Myth 2: Borders are beyond control

It seems like borders are beyond control as illegal migration is growing fast. Although levels of legal migration have remained stable, media images and political rhetoric suggest that growing numbers of migrants are crossing borders illegally in desperate attempts to reach Western countries. With smugglers and traffickers abusing people's desperation and luring them into costly and dangerous journeys across deserts and seas, Western governments seem to be failing to stop this. Politicians, pundits and media have therefore frequently sounded the alarm bell that immigration systems may collapse under ever-increasing migration pressures.

This crisis narrative is further reinforced by the common use of terms like 'mass immigration' and 'exodus' and other apocalyptic vocabulary. In 2015, British prime minister David Cameron spoke of 'a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean'.[1] In the same year, in response to the large-scale arrivals of Syrian refugees in Europe, Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte stated that: 'As we all know from the Roman Empire, big empires go down if the borders are not well-protected.'[2] Three years later, US president Donald Trump warned that immigration 'threatens our security and our economy and provides a gateway for terrorism'.[3] In 2022, UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman referred to growing numbers of boat crossings from France across the English Channel as an 'invasion on our southern coast'.[4]

Politicians frequently portray immigration as an assault on our borders by foreigners, something that is happening *to* us – or what French politicians habitually call an *immigration subie*[fn1] when they argue in favour of an *immigration choisie*, a 'chosen immigration'.

This has gone along with increasingly harsh political rhetoric – such as in Britain, where successive Labour and Conservative governments have endeavoured to create a 'hostile environment' for illegal migrants.

In the United States, too, politicians and pundits have frequently invoked the term 'invasion', while media images and political rhetoric about 'migrant caravans' fuel fears about a massive Third World exodus often portrayed as an attack on the sovereignty and safety of the US. This is anything but a new phenomenon. Back in the 1990s, growing immigration from Mexico gave rise to a narrative that portrayed Latino immigration as a threat to American society and culture. This was part of a broader resurgence of xenophobia in the US, with media and pundits comparing immigration to an 'invasion of illegal aliens'[5] in narratives that typically conflated legal and illegal immigration.

Similar language can be heard in Europe, where media and politicians have created the perception that millions of Africans are just waiting on their chance to move to Europe. In 2011, in response to the arrival of almost 5,000 boat migrants – mainly from Tunisia – on the Italian island of Lampedusa, Italian exterior minster Franco Frattini warned of 'an exodus of Biblical proportions', while interior minister Roberto Maroni talked about 'an invasion [...] that would bring any country to its knees'.[6] The popular 'exodus' narrative is often paired with the equally powerful 'invasion' narrative, which portrays immigration to Europe as increasingly clandestine in character.

But it is not only Western politicians who have bought into the idea of an impending immigration invasion. Leaders of countries of origin or transit, too, have used it as a negotiation chip to exact diplomatic, military and financial support. African leaders have frequently played into deep-seated European fears of a 'Black invasion' in their efforts to secure larger aid packages, or in seeking a return for their collaboration with border controls and taking back illegal migrants and rejected asylum seekers.

In 2010, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi warned that Europe 'could turn into Africa' as 'there are millions of Africans who want to come in', and argued that the EU should therefore pay Libya at least $6.3 billion (£4 billion) a year to stop illegal African immigration and avoid a 'Black Europe'.[7] In 2020, the Guatemalan president Alejandro Giammattei proclaimed that 'hunger, poverty and destruction do not have years to wait ... If we don't want to see hordes of Central Americans looking to go to countries with a better quality of life, we have to create walls of prosperity in Central America.'[8]

The fear that migration is spinning out of control has prompted many politicians to argue that we need to step up border enforcement. Others have argued that border controls won't solve the problem unless we (also) address 'root causes' such as poverty and conflict in origin countries. However, they all share the same perception: illegal immigration is getting out of hand. The extensive attention in politics and media given to border crises has fuelled the idea that South–North migration is mainly, and increasingly, about illegal immigration.

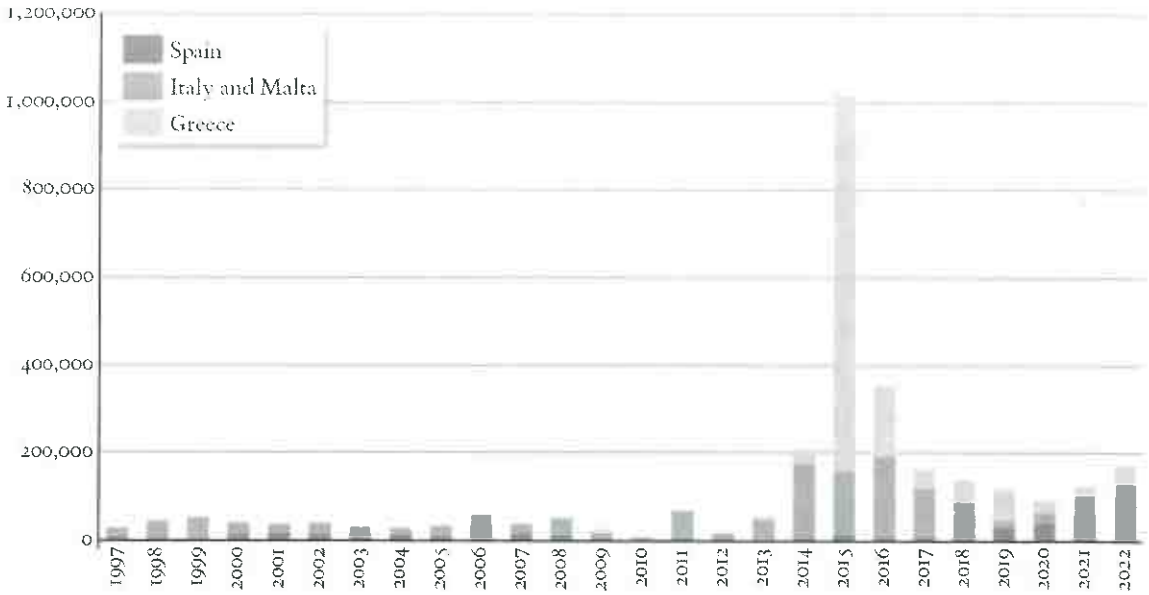
How it really works

The vast majority of people migrate legally

It is true that, over recent decades, Western countries have experienced increasing levels of immigration. It is also true that the share of non-European immigrants in Europe and North America has increased. As we saw in the previous chapter, this is part of a global migration reversal in which Europeans stopped massively emigrating to other parts of world. However, the idea that South–North migration is increasingly, and predominantly, about illegal migration is not backed up by evidence. Contrary to popular belief, the overwhelming majority of international migrants – including those moving from the South to the North – move legally, with passports and visas in hand. The extensive media coverage of illegal migration hugely inflates the true magnitude of the phenomenon.

