the shortest possible sea journey from Turkey to Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. This is an irregular migration and holds great risk because the boats used are overcrowded and inappropriate for the distance travelled. The six main destination islands are Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros, Kos and Agathonisi. 56% of these migrants have come from Syria, 21% from Afghanistan, and 10% from Iraq.

Figure 6. Asylum Claims in Europe in 2015 (Source: BBC)



As Figure 6 shows, the majority of migrants are headed for Germany. This is because in August 2015 Angela Merkel said all Syrians could apply for asylum, and wouldn't be sent back to the first safe country they landed in. Germany was already taking a substantial number of refugees. Sweden has had a similar policy of welcoming Syrian migrants since 2013. However, due to the route through the Balkans, many migrants are claiming asylum in countries like Hungary. The ratio of asylum applications to local population is shown in Figure 7 below. Therefore, although they are not taking the greatest number, it could be argued that migration is having a bigger impact on countries like Hungary, Sweden and Austria.

Case Study: Lesbos (Lesbos)

Between 1 January and 30 November 2015, 441,081 of the 747,981 migrants that arrived in Greece by sea came via Lesbos. During November 2015 there were an average of 3,450 new arrivals per day. This is equal to 50% of the total migration flow. Incidents at sea have become more frequent. Official figures from the Hellenic Coast Guard indicate 199 dead people and 110 missing as of 30 November 2015.

Distressed boats are rescued daily. This is placing huge pressure on the island's reception capacity of 3,800 individuals with over 5,000 needing shelter every day. On Lesbos, the Moria registration site has been hosting more than 2,000 migrants and over 700 have stayed at the Kara Tepe registration and temporary accommodation site. Another 3,800 have found shelter at Pikpa, the assembly point in North Lesbos and at Mytilene port.

When migrants have registered on the Greek Islands they are given permits to travel to the Greek mainland. From there they pass through the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to Serbia. Migrants were able to cross from Serbia to Hungary, and hence into Austria and Germany, until mid-October 2015.

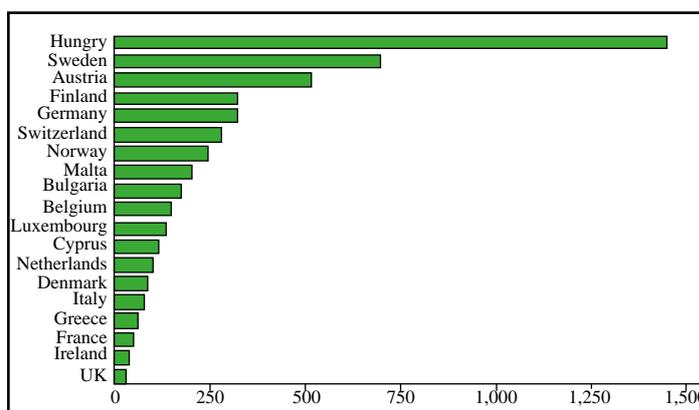
At this point, the Hungarian border was effectively closed. The daily rate of arrivals dropped from 8,700 on 12 October to 22 on 19 October. The migration route now transferred to Croatia and Slovenia. In September, numbers using this route had been negligible. In October, they became very significant very quickly. For example, on 24 October 11,570 were registered entering Croatia.

Migrant destinations

The vast majority of migrants are seeking asylum in the EU. According to the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is a person who is outside their own country's territory owing to fear of persecution. The EU launched a common asylum policy in 1990 with the Dublin Convention.

The aim was to stop multiple applications in countries throughout the Schengen area (passport free travel within the EU). The policy is for refugees to seek asylum in the first EU country that they arrive in. However, the majority arrive in Greece and Italy first, but they don't want stay there. Neither can these countries cope with the numbers. As a result, the Convention is breaking down. For example, on 24 August 2015, Germany decided to suspend the Dublin Regulation as regards Syrian refugees and to process their asylum applications directly itself.

Figure 7. Asylum application in EU countries relative to population size



EU response

Tensions in the EU have been rising because of the disproportionate burden faced by some countries, particularly Greece, Italy and Hungary where migrants have been arriving by boat and overland.

In September, EU ministers voted by a majority to relocate 120,000 refugees EU-wide, but for now the plan will only apply to 66,000 who are in Italy and Greece. The UK has opted out of any plans for a quota system but, according to Home Office figures, 1,000 Syrian refugees have been resettled under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme.

Prime Minister David Cameron has said the UK will accept up to 20,000 refugees from Syria over the next five years.

