

HANDOUT 1.5.2 TOP REFUGEE COUNTRIES



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Note: all references to information sources are linked throughout each brief.

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

Much of the recent increase in displaced persons, including refugees and asylum seekers, is because of the continuing war in Syria, conflict in South Sudan and the flight of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. Refugees and asylum seekers have also fled from conflicts in Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, Eritrea and Burundi.

The countries producing the highest numbers of refugees are located in developing regions. Many of these countries have been the most common countries of origin for refugees for at least 5 years. Afghanistan has been one of the major countries of origin for over 35 years.

Refugees from only five countries make up 68 per cent of the 19.9 million refugees registered with the UNHCR (2017).

In 2017, 1.7 million people became newly displaced. There were 1.9 million individual applications for asylum submitted in 2017, mostly by protection seekers from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Venezuela, Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Nigeria, Eritrea, Guatemala, Iran and Honduras. This figure does not include mass influxes or those recognised as refugees on a group basis, such as the Syrian refugees given temporary protection in Turkey.

AFGHANISTAN

Waves of conflict and displacement

Almost four decades of conflict and instability in Afghanistan has created the world's largest protracted refugee situation. With 2.7 million refugees, Afghanistan is the second largest source country of refugees, following Syria. Afghanistan is a significant source country for both Australia's offshore and onshore resettlement programs.

Afghanistan's troubled political history has generated successive waves of refugees since 1978, when the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan came to power.

Following the Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, there was a significant increase in refugees fleeing Afghanistan, which continued over the following decade. By 1981, 3.7 million refugees had fled to neighbouring Iran and Pakistan.

In 1988, the Soviet Union agreed to withdraw from Afghanistan, and UNHCR and the international community prepared for large-scale repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran.

Large-scale returns had begun around 1992, when Kabul descended into armed conflict as various factions began fighting for control of the capital and the surrounding area. After a year-long siege, the Taliban took control of Kabul in 1996, and by 1998 had gained control of most of the country.

A new wave of people became displaced, though the majority remained within Afghanistan's borders as internally displaced people. With the Taliban's severe restrictions on women's activities, education, and social and cultural life, many Afghans across international borders.

A further wave of refugees left Afghanistan during the invasion of October 2001, led by the United States. With the defeat of the Taliban a month later, UNHCR led another mass repatriation.

Since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, a new constitution has been adopted and presidential, parliamentary and provincial elections have been taking place.

However, conflict between government forces and the Taliban has continued, with a number of Afghan provinces at high risk of Taliban control and attacks on civilian. A 2015 report from the United States Department of State found widespread human rights problems including violence and societal discrimination along class, race, gender and religious lines.

From 1981 to 2013, Afghanistan was ranked as the top country of origin for refugees worldwide. Afghans were the second-largest group of asylum seekers, with 239,600 new

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applications registered during 2015. This excludes the more than 2.6 million refugees recognised in Iran and Pakistan on a prima facie basis currently residing in these countries.

In 2015, the majority of Afghan refugees resided in Pakistan (1.6 million) and Iran (951,100), as well as Germany (30,000), Austria (17,500), Sweden (13,100), Italy (12,200), and India (10,200).

Afghanistan ratified the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol in 2005, becoming the 146th country to ratify either the Convention or its Protocol. While Afghanistan remains a significant source country for refugees as war and civil conflict continue, Afghanistan has also hosted many refugees in recent decades, especially from Central Asia, thereby its accession to the 1951 Convention was widely welcomed.

The Hazara

During this time, one of Afghanistan's largest ethnic minorities – the Hazara – were particularly targeted and persecuted by the Taliban. The Hazara are primarily Persian-speaking Shia Muslims who have, for centuries, faced discrimination and persecution from the predominantly Sunni Muslim population. The Taliban declared war against the Shia Hazaras during their rule in the late 1990s, and many thousands lost their lives during a series of mass killings, fleeing to Shia Iran, Europe and beyond.

While the situation for the Hazara minority improved in the early 2000s following the overthrow of the Taliban, the Hazara continue to face persistent ethnic and religious persecution throughout Afghanistan. The resurgent Taliban power in recent years has meant thousands are again fleeing Afghanistan and seeking asylum.

Repatriation programs

Beginning in 2002, UNHCR and Afghanistan established separate agreements with Pakistan and Iran to enable voluntary repatriations (one of the durable solutions available to refugees) of Afghans to occur. Since 2002, 4.7 million refugees have returned to Afghanistan under the UNHCR's largest voluntary repatriation programme. Afghanistan reported the largest number of returned refugees during 2015, at 61,400. Afghanistan had a further surge in the number of refugees returning in the second half of 2016. Some 370,000 Afghan refugees returned from Pakistan in this time, marking a ten-year high. Those were returning as a result of a range of complex factors including deteriorating living conditions and growing intolerance for refugees.