The best data we have to estimate illegal migration trends is the number of people apprehended at international borders. Not all of these are illegal migrants. A small but significant share of border crossers are asylum seekers, who do not officially count as illegal migrants because seeking asylum is a fundamental human right. When referring to the arrival of both illegal migrants and asylum seekers this book therefore uses the term 'unsolicited border arrivals'. Border apprehensions are not an accurate reflection of the real number of unsolicited border crossings, because other migrants move across borders without being detected – for instance by hiding in trucks, vans or cars, or walking across borders, or climbing fences, with or without the help of smugglers.

Apprehension statistics also depend on the intensity of controls. The more intense the controls, the higher the number of migrants detected – but there is also the chance that the same person is counted twice as deportees often try to migrate again. Such double-counting has inflated recent surges in apprehension statistics in the United States. But while apprehension statistics are anything but perfect, they are the best data we have to at least get some idea about long-term trends in illegal border crossings.



Graph 3: Registered unsolicited arrivals by boat of migrants and asylum seekers in Europe, 1997–2022[9]

So, what does the data say? First of all, that illegal immigration seems to be a bigger problem in the US than in Europe. In the US, between 1990 and 2020 the average number of border apprehensions stood at just over 1 million per year. This is almost one-quarter – 23 per cent – of the average legal immigration to the US over the same period, which stood at 4.7 million per year – 1,024,000 permanent and 3,685,000 temporary migrants.

Compared to those numbers, illegal immigration to European countries is quite small. Graph 3 shows the number of border apprehensions of illegal migrants and asylum seekers crossing the Mediterranean. Between 1997, when systematic measurements started, and 2020, the average yearly number of registered sea border arrivals from North Africa in Italy, Spain and Malta stood at levels of around 47,300, 16,200 and 1,100 respectively. This makes a total average number of 64,600 yearly arrivals to these three countries.[10] Although these are significant numbers, this is only around 3–3.5 per cent of the (on average) 2 million non-EU migrants legally arriving in the EU every year. The number of arrivals reached a one-off peak in 2015, with almost a million asylum seekers and refugees from Syria and other countries crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey into Greece, but the long-term pattern is relatively stable.

Of course, the real numbers are certainly higher, because much illegal migration has gone undetected, particularly in the 1990s when border enforcement was low and illegal migrants could cross borders rather easily. However, there is no doubt that illegal immigration accounts for a minority of arrivals in Europe.

Another way of estimating the magnitude of illegal migration is to look at the size of undocumented migrant populations. This is important, because the majority of undocumented migrants actually crossed the border legally, but *became* undocumented because they stayed longer than their visa or work permit allowed them. Such 'visa overstaying' – which no wall can stop – is the main source of illegal stays.

As with illegal border crossings, it's impossible to know exactly the number of undocumented migrants, but available estimates give a

good idea about the relative magnitude. For Europe, the best available estimates – which date back to 2008 – tell us that there were an estimated 1.9–3.8 million undocumented migrants in the EU (including the UK), equal to 0.4–0.8 per cent of the total population and 7–13 per cent of the immigrant (foreign-born) population.[11] A review of recent studies estimated the size of the undocumented population in the UK at levels of between 674,000 and 800,000, or around 1 per cent of the British population.[12]

Compared to most of Europe, in the US illegal immigration seems a bigger problem. In 2018 there were about 10.5 million undocumented immigrants living in the US – that is, one-quarter of the total foreign-born population of 44.8 million in the same year, and 3.2 per cent of the total US population.[13]

Illegal immigration in Europe seems lower than in the US for several reasons. Geography is one factor – the Mexico–US border is easier to cross than the Mediterranean Sea. The virtual non-enforcement of laws prohibiting the employment of undocumented migrant workers in the US is another – although in Europe, too, worksite enforcement is rather low. Another explanation is that, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007, western European countries tapped into new free-migration labour sources in eastern Europe. However, another major factor is that European countries pursued several legalization ('amnesty') campaigns over recent decades, which meant that many undocumented migrants gained legal status, whereas the last migrant amnesty in the US dates back to 1986 because of a decades-long political stalemate on the issue.

In the longer term, illegal migration is not increasing

Most importantly, available evidence suggests that these numbers are relatively stable. This is also visible in the relative stability of the undocumented migrant population in the US – which, after a fast increase between 1990 and 2005, has been hovering at levels of around 11 million over the past two decades. While some undocumented migrants go back and some gain legal status, new

illegal border-crossers and visa-overstayers are added. The main changes have been to the composition of the undocumented population, particularly through a decreasing share of Mexicans and an increasing share of Central Americans and Asians.[14]

It's clearly a myth, then, that Latin American migration to the US or African and Middle Eastern migration to Europe is mainly, or increasingly, about illegal border crossings. The myth of invasion ignores the fact that most migrants arrive without breaking any laws. For instance, based on available data we can estimate that about nine out of ten Africans migrating out of the continent cross borders legally.[15] However, these legal border passages that happen on a day-to-day basis – in airports and at land borders – are invisible, and rarely attract any media attention. Sensationalist media coverage and alarmist political rhetoric therefore exaggerate the true scale of the problem. Most importantly, there is no evidence of an increase in unsolicited border crossings. The pattern is rather an erratic one, with flows going up and down depending on labour demand in destination countries (for illegal migration) and conflict in origin countries (for refugee migration). While the media usually report on surges, they don't tend to report on the usual post-surge decline, which partly explains why we get the impression that illegal migration is increasing fast and spinning out of control.

What typically happens is that every surge in unsolicited border crossings is extrapolated into the future, creating the usual migration panic about impending migrant invasion. However, these surges are usually one-off peaks, which are always temporary. Surges are generally the result of pressing labour demand in destination countries in the absence of sufficient legal migration channels, or spikes in violence and conflict in origin countries. Surges can also be seasonal, with crossings usually increasing when weather circumstances improve during spring. As we only hear about such migration when it's rising, and hardly ever when it's plummeting, we're easily left with the skewed impression that the number of border crossings is ever-increasing and getting out of hand.

Most immigration stems from active labour recruitment

The myth of invasion disguises the fact that the vast majority of South–North migrants, including illegal immigrants, are not as unwanted as politicians often make us believe. Such rhetoric conceals that, by and large, immigration has not been something that is happening to us, or an external force threatening our society, but rather something that stems from deliberate efforts by governments and businesses to recruit migrant workers in response to job scarcities in sectors like agriculture, mining, healthcare, domestic work and hospitality.

