

REFUGEE AND MIXED MIGRATION FLOWS

*Managing a Looming Humanitarian
and Economic Crisis*

Bimal Ghosh



Refugee and Mixed Migration Flows

Also by Bimal Ghosh

The Global Economic Crisis and the Future of Migration: Issues and Prospects. What Will Migration Look Like in 2045? Palgrave Macmillan, England/New York (2012), (2015, Revised)

The Global Economic Crisis and Migration: Where Do we go from Here? IOM/The Hague Process on Refugees and Migration. Geneva/The Hague (2010)

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Elusive Protection, Uncertain Lands: Migrants' Access to Human Rights, IOM, Geneva (2003)

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Gains from Global Linkages: Trade in Services and Movement of Persons, Macmillan Press, St. Martins Press, England/New York (1987)

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and Economic Crisis

palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-319-75273-0 ISBN 978-3-319-75274-7 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75274-7>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018933046

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer International Publishing AG part of Springer Nature
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*To all who deserve humanitarian protection and need empathy
and support to regain their hopes and start their life again*

Preface

When late in 2015 I started writing this book, several parts of the world were gripped by a looming crisis in refugee and mixed migration flows. In Europe, member states of the European Union were feeling overwhelmed by an inflow of more than one million refugees and migrants, with ominous signals of many more yet to come. As the EU states were agonising over how to cope with the situation, several other regions of the world were facing massive internal displacements, alongside huge, and often unwanted, outflows of a mixture of refugees, persons deserving humanitarian protection, and irregular migrants. As noted in the Introduction of the book, these were triggered by geopolitical and religious tensions, violent conflicts, persecution and extreme insecurity and, in many cases, abject poverty or a varying combination of them.

Massive human displacements, whether internal or external, are surely not new. But, as will be discussed in the book, several of these flows have been throwing new challenges or making the existing ones more difficult to manage with the available migration policies and tools. For the discussion in the book, I have selected four major instances of these flows—two of them in Europe and one each in Central America and

Asia. I have done this in a global context as cross-border migration has become an integral part of the global human society.

Clearly, each of these flows has its distinctive features and presents specific issues, and therefore needs to be addressed separately as I have tried to do in different chapters of the book. But they also reveal many issues common to all of them, and these are addressed in the concluding chapter.

An overarching, common problem that bedevils the present migration system lies in the inadequacy of attention given to its root causes—the mismatch between high emigration pressure in the origin countries, accentuated by powerful demand-pull in receiving countries, on the one hand and, on the other, dwindling opportunities for legal entry in destination countries that are often fearful of losing control of their borders.

The challenge involved in achieving orderly, safe and less unpredictable flows lies in bringing these two powerful, opposing forces closer into a state of dynamic harmony. Issues of effective internal management of migration, including protection of migrants' rights, avoidance of discrimination and migrant integration, are closely interwoven with that challenge; they defy isolation. History also shows that although each type of migratory, including refugee, flow has its distinctive characteristics, they are also interlinked. Malfunctioning of any one channel is likely to have a negative spillover effect on the functioning of all or some of the other channels as well. Hence, the need for a coherent and comprehensive approach to management of migration and refugee flows.

As argued in the concluding section of the book, this calls for a new form of global partnership, based on a common understanding and collective self-confidence and determination of nations. It is promising that in 2016 the United Nations finally decided to step in and agreed to develop two global compacts dealing, respectively, with migration and refugees. It is sad that under the new administration the USA (subsequently followed by Hungary) has decided to dissociate itself from the initiative. Even so, it remains a golden, long-awaited opportunity, and every effort must be made to make sure that the new initiative moves in the right direction.

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Abbreviations

AFD	Alternative for Germany
ASEAN	Association of South-East Asian Nations
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
EEA	European Economic Area
EU/EC	European Union/European Commission
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IFC	International Finance Corporation
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMO	International Maritime Organization
ISIS	Islamic State of Syria, Iraq and Levant Organization
KIND	Kids In Need of Defense
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PEGIDA	Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West

xii Abbreviations

PWC	Pew Research Center
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children Fund
WFP	World Food Programme

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1

Introduction

Gathering Violence, Widespread Persecution and Record Human Displacements: The Challenge of a Looming Crisis

