Research article[1]

Migration Crisis in the 21st Century: Geopolitical Transformations, Humanitarian Catastrophes, and Global Policy Challenges

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Abstract

This paper explores the ongoing migration crisis in the Middle East and Europe, analyzing its root causes, geopolitical implications, and humanitarian dimensions. The study argues that the waves of mass migration observed in recent decades have become a driving force of global geopolitical transformation. Migration has evolved from a socio-economic phenomenon into a determinant of international relations, influencing global power structures and humanitarian policies.

The research addresses critical themes such as the "Great Resettlement" of the 21st century, the transformation of migration policy into a tool of geopolitical strategy, and the role of global power centers in managing—or manipulating—migration processes. It also examines the humanitarian consequences of displacement, the responses of international organizations and states, and the moral dilemma arising from the persistence of double standards in migration politics.

Particular attention is given to the regional impact on Azerbaijan and the broader Islamic world's position regarding the crisis. The findings indicate that unless the international community abandons selective political practices and adopts a unified, justice-based approach, the migration crisis will continue to escalate, undermining the stability of global governance.

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Introduction

In recent years, the unprecedented surge in international migration flows has evolved into a global-scale humanitarian catastrophe, confronting millions of people with tragedy, deprivation, and displacement. Although human migration has existed for centuries, the contemporary crisis demands a new analytical prism—one that recognizes its multifaceted geopolitical, economic, and moral dimensions. Against this backdrop, the current wave of forced migration poses serious threats to the fragile geopolitical balance of the modern world.

The ongoing situation raises a series of pressing questions. How is it that in developed countries, migrants who once served as vital contributors to socio-economic development have suddenly been redefined as "strangers" or "obstacles" to progress? How has the so-called "integration policy" in many European states transformed from an inclusive framework into processes of social isolation and securitization? What role do indifference and double standards play in obstructing fair and sustainable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons? Why has the "migration apocalypse" of the 21st century produced such painful consequences for global governance and human rights?

The deepening of refugee crises worldwide is compounded by the absence of a coherent plan or conceptual framework within major international institutions such as the United Nations Security Council or the European Union. This vacuum invites further questions: What new geopolitical realities are emerging from these developments? How does the current relocation of refugees align with international law, and could it potentially trigger new conflicts? In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, no nation can consider itself immune to the influx of refugees and displaced persons. It is also important to note that contemporary media and political discourse often use the terms *migrants* and *refugees* interchangeably, thereby obscuring critical legal and ethical distinctions between them.

The "Great Resettlement" of the Twenty-First Century

The scientific study of migration dates back to the late nineteenth century, when the Western sociologist E. Ravenstein (1885–1889) formulated the first theoretical and legislative foundations of migration research [13; 14]. In a broad sense, migration is defined as a socio-economic process driven by domestic and international social, economic, and political factors that prompt the movement of individuals from one location to another for the purpose of temporary or permanent resettlement. Migration policy, therefore, represents a combination of legal, institutional, and political measures aimed at regulating population mobility and managing its socio-economic impacts [7].

The eruption of the so-called *Arab Spring* in 2010 marked a turning point in global migration dynamics. What began as popular uprisings across the Middle East quickly devolved into widespread instability, civil wars, and the disintegration of sovereign states. Before these upheavals, despite social and political challenges, millions of people in the region enjoyed relatively stable living conditions compared to today. Libya, for instance, has since fragmented into multiple administrative and militia-controlled zones, while its population continues to suffer from poverty, insecurity, and displacement.

The geopolitical interventions of the United States and its allies, driven by strategic interests in the Middle East, exacerbated the crisis and, in effect, externalized its consequences to

Europe. This has made migration one of the most pressing and complex challenges for the international community. There are no "reinforced concrete walls" capable of shielding a globalized world from the consequences of such large-scale displacement. Migrants primarily use two perilous routes to reach Europe: through the Strait of Gibraltar to Spain and across the Mediterranean Sea to Italy. Overcrowded vessels often capsize, leading to recurrent tragedies. In 2014 alone, approximately 5,500 migrants drowned in the Mediterranean. Although the routes through Turkey and the Balkans are considered more accessible, they too present grave risks.

