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## CFR Backgrounders

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### Europe's Migration Crisis

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#### Introduction

Migrants flooding into Europe from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia have presented European leaders and policymakers with their greatest challenge since the [debt crisis](#). The International Organization for Migration calls Europe [the most dangerous destination](#) for irregular migration in the world, and the Mediterranean the world's most dangerous border crossing. Yet despite the escalating human toll, the European Union's collective response to its migrant influx has been ad hoc and, critics charge, more focused on securing the bloc's borders than on protecting the rights of migrants and refugees. However, with nationalist parties ascendant in many member states, and concerns about Islamic terrorism looming large across the continent, it remains unclear if the bloc or its member states are capable of implementing lasting asylum and immigration reforms.

#### Where do these migrants and refugees come from?

Political upheaval in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia is reshaping migration trends in Europe. The number of illegal border-crossing detections in the EU started to surge in 2011, as thousands of Tunisians started to arrive at the Italian island of Lampedusa following the onset of the Arab Spring. Sub-Saharan Africans who had previously migrated to Libya followed in 2011–2012, fleeing unrest in the post-Qaddafi era. The most recent surge in detections along the EU's maritime borders has been attributed to the growing numbers of Syrian, Afghan, and Eritrean migrants and asylum seekers.

According to the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, approximately [58 percent \(PDF\)](#) of irregular migrants who crossed into Europe by sea in the first six months of 2015 came from Syria, Afghanistan, and Eritrea. Syrians fleeing their country's [four-year-old civil war](#) made up the largest group (34 percent). Afghans looking to escape the ongoing war with [Taliban](#) rebels (12 percent), and Eritreans fleeing [forced labor](#) (12 percent) made up the second and third largest groups of migrants. Deteriorating security and grinding poverty in Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia, and South Sudan have also contributed to the migrant influx.

#### What's the difference between a migrant and refugee?

Distinguishing migrants from asylum seekers and refugees is not always a clear-cut process, yet it is a crucial designation because these groups are entitled to different levels of assistance and

protection under international law.

An asylum seeker is defined as a person fleeing persecution or conflict, and therefore seeking international protection under the [1951 Refugee Convention on the Status of Refugees](#); a “refugee” is an asylum seeker whose claim has been approved. An “economic migrant,” by contrast, is a person whose primary motivation for leaving his or her home country is economic gain. The term “migrant” is seen as a neutral, umbrella term for all three groups. (Said another way: all refugees are migrants, but not all migrants are refugees.)