The world of migration and refugees has been witnessing two contrasting scenarios: slow and wavering increase in new inflows of migrants through regular channels in the aftermath of the 2008/2009 economic crisis juxtaposed with the highest recorded level of uprooted people in the post-World War II era. These human displacements were being caused by waves of violent conflicts and persecution, combined with a worsening geopolitical and security situation and, in many cases, abject poverty. Much of these displacements have taken place in the last few years, especially since 2012 when their total number was hovering around 45.2 million. In 2013, an estimated total of 51.2 million individuals were found forcibly displaced worldwide. Some 16.7 million were refugees (including 5.0 million Palestinian refugees), 33.3 million were displaced within their own countries (IDPs), then the highest number on record, and close to 1.2 million were asylum-seekers. In the following year (2014), there were 59.5 million uprooted people, including 38.2 million internally displaced persons, 19.5 million refugees (including 5.1 million Palestinian refugees) and nearly 1.8 million asylum-seekers. This was 8.3 million persons more than the year before—yet again, the highest annual increase ever in a single year.

The trend continued in 2015. The total number of uprooted people rose to 65.6 million (comprising 22.5 million refugees, 40.3 million IDPs and 2.8 million asylum-seekers). Figures most recently released by UNHCR show that there was no diminution of the level of human displacement in 2016; instead, the total number rose slightly more to 65.5 million.¹

The UNHCR estimated that in 2015, some 12.4 million persons (excluding *returns*) were newly displaced from their home. The enormity and poignancy of the problem become clearer when it is reckoned this implies that in 2015 on average 24 persons were forced to abandon their home and hearth every minute.²

We were thus living in a world in which one in every 107 persons had been forcibly uprooted. If all these displaced people were in one country, it would already have been the twenty-first most populous country in the world, with a population larger than that of the UK or Italy.

* * *

Roughly speaking, there has been a 55% increase over the number of refugees under UNHCR mandate in just four years since the end of 2011. In 2015, developing regions were hosting 13.9 million—or 86%—of the world's refugees under UNHCR's mandate. This was then the highest number in more than two decades. The trend was also reflected in the number of new asylum applications, especially in Europe. Figures collected by UNHCR showed that more than 2 million asylum applications were lodged in 2015 in 38 European countries,³ almost three times the number (709,800) registered in 2014. According to the European Union's Statistical Office, the number of *first time* asylum-seekers in 2014 in its member states was 562,000; it jumped to 1.26 million in 2015 and remained nearly as high in 2016 at 1.2 million. As a region, the Middle East has seen the sharpest increase in human displacements which more than doubled between 2005 and 2016, from about 25 million to around 54 million. Some of these

¹The world's total displacement figures for 2017, released by the UNHCR after this script went to press, reached 68.5 million, an increase of five consecutive years.

²There was a slight deceleration in the increase of new (*excluding returns*) in 2016, totaling 10.3 million and the number of newly displaced persons every minute was 20, compared with 24 in 2015.

³This, however, includes considerable instances of double accounting and is therefore somewhat exaggerated.

persons were economically motivated, but the majority of them, especially after 2011, were victims of forced displacement, according to an analysis by Pew Research Center of the United Nations data.

As the script was going to press, and the conflicts and violence, especially in the Middle East, continued unabated, there was hardly any sign of a break in these relentless waves of human displacements.

Deaths on the Fatal Journeys

Worse still, many of those seeking escape abroad in desperation are not making it at all. The episodes of deaths of migrants on their way to the elusive destination are not entirely new. According to Amnesty International, as many as 23,000 migrants have lost their lives in trying to reach the EU across the Mediterranean in the past 15 years. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) recently raised the number as high as 46,000 since 2000 and 60,000 over the past 20 years. More worryingly, the number of such risky journeys has been increasing in recent years.

In 2014, worldwide, some 4077 migrants⁴ lost their lives at sea or in remote deserts or mountains, making it the deadliest year on record and doubling the number of deaths in 2013. More than 540 migrants faced death in the Bay of Bengal, and at least, 307 migrants paid the same ultimate price in trying to cross the land border between Mexico and the USA (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2).

Since then, the situation turned still deadlier, with the number of migrants who died or disappeared worldwide rising to 5740 in 2015 and 7872 in 2016, making a 30% increase over the number in 2015, and representing an average of over 21 deaths a day, according to the figures released by IOM in January 2017.

The rising global trend in fatalities among migrants on their way to their destinations was particularly marked in the Mediterranean, where nearly 4600 of them perished in 2015. The UNHCR estimates that in two years,

⁴The UNHCR puts the number a little higher at 4272.