According to United Nations statistics, the number of refugees and internally displaced persons has reached record levels twice since the end of the Second World War. In 2013, an estimated 51.2 million people were displaced from their homelands; by the end of 2014, this figure had risen to 59.9 million. As a result of the conflict in Syria, an average of 42,500 people per day became refugees, asylum seekers, or internally displaced persons [19]. It is likely that the figures for 2015 were even more catastrophic.

As noted by António Guterres, then United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "those who initiate wars remain unpunished, while the international community appears powerless to stop them, restore peace, and ensure security." Over the previous five years, five new conflicts had either erupted or reignited, with half of the world's refugees being children.

A 2014 UN report revealed that one in every 122 individuals worldwide was either a refugee, asylum seeker, or internally displaced person. If these individuals were citizens of a single country, it would rank as the world's 24th most populous nation. Alarmingly, nearly all refugees are concentrated in just ten countries. Turkey, hosting approximately 1.59 million refugees, has become the world's largest refugee-hosting nation, while Lebanon ranks first in refugees per capita—232 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants, amounting to roughly 1.15 million in total. Before the Syrian civil war in 2011, Lebanon hosted only about 8,000 refugees, a number that surged to over 403,600 by 2014 [17].

The experience of Azerbaijan offers a poignant regional parallel. Following the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan became one of the countries with the highest number of refugees and internally displaced persons per capita. By 2014, an estimated 30,000 people were being displaced globally each day due to conflict and violence. Data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre indicated that by the end of that year, 38 million individuals were internally displaced—a record high.

Globally, 77% of refugees reside in just ten countries. Syria alone accounts for 7.6 million internally displaced persons, followed by Colombia with six million due to conflicts involving the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and Iraq with 3.4 million displaced individuals [10]. In 2015, hundreds of refugees perished while attempting to cross the Mediterranean.

As observed by international agencies, "the refugees reaching Europe are those fleeing wars in the Middle East and Africa. The majority attempt to cross the sea in unsafe, overcrowded boats unfit for navigation." Public attention intensified following the tragedy off the Italian island of Lampedusa, where on April 19 two ships carrying migrants capsized, resulting in nearly 900 deaths. Only after this disaster did the European Union announce reforms to

its migration policy. European leaders devoted unprecedented time to addressing the crisis, marking one of the longest deliberations in EU history. The deaths of refugees at sea, however, are not a new phenomenon. According to the UN Refugee Agency, between 1990 and 2013, 3,188 migrants died attempting to cross the Mediterranean; in 2014 alone, the death toll exceeded 3,500. In just the first four months of 2015, more than 1,800 refugees lost their lives at sea [5].

Finding a Way Out of the Current Situation

In the current migration realities, traditional political concepts and approaches have proven largely ineffective. The absence of a coherent and adequate migration policy capable of addressing the humanitarian and geopolitical dimensions of this crisis remains a critical gap. Instead, geopolitical interests continue to dominate decision-making processes, leaving no unified migration strategy across the European Union (EU). Yet, the future of Europe—and indeed the broader international order—depends on the capacity of political institutions to respond swiftly and effectively to this escalating crisis.

The unprecedented influx of migrants and refugees has triggered conflicts and confrontations among EU member states, casting doubt on the sincerity and solidarity of the Union itself. Major powers have sought to delegate the burden of managing migrants to smaller and less economically resilient states, thereby exacerbating divisions within the EU. Unlike the former colonial powers of Western Europe, several "younger" European nations perceive little moral responsibility for addressing the consequences of wars and interventions in the Middle East and North Africa. As Slovakia's Prime Minister poignantly asked, *"Who bombed Libya? Who created problems in North Africa? Was it Slovakia? No!"* Similarly, Hungary's Foreign Minister questioned the meaning of "European solidarity," noting that instead of offering humane support, Croatia "filled trains with migrants and sent them directly to Hungary" [9].

In response, Hungary began constructing barriers along its border with Croatia on 17 September, while Bulgaria deployed military forces along its border with Turkey to prevent migrant crossings. France's Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius sharply criticized Hungary for building such fences, describing them as incompatible with European values. Meanwhile, Brussels continued to call for solidarity, yet appeared disoriented and unprepared, with no comprehensive plan to resolve the crisis.