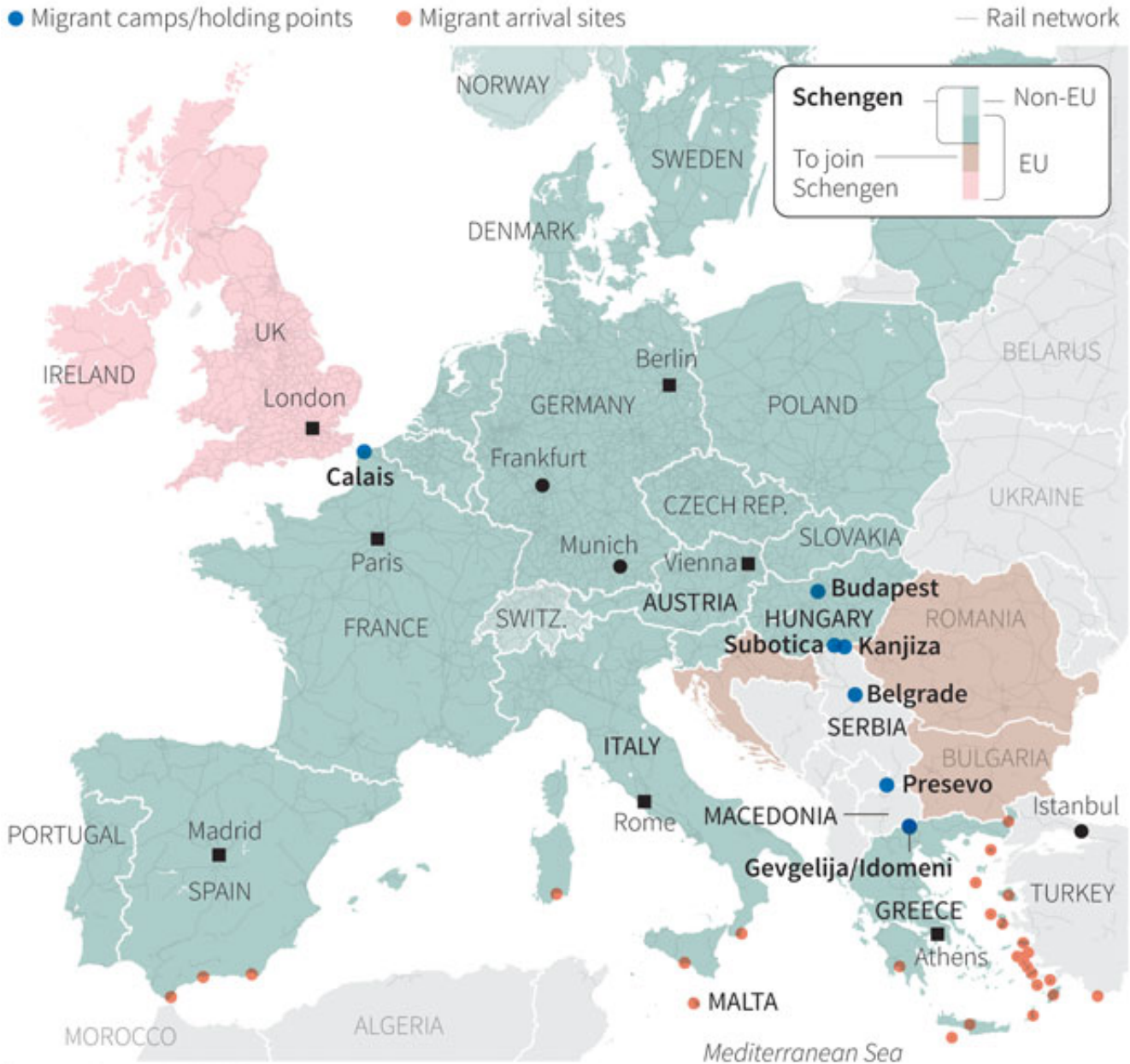
Europe is currently witnessing a [mixed-migration](#) influx, in which economic migrants and asylum seekers travel together. In reality, these groups can and do overlap, and this gray area is frequently exacerbated by the [inconsistent methods](#) with which asylum applications are often processed across the EU's twenty-eight member states.

### **Which EU member states are on the frontlines?**

EU member states hardest hit by the economic crisis, like Greece and Italy, have also served as the main points of entry for migrants and refugees due to their proximity to the Mediterranean Basin. Shifting migratory patterns over the past year have also exposed countries like Hungary, situated on the EU's eastern border, to a sharp uptick in irregular migration.

# Europe's migrant crisis

Hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing wars and economic migrants escaping poverty have arrived in the European Union in an unprecedented wave. Nearly all first reach the EU's eastern and southern edges and then press on illegally for richer and more generous EU countries further north and west.



Sources: Reuters; UNHCR

Reuters

**Greece:** By 2012, [51 percent \(PDF\)](#) of migrants entering the EU illegally did so via Greece. This trend shifted in 2013 after Greek authorities [enhanced border controls](#) under Operation Aspida (or “Shield”), which included the construction of a barbed-wire fence at the Greek-Turkish border. But by July 2015, Greece had once again become the [preferred](#) Mediterranean entry point, with Frontex reporting 132,240 illegal EU border crossings for the first half of 2015, five times the number detected for the same period last year. Syrians and Afghans made up the "[lion's share](#)" of migrants traveling from Turkey to Greece (primarily to the Greek islands of Kos, Chios, Lesbos, and Samos) in the first seven months of 2015. This most recent migrant surge coincided

with the country's tumultuous [debt crisis](#), which brought down its banking system and government this summer.