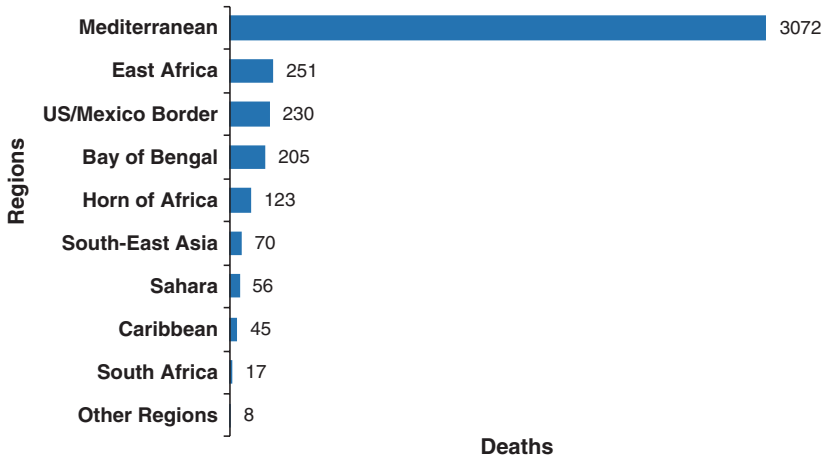


Fig. 1.1 Deaths on the fatal journey worldwide, January–September 2014 (Source IOM)

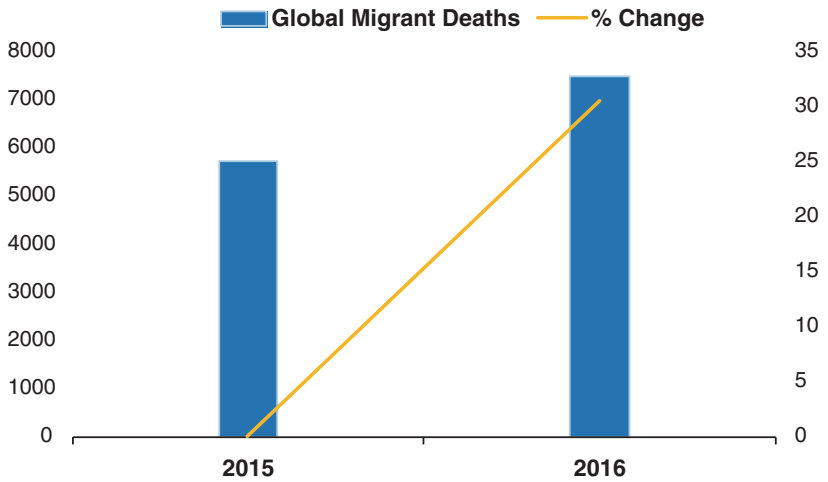


Fig. 1.2 Global migrant deaths, 2015–2016 (Source IOM)

2014–2015 over 10,000 migrants lost their life on the fatal journey; and with at least 5079 deaths or disappearances in 2016, these became the deadliest three years on record. And the trend, even if slightly subdued, seemed to continue, with the number reaching 1770, as of 10 June 2017.

The massive and cruel deaths in the small islands of Greece were starkly symbolic of the poignancy of the situation in some areas, with its painfully sobering effect. In October 2015, citing the local mayor, *Al Jazeera* reported that the Greek island of Lesbos had run out of room to bury the growing number of deaths at sea. Since autumn 2015, the accumulation of drowned bodies has become part of a wider migration crisis in Greece. The town morgue at Mytilene was full and so was a section of a Christian burial site which the church, in response to the emergency, had set aside for Islamic internment. As *The Economist* observed, in 1923 the region's affairs were settled by a vast separation between Christians and Muslims. In 2016, such separation no longer seems possible, either of the living or of the dead.⁵

According to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), every month 5000 Eritreans were leaving the country to escape oppression, but as they try to cross the desert and the Mediterranean to reach Europe, a good many of them perish on the way. Half of those interviewed by MSF reported that they had seen their fellow travellers dying on the way.