In reality, the EU has become "a hostage to its own principles." It cannot accept millions of refugees without undermining its internal stability, but rejecting them would contradict its declared commitment to human rights and solidarity. The continent's *"geopolitics of human rights"* is thus undergoing a profound test. On 23 April 2015, representatives of 28 EU member states convened to discuss migration policy, but the meeting failed to produce substantive results. Italy's controversial proposal to *"sink migrant ships before they reach port"* was rejected outright. Rather than fostering consensus, the meeting further fragmented the Union's unity [12].

A deeper examination reveals that the persistence of the migration crisis is not merely a policy failure but a structural problem linked to entrenched lobbying networks that have profited from the status quo. Following the events of September 11, a powerful coalition of political and economic actors emerged—comprising individuals and groups with vested in-

terests in sustaining illegal migration dynamics. These lobbies include business circles benefiting from lax border policies, private security companies supplying border control technologies, and organizations tied to humanitarian aid and detention infrastructure [2, pp. 203–206].

Thus, behind the rhetoric of compassion and security lies a complex nexus of business and power interests. Private corporations producing high-tech border surveillance systems, software for migrant tracking, and communication technologies for inter-agency coordination are among the direct beneficiaries. Likewise, construction and logistics companies involved in building and maintaining detention centers, reception facilities, and refugee camps profit from stricter border regimes and prolonged crises.

In light of these dynamics, EU foreign ministers have proposed establishing "safe zones" and "processing centers" in third countries—primarily neighboring Balkan states—to handle asylum applications outside EU territory. The European Parliament subsequently endorsed measures to intensify the fight against human traffickers and enhance the Union's maritime patrol missions. The so-called *"Triton Operation"* was expanded to include search-and-rescue capabilities across the Mediterranean, while the *"Frontex"* agency received additional funding to coordinate the European Asylum Support Office's operations [25].

Other proposals have been more radical. The Jewish businessman J. Buzi suggested creating an entirely new state where refugees from all nations could reside, arguing that such a project could offer a permanent solution to the global refugee problem. Drawing a historical parallel, he noted that *"Israel was essentially founded as a state of refugees—a nation created by and for displaced people"* [13].

Nevertheless, many experts emphasize that the solution must be comprehensive, beginning with stabilizing the regions from which migration originates. Rather than closing transit routes, efforts should focus on addressing the root causes—conflict, economic collapse, and political instability. The European Commission's proposals reflected this integrated approach, including enhanced funding for rescue operations, accelerated deportation procedures for those without asylum rights, and cooperation with North African states such as Libya to regulate migration flows. At the same time, the EU sought UN Security Council authorization to conduct limited military actions against human traffickers in the Mediterranean [5].

Ultimately, migration policy cannot be separated from the broader structure of inter-civilizational relations and global geopolitics. Each major civilization exercises influence over the configuration of global power, and mutual interests—or shared threats—may lead to cooperation even among culturally distinct states. However, in the absence of moral consistency and equitable burden-sharing, the migration crisis will continue to deepen.

Another dimension of the crisis concerns the growing xenophobia and racism in several EU member states. The economic stagnation following the global financial crisis has fueled public resentment toward immigrants, who are often scapegoated as the cause of unemployment and social tension. Far-right and nationalist parties have capitalized on these sentiments, using the migration issue to expand their political influence and legitimize exclusionary policies. If unaddressed, the increasing visibility of migrants in certain European

societies may further embolden racial and religious extremist movements, thereby threatening the stability of liberal democratic systems.

Echo of the Migrant Disaster in Azerbaijan

The ripple effects of the global migration crisis are also felt in the South Caucasus. Armenia, in particular, has sought to exploit the broader humanitarian tragedy to reinforce its territorial claims against Azerbaijan. Historically, Armenians resettled in the Nagorno-Karabakh region under the auspices of Tsarist Russia, a policy that artificially altered the demographic composition of the area and laid the groundwork for subsequent territorial disputes [9, p. 15].

The Armenian leadership continues to instrumentalize population movements for geopolitical gain. Even amid the global migration crisis, Yerevan has attempted to justify its occupation policies under the guise of humanitarian considerations. This manipulation of refugee narratives underscores a deeper geopolitical objective: to legitimize territorial expansion and weaken Azerbaijan's sovereignty.