Few Americans and Europeans realize that the presence of large Latino populations in the US, Caribbean and South Asian populations in the UK, and North and West African and Turkish populations in continental Europe all stem from active efforts to recruit workers. These countries *asked* them to come – it was an *immigration choisie.* Contrary to popular images, most migrants did not just 'show up' or 'pour in' or leave their homes out of desperation, but were workers who were actively sought in origin countries. The real migration story of the post-Second World War era is not one of massive arrivals of illegal immigrants, but of major changes in patterns of labour recruitment. Growing immigration was not a natural, spontaneous phenomenon, but was set in motion by deliberate recruitment prompted by growing labour shortages.

The increase in the number of non-European migrants to Western countries has been primarily driven by fundamental geographical shifts in the global supply of and demand for migrant labour. In Europe, initially, decolonization marked the end of European world hegemony *and* large-scale European emigration. The dismantling of the British, French, Dutch, Portuguese and Belgian colonial empires between 1945 and 1975 prompted the large-scale – both voluntary and forced – departure and repatriation of colonial administrators, soldiers, settlers, and other groups that no longer felt welcome or safe in the atmosphere of political turmoil and anti-colonial nationalism in newly independent countries. This triggered substantial migration from decolonized countries to the nations of

former colonizers, such as Algerian *colons* moving to France, Indonesian mixed-race 'Indos' moving to the Netherlands, and Indian-heritage populations in Uganda and Kenya moving to Britain.

After the first phase of post-colonial migrations, labour demand soon took over as the main cause of increasing migration to western European countries. Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, rapid economic growth fuelled increasing job shortages in industries and mines. This prompted the large-scale recruitment of migrant workers. For instance, between 1948 and 1971 Britain recruited many migrants from the Caribbean – named the 'Windrush generation' after the first ship that brought workers from Jamaica, Trinidad, Tobago and other islands – to help fill the post-war labour shortages in public services such as London Transport, British Rail and the National Health Service (NHS), while various industries, including mining, recruited workers in Pakistan and Bangladesh.[16]

French industries sent recruiters to the rural areas of their former colonies in the Maghreb, Senegal and Mali to recruit able-bodied, hard-working peasant sons to work in mining, car manufacture, and other heavy industries and jobs the native French no longer wanted to do. Between 1963 and 1982, the French government also recruited 186,000 workers from the overseas territories Réunion, Guadeloupe and Martinique to work in various government services.[17]

In the First and Second World Wars, the French and British had enlisted hundreds of thousands of colonial 'subjects' to fight on Europe's battlefields. The French army recruited Senegalese, Malian, Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian soldiers.[18] Likewise, some 2 million Indians served in the British Indian Army, and 24,000 died in the Burma, North African and Italian campaigns. Some 30,000 Jamaicans and other Caribbean men served in the army on the battlefields, and with the Royal Air Force and Merchant Navy. This would sow the seeds for the labour migrations to Britain and France that ensued soon after the Second World War. For example, the migration of Sikhs to Southall in West London was initiated by a former British officer in the Indian Army working for the R. Woolf Rubber Factory.[19]

Likewise, industries and mining companies in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Sweden pressed their governments to sign guest worker agreements with governments in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece and former Yugoslavia from the 1950s. However, as growing prosperity in southern European countries decreased their emigration potential in the 1960s and 1970s, governments and employers tapped into new sources of migrant labour by recruiting workers from Turkey, Morocco and Tunisia.

Once migrant communities were established, new workers started arriving more spontaneously, and sometimes illegally, with migrants being informed about new jobs and helped by already-settled migrants. Although some workers arrived without permits, there were no visas, and as there were huge labour shortages, most of them could secure legal residency relatively easily.

How the United States recruited migrant workers

In Europe, and France and Britain in particular, the social, economic and cultural ties created through centuries of colonial occupation led to a reverse flow of migrant workers from former colonies through recruitment after independence. In a similar way, increasing global US hegemony from the late nineteenth century would shape twentieth-century migration patterns towards America.

The US occupation of Puerto Rico and the Philippines after the Spanish-American War of 1898 prompted the large-scale recruitment of workers. Puerto Ricans started migrating as contract workers, first to sugar-cane plantations in Hawaii – another US overseas territory before its full incorporation as a state in 1959 – and from there to the US mainland. The extension of US citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917 further boosted migration.[20]

Filipino migration to the US also had roots in recruitment: in 1906, the first Filipino workers were hired to work on the sugar-cane and pineapple plantations of Hawaii. From there, they migrated to the US mainland, attracted by farm jobs in California, Washington and Oregon, and the salmon canneries of Alaska, while others were employed in the Merchant Marine. As de facto colonial subjects,

Filipinos could move freely to America until Congress established a Filipino immigration quota in 1934.[21] Many Filipinos served in the US Navy, which also provided a route to US citizenship. Likewise, immigration to the US from Korea began with active labour recruitment. This was set in motion after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited Chinese immigration, encouraged employers to recruit Korean workers, although Korean and Filipino immigration dropped after Congress passed the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924. [22]

In the US, immigration from southern and eastern Europe halted after 1914 because of growing anti-immigrant sentiment – while the relatively modest Asian immigration was also being curtailed. The resulting labour shortages prompted employers to recruit Black workers in the US South. This would set in motion the 'Great Migration' of approximately 6 million African American workers fleeing racism and economic exploitation in the Southern states to work in the industries of the Northeast, Midwest and West.[23]

From 1942 onwards, however, the war effort and massive military conscription – combined with fast economic growth – again created huge job shortages in various sectors. This pushed the US government to initiate the Bracero Program, which between 1942 and 1964 recruited 4.5 million young Mexicans to work in agriculture and railway-track maintenance in twenty-four states. Although it was officially considered temporary labour, the programme effectively kicked off large-scale permanent migration from Mexico to the US. Increasing labour demand in manufacturing, agriculture and domestic work would also stimulate immigration from Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries.[24]

Most illegal migrants are wanted workers, too

In the 1970s, West European countries as well as the US stopped active recruitment, followed in the 1980s by the introduction of travel visa requirements to prevent free entry, and the stepping-up of border enforcement from the 1990s. However, this did not stop immigration, as labour demand remained high, particularly with the resumption of economic growth and growing labour shortages. The fall of the Berlin

Wall, the end of communist regimes, and EU enlargement all helped to create a new migration frontier in eastern Europe. Over the 1990s and 2000s, central and eastern European countries evolved into major sources of migrant workers for western Europe. However, increasing labour demand and family reunification would continue to fuel growing migration of lower-and higher-skilled workers from outside the European Union – from traditional origin countries in North Africa and Turkey but also from countries such as Ukraine, Russia, China, Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal.

Another change was that former origin countries in southern Europe, which had supplied workers to West European and American industries for over a century, started evolving into major migration destinations themselves. Particularly in Spain and Italy, growing labour shortages in agriculture, construction, domestic and other service jobs led to increasing immigration from North and West Africa, Latin America and later also eastern Europe.