**Italy:** The Central Mediterranean passage connecting Libya to Italy was the most trafficked route for Europe-bound migrants in 2014: Frontex reported more than [170,000](#) illegal border crossings into Italy. In October 2014, the country's [Mare Nostrum](#) search-and-rescue program, credited for saving more than 100,000 migrants, was replaced by Frontex's Triton program, a smaller border-control operation with a third of Mare Nostrum's operating budget. In April 2015, EU leaders tripled the budget for Frontex's Triton border patrol program to 9 million euros a month (\$9.9 million), but refused to broaden its scope to include search and rescue. While the number of illegal border crossings into Italy for the first half of 2015 remained high at 91,302, the rising death toll (the IOM [estimates](#) that more than two thousand people died along this route in 2015) and the deteriorating security situation in Libya have pushed many migrants to seek out alternate paths to Europe through Greece and the Balkans. [Ninety percent](#) of the migrants using this route in the first half of 2015 were from Eritrea, Nigeria, and sub-Saharan Africa.

**Hungary:** A growing number of Syrians and Afghans traveling from Turkey and Greece through Macedonia and Serbia have made this EU member state the latest frontline in Europe's migration crisis. (A growing number of citizens from Kosovo traveling through Serbia also contributed to Hungary's migrant influx this year.) From January to July 2015, Frontex reported 102,342 illegal crossings into Hungary. This surge prompted Prime Minister Viktor Orban to erect a [barbed-wire fence](#) on the border with Serbia in July 2015. In April 2015, a [public opinion survey \(PDF\)](#) found that 46 percent of polled Hungarians believed that no asylum seeker should be allowed to enter Hungary at all. Stranded migrants, barred from boarding westbound trains, effectively transformed Budapest's Keleti station into a [makeshift refugee camp](#) in September 2015.

### **What is the Dublin Regulation?**

Entry-point states bear unilateral responsibility for migrants under the [Dublin Regulation \(PDF\)](#). Revised in 2013, this EU law stipulates that asylum seekers must remain in the first European country they enter and that country is solely responsible for examining migrants' asylum applications. Migrants who travel to other EU states face deportation back to the EU country they originally entered.

Many policymakers agree that reforming the Dublin Regulation is an important step to establishing a [common European asylum policy](#). Under the current system, the burden of responsibility falls disproportionately on entry-point states with exposed borders. In practice, however, many of these frontline countries have already stopped enforcing Dublin and allow migrants to pass through to secondary destinations in the north or west of the EU. [Germany and Sweden](#) currently receive and grant the overwhelming majority of asylum applications in the EU.

"Both the burden and the sharing are in the eye of the beholder. I don't know if any EU country will ever find the equity that is being sought," says Center for Strategic and International Studies Senior Fellow Heather Conley.

### **What conditions do these migrants face in Europe?**

Migrant detention centers across the continent, including in [France](#), [Greece](#), and [Italy](#) have all



invited charges of abuse and neglect over the years. Many rights groups contend that a number of these detention centers [violate Article III \(PDF\)](#) of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits inhuman or degrading treatment.

*"The risk of securitizing migration is that you risk legitimizing extraordinary responses."  
—Khalid Koser, Brookings Institution*

“We used to think of migration as a human security issue: protecting people and providing assistance,” says Brookings Institution’s Senior Fellow [Khalid Koser](#). “Now we clearly perceive—or misperceive—migration as a national security issue. And the risk of securitizing migration is that you risk legitimizing extraordinary responses.”

In Italy, migrants face [fines and deportation](#) under the controversial Bossi-Fini immigration law, which stipulates that migrants must secure work contracts before entering the country. This 2002 law makes illegal migration—and aiding illicit migrants—punishable by fine or jail. In Greece, the prolonged detention of migrants and asylum seekers, who are sometimes “[mixed in with criminal detainees](#),” has elicited repeated [censure](#) from rights groups. And in Hungary, a new series of [emergency laws](#) adopted in September 2015 will allow its police to operate detention centers, in addition to making illegal border crossings and aiding migrants punishable by prison time. The government is also debating the deployment of [armed troops](#) to its border.