As former Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan admitted in a 2015 interview, when asked why Armenia remains a mono-ethnic state, he replied: *"I have thought about this question and found the answer. Tsarist Russia deeply trusted the loyalty of Armenians to the emperor. For this reason, Armenia was seen as the empire's outpost, and there was no need to resettle other nations in these territories."* [6]. This statement not only confirms the historical roots of Armenia's demographic policies but also reflects its continued adherence to exclusivist and ethnonationalist principles that stand in stark contrast to international norms of coexistence and multiculturalism.

Echo of the Migrant Disaster in Azerbaijan (continued)

As Serzh Sargsyan himself acknowledged, Armenia's artificial demographic engineering has had lasting consequences. Through aggressive policies and population resettlement, Armenia transformed its demographic composition and expanded territorial claims at the expense of neighboring states. In the early 1990s, these policies culminated in the occupation of Azerbaijan's historical territories and the forced displacement of approximately one million Azerbaijanis—creating one of the most severe cases of violent, forced migration in the post-Soviet era.

Throughout modern history, Armenia has repeatedly exploited the geopolitical environment to advance its irredentist objectives. Each time a new global or regional migration crisis has emerged, Armenia has sought to benefit by manipulating demographic changes and leveraging humanitarian narratives to justify its territorial ambitions. According to various reports, since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, approximately one-third of Syrian Armenians—an estimated 15,000 to 17,000 people—have resettled in Armenia. A significant portion of these individuals has been relocated to the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, particularly in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which remains under Armenian control [1].

According to Lusine Stepanyan of the Armenian Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, "since 2012, nearly fifteen thousand Syrian Armenians have been granted Armenian citizenship. To facilitate their return, the government simplified citizenship procedures, allowing Syrian Ar-

menians to receive Armenian passports not only in Armenia but also through consulates in Syria and Libya. Our president has stated that Armenians should not be refugees in their own homeland. This is one of the main reasons behind the simplification of the citizenship process" [1].
Moreover, non-citizens can obtain Armenian visas immediately at border crossings and are exempted from taxes during their temporary residence. The Government of Azerbaijan has strongly protested these actions, describing the settlement of Syrian Armenians in occupied Azerbaijani territories as "unacceptable" and contrary to international law [1].

Further confirming this trend, T. Vardapetyan, commenting on the visit of the Armenian–Syrian Friendship Group to Syria, stated that "there are many opportunities for living and working both in the provinces and in Nagorno-Karabakh. Although the emigration of the traditional Syrian Armenian community is unfortunate, the Armenian government will do everything in its power to accommodate its citizens in the country" [22].

Nevertheless, these initiatives cannot conceal Armenia's severe socio-economic crisis. The country suffers from chronic unemployment and poverty. To address depopulation, Armenia—since 2013—has participated in the European Union–funded project *"Purposeful Initiative for Armenia"* under the concept of *"circular migration."* Funded at approximately three million dollars, the initiative sought to stimulate temporary labor migration between Armenia and EU states. However, according to United Nations statistics, more than 115,000 Armenians left the country within four years, with 30,000 emigrating annually. At present, 40–50% of Armenia's population are considered potential migrants, and nearly 15% of families depend on remittances from abroad for their livelihoods [24].

At an international conference held in Paris on 8 September 2015, dedicated to violence against ethnic and religious minorities in the Middle East, Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandyan declared that "Armenians have for centuries been an integral part of the Middle East's cultural diversity. A century ago, we protected hundreds of thousands of citizens who escaped genocide. Today, the existence of Syrian Armenians is again in danger." Nalbandyan noted that "tens of thousands of Armenians, like other nations in the Middle East, are on the path of forced emigration. Only 15,000 Armenians have arrived in Armenia from Syria."
However, the Minister of Diaspora Affairs simultaneously admitted the severe limitations of the Armenian state, stating: "We are not able to accommodate them. Many have lost their homes and come to Armenia, but if they accepted to live outside Yerevan, things would be easier. Yet, they cannot find jobs elsewhere. In Armenia, there are no employment opportunities outside the capital" [16].