While most workers continued to arrive legally, growing border restrictions increased visa overstaying and illegal immigration – in the US principally from Mexico, and in Europe principally from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Turkey. However, this illegal migration has nothing to do with an 'exodus' or 'foreign invasion', but is largely a response to labour shortages, often facilitated by informal recruitment systems and word-of-mouth referrals. In other words, most illegal migrants are wanted workers.

Despite anti-immigration rhetoric and massive investments in border enforcement, governments have largely tolerated this, just as they have turned a blind eye to the illegal deployment of undocumented workers, as they fill urgent labour shortages in sectors such as agriculture, construction, domestic work, hospitality, and child and elder care. It's not so much borders that are beyond control, but immigration systems that are partly dysfunctional or 'broken' – with a large gap between the demand for foreign workers and the number of legal immigration channels to accommodate such a demand. This is helping to drive migration underground and facilitating the widespread exploitation of migrant workers.

The main point is that most immigration remains legal. However, because the days of official recruitment by governments are largely over, this 'wanted' dimension of legal and illegal immigration has become less visible. Reflecting a general move towards economic deregulation, private recruitment agencies have increasingly taken over the role of governments in recruiting workers. But while Western governments no longer play the central role, they continue to facilitate the recruitment of migrant workers either through official immigration policies or through policies whose euphemistic names avoid the controversial M-word but in reality are designed to facilitate immigration. Good examples of these are au pair programmes that allow the entry of care and domestic workers into western Europe, international traineeships in Japan and South Korea, and holiday worker programmes run by Australia.

The myth of invasion

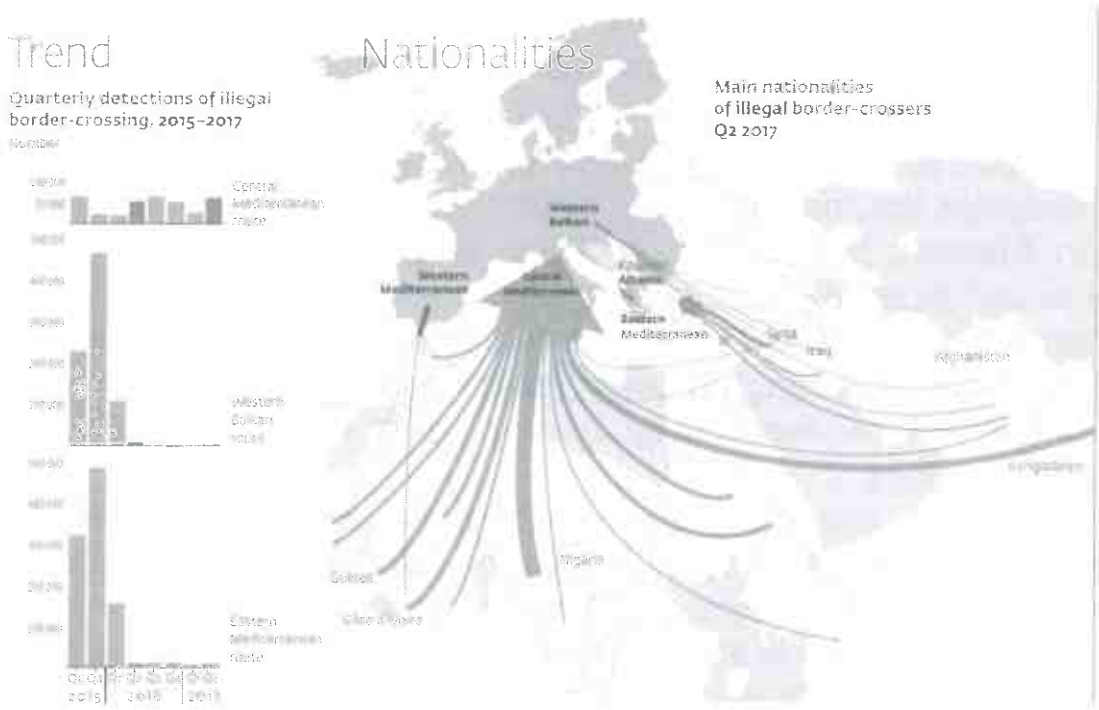
The arrival of refugees and migrants at borders represents a major humanitarian problem. Many migrants and refugees are injured or die during their attempts to cross borders, and suffer severe abuse and extortion by police, border guards and criminals. However, in order to find solutions to these problems it is important to understand the true nature, scale and causes of the phenomenon. And the reality has little to do with political fearmongering about increasingly uncontrollable immigration waves crashing on the shores of the Wealthy West.

First of all, there is no evidence that immigration is spinning out of control. It is true that Western societies have experienced levels of immigration and settlement that are higher than most expected a few decades ago. But this increase is mainly down to *legal* immigration, largely driven by labour demand. There is a large gap between labour demand and legal migration channels, and so a significant share of migration has been illegal, but it is not as massive as many people think.

However, the most important observation is that immigration is not something happening to us (an *immigration subie*), but largely stems

from active efforts by governments and businesses to recruit migrant workers (an *immigration choisie*), even though such workers are officially framed as 'undesired'. The evidence shows that legal and illegal immigration is much more 'wanted' than belligerent political rhetoric about 'fighting illegal migration' and 'combating smuggling' seems to suggest.

The modern-day immigration of migrant workers, families and refugees – whether legal or illegal – can simply not be compared to invasions or the ventures of European colonialists who, over five centuries, invaded and occupied foreign lands by brute military force. Such comparisons expose the myth of invasion for what it really is: a form of propaganda that is deliberately designed to sow panic and fear. Governments, media and migration agencies have actively fabricated and recycled the idea that the West is besieged, not only in the way they talk about illegal migration, but also in how they – literally – depict it.



Map 2: A migration map published in 2017 by Frontex, the European border and coastguard agency, depicting illegal border crossings

For instance, Frontex, the EU's border agency, regularly publishes maps that depict illegal immigration as a foreign invasion. Map 2 is one such map, published in 2017.[25] An array of huge arrows, coloured red in the original and all menacingly pointing to Europe, reinforces the impression that these are gigantic flows – an onslaught on Europe's borders. By depicting illegal immigration as a huge security threat, against which we have to arm ourselves, politicians tap into our deepest fears and tribal instincts while portraying themselves as strong leaders or saviours who will defend their people against foreign enemies by fighting illegal immigration, smugglers and traffickers.

Of course, both the scale and nature of illegal immigration do not in any way resemble a foreign invasion. Immigrants and refugees do not arrive with gunboats, fighter jets, or with the aim to overthrow governments. Nor is there a massive exodus of illegal migrants from the Global South to the Global North. These are myths that reinforce narratives depicting immigration as out of control, and therefore as a fundamental threat to economies, security and identity. These fears are a product of the imagination. In brief, there is no need to panic.

