



HMUN 2025

Debating the safety of refugees during their journey

UNHCR

Santiago Fattoruso

Deputy Chair



Forum: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Issue: Debating the safety of refugees during their journey

Name: Santiago Fattoruso

Position: Deputy Chair

Introduction

People all around the world are forced to flee their country in search of safety and stability. They are forced to do this due to issues such as violence, oppression, war, and poverty. While the reward of finding shelter and being able to start anew in another country is grand, the risks that it brings with it are also immeasurable. One of those risks is the journey they must undertake to reach their destination.

This journey is a very dangerous one, which can range from crossing vast seas on a small boat full of other refugees to traveling through perilous lands with smugglers, excruciating heat, and challenging landscapes. Without external help, this voyage can become near impossible to complete, leading to the deaths of many people, including children.

It is the responsibility of the members of the UNHCR to work together to find effective solutions to fight this problem, to debate to what extent these people should be helped, and, most importantly, to save as many lives as possible.

The task of this committee is to come up with effective solutions to fight this problem, to debate to what extent these refugees should be helped, and to save as many lives as possible. This research report will further elaborate on what the journey exactly looks like, the most common areas of refugee travel, and the problems around them. This report will also state the different parties involved with this problem and provide possible ideas on how to resolve this issue.

Definition of Key Terms

Asylum-seeker

A person who is looking for international protection due to unsafety in their own country.

Coast guard

The military or naval force with the task of guarding a coast or ensuring the safety and operation of maritime traffic in neighboring waters.

Irregular immigrant

An immigrant who crosses the borders of a country without a legal residence permit.

Refugee

A person who has fled their country due to war, persecution, natural disasters, or their economic position has crossed an international border to find safety in another country.

Schengen Area countries

A small group of European countries in between which border controls have been abolished.

General Overview

The world in which we currently live is in a state where many countries are currently in conflict with other nations. This ongoing state of conflict and war leads to many countries being unsafe and unstable for many citizens, as these people must face war, violence, poverty, hunger, and a dire financial situation. Because of this, there are currently 37.9 million people who are refugees, 8 million asylum-seekers, and a total of 122.6 million forcibly displaced people worldwide.

For many of these people, the only possible solution is to flee from their country. This process differs for every person regarding what country they are fleeing from and where they are going. The most common countries where refugees come from, according to the UNHCR's Refugee

Population Statistics Database, are the Syrian Arab Republic, Venezuela, Ukraine, and Afghanistan, with each country having around 6 million refugees in their country. Iran, Türkiye, Colombia, and Germany are the countries that host the most refugees, with their numbers ranging from 3.8 to 2.7 million refugees in those countries. For a lot of refugees, the best travel option is to go to a neighboring country, like, for example, refugees from Afghanistan to Iran. But for many refugees, this somewhat easy and profitable option is not possible. The most popular option is then to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

The crossing of the Mediterranean Sea

The journey across the Mediterranean is the most used travel route among refugees. This route is sought after because it is a fast route where the seas aren't as wild and dangerous as it is surrounded by land, and it is reachable for refugees from three different continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe. Nonetheless, this journey is still very dangerous. This danger starts before the sea itself, as getting to the border of the Mediterranean is already a challenge. For many, getting to the Mediterranean means crossing harsh lands, dealing with heat, a shortage of vital resources such as food and water, encountering traffickers and smugglers, and crossing through conflict zones.

If these refugees manage to arrive at the shore safely, they will be put on inflatable rafts or small wooden boats, which are not anywhere near ideal for crossing the sea. This method of transport is so unstable that if the right amount of people is not in the right spots on the boat, the boats are guaranteed to topple over. This is why a better way of travel must be found for these people.

Different Mediterranean routes

When crossing the Mediterranean Sea, there are three important travel routes possible: The Central Mediterranean route, The Western Mediterranean route, The West-Africa Mediterranean route, and the Eastern Mediterranean route.

The Central Mediterranean travel route is the most used Mediterranean route, with an estimated 41% of refugees electing to use this route. This route goes from Algeria, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia to Italy and Malta. Although this is the most popular route, it is also the most dangerous one, with over twenty-two thousand deaths since 2014 and over two thousand deaths in 2024 alone. This

is because of the badly designed rafts and boats and the overpopulation in this area, leading to a very extreme humanitarian crisis.

There are two western routes: The Western Mediterranean route, which goes from Algeria and Morocco to Spain. This route is very plausible for people living around that area as the crossing itself is very short, opposite to the long and dreadful Central Mediterranean crossing. Even so, there have still been 450 reported dead or missing in the year 2023 alone, although this number is getting smaller each year. The only issue is that people living in, for example, Mauritania or Senegal have to cross very dangerous territory, including the vast Western Sahara. Luckily, there is a second option for these refugees. They can choose to take the Western Africa route. This route goes from Senegal, Mauritania, Morocco, and Western Sahara to the Canary Islands, the islands of Spain. This is a much safer option for a lot of refugees and is why this route is becoming much more popular than the regular Western Mediterranean route.

