



Europe's Migration Crisis

Mixed Migration to Europe

Mixed migration has become a pattern in several regions across the globe, including Europe. Mixed migration refers to flows of various groups of people—such as economic migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, trafficked persons, and unaccompanied children—who travel the same route and use the same modes of transportation (see text box). Sometimes termed irregular migrants, such individuals do not have the required documentation such as passports and visas, and may use smugglers and unauthorized border crossings.

There are numerous mixed migration routes into Europe, both over land and by sea. As seen in **Figure 1**, sea routes cross the western, central, and eastern Mediterranean Sea. Greece and Italy (including the islands of Sicily and Lampedusa) are major points of arrival and transit, with many people seeking to travel onward to northern Europe, where they believe they are more likely to be granted asylum and receive better welfare benefits.

Figure 1. Main Mediterranean Sea Migration Routes



Source: Graphic created by CRS, based on information from “Everything You Want to Know About Migration Across the Mediterranean,” *The Economist*, May 4, 2015.

Land routes into Europe include those via Turkey and the Western Balkans, and along borders in the east with the countries of Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia. Many migrants and asylum-seekers are eager to reach European countries that belong to the Schengen area, which allows individuals to travel without passport checks among 26 participating states.

Recently, more people have been trying to cross the Mediterranean, using both the central route in the Strait of Sicily and increasingly, in 2015, the eastern route to Greece. Although it is impossible to know exactly how many individuals have attempted to cross, estimates from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicate a significant upward trend. In 2013, 60,000 refugees and migrants are thought to have made the journey. In 2014, nearly 219,000 did so. By late June 2015, 137,000 people reportedly had reached southern Europe by boat (with the vast majority arriving in Italy and Greece). Fatalities are also growing, from roughly 600 people in 2013 to 3,500 in 2014. Of the more than 1,800 believed to have died in the first half of 2015, over 1,000 perished in two shipwrecks within the span of a week in April 2015.

With the war in Syria in its fifth year, and with over 4 million refugees in neighboring countries, more Syrians are trying to move to Europe by sea via Libya. Many Syrians have also tried to reach Greece and Bulgaria via Turkey. So far in 2015, Syrians make up the largest group by nationality crossing the Mediterranean, followed by Eritreans and Afghans. Many of the others originate from Iraq, Somalia, Nigeria, Sudan, and elsewhere in Africa.

The lines of distinction between groups in mixed migration flows have raised questions about determination of status and protection required. A key policy consideration is whether the movement is voluntary or forced. While some migrants may choose to leave their place of origin, refugees and others may be forced to do so because of armed conflict, ethnic strife, human rights violations, or natural disasters, among other reasons. UNHCR asserts that most of those arriving in Europe by sea are refugees.

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

Refugees are individuals 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 are people 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. They may receive legal protection and assistance while their formal status is determined.

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

Growing Asylum Claims

The number of individuals seeking asylum in the 28-member European Union (EU) has been increasing steadily. According to EU statistics, asylum applications have grown from 225,000 in 2008 to 431,000 in 2013 and almost 626,000 in 2014. Some 80% of asylum claims in the first quarter of 2015 were concentrated in five EU countries: Germany (40%), Hungary (18%), Italy (8%), France (8%), and Sweden (6%). Key countries of origin include Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ukraine, Kosovo, and Iraq.

Under current EU rules governing responsibility for asylum applications (known as the “Dublin regulation”), the first EU member state an asylum-seeker enters is usually responsible for examining that individual’s application. If an asylum-seeker travels to another member state, he or she may be transferred back to the member state of arrival. The recent surge in irregular migration to Europe has generated frictions between “frontline” states, which argue that they are overburdened, and other EU countries, which charge that some “frontline” authorities are not properly processing asylum applications and essentially allowing migrants and refugees to leave and seek asylum elsewhere in the EU.

EU Responses and Challenges

For many years, the EU has sought to develop a common immigration and asylum policy, but progress has been slow because of national sovereignty concerns and sensitivities about minorities, integration, and identity. The rising death toll in the Mediterranean in the first few months of 2015 and the increase in asylum-seekers has prompted new EU initiatives both to address the current crisis and to better manage migration to the EU in the longer term. Some proposals, however, have produced considerable divisions among member states—especially between those on the “frontlines” of the Mediterranean crisis in the south and those farther north and east—and raised serious questions about EU solidarity. Immediate EU efforts have focused on:

- **Saving Lives.** In late April 2015, the EU tripled the funding and assets for EU maritime patrol operations Triton (in the central Mediterranean) and Poseidon (in the eastern Mediterranean). Both are led by Frontex, the EU’s border management agency. Established in late 2014, Triton replaced Mare Nostrum, an Italian mission credited with saving up to 150,000 at sea and arresting over 300 human smugglers over the previous year. With fewer ships and aerial capabilities, a smaller budget, and a more limited operational area, Triton was criticized as being far less effective than Mare Nostrum. According to UNHCR, the EU’s decision to strengthen its operations in the Mediterranean helped decrease fatalities significantly in May and June 2015.
- **Protecting Refugees and Improving Burden-Sharing.** In May 2015, the European Commission (the EU’s executive) called for

relocating 40,000 Syrian and Eritrean asylum-seekers currently in Italy and Greece, and resettling 20,000 refugees, throughout the EU. Several EU governments, however, objected to the proposed mandatory distribution scheme and preferred a voluntary program. EU member states have committed to the relocation and resettlement plans, but leaders will decide “by consensus” how to distribute those eligible among EU countries.

- **Stopping Migrant Smugglers.** In late June 2015, the EU launched the first, intelligence-gathering phase of EUNAVFOR Med, a new security mission aimed at dismantling human trafficking networks by patrolling the high seas for smugglers and ultimately seizing and disposing of their vessels. However, it is unlikely that the EU will fully implement these operational plans without U.N. Security Council approval (which has been elusive because of objections from Russia and others) and the consent of the coastal states concerned (discussions with Libya have been difficult in the absence of a united government).

Longer-term EU priorities include: improving EU rates of return for failed asylum-seekers and illegal migrants; ensuring the full implementation of EU asylum rules (especially by promoting the systematic identification and fingerprinting of all asylum-seekers); and developing a new policy on legal migration to attract skilled migrants. Nevertheless, as the EU seeks to forge a more coherent and robust response to the influx of migrants and asylum-seekers, it will likely continue to struggle with equitable burden-sharing arrangements and the dual imperatives of maintaining security and protecting human rights. Europe’s financial difficulties and the growing popularity of anti-immigrant political parties throughout Europe may also constrain EU responses.

U.S. Concerns

U.S. officials are concerned about the crisis in the Mediterranean, viewing it as a potential threat to both regional and European security. U.S. and EU policymakers have agreed to expand dialogue on mixed migration and voluntary resettlement programs (especially in response to the Syrian crisis), and on possible joint initiatives to increase protections to persons most in need. Some U.S. officials also worry that Islamist terrorists could enter Europe illegally on migrant boats, noting that Italian authorities arrested a young Moroccan man—who may have traveled to Italy on a migrant ship—in relation to the March 2015 terrorist attack on a museum in Tunisia.

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