The available figures of deaths certainly understate the real numbers, as many migrants perish during the lengthy and harsh Sahara crossing, in the deep jungles or on hostile hilltops elsewhere. In June 2015, for example, the remains of 30 migrants were found in Dirked, Niger, who most probably were trying to reach Libya on their way to Europe.⁶ Exactly one year later in June 2016, the dead bodies of 34 migrants—20 children, nine women and five men—were discovered in the desert of Niger. They, too, were trying to reach Libya on their way to Europe, which they never made. Mass graves of trafficked migrants were suddenly discovered on the Thai/Malaysian borders (further discussed in later Chapter 11).⁷ A recent *BBC* investigation found that over 1250 unnamed

⁵*The Economist*, 21 April 2016.

⁶*IOM News*, 14 July 2015.

⁷*The Telegraph*, 24 May 2015.

migrant men, women and children have been buried in unmarked graves in 70 sites in Turkey, Greece and Italy since 2014.

* * *

In autumn and winter when the winds are stronger and more frequent, corpses float around on the sea in the triangle between Tripoli, Zouara and Lampedusa and then are washed ashore, mostly of those who were attempting to cross the Mediterranean in search of a better life. Some, including children, get lost during the fatal journey and may remain unaccounted for. In Europe, for example, it is estimated that some 10,000 children had disappeared during 2014–2015.

In several regions of the world, including the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), sub-Saharan Africa, Central America and parts of eastern Europe and Asia, there have been in recent years unprecedented internal displacements as well as massive and unpredictable mixed flows of refugees, persons deserving humanitarian protection and poverty-driven irregular migrants. As already mentioned, these have been variously triggered by political and religious tensions, violent conflicts, persecution and insecurity, combined with economic dislocation and, in many cases, severe poverty. While these diverse flows have several features in common, they also differ in many important ways just as their geopolitical contexts do. Instead of lumping them together, I have thought it useful, for purposes of both insightful analysis and policy formulation, to treat them separately, albeit all in a global context.

In doing so, I have selected four main flows, which lately have also been receiving wide attention of the public and the policy-makers alike—two of them in Europe and one each in the Americas and Asia. Clearly, these are all urgent, and among the top, migration issues. However, given both its magnitude and its wider political and economic implications, I have discussed Europe's refugee and mixed migration crisis in more detail than the other flows.

Part I

**The European Refugee and Mixed
Migration Crisis in a Global Context**



2

The Backdrop of the Crisis in Europe MENA and Sub-Saharan Africa: Flights in Despair, Cruel Deaths at Sea

In 2012, when I was finishing a companion volume of this book,¹ the high hopes of the Arab Spring in the conflict-prone Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region were already receding with the rising trends of sectarian, tribal and local conflicts and tensions within and across countries. I had at that time expressed concern—not the only one to do so—that if the then ongoing sectarian Shia-Sunni and tribal conflicts could not be resolved within individual countries, these could easily suck in neighbouring ones, threaten the stability of almost the whole region, generating huge outflows of refugees and migrants as well as massive internal displacements, with serious geopolitical repercussions going beyond the region.

The Backdrop of the Crisis

Five years on, sadly, these misgivings have turned into hard realities, and things were looking increasingly even more ominous. Sharp divisions within the warring religious sects, often mingled with tribal/ethnic

¹Bimal Ghosh, *The Global Economic Crisis and the Future of Migration: Issues and Prospects. What Will Migration Look Like in 2045?* Palgrave/Macmillan, Houndmills, England, 2012.

rivalries, and the rapid rise of opposing local militias in the political/security vacuum have made the MENA region extremely unstable. The situation has been worsened by tensions between regional governments and their active or tacit alignment with one conflicting group or another within a country. These have made the conflict in the MENA region both multi-layered and multifaceted and increasingly more violent. Amid the ongoing fighting in Syria and Iraq, the emergence of the Islamic State of Syria, Iraq and Levant Organisation (dubbed ISIS or IS) has added a more alarming and grotesque dimension to the conflict which has not only now engulfed the region but has pulled in several world powers, sometimes acting for cross purposes and reigniting the old East–West tension of the Cold War era.

The “wars within wars” in the region are thus casting a dark and worrisome shadow on the global situation as well. Mostly, as a consequence of these upheavals between January 2015 and January 2016, Europe saw an inflow of a total of 1.2 million asylum-seekers and migrants, of which 1.06 million travelled by sea. Greece received nearly 911,000 of them and Italy over 157,000 during the period; and the flows, although seemingly somewhat subdued, had not ceased.