The Eastern Mediterranean route goes from Turkey, Syria, to Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria. The popularity and use of this route in the last couple of years have fallen due to the agreement between the European Union and Turkey struck in 2016 (see more in the definition of key terms). Since then, many fewer refugees have opted for this route. Still, there are currently some problems with this route. As irregularly using this route has become much more difficult, there is a humanitarian crisis in both Turkey and Syria, as many of the refugees who aren't able to cross are forced to stay there. Even with the funding and aid of the EU, there is still much work to do if this crisis is to be ended.



Image 1: The Central, Eastern, and Western Mediterranean Routes

EU-Turkey pact

This is an agreement between the European Union and Turkey, struck on the 18th of March 2016, aimed at halting the flow of irregular migration through Turkey to Europe. This agreement included measures such as returning new irregular immigrants to Turkey, EU funding to Turkey to help them fight the humanitarian crisis, and the EU and Turkey helping Syria with their current humanitarian crisis.

Libyan Coast Guard

This is the official coast guard of Libya, founded in 1970. Although it is part of the Libyan Navy, the force is operated with oversight from the Frontex, the European border agency. The Coast Guard consists of over 1000 personnel members and, since 2015, when the EU started funding the operation, has received around \$455 million in funding. Its main function is to stop irregular immigrants from reaching the borders of countries of the European Union. Although in 2024 alone, around 21000 refugees have been successfully halted by the Libyan Coast Guard, making it an extremely effective force, how this is being done is being questioned and frowned upon by many. In

June of 2024, the Crotona Civil Court of Italy even ruled that interceptions made by the Libyan Coast Guard do not qualify as rescue operations as the personnel who are rescuing the refugees are carrying arms, firing gunshots to intimidate the refugees, and violating many human rights. This includes torture, enslavement, and human trafficking.

Dangers of travel on land

It is almost always the case that a refugee on their journey must travel through stretches of land before reaching their destination. These refugees are unprotected and low on resources. This is taken advantage of by smugglers and traffickers. They often work in networks with over a hundred people stalking lands and sabotaging vulnerable refugees on their journey. These networks use social media as a primary source of information for updates on humanitarian crises so that they can locate what areas refugees will travel to. Refugees captured by these smugglers are victims of enslavement, violence, torture, oppression, and sometimes even death. Even though there are organizations, such as Interpol, who are working hard to solve this problem, these networks are still terrorizing refugees all over the world.

Another problem of traveling on land is the environment of the areas where it is being migrated. A lot of times, refugees must travel through areas where the weather and climate can be lethal for the unprepared and unequipped refugees. For example, when crossing Saudi Arabia, a country that is passed a lot by refugees, these refugees have to deal with extreme heat and dry climates with temperatures reaching more than 40 degrees. This is unbearable for refugees, especially since they are almost always low on water and energy.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Event
1951	International Organization for Migration is established.
1970	Libyan Coast Guard is established.
2004	Frontex is established.
18 December 2015	EU starts funding the Libyan Coast Guard.
18 March 2016	The agreement between the EU and Turkey to fight the flow of irregular immigrants through Turkey to the EU and the humanitarian immigration crisis in Turkey and Syria is struck.

- 1951** The 1951 Refugee Convention was a convention of the UNHCR which outlines the minimum standards for how refugees are treated, such as education, housing and work so that while displaced they can live independently. This convention, together with the 1967 Protocol, outlines refugee's rights and defines the term refugee.
- 31 January 1967** The 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees is adopted and then entered into force on the 4th of October 1967. This protocol removes the time and geographical limits that were stated in the 1951 Refugee Convention so that this convention would apply universally.
- 28 September 1954** The 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons , adopted on 28 September of 1954 and entered into force on the 6th of June 1960, legally defines what a stateless person is, outlines their rights and minimum standard of treatment and aims to end statelessness globally.

Major Parties Involved

Syrian Arab Republic

The Syrian Arab Republic is currently struggling with a dire humanitarian crisis, with 90% the population living in poverty and 70% needing humanitarian assistance. The humanitarian crisis in Syria began when, in 2011, the Syrian people started protesting against the government security forces, who they felt were treating them much too aggressively. The conflict then quickly escalated into a civil war, and since then, the country has been in a state of instability and chaos. Because of this, a lot of Syrians are forced to flee the country in search of stability and safety. This is what makes the Syrian Arab Republic the country from which the most refugees come , with over 14 million Syrians having fled the country since 2011. Most Syrian refugees flee to the five neighboring countries of Syria: Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Turkey alone hosts 3.3 million Syrian refugees. Aside from these five countries, Germany currently houses the most Syrian refugees, counting more than 850000 Syrian refugees.

