



Europe’s Refugee and Migration Flows

Mixed Migration to Europe

Over the past several years, Europe has experienced significant refugee and migrant flows as people have fled conflict and poverty in bordering regions. Although 2015 is considered the height of the crisis, refugee and migrant arrivals have continued (see **Table 1**). The war in Syria has created millions of refugees in neighboring countries and driven some to leave for Europe. Other refugees and migrants originate from elsewhere in the Middle East, as well as Afghanistan, Africa, South Asia, and some Western Balkan countries. Experts characterize these flows as *mixed migration*, defined as different groups of people—such as economic migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, trafficked persons, and unaccompanied children—who travel the same routes and use the same modes of transportation (see text box). Many of these individuals do not have the required documentation, such as passports and visas, and often use smugglers and unauthorized border crossings.

The flows have challenged European governments and the European Union (EU). The distinctions between groups in the mixed migration flows have raised questions about determination of status and rights. A key policy consideration is whether the movement is viewed as voluntary or forced. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) asserts that many of the arrivals are from refugee-producing countries and require due process for asylum claims. Many also need humanitarian and protection assistance. At the same time, some of those seeking to enter Europe may be economic migrants.

Mixed migration flows may include groups such as

Economic migrants, who are largely trying to escape poverty and seek a better life. They do so legally or illegally, for the long term or temporarily. In theory, these migrants would receive the protection of their government should they return home.

Refugees, who have fled their country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social or political group. Refugees are unwilling or unable to avail themselves of the protection of their home government due to fears of persecution. Once granted refugee status, a person has certain legal rights and protections under international law.

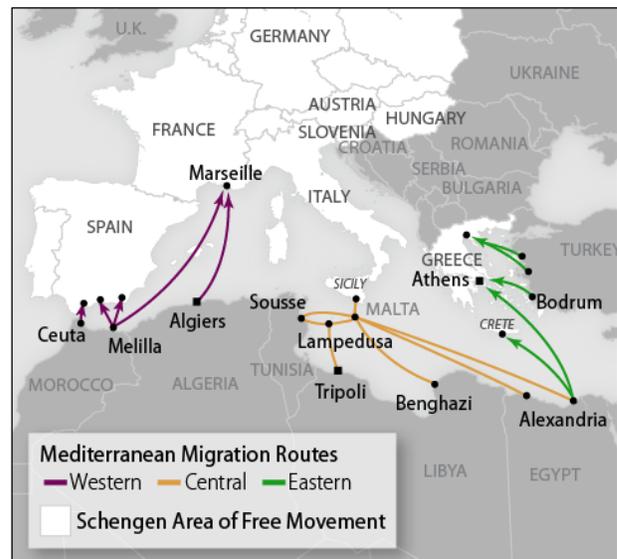
Asylum-seekers, who flee their home country and seek sanctuary in another state where they apply for asylum (i.e., the right to be recognized as a refugee). Asylum-seekers may receive legal protection and assistance while their formal status is determined.

Stateless persons, who are not considered to be citizens of any state under national laws.

Routes, Flows, and Arrival Profiles

Refugees and migrants travel various routes to reach Europe, and the routes often shift in use and popularity. As seen in **Figure 1**, several routes cross the western, central, and eastern Mediterranean Sea. Greece and Italy have been major arrival and transit points for years, and Spain has seen an uptick in arrivals since 2017. There are land routes via Turkey and the Balkans and along eastern borders with Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia.

Figure 1. Main Mediterranean Sea Migration Routes



Source: Graphic created by CRS, based on information from *The Economist*, *New York Times*, UNHCR, and Frontex.

Reportedly, significant numbers of refugees and migrants arriving in Greece come from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, whereas a majority of those arriving in Italy and Spain are from African countries. Although the main surge in arrivals occurred in 2015, the estimated number of dead or missing was highest in 2016. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that many of those who have perished in the Mediterranean were from Africa.

Table 1. Estimated Refugee/Migrant Flows to Europe

Year	Sea Arrivals	Land Arrivals	Dead/Missing
2014	216,054	Not available	3,538
2015	1,015,078	34,887	3,771
2016	362,753	24,388	5,096
2017	161,338	10,550	3,049
2018	116,711	24,800	2,277

Source: UNHCR, IOM.

Many refugees and migrants are eager to reach European countries that belong to the Schengen area of free movement, which allows travel without passport checks among 26 participating states. Germany and Sweden traditionally have been preferred final destinations due to perceptions that they are more likely to grant asylum and provide better welfare benefits.