Budgets for migration and asylum issues in many of these entry-point states hardest hit by the economic crisis have not kept up with growing demands and needs. In August 2015, the European Commission approved a [2.4 billion euro](#) (\$2.6 billion) emergency aid package, with 560 million euros (\$616 million) earmarked for Italy and 473 million euros (\$520 million) for Greece to subsidize their migrant-rescue efforts for the next six years. However, many policymakers say that these funds still fall short of the growing magnitude of the crisis.

In contrast, migrants in the richer north and west find comparatively well-run asylum centers and [generous resettlement policies](#). But these harder-to-reach countries often cater to migrants who have the wherewithal to navigate entry-point states or obtain expensive travel documents that ensure safe air passage with the assistance of smugglers. These countries still remain inaccessible to many migrants seeking international protection.

### **How has the European Union responded?**

As with the sovereign debt crisis, national interests have consistently trumped a common European response to this migrant influx. In June 2015, European leaders [rejected](#) a mandatory migrant quota system, and instead opted for a plan that called upon member states to voluntarily resettle [forty thousand migrants](#) from Greece and Italy over a two-year period. (In July 2015, the EU announced that it had [fallen short](#) of its target goal by almost eight thousand.)

Some experts say the bloc’s increasingly polarized political climate, in which many [nationalist](#), anti-immigrant parties are gaining traction, is partially to blame for the muted humanitarian response from some states. France and [Denmark](#) have also cited security concerns as justification for their reluctance in accepting migrants from the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in the wake of the [Paris](#) and [Copenhagen](#) terrorist shootings in early 2015.

*"Europe has historically embraced more ethnic than civic approaches to nationhood, unlike the United States, and that is part of the reason immigration is proving so difficult." —Charles Kupchan*

“The backdrop to this [migrant crisis] is the difficulty that many European countries have in integrating minorities into the social mainstream. Many of these immigrants are coming from Muslim countries, and the relationship between immigrant Muslim communities and the majority populations is not good,” says former CFR Senior Fellow Charles Kupchan.

Underscoring this point, leaders of eastern European states like Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic have all recently expressed a strong preference for [non-Muslim migrants](#). In August 2015, [Slovakia](#) announced that it would only accept Christian refugees from Syria. [Poland](#) has similarly focused on granting Syrian Christians asylum, and the head of the country's immigration office admitted to the *Financial Times* that, “[applicants’] religious background will have [an] impact on their refugee status applications.” And in Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban has explained his anti-migrant policies in explicitly [anti-Muslim](#) language. While selecting migrants based on religion is in clear violation of the EU's non-discrimination laws, these leaders have defended their policies by pointing to their own constituencies' discomfort with growing Muslim communities.

The recent economic crisis has also spurred a demographic shift across the continent, with citizens of crisis-hit member states migrating to the north and west [in record numbers](#) in search of work. And while the issue of [intra-EU migration](#) has sparked anxiety over social welfare benefits in recent months, “those who are coming from the Middle East and North Africa tend to provoke more heated political debate because of this issue of communal cleavage and integration,” says Kupchan.

By contrast, Germany and Sweden have unveiled some of the most generous asylum policies in the EU. In September 2015, Berlin pledged 6 billion euros (\$6.6 billion) to support the [800,000 migrants](#)—about quadruple the number from 2014—it was expecting to receive by the end of 2015. “If Europe fails on the question of refugees,” warned German Chancellor Angela Merkel, “then it won't be the Europe we wished for.” German officials also signaled that the country was prepared to take “[500,000 asylum seekers](#) a year” for several years. Similarly, Sweden's liberal asylum policies have spurred a [dramatic uptick](#) in applications. Measured on a per capita basis, the country granted refuge to the [largest share](#) of EU applicants (317.8 per 100,000) in 2014. Stockholm had previously announced that it would offer permanent residency to all Syrian applicants in 2013.

Some experts say Germany and Sweden's open immigration policies also make economic sense, given Europe's [demographic trajectory \(PDF\)](#) of declining birth rates and ageing populations. Migrants, they argue, could boost Europe's economies as workers, taxpayers, and consumers, and help shore up its famed social safety nets. But others caution that EU citizens might come to regard migrants as economic competitors, not contributors. Brookings' Koser says the demographic argument presents a political paradox for some member states. “You have 50 percent youth unemployment in Spain, and yet Spain needs migrants. That's just a very hard sell,” he says.