Several of the MENA countries such as Iraq, Syria and Libya were at the time of writing badly fractured, with swaths of territory controlled by different non-state groups, and their power bases were almost constantly shifting. An analogous situation was developing in Yemen, where the ongoing conflicts, as I discussed in detail in 2012,² have become more fierce, widespread and complex, with no clear battle lines. Internal sectarian fighting has drawn in big external powers, and in fighting a proxy war, they have made the situation more violent and complex. In the power vacuum created by the resignation of the Sunni-led government, and internment of the President, different groups—Sunnis, Shia (Huthi), Al-Qaeda and tribal groups—had stepped up their fighting, and thrown the country into complete chaos, prompting Ban Ki-moon, then UN Secretary-General, to say “Yemen is collapsing before our eyes”. Several western governments soon closed their embassies and evacuated their nationals.

²Ibid.

At the end of 2014, Yemen already had 334,000 internally displaced persons. With the widening of the conflict and gathering intensity of violence, the number jumped seven times to 2.5 million—8% of its population—by the end of 2015. Three governorates—Taizz, Amran and Hajjah—accounted for some 900,000 of them due to gruesome fighting. Displaced from their homes, they lived with their relatives, with host communities, or in makeshift camps in miserable conditions. By the end of 2016, the number of internal displacements rose to 3 million, according to the United Nations; it reached the level of 3.3 million in April 2017, of which 1.3 million later returned to their governorates of origin. As of March 2016, the conflict had led to 6000 deaths, of which one-third were children, according to a UNICEF source. In January 2017, the UN reported that number had risen to 10,000.³ At least one child was dying every 10 minutes because of preventable diseases. Water and sanitation system was collapsing, cutting off nearly 15 million Yemenis from access to these services. And an epidemic of cholera, largely a consequence of over two years of conflict, had killed thousands of people and many more had been infected. Nearly 80% of the country's population needed humanitarian assistance. As of March 2017, 2.2 million people, including nearly half a million children, were suffering from malnutrition. "Cemeteries are filling up with unmarked graves, the deaths of children unreported to authorities, their suffering invisible to the world", UNICEF remarked.

Over 173,000 persons had fled the country. At the same time, political vacuum and lax border control have been swelling the traditional inflows, mainly from Ethiopia, to the country; many of these migrants were using it as a transit post to reach Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. The ongoing violence and destruction, including bombing by Saudi Arabia, and the breakdown of law and order would continue to increase disorderly movements, both inside the country and outward. In October 2016, a fragile, temporary truce was initiated by Saudi Arabia, but it soon collapsed. In an urgent message to the UN Security Council, Stephen O'Brien, humanitarian chief of the organisation, said that if the conflicts continued, the country could collapse with menacing implications for the wider region.

³<http://www.voanews.com/content/reu-unicef-yemen-humanitarian-aid/2817370.html>.

The situation in both Syria and Iraq continued to be no less alarming. UNHCR estimated that by October 2014, in Syria and Iraq a total of nearly 14 million persons had already been internally displaced or moved outside their home country as a result of the conflicts. And since then, these numbers have kept on rising, especially in Syria after the indiscriminate Russian bombings that seriously affected the civilian population in Aleppo city and the surrounding areas. According to the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 4000 civilians had been killed by these bombings. And, as of February 2016, Syria alone had 6.6 million internally uprooted people (IDPs) and 4.8 million refugees outside the country. By March 2017, the number of refugees rose to 5.1 million, according to UNHCR. This implies that since the conflict began five years ago, the hostilities had uprooted half its pre-war population of 22.5 million, killed possibly between 450,000 and half a million people⁴ and left much of the country in ruins. According to the United Nations, as of February 2016, a total of 13.5 million people, including refugees and IDPs, needed humanitarian assistance—more than three times the number (4 million) in 2012.

More gloomy news had also been pouring in. For instance, a recent joint UN/St. Andrews University study showed that over 80% of Syrian population was below the poverty line, compared to 28% prior to the conflict.⁵ The country's food production dropped to an all-time low due to conflict-related instability and devastation. Between March 2011 and November 2015, the price of wheat flour and rice rose by 388% and 723%, respectively. Increasing numbers of civilian populations have become captives in enclaves as adjacent territories are controlled by opposing conflicting powers, making access to them for humanitarian supplies extremely difficult.