Ukraine

Ukraine is the country where the second most refugees come from and the country that has seen the biggest increase in refugees in the past years. This is, of course, because of the Russo-Ukrainian War, which has caused a humanitarian crisis where 14.6 million people require humanitarian assistance and 4 million people are internally displaced because of this, 6.8 million Ukrainians have been forced to flee their country. The country that houses the most Ukrainians is Poland, with around 60% of all Ukrainian refugees.

Turkey

Turkey currently hosts the second largest number of refugees in the world, with 3.3 million refugees in the country. This is because of a couple of different factors. Firstly, this is because of the flow of Syrian refugees that enters Turkey. As stated previously, Turkey hosts 3.3 million Syrian refugees. This leads to the number of refugees exceeding their capacity, making living conditions far below desirable for the refugees there. Another reason for this is the pact made with the EU to not let any refugees traveling through Turkey take the Eastern Mediterranean route to Greece, Cyprus, or Bulgaria.

Iran

Iran currently hosts the largest number of refugees in the world, with 3.8 million refugees being hosted there. This is because Iran is surrounded by countries where a lot of refugees come from, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Despite the massive number of refugees in Iran, the circumstances for these refugees are surprisingly good. Thanks to the government's inclusive policies, a large number of refugees in Iran have access to health, food, and a place to live. This makes Iran a very opportunistic place to migrate to for refugees.

Frontex

Frontex, the European Border, and Coast Guard Agency, supports countries in the European Union and Schengen countries with managing their external borders. Established in 2004, they have a staff of more than 2100 people, with their headquarters located in Poland. Their purpose ranges from aerial surveillance and collecting information to fighting cross-border crime and supporting the ground with their officers. Since its founding, it has become a vital operation for the EU and the entire world, as even though they mainly operate in Europe, they also provide support beyond Europe.

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

The IOM, International Organization for Migration, is part of the United Nations and is a core piece for dealing with migration and refugee travel. This organization consists of 183 member states and has offices in 172 countries. The IOM has three main objectives: Saving lives and protecting people on the move, coming up with innovative and effective solutions to displacement, and making easier and safer pathways for migration. When it comes to achieving these goals, they put the safety of the people first, work together with both governmental and non-governmental parties, and prioritize solutions that please everyone to avoid internal conflict. Using the International Organization for Migration is, therefore, very important to fight this issue.

Possible Solutions

Safer travel methods

The first solution that is critical when resolving this situation is coming up with a better method of transportation for the refugees. This is probably the issue that leads to the most deaths/missing people. Take the crossing of the Mediterranean, for example. Since 2014, more than 30 thousand people have gone missing or died in the Mediterranean Sea, and when you see how they travel, this number becomes very clear. They travel in wooden boats and rafts, which alone are not equipped to travel the Mediterranean Sea. But add to that that these boats are overfilled with too many refugees for the boats to carry, and the risk of this method of travel becomes much riskier. This is why this issue must be tackled to improve the safety of refugees and to save as many lives as possible.

Creating better routes

Another big issue is the dangers that refugees must face when using a lot of the existing routes. With many of the existing travel routes, refugees suffer from wild seas, extreme temperatures, smuggling, and natural disasters. This makes their journey nearly impossible. This is why creating better travel routes for refugees is crucial. Part of creating better travel routes also has

to do with humanitarian access for these refugees, as, as it stands now, refugees have very limited access to vital resources, making a journey, no matter how safe the route, still very challenging.

Combatting refugee smuggling

On top of all the challenges the journey brings with it, the different networks of human traffickers and smugglers make the journey incredibly dangerous. That is why working against these networks is of utmost importance to ensure safe travel for refugees. One way to do this is to work together with different crime-fighting organizations such as Interpol or the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime (ICPC). Refugee smuggling and trafficking also includes the Libyan Coast Guard. They violate several human rights and have been known to resort to violence when “rescuing and protecting” the refugees. This Coast Guard captures hundreds of refugees every year, and if safety for the refugees is to be ensured, something must change within the Coast Guard.

International cooperation

None of these solutions are possible if there is not well-organized international cooperation between nations, governments, and organizations. This includes working together with the IMO, Frontex and third-party organizations such as Amnesty International and International Rescue Committee. Only if nations work together well and cooperation is reached can safety for refugees truly be ensured.