Asylum Claims

As seen in **Table 2**, asylum claims in the EU spiked in 2015 and 2016 but have since decreased to pre-crisis levels.

Table 2. First-Time Asylum Applications in the EU

2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
562,700	1,256,600	1,206,000	654,600	580,800

Source: Eurostat.

Some 80% of asylum claims in the fourth quarter of 2018 were in six EU countries: Germany (24%), France (21%), Greece (13%), Spain (10%), the UK (7%), and Italy (6%). On average in the EU, 90% of Syrians and 80% of Eritreans qualified for asylum or subsidiary protection, as did over 50% of Afghans, Sudanese, and Somalis, and roughly 40% of Iraqis and Iranians. The majority of asylum claims from people from other African countries, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Western Balkans were rejected.

EU Responses and Challenges

For years, the EU has sought to develop a comprehensive migration and asylum policy, but progress has been slow because of national sovereignty concerns and sensitivities about minorities and integration. As a result, policies vary widely across the EU. Germany and Sweden have accepted hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees since 2015, but other EU countries—especially in Central and Eastern Europe—have been less welcoming. The EU has attempted to address the flows through a range of initiatives, but the flows have posed humanitarian and security challenges, strained the Schengen system, and divided the EU.

By March 2016, EU efforts began to focus on discouraging people from undertaking the journey to Europe. EU leaders agreed to end the “wave-through approach,” which allowed individuals arriving in Greece to transit the Western Balkans to seek asylum in other EU countries. The EU also concluded a deal with Turkey in which Turkey agreed to take back irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greece in exchange for substantial EU financial assistance and other concessions. The accord with Turkey and similar EU efforts in 2017 to work with the U.N.-backed Libyan government are credited with helping reduce the flows. Such measures, however, remain controversial on human rights grounds and fragile given heightened EU-Turkish tensions and instability in Libya. In late 2017, the EU began assisting refugees and migrants facing abuse in Libyan detention centers with repatriation to their country of origin, or, for those unable to return, with resettlement elsewhere.

Other EU steps since 2015 to address the flows include enhanced EU maritime missions in the Mediterranean and cooperation with NATO to save lives and combat human trafficking; establishment of EU facilities (or *hotspots*) in

the “frontline” countries of Italy and Greece to help register refugees and migrants; efforts to strengthen external EU border controls and bolster Frontex (the EU’s border and coast guard agency); and initiatives to address the root causes of migration, especially in Africa. The EU also has worked to resettle refugees from outside the EU and to relocate some asylum-seekers from Greece and Italy to other EU countries for asylum processing.

Despite the decrease in refugee and migrant arrivals since 2016, many EU governments face domestic pressure for policies largely aimed at curbing future flows. Among other measures, the EU is considering establishing regional disembarkation platforms outside the EU to assess asylum claims for people saved at sea. This proposal is controversial both within and outside the EU amid questions about its feasibility and legality. The EU would have to persuade non-EU countries to participate, and some African countries do not appear inclined to do so. Revising EU asylum processing rules to relieve some of the burden on frontline states is also contentious. In 2018, Italy began turning away some ships with rescued refugees and migrants, asserting that other EU countries must be willing to accept more individuals for asylum processing.

International Humanitarian Response

UNHCR is working closely with the EU, national governments, and local authorities to assess humanitarian and protection needs and provide support. Other international humanitarian organizations and entities are also assisting the displaced. Even as overall numbers of refugee and migrant arrivals fall, reports of people smuggling; trafficking networks; unaccompanied children; abuses (including sexual violence, torture, abductions); and deaths persist. With limited oversight and legal protection, UNHCR and others argue the flow of arrivals cannot be exported to other countries. Experts say there is a need for increased resettlement, safe and legal mechanisms for arrivals, greater access to asylum procedures at borders, and better protection in neighboring countries.

Issues for the United States

Many U.S. officials and Members of Congress view the refugee and migrant flows to Europe as a potential threat to the region’s stability and a key challenge facing the EU. U.S. concerns also have centered on the risk that terrorists could enter Europe as part of the flows. The United States has supported NATO maritime missions and NATO-EU cooperation in the Mediterranean, and U.S. and EU officials traditionally have worked together on global refugee and migration concerns. In 2018, U.N. member states adopted a Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and a Global Compact on Refugees. The United States withdrew from both compacts during the negotiation phase. The U.S. worldwide refugee ceiling was set at 110,000 in FY2017, 45,000 in FY2018, and 30,000 in FY2019.

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