Myth 3: The world is facing a refugee crisis

Politicians, experts and media often claim that there is an unprecedented global 'refugee crisis'. This belief is linked to the widespread perception that growing conflict and oppression in Latin America, the Middle East and Africa are prompting more and more people to flee their homelands and seek a better future in the West. As a consequence, swelling tides of refugees seem to be increasingly overburdening asylum systems in Western countries.

In Europe, the debate about refugees reached fever pitch in 2015, when about 1 million Syrian refugees moved into Europe. Since then, a series of new border crises have occurred in other parts of the world – such as the increasing numbers of people fleeing violence and poverty in Central America, using Mexico as a transit country to move to the US, and the massive movements of refugees out of Venezuela. From March 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine prompted millions to flee to Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Moldova, and from there into western Europe, seemingly adding to the rapidly multiplying number of refugee crises elsewhere in the world.

As the cycle of violence and conflict seems never-ending, the situation of refugees trying to cross borders seems increasingly desperate. The idea that we are facing a refugee crisis is sustained by claims from international organizations. In 2022, UNHCR chief Filippo Grandi claimed that 'every year of the last decade, the numbers have climbed', and warned: 'Either the international community comes together to take action to address this human

tragedy, resolve conflicts and find lasting solutions, or this terrible trend will continue.'[1]

In brief, as the world seems on fire, the global refugee crisis seems to be getting out of hand. Politicians, experts and media have also been fuelling the common perception that numbers of refugees have soared rapidly in the recent past – and will only continue to increase, as a result of a toxic mix of warfare, conflict, poverty, inequality and climate change.

The refugee crisis narrative is also based on the widespread belief that more and more asylum seekers are not 'real' refugees, but are in fact economic migrants posturing as refugees. Politicians and media have repeatedly claimed that these 'bogus' asylum seekers abuse the asylum channel to avoid deportation and gain legal status. By trying to play the system, they are muddying the waters for 'real' refugees. Tapping into similar narratives, agencies like UNHCR and IOM have spread the idea that refugee flows have increasingly become 'mixed', with more and more economic migrants mingling with 'real' refugees.

This has created the impression that a soaring number of asylum applicants have put Western refugee systems under such pressure that they are on the verge of collapsing. This would leave us with no other choice than to dismantle current asylum systems. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was created in 1950 to address the refugee crisis resulting from the Second World War. The modern refugee regime is based on the UN Refugee Convention that was established one year later. According to the Convention, it is a fundamental human right to cross international borders to seek protection from violence and persecution, so the idea of an 'illegal asylum seeker' is a contradiction in terms. Importantly, the Convention prohibits signatories from expelling or deporting asylum seekers to countries where they may fear danger of persecution, without first investigating whether they have made a legitimate claim for refugee status. This 'non-refoulement' principle is still the linchpin of the modern refugee system, and is quite unpopular with tough-on-immigration politicians.

The argument now is that this system that was designed to manage European refugee flows is no longer sustainable in an increasingly violent and unstable world. As socialist French prime minister Michel Rocard famously argued back in 1989, '*La France ne peut pas accueillir toute la misère du monde*' ('France cannot welcome all the misery of the world'). Politicians have increasingly claimed that, given the huge surge in refugee numbers, we have no choice but to curtail the right to asylum and reinforce border controls, and that these policies are a 'necessary evil' to prevent our borders being overrun and our asylum systems becoming overwhelmed. This has gone along with regular pleas to revise the UN Refugee Convention. In 2003, Tony Blair called it 'completely out of date' in terms of its ability to tackle the problems of the mass migration of people around the world.[2]

All of this reflects a growing political consensus that, in order to prevent our asylum systems from collapsing, we have no other choice than to: (1) put in place 'firm but fair' asylum policies that sift out 'real' refugees from 'bogus' asylum seekers; (2) deter 'bogus' asylum seekers by sending them back to transit states, or process their cases in 'third countries'; and (3) provide 'regional solutions', or in other words have the international community create safe havens and economic opportunities for refugees in their regions of origin so that they no longer have to come to the West.

Destination countries have increasingly tried to outsource asylum processing by seeking collaboration with third countries. In 2013, the Australian government led by Labor prime minister Kevin Rudd pioneered this 'tough line' approach by sending asylum seekers to the small Pacific islands of Manus and Nauru to be detained while awaiting the outcome of their asylum applications. Other Western countries have followed Australia's example: Greece's mass detention of asylum seekers in camps on a few islands like Lesbos (essentially turning Greece into a 'buffer state'[3]); Trump's 'Remain in Mexico' policy (forcing asylum seekers to await processing of their asylum claims in Mexico[4]); and Denmark's and Britain's attempts to send asylum seekers to Rwanda.

How it really works

Refugee numbers are relatively small and not accelerating

The idea that the West is facing an unprecedented – and increasingly untenable – refugee crisis is based on the assumptions that: (1) refugee numbers are at an all-time high; (2) the number of refugees coming to the West is increasing at a staggering pace; and (3) more and more asylum seekers are in fact economic migrants ('bogus' asylum seekers). However, the facts challenge every one of these three assumptions.

First of all, contemporary levels of refugee migration are anything but unprecedented. Refugee migration is much smaller than media coverage and political rhetoric suggest. Since the 1950s, refugee numbers have been between 0.1 and 0.35 per cent of the world population, and refugees form only a small part of the international migrant population. Between 1985 and 2021, the estimated size of the total international refugee population fluctuated between 9 and 21 million, which is roughly between 7 and 12 per cent of the total number of international migrants in the world.

Second, there is no evidence of a long-term increase in refugee migration. The pattern is rather one of fluctuation, with refugee numbers going up and down according to levels of conflict in origin countries. Refugee numbers peaked at 16 million in the early 1990s, a period of increasing conflict around the world – in former Yugoslavia, the Horn of Africa (Somalia in particular), and countries in the African Great Lakes region such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. The wars in former Yugoslavia in particular led to increased refugee movement to western Europe, accompanied by growing political panic about the alleged mass movements of 'bogus' asylum seekers. After 1993, however, global refugee numbers plummeted – falling to 9 million by the early 2000s. Numbers were so low that refugee experts were increasingly out of work and insiders even started to question the *raison d'être* of UNHCR.

Numbers started going up again in 2005, partly because of protracted conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq following the US-led

invasions of 2001 and 2003. From 2011, the Arab Spring sparked a wave of pro-democracy street protests that were met by severe government repression. This sparked civil conflict in various countries, particularly Libya, Yemen and Syria. In Syria, it prompted the internal displacement of 6.2 million Syrians, while 5.6 million sought refuge in neighbouring countries. In more recent years, violent conflict and repression in South Sudan and Eritrea, the expulsion of the Rohingya Muslim minority from Myanmar, political crisis in Venezuela and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine have further increased global refugee numbers.