While security has improved significantly in some areas, repatriation is not possible or safe for all of those outside the country. A significant number of Afghans remain in exile, many of whom fled conflicts which pre-date the 2001 invasion. Worldwide, there are more than four million Afghan refugees, asylum seekers and people in refugee-like situations.

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Afghani asylum seekers in Europe

Afghanistan is a significant source country of asylum seekers entering the European Union. According to UN estimates, in 2015 21 per cent of arrivals to the Mediterranean were from Afghanistan. In October 2016, The European Union signed an agreement with the Afghanistan government allowing its member states to return the country's nationals who 'do not fulfil the conditions in force for entry to, presence in, or residence on the territory of the EU', and obliging the Afghan government to receive them.

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IRAN

Iran is significant to global forced migration both as a source and as a destination country for asylum seekers and refugees. It is part of an unstable region and led by a religious theocracy government. Ethnically diverse, the population of Iran is approximately 77 million.

Iran is a signatory to the Refugee Convention as well as other international conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Iran as a source country of asylum seekers

Despite having ratified these international treaties, Iran continues to be widely criticised for human rights violations, including the ongoing execution of juvenile offenders, homosexuals and political dissidents.

A 2015 United States Department of State Report highlights significant human rights problems in Iran, particularly related to severe restrictions on civil liberties (such as freedoms of assembly, association, speech, religion, and press), limitations in free and fair elections, and escalating use of capital punishment for crimes that do not meet the threshold of most serious crime or are committed by juvenile offenders.

In this context, Iran is a significant source of refugees. In 2015, there were approximately 85,000 Iranian refugees, of whom nearly 15,000 were receiving assistance from UNHCR. However, the height of refugees fleeing Iran occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, following the 1979 fall of the monarchy, the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the protracted war between Iraq and Iran. During this time, many Iranians fled religious and political persecution.

In the European context, of the 1,015,078 people who crossed the Mediterranean to arrive in Europe in 2015, 2 per cent were from Iran.

Iran as a host country to asylum seekers and refugees

UNHCR reports that Iran hosts the fourth-largest number of refugees in the world, after Turkey, Pakistan and Lebanon, with 979,400 by the end of 2015.

The great majority of refugees located in Iran, estimated at 951,100, have originated from Afghanistan, with much of this Afghan population having lived in Iran for more than three decades. In addition, the UNHCR estimates around 1.5 to 2 million undocumented Afghans are living in Iran.

Over recent years, Iran has played an important role in supporting the repatriation of refugees it hosts. In May 2012, Iran partnered with UNHCR and neighbouring states to

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deliver the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees. This strategy aims to deliver basic health and education services, while also facilitating the relocation and voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees in the Middle East.

Asylum seekers arriving in Iran are registered by the government and provided with a refugee identity card. They are allowed to live in the community, where they receive access to basic services, such as primary health care and the right to attend school. Refugees who hold an Afghan passport are also able to apply for temporary work permits. The Iranian Government delivers these services in conjunction with the financial and logistical support of UNHCR.

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IRAQ

A series of wars

With a population of around 38 million, Iraq shares borders with, among others, Syria, Turkey and Iran. Ninety-nine per cent of Iraqis are Muslim, with Shia the majority denomination. Iraq is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its Protocol.

Iraq has been involved in conflict on and off since the 1980s, beginning with the Iran-Iraq war, followed by the Gulf War which involved western forces. By 2002, 400,000 Iraqis were seeking asylum in countries as disparate as Australia, Finland and Argentina, with the majority fleeing to Iran. At this time, Iraqis were the largest group of asylum seekers worldwide.

In 2003, the US and British armies invaded Iraq, believing it held weapons of mass destruction and posed a 'grave and gathering danger' to other nations.

Following Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's removal in 2003, more than 300,000 refugees were able to return to Iraq, mostly those living in Iran. However, this relative stability within Iraq was short-lived: in 2006, growing tensions culminated in Sunni forces destroying the Shiite al-Askari mosque in Samarra, sparking a civil war.

For much of this time, neighbouring Syria welcomed Iraqi refugees fleeing the conflict. However, the 2011 outbreak of civil war in Syria (which continues today) further destabilised the region. In 2014, militants from extremist group ISIS took control of Mosul and Tikrit in Iraq's north. This civil war being fought between ISIS and a coalition of government and Kurdish forces has displaced more than 3.1 million people internally Iraq. In eight months up to May 2017, a further 300,000 Iraqis were internally displaced from the Mosul area due to the military operation to regain the city from ISIS control.