William L. Swing, Director General of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), during his visit to Baku, confirmed that he had no prior knowledge of the resettlement of Syrian Armenians in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan and emphasized that such actions are "in violation of international law" [1].

The Position of Islamic Countries on Migration Issues

A central question in global migration debates concerns whether the wealthy nations of the Middle East—despite their economic capacity—are able or willing to accommodate large numbers of refugees and migrants. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, thou-

sands of displaced persons have sought refuge in Gulf and Middle Eastern states, often through labor visas rather than formal asylum mechanisms. Nevertheless, these flows remain limited compared to the hundreds of thousands received by Europe.

The legislative frameworks of most Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states do not recognize the category of "refugee" as defined in international law. Instead, individuals enter under tourist or employment visas and are regarded as temporary or potential labor migrants. Political asylum exists in principle but is rarely granted and remains subject to the discretion of the ruling emirates. Consequently, refugees from Syria, Yemen, and Somalia seldom qualify for political protection in these states.

However, another important aspect of migration policy in the Gulf is the *"principle of guarantees."* Tens of thousands of foreigners are registered under this system, which ties residency to employment sponsorship. While this may seem restrictive, it has a demographic logic: several Gulf states face declining local population growth and rely heavily on foreign labor to sustain their economies. Foreign nationals currently constitute approximately 76% of the population in the United Arab Emirates, 74% in Qatar, 67% in Kuwait, 25% in Saudi Arabia, and 23% in Oman [23].

The expansion of migration flows has significantly increased the size of the Syrian community in the Gulf, particularly in Saudi Arabia, where it now numbers around half a million, ranking third after the Egyptian and Yemeni expatriate communities. At the same time, GCC countries remain among the primary donors financing humanitarian aid for refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.

Turkey, however, bears the heaviest burden of the regional crisis. Hosting more than two million refugees, it has become one of the principal destinations for those fleeing conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Despite being repeatedly denied EU membership for decades, Turkey now shoulders the primary responsibility of managing the consequences of the crisis on Europe's behalf. The European Union allocated €1 billion to support Turkey's refugee response, although Turkish leaders have repeatedly emphasized the inadequacy of this assistance.

At the 69th Session of the United Nations General Assembly on 14 September 2014, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan openly criticized the double standards of Western countries regarding migration:

"We sustain millions of people who have fled Syria with our own resources. Has the world shown genuine solidarity? Unfortunately not. Look—the wealthy and powerful European states have received only 130,000 Syrians." [4]

Conclusion

The end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century have witnessed migration evolve from a social process into a defining factor of geopolitics and global transformation. Over the past decade, European societies have become accustomed to viewing migration as a byproduct of economic growth and globalization—an emblem of progress rather than a challenge to political stability. Yet today, migration flows have become instruments of geopolitical confrontation and strategic manipulation.

In the contemporary context, nearly every state seeks to extract political or economic advantage from the movement of people, often while neglecting humanitarian obligations. The global migration crisis thus reflects deeper structural failures: deliberate interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, the collapse of liberal multiculturalism, and the absence of coherent international frameworks for managing displacement.

It can therefore be concluded that migration today represents not merely a humanitarian challenge but also a decisive force reshaping integration models, political alignments, and social stability worldwide. The fusion of migration dynamics with geopolitical competition has produced severe humanitarian consequences that demand urgent, coordinated, and equitable solutions.

The most effective response must include the regulation of violent migration, the stabilization of conflict regions, and the voluntary return of refugees to their homelands in conditions of dignity and security. The Azerbaijani experience in managing large-scale refugee and internally displaced persons (IDP) crises during the 1980s and 1990s provides valuable lessons for the international community. Its policies toward the reintegration, social protection, and rehabilitation of displaced populations can serve as a constructive model for addressing the broader global migration challenge.

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Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in accordance with the principles of academic integrity, transparency, and responsibility. All sources and data used in the study were properly cited and derived from publicly available or officially published materials. The article does not involve any human participants, personal data, or experimental interventions requiring ethical approval. The author confirms adherence to the **ethical publication standards of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)**.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares **no conflict of interest** related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article. The views and interpretations expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of any affiliated institution.

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