Graph 4: Total worldwide refugee numbers as a percentage of the global population, 1985–2021

These crises explain why the total number of international refugees had grown to 21.3 million at the end of 2021, and 26.7 million in 2022 (mainly because of the war in Ukraine).But although refugee numbers have increased, current levels are in fact similar to those in the early 1990s. As graph 4 shows, in 1992, 0.33 per cent of the world population were refugees, and this percentage was 0.25 in 2021.

Looking at long-term trends, current refugee numbers are therefore not as unprecedented as they may seem at first sight.[5]

The real refugee crisis is in origin regions

The facts also defy the idea that swelling masses of refugees are on their way to the Wealthy West. In reality, the vast majority of refugees stay in neighbouring countries. According to official UNHCR data, in 2017 about 80 per cent of refugees resided in neighbouring countries and 85 per cent of all refugees had stayed in developing countries, percentages that have remained relatively stable in recent decades.[6] The main reason why most refugees generally don't travel far is because most prefer to stay close to home, in countries that are more familiar in terms of culture, religion and language. This also makes it easier to remain in touch with family and friends left behind in origin countries, and to return as soon as the situation allows. Furthermore, fleeing over large distances requires considerable resources. For those wishing to move further away, only a minority of refugees have the money, connections and papers required.

Despite politicians' talk about 'regional solutions' (the idea that refugees should be hosted by neighbouring countries to prevent massive numbers coming to the West), this has already been the reality for half a century. In 2018, Turkey hosted more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees, equivalent to about 4.4 per cent of its population of 82 million. In the same year, almost 1 million Syrian refugees lived in Lebanon, out of a total population of 6 million. By comparison, in the same year, 532,000 Syrians were living in Germany, 15,800 in France and 9,700 in the UK.[7] In the same vein, the majority of people who fled war-torn parts of Ukraine in 2022 moved either to safer regions in their own country or to neighbouring countries – principally Poland.

As most refugees stay close to home, the real refugee crisis is occurring not in the West, but in origin regions. Some of the poorest countries in the world host large numbers of refugees. While in 2018 the number of refugees born in African countries stood at 6 million, African countries hosted 5.5 million refugees in that same year, almost all of them from other African countries. About 92 per cent of

African refugees remain in Africa, where the main refugee-hosting countries are Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya – which have received large groups fleeing violent conflict in South Sudan, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 2021, of the 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees in the world, about 2.2 million (or 85 per cent) lived in Iran and Pakistan. And we see the same pattern in other world regions: Bangladesh hosts most refugees from Myanmar, while Colombia, Peru and Chile host most Venezuelan refugees.

Refugee numbers in Western countries only spike when there is conflict in the relative geographical vicinity, such as during the wars in former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the Syrian civil war and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Numbers vary a lot across western Europe. Refugee numbers are highest in Germany, the fifth-most important refugee-hosting country in the world (after Turkey, Colombia, Pakistan and Uganda), with 1.15 million refugees in 2019 representing 1.38 per cent of the total German population. In relative terms, Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands also host large refugee populations. In many other countries, such as the UK and France, the numbers are actually rather low. In 2018, the 152,000 refugees and asylum seekers living in the UK represented 0.23 per cent of the total population.

In Canada, Australia and New Zealand, historically most refugees have arrived through official resettlement programmes, with governments inviting limited quotas of refugees to migrate permanently, after careful vetting in origin regions. They can do so partly because these countries are geographically further away from major conflict zones, hence there are far lower numbers of spontaneous arrivals of asylum seekers at the border. In Australia, for instance, despite the political upheaval around boat arrivals of asylum seekers, these numbers have never exceeded 21,000 per year – a small fraction of total legal immigration into Australia of 600,000–800,000 per year over the 2010s.

There is no evidence of a rise in 'bogus' asylum claims

The evidence also contradicts the popular idea that the number of 'bogus' asylum seekers is rising fast and that migrant flows are becoming increasingly mixed because of growing numbers of asylum claimants posturing as refugees. Of all the available indicators, asylum rejection and acceptance rates are the best estimate we have of the relative share of legitimate asylum applicants. This is of course a highly imperfect measure, because some countries have much tougher procedures than others, and asylum rejection and acceptance rates vary across countries and over time. Yet trends in acceptance and rejection rates can still give us some general sense of the proportion of 'real' refugees among all asylum applicants.

The data reveals that in most Western countries, asylum rejection rates have remained remarkably stable over the past decades. For instance, in 2020, about 521,000 people applied for asylum in the EU, or 0.12 per cent of the total EU population of 448 million (excluding the UK). Of these applications, 40.7 per cent resulted in initial positive decisions. Of these 212,000 positive decisions, half were granted official refugee status. Another quarter received 'subsidiary protection status', which is given to asylum seekers who cannot prove that they are personally persecuted but who could face serious risk to their life or personal safety if deported. The latter category often includes people coming from war-torn countries.

Another quarter received a temporary authorization to stay for humanitarian reasons – because of illness, or because they were minors. If we include positive outcomes of appeals procedures, in total 281,000 asylum seekers were granted permission to stay in 2020. This is 9.5 per cent of the 2,955,000 people who legally migrated to the EU from non-EU countries in the same year.[8]

We see similar patterns in the UK. According to data compiled by Oxford University's Migration Observatory, in 2019 about 388,000 foreign-born people living in the UK had originally come to Britain to seek asylum. This is equivalent to 4 per cent of Britain's 9.5 million foreign-born population during that year.

In 2019, there were about five asylum applications for every 10,000 people living in the UK, or about 0.05 per cent of the total population. British refugee recognition rates are roughly comparable to those of the EU. Including appeals, around 54 per cent of original asylum applications submitted between 2016 and 2018 had received a grant of asylum-related protection by May 2020 – up from 36 per cent at initial decision.[9]

Since the 2010s, the US has seen a significant increase in the number of asylum seekers spontaneously arriving at the border, partly because of growing violence and political crises in Central America, Venezuela and Haiti. Still, refugee recognition data does not provide evidence of a massive increase in the numbers of 'bogus' asylum seekers. In the US, the asylum denial rate fluctuated between 50 and 60 per cent over the period between 2000 and 2017, although it has been increasing in recent years because of a political drive to deny asylum seekers access to the US refugee admission system.[10]

So, if we focus on the longer term, trends have been remarkably consistent across most Western countries. Roughly half of asylum applicants see their cases eventually approved. In an analysis of recognition rates for asylum applicants from sixty-five origin countries to twenty European countries from 2003 to 2017, economic historian Timothy Hatton even found a certain increasing trend. This was mainly because a growing share of asylum seekers were coming from countries with high levels of political terror and repression, such as Syria, Eritrea and Yemen. EU directives seeking to harmonize asylum policy between countries – to prevent a 'race to the bottom' – have also played a modest role in increasing recognition rates. However, there are big differences across Europe, with countries like France, Greece, Spain and Hungary having recognition rates of below 20 per cent; Denmark, Norway and Switzerland above 40 per cent; and Germany and the UK occupying more intermediate positions.[11]

If it were really true that unsolicited migrant flows had become increasingly mixed and the number of 'bogus' asylum seekers had increased, we would have expected an *increase* in rejection rates.

