

Syria & the Refugee Crisis



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Four and a half years into the Syrian civil war, millions are being displaced, hundreds of thousands killed, and cities and historic sites destroyed as numerous rebel and pro-government forces seek dominance in this Middle Eastern country. Both sides have committed war crimes, including murder, torture, rape, abductions, chemical attacks, and blocking of services and aid to civilians.

The conflict began in 2011 when President Assad responded harshly to pro-democracy protests and used the military to suppress ongoing demonstrations. By the end of the year, the Free Syria Army was battling against Assad's government. The conflict was soon complicated by sectarianism as Assad's Shia-linked government positioned itself against Sunni insurgents, including the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front. The United States backs some of the insurgent forces that oppose Assad, and also conducts airstrikes against the Islamic State in Syria (and in Iraq). The U.S. has long disagreed with Assad's stance against Israel and his vocal opposition to the influence of the West in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Assad has received support from Iran and Russia. Iran has long funded Hezbollah, the Shia Islamist militant group and political party based in Lebanon that supplies fighters for Assad. Russia provides war materiel and conducts airstrikes against rebel groups, and has recently announced its intention to send volunteer ground troops into Syria in order to further bolster Assad's regime and increase Russia's influence in the Middle East. Fighters on all side are wreaking havoc on the country.

A full half of Syria's population has been displaced, with four million refugees looking for safety and opportunity abroad. The majority of Syrian refugees have landed, at least temporarily, in nearby countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, where the refugees make up a very high percentage of the local population. Indeed, nearly one in four Lebanese is a recent refugee. Many other refugees are searching for opportunity in Europe. Compounding the issue is that Syria is not the only place churning out refugees. Between three to four hundred thousand people this year have entered Europe after dangerous land and water crossings. In addition to Syrians, these are

refugees from Afghanistan, a country also torn by long-term conflict and instability; and from Eritrea, an East African country known for its repressive government and violence; as well as from other countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

There is some debate regarding who is a refugee and who is a migrant. Only someone who is seeking to escape war or persecution is allowed to apply for refugee status, and according to international agreements, cannot be deported. This international law was established in 1951 at the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, convened in the wake of the tremendous population upheaval caused by World War II. An estimated forty million people were displaced within Europe in 1945, and refugee camps did not close until 1960. Approximately thirty million Chinese became displaced between 1937-1945 while the country fought Japan. And of course there were millions more displaced in the many countries involved in World War II. Any war, but especially a global war, has devastating and far-reaching effects on civilian life.

Today, European countries have not reached consensus on what sort of measures to adopt to accommodate the newcomers. Refugees meet a spectrum of responses in Europe, from a general welcome in Germany, to Hungary's border fences, tear gas, and water cannons. At least part of Hungary's aversion to these refugees is the fear that the new arrivals will negatively impact the region's "Christian character." European countries face the reality that so many new residents of non-European heritage will alter social, cultural and religious norms. At the same time, most European nations are experiencing negative natural increase, or very minor population growth. This population challenge means that Europe needs additional laborers in order to help fund social security programs and support the overall economy.

There will be numerous challenges incorporating these Syrians, Afghans, and others into Europe. Differences in language, religion, schooling and social customs may not even be the hardest transitions to make. Refugees fleeing countries that have been wracked by years of violence and upheaval are no doubt traumatized by their experiences. As these refugees seek security, their interests and needs may very well look different from those of the average European citizen, and the process of acclimation could be drawn-out and not entirely smooth. But their distinct skills and attributes may also diversify and broaden their adopted country in ways that can bring enduring economic and social benefits. Not all refugees will remain abroad permanently; some will undoubtedly return to their homeland once conditions improve. But it is impossible to tell whether or when these countries in turmoil and war will find stability.

-Shelley Brooks, Ph.D., CHSSP Statewide Office

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A brief timeline on refugees:

The history of refugees begins well before the twentieth century, and is essentially as old as warfare. The list below is far from comprehensive, but is meant to provide some historical context for considering today's refugee crisis.

1938: Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees created in recognition of the need for a coordinated approach to displaced people. World War I (1914-18) had caused numerous displacements, notably among Armenians, Serbians, and Belgians.

1945: WWII ends; 40 million people displaced within Europe, 30 million Chinese displaced, among many others

1946: International Refugee Organization created

1950: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees created

1951: UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees declares that no refugee can be forcibly returned to home country

1979-1989: Soviet Union occupies Afghanistan, leading to a drawn-out war that creates millions of Afghani refugees

1980-present: Iran-Iraq War is the beginning of a long-term refugee problem for Iraq, compounded by

the Iraq War starting in 2003 and the Islamic State's current activity in Iraq

1991-2001: Yugoslav Wars create waves of refugees, including half of Bosnia's population

1994: More than two million people flee Rwanda during Hutu genocide of Tutsis

2001-present: U.S. military operations in Afghanistan against the Taliban lead to steady numbers of refugees leaving Afghanistan

2003-present: War in Sudan displaces two and a half million people

2011-present: Syrian civil war displaces half of Syrian population and creates four million refugees

2014-present: Fighting in eastern Ukraine leads to over one million people internally displaced within the country, and close to one million refugees