Iraqis who had fled to Syria as a result of previous conflicts have nevertheless been returning to the relative safety of Iraq, putting further strain on local resources for assisting internally displaced people. Syrian asylum seekers are restricted from entering Iraq except in 'urgent humanitarian cases'.

Asylum seekers continue to flee Iraq today, fearing racial, religious, gender and political persecution. Human Rights Watch reports of ISIS forces sexually assaulting and enslaving Iraqi women and executing journalists.

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SYRIA

Syria has been in a state of civil war since 2011, which has seen mass migration of its people into bordering countries and, to some extent, onto Europe. Syria shares borders with Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Israel.

In 2012 the population of Syria was 22 million. The Alawite Assad family has ruled Syria since 1970, with Bashar al-Assad succeeding his father, Hafez al-Assad, as president in 2000.

Syria is home to a diverse range of ethnic and religious groups, the majority of the population (74%) being Sunni Muslim. The main minority groups in Syria are: Alawi Muslims (2.1 million); Christians of various denominations (1.9 million); Iraqi refugees (1.5 - 2 million); and Kurds (2 - 2.5 million).

The conflict

Following unrest across regional countries such as Egypt and Libya, disquiet over political leadership erupted in to waves of pro-democracy demonstrations, known as the Arab Spring.

The Assad regime in Syria was not unaffected by this regional uprising, amid dissatisfaction the regime had not delivered economic reform or improved political freedoms. In response, demonstrations were oppressed with force, triggering nation-wide protest and sparking conflict between the regime and its opposers.

Over time different opposition groups, based on ethnic or religious factions, began to rebel against the Assad regime. By 2012, the uprising against Assad had escalated to a sectarian conflict with Sunni rebels opposing with the Alawite-leaning regime. What began as peaceful anti-government protests had escalated into a civil war.

By 2013, the terrorist group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged in Syria and gained control of much of the northern half of the country, capitalising on the chaos and conflict.

All sides of the conflict have allegedly used violent means to gain control over territory. Violations of international human rights law by multiple actors in this conflict has been documented, including the use of chemical weapons. Since the war began, around 250,000 people have been killed.

While discrimination and armed attack has in many cases been targeted towards particular religious groups or communities, the scale of the conflict has meant that no group or community has been untouched. All religious and ethnic communities within Syria continue to be affected by this conflict.

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The refugee crisis

Over half of Syria's population of 22 million is currently displaced inside or outside the country. The United Nations reported that the number of refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people has exceeded 50 million, the first time since World War II. The Syrian civil war has been a large contributor to this global crisis.

Syria has become the largest source country of refugees in the world, surpassing Afghanistan and Somalia. With the conflict continuing to intensify, the number of people moving within Syria and across the region continues to grow.

By the end of 2014, an estimated 7.6 million people were internally displaced in Syria living in official or makeshift camps along the country's borders or in villages and towns where they have been able to find shelter. With camps being insecure and unprotected, internally displaced people are turning to migration in the region and further afield to Europe.

In 2015, 4.01 million people are registered as refugees with UNHCR, with 95 per cent in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. Lebanon and Jordan now have the highest numbers of refugees per capita worldwide. Given the scale of need, refugee camps in neighbouring countries have become overcrowded and vastly under-resourced, forcing thousands of people to live in impoverished conditions.

Under these circumstances, a significant influx of asylum seekers have been migrating to Europe to seek safety and security. Since January 2015, there have been over 680,000 arrivals into Europe by sea, 53% of these are from Syria. This influx has caused a crisis in Europe's capacity to respond to this unprecedented entry of refugees into Europe.

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: Fact Sheet - Humanitarian Response to the Syria Crisis (2015)

Department of Immigration and Border Protection: Australia's Offshore Humanitarian Programme 2013-14 (2014)

European Commission, EU Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection: Syria Fact Sheet (2015)

Kaldor Centre, University of New South Wales, Factsheet: Refugees from Syria (2015)

Syria Deeply: Background Information (accessed October 2015)

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): Data portal (accessed October 2015)

UNHCR: Global Trends (2014)

UNHCR RefWorld: World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Syria (2015)

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FIRST RISKY STEP IN AN ERITREAN'S JOURNEY TO EUROPE

By Emmanuel Igunza BBC Africa, Tigray, Ethiopia
17 July 2015

A 20-year-old man from Eritrea is nursing serious leg wounds after being shot twice by people he says were Eritrean soldiers stationed near the border with Ethiopia.