Recognition rates have remained remarkably stable, suggesting that a large share are valid asylum claims. Such evidence defies the idea that modern refugee migration is increasingly about 'mixed flows'.

Inflating refugee numbers

The facts challenge the idea that the West is succumbing under the weight of increasing arrivals of refugees and asylum seekers. The chance of a legitimate claim to asylum not being approved is arguably higher than the chance of a 'bogus' asylum seeker slipping through the net. The number of asylum applications filed in Western countries has primarily fluctuated with levels of conflict in neighbouring regions,[12] and there is no evidence of a long-term increasing trend. This reveals a simple truth: most people flee because of conflict and oppression.

So why do we then *think* that refugee numbers are spinning out of control? Part of the answer is that ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, political rhetoric and sensationalist media coverage have created the *impression* that refugee flows are much bigger than they really are. And organizations like UNHCR and IOM present their data in such a way as to back up these claims. For instance, UNHCR data seems to show that the total number of displaced people in the world increased from 1.8 million in 1951 to 20 million in 2005, accelerating to 62 million in 2018, and then suddenly hiked up to almost 89 million in 2021 and 100 million in 2022.[13]

I have always found such claims difficult to believe. After all, levels of warfare and political oppression were actually higher in the post-Second World War decades than in more recent years. So why would refugee numbers be higher now? To investigate the validity of such claims, my colleague Sonja Fransen and I conducted a study in which we analysed long-term trends of refugee migration around the world based on historical UNHCR data.[14] We discovered that what *appears* to be an unprecedented increase in refugee numbers is in reality a statistical artefact caused by the inclusion of populations and countries that were previously excluded from displacement statistics.

In 1951, one year after its establishment, UNHCR started registering refugee data. In that year, its database covered information for only 21 countries, and the real number of refugees was of course much higher. From then on, the number of countries and territories included in UNHCR statistics increased, to 76 in 1970, 147 in 1990, 211 in 2010 and 216 in 2018. As the number of countries included in the UNHCR database went up, so did refugee numbers. This means that official UNHCR data severely underestimates past refugee numbers, because the data for most countries is missing over the 1950–1990 period.

A second source of problems is that UNHCR has added new categories of displaced people to their databases. In particular, internally displaced persons (IDPs) – a very broad category that includes all persons forced or obliged to leave their home because of armed conflict, violence, persecution or natural or human-made disasters, without crossing borders.

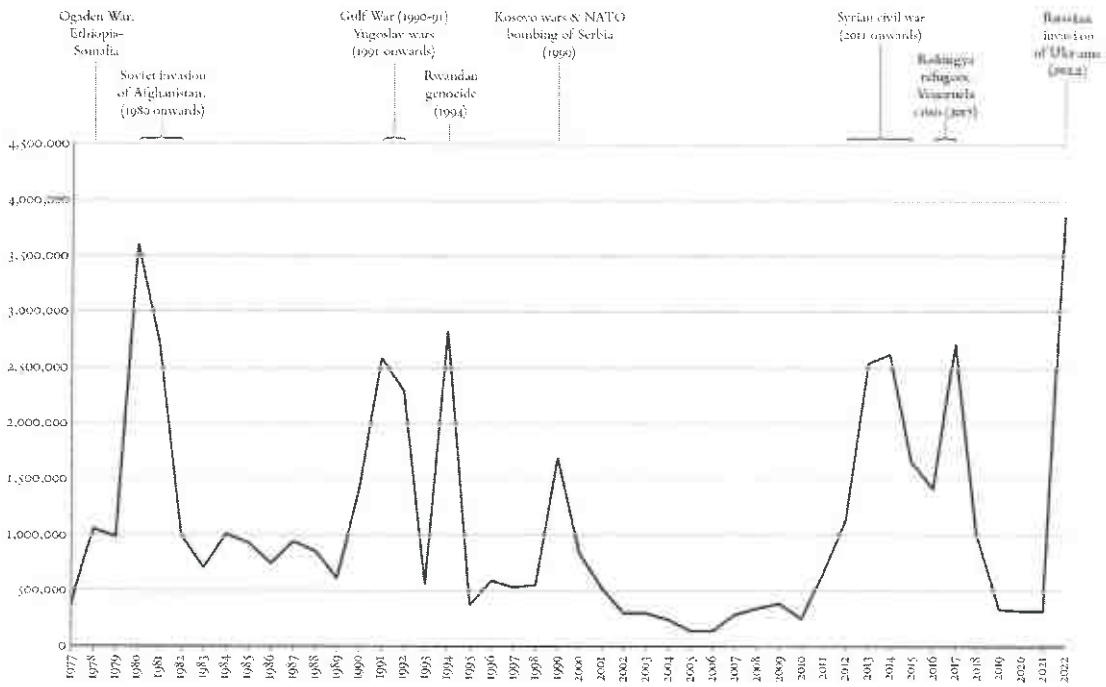
Most of the huge hike in global displacement levels reported by UNHCR is explained by a sharp increase in IDP numbers, from 4.2 million in 2003 to 41.4 million in 2018. This 41.4 million was two times higher than the number of international refugees in the same year. This does not of course mean that there were no IDPs in previous years, but that they were not included in past displacement statistics. By basically comparing apples and oranges, most of what appears to be a spectacular increase in refugee numbers is the artificial result of a rather misleading presentation of data.

Refugee flows go up and down with warfare

Graph 5 shows how many people were displaced by violent conflict and oppression in the years between 1977 and 2022. It confirms that, instead of a linear upward trend, refugee movements have gone up and down alongside the outbreak of violent conflicts. In the late 1970s, the Ogaden War produced many refugees, particularly those moving from Ethiopia to Somalia. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan produced 4.2 million refugees between 1980 and 1982 alone, and 5.8 million refugees in total until the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the bulk of

them fleeing to neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Over the 1980s, conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa displaced refugees mainly from Ethiopia, Rwanda, Mozambique and Liberia, although globally the numbers of refugees subsided until the 1991 Gulf War displaced 1.4 million Iraqis, most of them fleeing to Iran. The same year also marked the beginning of the Yugoslav Wars, generating major refugee flows, particularly from Bosnia.

