

REFUGEES IN FOCUS

THE BIGGEST CONCENTRATIONS OF DISPLACED PEOPLE LIE FAR FROM THE SPOTLIGHT.

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Growing concerns over an 'invasion' of refugees and migrants helped to elect Donald Trump and sway Brexit voters. Yet the data suggest that the situation is very different from how it is often portrayed.

Researchers warn that misleading reports about the magnitude of flows into Europe and the United States are creating unjustified fears about refugees. That is undermining efforts to manage the massive humanitarian problems faced by those fleeing Syria and other hotspots.

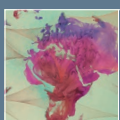
"The alleged increase in migration and forced displacement tells us more about the moral panic on migration than the reality," says Nando Sigona, a social scientist at the University of Birmingham, UK.

The number of refugees and migrants entering the European Union is low compared with the bloc's population. Nations in Africa and Asia are absorbing many more. "The number of refugees in Europe is a classic example of perception versus reality," says geographer Nikola Sander at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.

Experts also question assessments of the global situation. The UN refugee agency (UNHCR), declared in 2015 that the world was "witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record". Around 40 million people were 'internally displaced' within their home countries. But researchers say that such estimates are often unreliable.

Refugee numbers are easier to track. The UNHCR estimates that there were 21.3 million refugees in 2015; that is only slightly higher than the 1992 figure of 20.6 million, when the global population was just two-thirds of today's.

Researchers also warn about misinterpreting estimates of international migrants — those who move for economic or other reasons. These numbers can be problematic because the most widely cited UN figures are cumulative. Guy Abel, a statistician at the Vienna Institute of Demography, has studied the dynamic flow and found that the number of people migrating has remained stable over the past 50 years. His latest estimates indicate that migration rate, as a share of global population, has dropped to its lowest point in 50 years. ■



HUMAN MIGRATION
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ORIGIN

WHERE REFUGEES ARE GOING

Most of the 21.3 million people who were refugees at the end of 2015 had fled conflicts in Africa and Asia. The vast majority sought refuge in neighbouring countries; only a small proportion headed to Europe or the United States. Just over half of refugees worldwide come from three countries, Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia.

AFRICAN CONFLICT

There were 5.2 million refugees at the end of 2015, most of whom had fled conflicts, particularly long-standing instability in Somalia.

From Somalia to Kenya
417,920

SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

The Syrian civil war has led to the largest outflow of refugees from any one country this century.