"Even after I fell down, I could hear the bullets whizzing past me," Weldab tells me from a clinic bed in Mai-Aini refugee camp in Ethiopia.

"I was lucky that I escaped. There were 10 of us in total; I don't know what happened to the rest of my friends."

This was the young man's second attempt to leave his homeland.

He walked for most of the journey. Many of the refugees I met walked, mostly at night to avoid being detected.

Some told me they paid traffickers between \$100 and \$700 (£65 and £450) to show them the way.

Others said that relatives in Europe have been known to pay the traffickers directly.

They would be taken by car part of the way and then shown the „safest“ route by foot.

Although there is no war or famine in Eritrea, it accounts for the second largest number of asylum-seekers arriving in Europe, after Syria.

Weldab, who did not want to give his full name, had paid a fee to go to Europe the first time he tried to flee.

But it went wrong at the border with Sudan, when he was arrested on the Eritrean side and spent three weeks in police cells.

He told me that back home he only dreamt of two things: Playing football and going abroad - because he wants to avoid being conscripted into the army.

The UN has witnessed a huge rise in the number of people crossing from Eritrea into Ethiopia in May and June.

In just two days I saw nearly 500 refugees coming through dozens of illegal routes on the heavily guarded border.

Like Weldab, most are young people wanting to avoid conscription, which is compulsory after finishing school for both men and women.

It is supposed to last 18 months, but if not picked to continue their studies after this time - people can be forced to stay in the army until their 40s.

Many of the refugees are women, some carrying babies on their backs.

ERITREA - KEY FACTS

- Nation of six million on Red Sea - one of Africa's poorest countries
- One-party state - no functioning constitution or independent media
- Former Italian colony, later formed loose federation with Ethiopia
- 1962 - Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie dissolved Eritrean parliament, seized Eritrea
- Eritrean separatists - the Eritrean People's Liberation Front - fought guerrilla war until 1991, when they captured capital Asmara
- Eritrea voted for independence in 1993
- May 1998 border dispute with Ethiopia led to two-year war costing 100,000 lives
- Still no peace settlement - thousands of troops face each other along 1,000km (620-mile) border

In one of the Ethiopian military camps that we visited, a section had been turned into a temporary shelter for those arriving.

Women and babies shared a few mattresses laid down on the floor of a structure made from wood and corrugated iron.

Outside in the scorching sun, more women sat in groups under the shades of trees.

ARMY DESERTER

Some young men covered their faces with their clothes and hands as we approached them, too afraid to be filmed.

"They won't talk to you," one elderly woman carrying a baby told me through an interpreter. "They are all scared."

Sitting next to the woman was a man in military camouflage, who said he had deserted the army after he was not allowed to leave despite being diagnosed with a serious ear problem.

"How could I continue serving under such pain?"

He left his wife and seven children behind and walked to the border with his gun; it took him just a day because he knew the area well.

"It is a tough choice as I don't know if I will ever see them again. But I know they will understand; it was a matter of life or death. At least here, they will know I am safe and alive."

He joins more than 150,000 Eritrean refugees living in Ethiopia and will get a new home in one of the six camps in the Tigray and Afar regions in the north of the country.

THE LONE CHILD

Young children have also been caught up in the exodus. In July alone, hundreds as young as seven made it to Ethiopia unaccompanied.

I met 13-year-old Yordhanos, who with her four friends now lives at special section of the camp reserved for children.

She too said she had left to avoid being conscripted when she left school.

"It was hard leaving our friends and families behind but we just ran because of fear," she says, explaining they literally ran over the border, terrified of being shot.

The area is heavily fortified because of a border war fought more than 15 years ago.

The children's compound has a football and basketball area and children are able to attend informal classes.

"I had an uncle here in Ethiopia, he came here nine years ago. But I don't know where he is," says Yordhanos, who hopes to make contact with him.

THE DEAD IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

To try and discourage young people from carrying on to Europe, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) and others have started projects like metal- and wood-workshops at the camps.

There are also computer and dress-making courses.

But UNHCR field officer Safi Ilunga tells me the migration continues.

"We try to show them how it is dangerous and risky to go."

Only three of the people I spoke to openly admitted they wanted to go to Europe, the rest were guarded about their plans.

But this is still Weldab's intention despite his injury - and despite the fact that the journey could end tragically in a desert or the Mediterranean Sea.

Europe is his goal, and he is determined to get there.

► Source:

Igunza, Emmanuel. "First risky step in an Eritrean's journey to Europe." *BBC Africa*, 17 July 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-33525280>.