In 1994, the Rwandan genocide prompted some 2.3 million – equal to one-third of the country's population – to flee, almost exclusively to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania and Burundi. In 1999, the Kosovo war and NATO bombings in Serbia would generate the latest major refugee flow in former Yugoslavia, displacing almost 1 million people from Serbia and Kosovo. The 2000–10 period was one of relative peace, with most displacement occurring in sub-Saharan Africa; this changed when protest against dictatorial regimes in the Arab world broke out in 2011. Government repression and ensuing conflict caused displacement, particularly from Syria, with extreme violence generating large-scale refugee migration. Over the entire 2012–21 period, some 8.7 million Syrians fled their country, 41 per cent of the pre-war population.



Graph 5: Global refugee displacements, 1977–2022[15]

In 2017, the Myanmar government expelled almost 700,000 Rohingya. The violent repression of anti-regime protests in Venezuela and an overall climate of corruption, hyperinflation and insecurity prompted the first major refugee flow in Latin America for decades, causing 4 million to flee in 2018 and 2019 alone – mainly to Colombia, Peru and Chile. Refugee migration then stabilized at lower levels, only to peak again in 2022 with the Soviet invasion of Ukraine, which led to the westward flight of at least 2.3 million Ukrainians – principally to Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic.

Instead of showing a long-term trend, therefore, the pattern is very erratic, with numbers rapidly going up and down but not showing a clear linear trend over time. This challenges the assumption that we are experiencing a global refugee crisis. As Sonja Fransen and I concluded in our study on refugee statistics, recent surges in refugee numbers as well as asylum applications in Western countries do not reflect a 'rising tide' of refugee migration, but rather a normal and therefore temporary response to increases in conflict levels in particular countries, with refugee numbers usually going down again after the conflicts subside.

The world has become more peaceful

Thanks to satellite television, internet and smartphones, images of war and oppression reach more people, more frequently and more powerfully than ever. Increased *exposure* to violence and oppression and political rhetoric easily creates the wrong impression that the world is on fire. Sensationalist media coverage and political propaganda play a role in creating the myth of invasion, but ideas about huge floods of refugees overwhelming asylum systems are also based on overly pessimistic thinking about the state of the world.

Going further back in time, there are good reasons to believe that displacement levels in the early and mid-twentieth century were much higher than in the post-Second World War period covered by UNHCR data, simply because this was a much more violent period. For instance, between 1914 and 1918 the First World War displaced an estimated 9.5 million Europeans. In 1923, the formation of the

modern Turkish nation out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire prompted the forced migration of over 1.2 million Greeks out of Turkey, and 350,000–400,000 ethnic Turks from Greece to Turkey.[16]

In Asia, the war between China and Japan (1937–45) displaced an estimated 60–95 million people,[17] while Japanese aggression during the Second World War led to mass displacement and forced labour throughout South-East Asia, and between 3 million and 10 million deaths.[18] It is thought that the Second World War displaced approximately 60 million Europeans.[19] About 6 million European Jews and millions of ethnic Serbs, Poles and Russians were murdered by the Nazi regime. The Nazis killed 20.9 million in total, 8.3 million of whom were East Europeans.[20]

The end of the war led to large-scale population movements of Holocaust survivors, displaced persons and various ethnic groups, such as the approximately 12 million ethnic Germans expelled as part of ethnic cleansing policies in eastern Europe.[21] In total, some 55 million Europeans would have been displaced between 1939 and 1947.[22] In the direct aftermath of the war, according to some estimates, the global population of displaced people was as high as 175 million just *before* UNHCR started compiling refugee statistics.[23] This was approximately 8 per cent of the world population at the time, significantly higher than the 0.3 per cent that are refugees now.

Many refugees of the post-war decades were not included in official statistics, particularly if they were not European. Between 1947 and 1951, the withdrawal of the British from India and the inter-religious tension and violence surrounding Partition prompted the displacement of about 14 million people, many of whom crossed the border between the two new states of Pakistan and India.[24]

In 1962, over 1 million *colons* (descendants of French and other European settlers) and *harkis* (Algerians who served with the French Army) left after Algeria achieved independence from France.[25] Between 1945 and the early 1960s, 375,000 mixed-race 'repatriates' from the former Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) felt forced to move to the Netherlands.[26] In 1972, about 50,000 ethnic Indians – descendants of former contract workers and traders – fled Uganda

(mainly to Kenya and Britain) on the orders of military dictator Idi Amin, who accused Ugandan Asians of being 'bloodsuckers' who were 'milking Uganda's money'.[27]

So, the idea that we face a global refugee crisis is partly based on the flawed assumptions that levels of warfare and oppression have generally increased. The evidence rather points in the opposite direction: the world has generally become more peaceful. Using data on the number of battle-related deaths as a measure for violence, Sonja Fransen and I found that there has clearly been a long-term decreasing trend in the intensity and severity of warfare.[28] Although the *number* of conflicts has not decreased, they have become much less lethal.

The refugee crisis is a political crisis

The evidence shows that UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations misrepresent refugee numbers, sustaining the idea that refugee and asylum migration has reached unprecedented heights. While these organizations may do this to attract attention and funding to pursue their important activities, it also makes them complicit in reinforcing the perception that refugee migration is getting out of hand. This perception of a 'refugee crisis' has become deeply ingrained in the collective psyche, even extending as far as school atlases: for instance, a 2015 edition of *De Grote Bosatlas*, used in many schools in the Netherlands, continued this alarmist misrepresentation by including large red arrows in their maps to depict the flows of asylum seekers.

Unfortunately, such misrepresentations undermine the case for refugee protection if people start to believe that current numbers of refugees are indeed exceeding the absorption capacity of destination societies and asylum systems. Politicians, too, have an interest in claiming that refugee numbers are unsustainably high, as this can provide justification for further stepping up border controls, illegally 'pushing back' asylum seekers and subjecting them to harsh and inhumane treatment.

Obviously, the arrival of large numbers of refugees can be challenging for populations living near border-crossing points or in towns and neighbourhoods where asylum seeker centres are located. Sudden refugee influxes can overwhelm communities and put significant pressure on local resources. But while the problems that large refugee inflows can generate on the local level should not be trivialized, there is no scientific basis for the claim that, on a national or international level, asylum systems are on the verge of collapsing because refugee numbers have reached record levels.

The data clearly defies the widespread belief that the West is besieged by a rising tide of refugees that exceeds the capacity of asylum systems. As we have seen, in the post-war decades, Western countries – and those in Europe in particular – were able to deal with much higher refugee numbers. While refugee numbers are not much higher than in the past, most refugees stay close to home, and some of the poorest countries in the world bear the heaviest burden. What is commonly called the 'refugee crisis' is therefore not so much a crisis of numbers as a political crisis, reflecting a lack of political will to host refugees and to share that responsibility with other destination states.