Bibliography

Amnesty International. (2024, July 22). *Refugees, asylum seekers and migrants - Amnesty International*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/>

What are the dangers in refugee camps? (n.d.). PCRF. https://www.pcrf.net/information-you-should-know/what-are-the-dangers-in-refugee-camps.html?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiAmfq6BhAsEiwAX1jsZ1u724Tyu3_YrJ_WZySToQWBjz_ZWTWufVcYmTpZFkMTxDMWnVoPNhoCtGoQAvD_BwE

Desperate Journeys - UNHCR | (n.d.). <https://www.unhcr.org/desperatejourneys/>

Refugee journeys: Crossing borders, the physical journey and seeking asylum. (n.d.).

<https://www.roads-to-refuge.com.au/journeys/journeys-crossing.html>

UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency. (n.d.). | *UNHCR*. UNHCR.

<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>

West and Central Mediterranean situation. (n.d.). Global Focus.

<https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/west-and-central-mediterranean-situation>

United Nations. (2024, July 5). *Migration: twice as many migrants die crossing the Sahara than the Mediterranean Sea.* United Nations Western Europe. <https://unric.org/en/migration-twice-as-many-migrants-die-crossing-the-sahara-than-the-mediterranean-sea/>

Mediterranean: Central Mediterranean Route Was the Most Active Migratory Route in 2023, Crossings and Rescue Efforts Continue, Multiple Trials Related to Migration in Italy Happening as Court Prepares to Rule on Albanian-Italian Deal, Attack on Human Rights NGO KISA Highlights Rise in Racist Violence | European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). (n.d.). <https://ecre.org/mediterranean-central-mediterranean-route-was-the-most-active-migratory-route-in-2023-crossings-and-rescue-efforts-continue-multiple-trials-related-to-migration-in-italy-happening-as-court-prepares/>

Deadliest quarter for migrants in the Central Mediterranean since 2017. (2023, April 12).

International Organization for Migration. <https://www.iom.int/news/deadliest-quarter-migrants-central-mediterranean-2017>

EU action to manage irregular arrivals in Spain. (n.d.). Consilium.

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/western-routes/>

European Parliament. (n.d.). *EU-TURKEY STATEMENT & ACTION PLAN | Legislative train schedule*. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan>

Migrants missing in Libya are a matter of gravest concern. (2020, April 17). International Organization for Migration. <https://www.iom.int/news/migrants-missing-libya-matter-gravest-concern>

Strik, T. (n.d.). *Parliamentary question | Italian court ruling on Libyan Coast Guard rescue operations and its implications for the legal compliance of EU funding | E-002089/2024 | European Parliament*. © European Union, 2024 - Source: European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2024-002089_EN.html

Syria refugee crisis explained. (n.d.). <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>

Situation Ukraine refugee situation. (n.d.). <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

Ukraine Refugee Crisis: Aid, Statistics and ,news | USA for UNHCR. (n.d.). <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/>

World Bank Group. (2016). *Turkey's Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Road Ahead*. In *World Bank*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/turkey/publication/turkeys-response-to-the-syrian-refugee-crisis-and-the-road-ahead>

UNHCR Iran -. (n.d.). *Refugees in Iran | UNHCR Iran*. UNHCR Iran. <https://www.unhcr.org/ir/refugees-iran>

Homepage. (2024, December 18). International Organization for Migration.

<https://www.iom.int/>

Who we are | International Organization for Migration. (n.d.). International Organization for Migration. <https://www.iom.int/who-we-are>

European Border and Coast Guard Agency | European Union. (n.d.). European Union.

https://european-union.europa.eu/institutions-law-budget/institutions-and-bodies/search-all-eu-institutions-and-bodies/frontex_en

Human trafficking and smuggling of migrants. (n.d.).

<https://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Human-trafficking-and-migrant-smuggling>

Interconnected and digital: how migrant smugglers and human traffickers operate | Europol.

(2024, July 17). Europol. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/interconnected-and-digital-how-migrant-smugglers-and-human-traffickers-operate>

Gaggiotti, G. (2024, July 4). *World Refugee Day: The biggest migration routes in the world.*

unicef.ch. <https://www.unicef.ch/en/current/blog/2024-06-19/world-refugee-day-biggest-migration-routes-world>

World Bank Climate Change Knowledge Portal. (n.d.).

<https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/saudi-arabia/extremes>

UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency. (n.d.). *Refugee travel documents | UNHCR.* UNHCR.

<https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/long-term-solutions/complementary-pathways-admission-third-4>

Rights and duties - UNHCR Frequently asked questions. (n.d.). UNHCR Frequently Asked

Questions. <https://help.unhcr.org/faq/how-can-we-help-you/rights-and-duties/>

UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency. (n.d.). *The 1951 Refugee Convention* | UNHCR.

UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention>

UNTC. (n.d.). https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetailsII.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=V-3&chapter=5&Temp=mtdsg2&clang=_en

UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency. (n.d.). *UN Conventions on Statelessness* | UNHCR.

UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/protect-human-rights/ending-statelessness/un-conventions-statelessness>