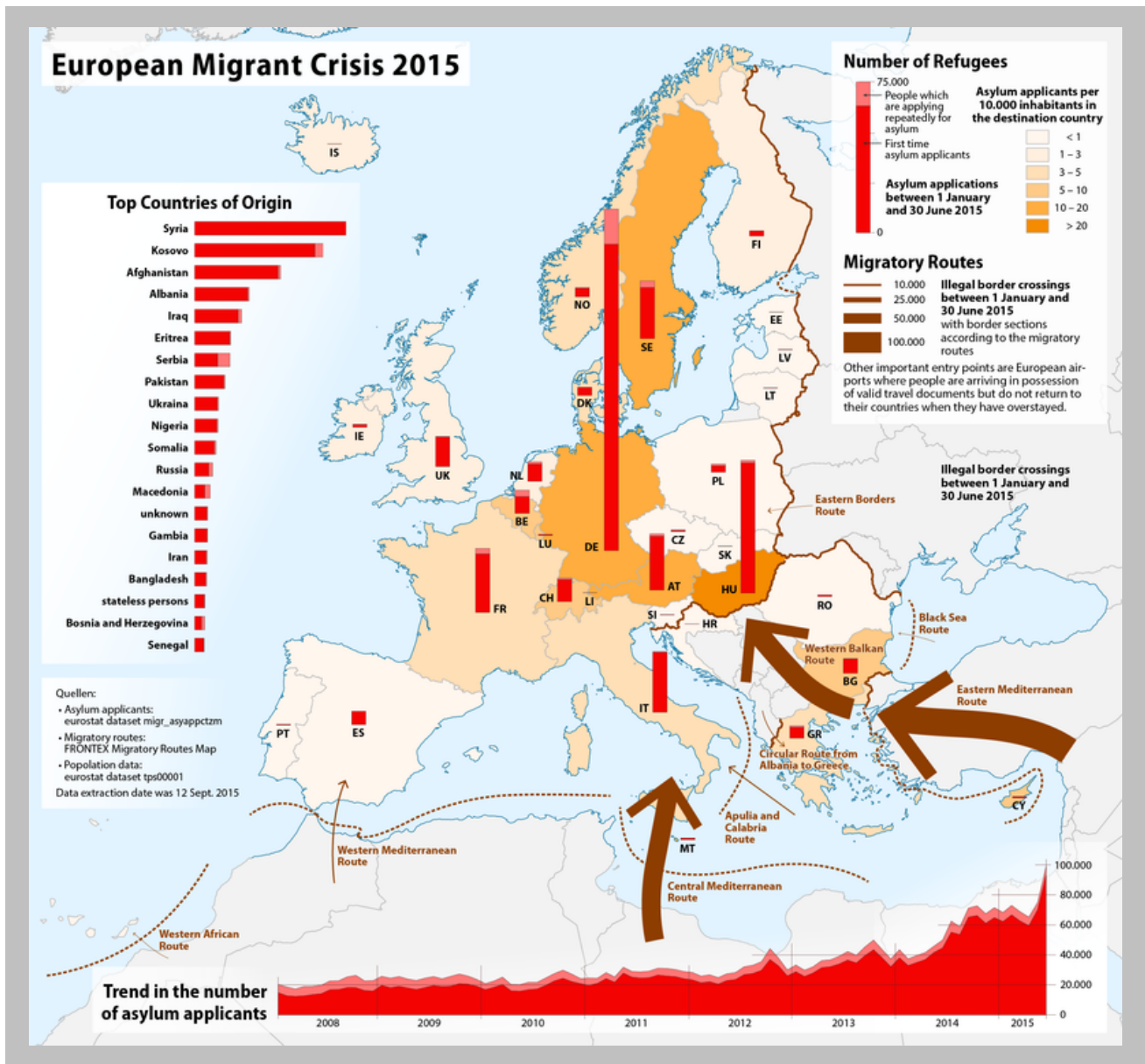
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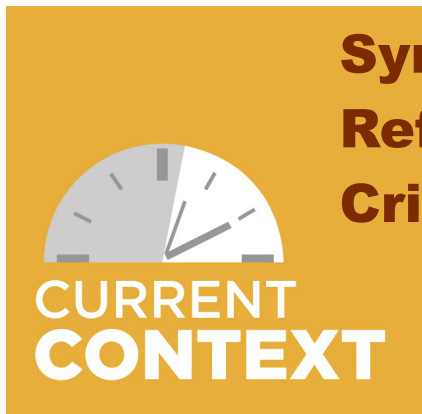
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Applicants seeking refugee status in Europe from January - June 2015

- Red bars indicate numbers of applicants
- Shaded areas represent the number of refugees in relation to population



Map from Wikimedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#/media/File:Map_of_the_European_Migrant_Crisis_2015.png



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CHSSP Teaching Blog: <http://chssp.ucdavis.edu/blog/examining-european-responses-to-the-refugee-crisis>

Additional Resources*

- BBC News on migration <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24583286> & <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34332759>
- The New York Times on migration <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/28/world/migrants-refugees-europe-syria.html>
- The Guardian on Eritrean refugees <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/apr/21/escaping-eritrea-migrant-if-i-die-at-sea-at-least-i-wont-be-tortured>
- Vox on refugees <http://www.vox.com/2015/9/9/9290985/refugee-crisis-europe-syrian>
- The Atlantic on refugees <http://www.theatlantic.com/notes/all/2015/08/the-global-refugee-crisis/402718/>
- The New York Times on Russian involvement in Syria http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/world/europe/nato-russia-warplane-turkey.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=first-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0
- The Wall Street Journal on U.S. involvement in Syria <http://www.wsj.com/articles/conflicting-agendas-caution-beset-pentagon-plans-in-syria-1443997392>
- BBC News timeline on Syrian conflict <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>
- The Guardian on the history of refugees <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/interactive/2013/jul/25/what-happened-history-refugees#Israelites>

*The resources listed above are provided for further research and do not imply an endorsement by the California History-Social Science Project or the University of California.