Case Study: Hungarian Response

The influx of migrants to the EU over the Serbian-Hungarian border has been very controversial in Hungary. The Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, has taken a tough approach to the migrant crisis. His comments describing the situation as “Germany’s problem,” and insisting that Hungarians have “the right not to live together with populous Muslim communities,” drew strong criticism from EU politicians. As a result, his government has built a fence along the whole Serbian border to prevent migrants from entering the country. Migrants must now enter through official checkpoints and claim asylum in Hungary in accordance with international and European law. The migrants, who mainly wanted to claim asylum in Germany, Austria or Sweden, tried to travel through Croatia instead. Croatia responded by leading the migrants back to its border with Hungary. Hungary then started the construction of a second fence along its border with Croatia.

The EU is now improving border security along the Balkan route. Through Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Denmark and Sweden, the welcome is cooling, the checks are getting tougher, and people are being turned back. Those fleeing conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq are supposed to be allowed through. Everyone else is being stopped. However, many who are not from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq are now trying to get through with forged papers. Greece keeps no exact figures of how many are turned back at its northern border. It has no real policy to deal with the problem, and little capacity to stop determined people. But growing numbers are seeking to pass and smuggling is on the rise in response to increased border security.

The EU is asking Turkey to stem the flow of migrants in exchange for £2.2 billion of financial assistance and visa-free travel for Turkish citizens in parts of Europe. The deal is designed to improve life for migrants living in Turkey, so they do not want to migrate to the EU. However, Amnesty International says that refugees and asylum-seekers are being illegally sent back to Syria and Iraq.

In the meantime checkpoints, border patrols and fences are springing up in different parts of Europe. Border identity checks have been introduced on the Oresund Bridge linking Sweden and Denmark for the first time since 1958. Denmark has introduced checks on its border with Germany. Austria is reinforcing its border. Italy is considering controls on its border with Slovenia. Hungary is helping Macedonia to build a fence. These are being described as temporary, but Chancellor Merkel of Germany has said that the passport-free zone, guaranteed by the Schengen agreement, can only work “if there is joint responsibility for protecting the external borders”.

Case Study: German Response

Germany has a quota system which redistributes asylum seekers around its federal states based on their tax income and existing population density. North Rhineland Westphalia and Bavaria take the most with 21% and 15% respectively. Poorer regions such as Pomerania in North East Germany take far fewer, currently 2%. The recent influx has caused a mini-political earthquake in Germany. Merkel’s approval rating slipped to 54% in December 2015 - down from 71% in January 2016. There have been high-profile and large Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West) demonstrations against the arrival of Muslim refugees. These have mostly been held in Dresden. Die Linke, a left-wing German political party, has actively welcomed migrants, alongside many local charities and volunteers. They have seen opposition from AfD - Alternative for Germany - a right-wing group which is cynical about the entry of so many refugees. It is safe to say that German public opinion is very divided about the influx of migrants. One recent event has crystallised the debate. On New Year’s Eve more than 500 cases of violence were recorded in Cologne. The majority were reported as being carried out by a large group of young men of Middle Eastern and Arab origin. Some asylum seekers included. It does not appear that the crime rate among asylum seekers is higher than among similar groups in the native population. However, the high profile event has fuelled the suspicion - now widely held - that the German establishment is not telling the truth about migration and its impacts and there have been some very ugly incidents of arson of proposed refugee accommodation.

Conclusion

The Syrian conflict has triggered the world’s largest humanitarian crisis since World War II. This is happening at the same time as conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as endemic poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa, parts of the Middle East and Central Asia. There is an unprecedented migration occurring as a result, with people seeking safety and a better life outside the troubled countries. The main migration has been to neighbouring countries in the region, such as Turkey and Lebanon. However, the quality of life for migrants here can be terrible. As a result, 2015 saw a large increase in migration to the EU via the Balkan route. Some countries like Germany have been more welcoming to migrants than other countries such as Hungary. Nevertheless, the scale of the migration and its economic and cultural challenges are leading to increasing restrictions being put in place. It does not appear that the conflict is likely to end soon, so it is likely that the migration will continue. The resultant pressures are reshaping the politics and economy of the Middle East and Europe. The immediate future for the migrants and their source and host countries looks very uncertain.

Activities

1. Keep a diary of news stories for a month recording updates to the migration story, both host and source regions.
2. List the evidence in this article to show why the migration is taking place. Categorise the evidence as push and pull factors.

Further research

UNHCR – data on migration through the Mediterranean

<http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>

FRONTEX – Frontex is the EU border force.

<http://frontex.europa.eu/>

BBC News In depth Reports on the Migrant Crisis

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-32395181>

Economist April 18th 2015. Briefing Europe’s Boat People

Acknowledgements;

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