## What is the Schengen Zone?

The “secondary movements” of migrants who evade their first country of entry, in clear violation of

the Dublin Regulation, have put enormous strain on the EU's visa-free Schengen zone, which eliminated border controls among twenty-six European countries. Considered one of the signature achievements of European integration, it has come under [heightened scrutiny](#) in light of the current migrant influx and attendant security concerns. (Fissures first surfaced in April 2011, when France briefly [reintroduced border controls](#) in response to the influx of thousands of Tunisian and Libyan refugees from neighboring Italy. Denmark [followed suit](#) in May 2011 by reintroducing temporary controls on its shared borders with Sweden and Germany.)

In August 2015, Germany announced that it was [suspending Dublin](#) for Syrian asylum seekers, which effectively stopped deportations of Syrians back to their European country of entry. This move by the bloc's largest and wealthiest member country was seen as an important gesture of solidarity with entry-point states. However, Chancellor Merkel also warned that the future of Schengen was [at risk](#) unless all EU member states did their part to find a more equitable distribution of migrants.

CSIS' Conley fears that a sustained influx of migrants could spur more member states to suspend borderless travel, as Denmark and France did in 2011, for longer stretches of time. "I suspect if the politics surrounding migration really start getting messy, you'll see countries reintroducing internal borders with greater frequency, which means they would have chiseled away at one of the main pillars of Europe, which is the free movement of people," she says.

### **What are the main proposals for managing the crisis?**

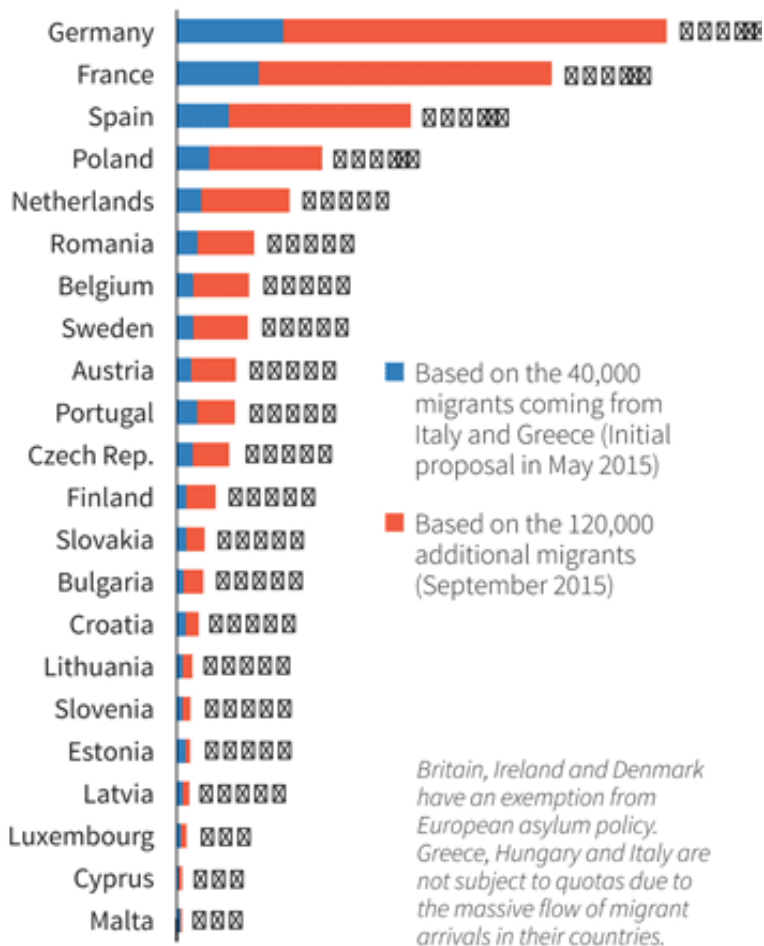
In September 2015, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker announced plans to [revisit a migrant quota system](#) for the bloc's twenty-two participating members. (Greece, Italy, and Hungary would not be required to resettle more migrants, and Britain, Denmark, and Ireland are exempt from EU asylum policy under provisions laid out in the [2009 Lisbon Treaty](#).) Juncker's second attempt to institute a quota involves 160,000 migrants, quadruple the number floated in April, and adds Hungary to the list of entry-point states in need of relief alongside Greece and Italy. Some critics of this quota plan argue that it will create a new "[pull factor](#)" for migrants, which, they argue, is unsustainable. EU leaders are scheduled to discuss this proposal at an [emergency migration summit](#) scheduled for September 14.

# New plan for migrant quotas in the EU

The European Union executive is preparing for a new clash over refugees with national governments, after officials gave details on Monday of how many it would ask each of them to accommodate.

## Proposed quotas of asylum-seekers per country\*

of a total of 160,000 refugees to be relocated



Source : European Commission

Reuters

In addition to taking in larger numbers of refugees, many experts say the EU and global powers must also provide more aid to Middle Eastern countries like Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, which have borne the primary responsibility for Syrian refugees. According to the UNHCR, [1.9 million](#) Syrians have taken refuge in Turkey, [1.1 million](#) in Lebanon, and 630,000 in Jordan since the start of the conflict in 2011. This influx has altered the demographics and economies of these host countries, which are now struggling to provide basic food and shelter due to [funding shortages](#). (Since 2011, the United States has spent more than [\\$4 billion](#) on Syria humanitarian assistance, but has only given refuge to fifteen-hundred Syrians.)

Other policies floated by the European Commission include drawing up a common “[safe-countries list](#)” that would help countries expedite asylum applications and, where needed, deportations. Most vulnerable to this procedural change are migrants from the Balkans, which



lodged [40 percent](#) of the total asylum applications received by Germany in the first six months of 2015. However, some human rights groups have questioned the methodology used by several countries in drawing up these lists and, more critically, cautioned that such lists could [violate asylum seekers' rights](#).

A [ten-point plan](#) on migration adopted by the EU in April 2015 includes calls for a “systematic effort to capture and destroy vessels used by the smugglers.” However, [many critics](#) argue that this focus on disrupting smuggling operations fails to recognize the larger “push factors” driving migration to the region: poverty and conflict across large swaths of the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia that have left many with no recourse but to flee.

In May 2015, the EU foreign policy chief, Frederica Mogherini, sought [UN Security Council](#) authorization for the use of [military force](#) against human smugglers and their vessels off the shores of Libya. Libya's internationally recognized government, however, promptly rejected the proposal, and Russia, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, also signaled that it would [veto](#) any proposal that aimed to destroy smugglers' boats. In September 2015, Mogherini announced plans to revisit the issue of [destroying smugglers' boats](#) with both a Libyan national unity government and the UN Security Council.

Quota plans and naval operations may help EU member states better manage this crisis, but experts caution that these proposals alone will not stem the tide of migrants. For that, European leaders must address the root causes of migration: helping to broker an end to [Syria's civil war](#), restoring stability to [Libya](#), and upping aid to sub-Saharan Africa. Barring a political solution to these regional crises, Europe will continue to struggle with migrant inflows.

In the meantime, the lack of a coordinated EU response to irregular migration in the near-to-mid-term could continue to feed sentiments that push individual countries to emphasize national security over international protection. This could make [closed borders](#), [barbed-wire fences](#), and [maritime pushbacks](#) the policy norm rather than the exception.

But for CSIS' Conley, such practices would not just imperil migrants and asylum seekers, but also the very ideals upon which the EU was founded. “The political response of countries pushing migrants out or incarcerating them for long stretches runs counter to the very values that the EU promotes, like protecting human life and the right to asylum,” she says.

## Additional Resources

A team of *New York Times* reporters has [documented the journey of migrants](#) traveling through Europe.

Mattathias Schwartz [profiles one priest's efforts](#) to help African migrants in Europe for the *New Yorker*.

UNHCR's [2014 Global Trends report](#) (PDF) finds forced displacement at a nineteen-year high worldwide.

Frontex's [2015 Global Risk Analysis](#) (PDF) provides an overview of irregular migration trends across Europe.

This [Guardian interactive](#) invites users to experience the harrowing choices asylum seekers must make as they attempt to access Europe.

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