From Syria to Turkey
2,503,549

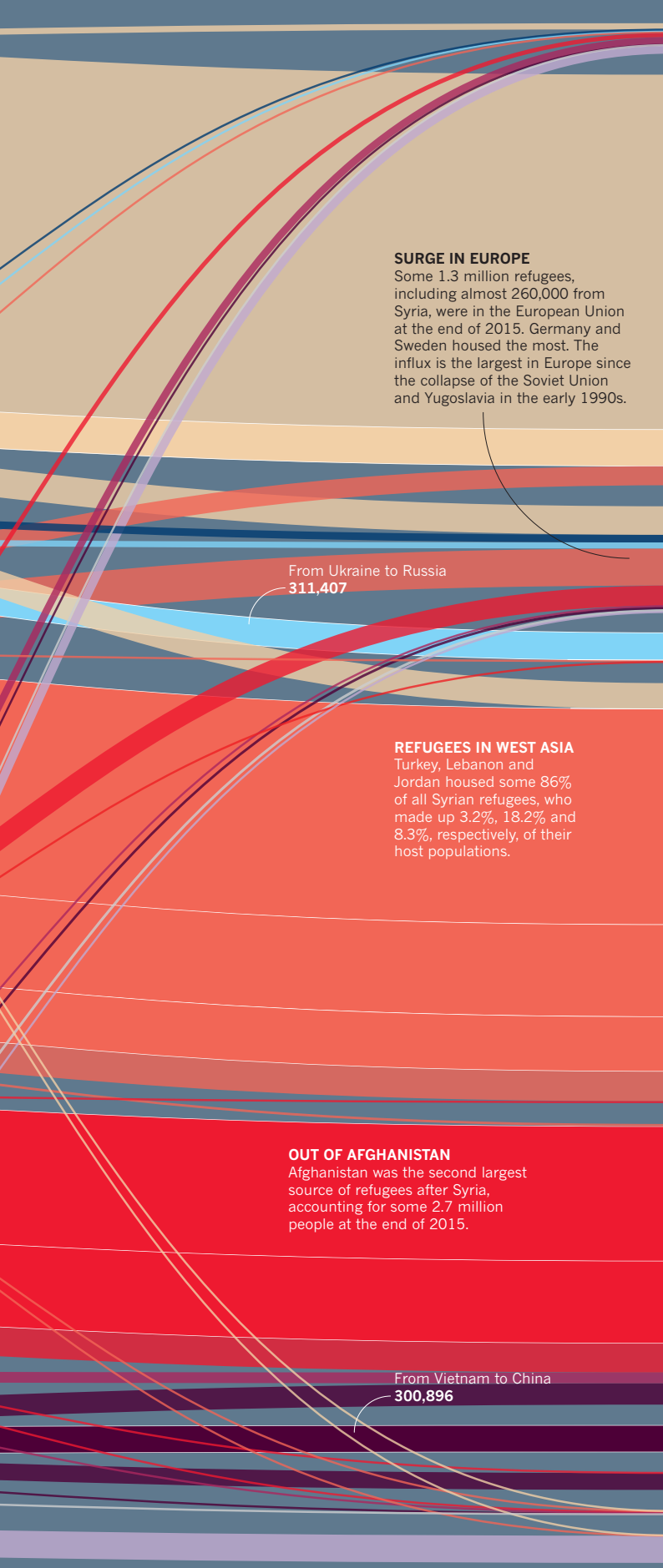
From Syria to Lebanon
1,062,690

From Syria to Jordan
628,223

From Afghanistan to Pakistan
1,560,592

From Afghanistan to Iran
951,142



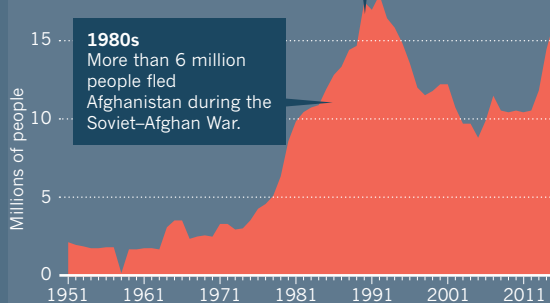


REFUGEES OVER TIME

The number of refugees has risen in recent years to levels similar to those seen in the early 1990s. These data are from the UNHCR, so do not include Palestinians, who are registered through a different UN Agency.

Early 1990s

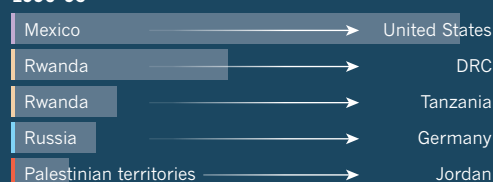
Wars in West Africa, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Iraq, and the Rwandan genocide created millions of refugees.



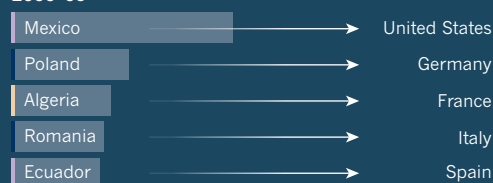
CHANGES IN MIGRATION

The total rate of migration has remained relatively stable over the past 50 years. These are the top five increases in migration at the start of the last three decades. Figures reflect the net increase in migration from source to host country during each 5-year window.

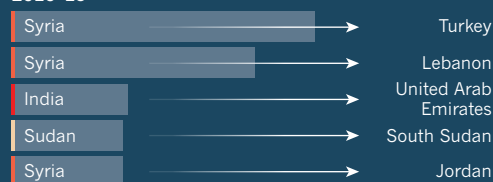
1990-95



2000-05



2010-15



SOURCES: UNHCR AND UN DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS. DATA FOR FLOWS COMPILED BY N. SANDER, UNIV. GRONINGEN, AND R. BAUER, VIENNA INST. DEMOGRAPHY.