In October 2016, when Syrian forces, backed by indiscriminate Russian bombings, mounted a brutal offensive, and attempts at a

⁴The actual number and categories of deaths, as well as the responsibilities for them, remain a subject of controversy. At the upper end, an estimate puts the number at around half a million. See also in this connection Colum Lynch, "The war over Syria's war dead", *Foreign Policy*, January 2016. A most recent estimate (March 2017) by the Human Rights Observatory in Syria put the figure at over 321,000 deaths and 2880 disappeared, of whom more than 96,000 were civilians, including children.

⁵UNESCWA, *Syria at War: Five Years On*, UNESCWA, Beirut, April 2016. www.unescwa.org/news/syria-war-five-years. The 2016 UN/St. Andrews University study estimate.

temporary ceasefire to permit the distribution of aid were making little headway, there was widespread concern over a looming humanitarian crisis. By December 2016 as the Syrian government soldiers, with the support of Russian bombings, were making headway into the hitherto rebel-held areas, and human casualties were mounting among the civilian population, there was an exodus of people from those areas, with possibly more than 100,000 moving to the government-controlled part of the country within weeks. At the same time, in the absence of the possibility of distributing aid, the humanitarian situation was worsening by the day. Finally, at the end of 2016, at the behest of Russia and Turkey, a truce was signed by the parties concerned, excepting the ISIS, which regained control of Palmyra in the same week that Aleppo succumbed. But peace had not returned. And the situation took a new turn when, on 7 April 2017, the US government staged a missile attack on the Syrian airfields in retaliation to the use by the Syrian army of chemical gas in the rebel-held areas. The future, as the script was going to press, looked uncertain.

In Iraq, too, already by June 2015 the number of internally displaced persons had risen to 3.9 million, including 250,000 displaced from Ramadi, the capital of Anbar Province, along with more than half a million (520,000) refugees and asylum-seekers abroad. By April 2017, the total number of forcibly displaced persons rose to 5 million, of which 1.7 million had later returned to their areas of origin. As in Syria, shifting control of swaths of its territory and the consequent insecurity were aggravating the situation. In moving across provincial lines with lots of checks and control, displaced persons were often feeling like crossing borders as immigrants. The situation was both chaotic and fluid. In Mosul, for instance, as by March 2017 the Iraqi army was advancing towards the west after gaining control of the eastern part of the city, some 3000 ISIS militants were holed up among 750,000 civilians. In June 2017, as Iraqi forces began its assault on Mosul's old city in the last phase of the month-old battle against ISIS militants, the situation became vicious. The United Nations estimated that up to 150,000 civilians were trapped in the city, held by ISIS fighters as human shields, while the supply of food and water was perilously running low. According to UNICEF, 2016 alone saw 626 deaths among children, 20% more than in 2015, making it the darkest year for children so far.

At the same time, the country had to accommodate nearly 300,000 refugees, uprooted from conflict-ridden, neighbouring Syria. The US-led coalition has made it possible for the government to recapture much of the territory from the ISIS which at one stage had control over 40% of the territory. However, peace and stability remained elusive. Renewed sectarian violence could refuel the anger and resentments that led to the rise of the ISIS and its control of Sunni-dominated areas. In October 2016 when the Iraqi government, jointly with Peshmerga Kurdish soldiers and Shia militia, launched a campaign to restore Mosul which was under ISIS control, there were fears of large-scale human displacement, which, according to some NGOs, might have involved 200,000 people; and already in October at least 160,000 were displaced, although 30,000 of them had returned later. And, again in January 2017 when a new offensive was launched to capture the western part of the city, still held by the ISIS, there were fresh fears of massive internal displacements.

In May 2017, the UN was fearful that 200,000 civilians would be driven out of Mosul, adding to some 700,000 already displaced. Most of the new IDPs were likely to end up in displacement camps; some would, with government authorisation, move in with relatives in other parts of the country; and some others would try to get into Europe. As the Sunni population made up the majority of people in Mosul, there was also the danger that they may resent government efforts if they believed them to be driven by a Shia supremacy agenda. This could ignite new sectarian tension and create more instability. Meanwhile, tensions were also rising between Turkey, which wanted to take an active part in the operation in order to maintain its influence in the area, and Iraq, which was totally opposed to it.

Already by November 2014, with opportunities for entry in neighbouring countries like Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey (which had already accommodated a combined total of some 5 million people) nearly exhausted, refugees from Syria had almost nowhere to go.⁶ In desperation, many turned to human traffickers who made them embark on a perilous journey through the Mediterranean in unseaworthy boats

⁶Nine in 10 Syrian refugees are currently being hosted by five neighbouring countries—Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt.