Migration flows to the Mediterranean

By Rebecca Priest

Synopsis

Migration is one of the most complex and dynamic processes taking place in the 21st century, with the flows of people having noticeable effects on both origin and destination countries around the world. The countries of the Mediterranean region are experiencing movements of people from developed countries, in the form of retired migrants, and developing countries, in the form of asylum-seekers and refugees. Current political changes, such as the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the European Union and the growing conflict and unrest in the Middle East, are having a significant effect on these flows. There is an uncertain future for retired migrants in the Mediterranean: threats to health care provision and poorer exchange rates may well drive many back to the UK. The EU has struggled to cope with a migrant crisis for several years, most evidently in 2015.

Key terms

Economic migrant, refugee, asylum-seeker, assimilation, Brexit, diaspora, remittances, trafficking

Learning objectives

After working through this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the current spatial pattern of migration flows to the Mediterranean.
- Explain the reasons for the growing trend of retirement migration and those seeking asylum.
- Assess the positive and negative impacts these trends are having on the Mediterranean region.
- Explain the responses to the increased migration flows and the potential future of the movements in the region.

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Migration flows to the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean region (sometimes called the Mediterranean Basin or Mediterranean) refers to land which borders the Mediterranean Sea and has a seasonal climate of mild, wet winters and hot, dry summers (Figure 1). The migration system within the region involves flows of people moving both inter-regionally (within the Mediterranean) and intra-regionally (from outside the Mediterranean). These take the form of:

- economic migrants
- refugees
- asylum-seekers, and
- retirement migrants.

This GeoFile unit will look at the current spatial pattern of migrant flows in the Mediterranean, the reasons for these dominant flows and the impact of these flows on the Mediterranean region.

### Migration from developed countries

A dominant migration flow in the Mediterranean region is the movement from developed countries outside the region to developed countries within the region. There has been a growing trend of international migration, with people moving from northern European counties to Mediterranean countries when they have retired. One of the most dominant flows is from the UK to Spain, with Spain having the second-largest British diaspora, according to the Spanish census record. The number of migrants from the UK to Spain has grown steadily over the past two decades, totalling 311,774 people living in Spain in 2014 (Figure 2). The number of British nationals living in Spain is estimated and can vary due to under-registration and the fluid nature of the flows, as some migrants only reside in Spain for part of the year. Retired migrants from northern European countries make up approximately 20% of Spain’s total immigrants, with economic migrants from Eastern Europe, South America and North Africa making up the other 80% (University of Valencia, 2014).

The rapid growth of international retirement migration to the Mediterranean over the last 20 years can be attributed to:

- Growing affluence among the retired population. Pensioner income has been steadily rising (Figure 3). 40 years ago, a private pension made up just 17% of a pensioner’s total income and now has increased to 42% (ONS, 2016).
- The increasing life expectancy and better health in retirement, where people are still capable of travel and relocation. In 1970, life expectancy at birth in the UK was 72, whereas in 2015 it had risen to 81 (World Bank, 2017).
- Increased home ownership, which finances the move to Spain by the selling of the property in the origin country.
- Faster and cheaper international travel, allowing ease of movement for migrants and their families to visit each other, for example frequent low-cost flights between Malaga airport and the UK.
- Improvements in communications to allow easy correspondence with family in the origin country – email, Skype, Facetime.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total British migrants living in Spain</td>
<td>107,326</td>
<td>274,722</td>
<td>314,951</td>
<td>390,880</td>
<td>311,774</td>
<td>283,554</td>
<td>+264%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Figure 1** The Mediterranean region

**Figure 2** The increasing number of British migrants to Spain

*Source: Spanish Statistical Office, 2001–11*
Access to healthcare in any EU country, under the European Union S1 Certificate of entitlement to healthcare – usually free, but in France payments are still necessary and many people buy a ‘mutuelle’, private top-up insurance.

Changing views on lifestyles and increased desire to travel and live abroad.

An increase in the number of people taking early retirement.

The pull factors of the ‘European sunbelt’ include cheaper property, lower heating costs and more affordable entertainment than in the UK. Many migrants cite the more pleasant climate as an influential factor, including the perceived beneficial impact this may have on health. Another pull is the Mediterranean way of life, including the cuisine, slower pace, social life, and outdoors lifestyle. A migrant’s prior experiences of Spain and the perceptions of Spain that they have acquired through previous holidays are also taken into consideration.

Impacts on the Mediterranean

Receiving regions which have a high proportion of retired migrants, for example the Costa del Sol, have seen both positive and negative impacts of the increased elderly population. The ‘grey pound’ has boosted local economies, as the affluent older population spend their money locally. Providers of age-related services, such as healthcare and social groups, have seen an increase in demand. It has also meant that areas which were previously undeveloped Mediterranean scrubland have become valuable building plots for properties and services for the new immigrants. It is also common for elderly residents to have a higher rate of political participation and to become actively involved in local politics.

However, seasonal migrants may leave their properties vacant during the summer season (as they return to the UK), and so the local economy experiences losses, as services and facilities are less productive. There is often poor assimilation of the British expatriates into the culture of the host area, which can lead to segregation and tension with the local population. House prices rise due to demand and may outprice the local Spanish residents. Strains on healthcare and physical infrastructure can develop as the proportion of elderly people increases.

The impact of Brexit

On 23 June 2016, the UK electorate voted to withdraw from membership of the European Union. When the UK has left the EU (March 2019), the UK will no longer be subject to EU law, and so the free movement of British citizens will come to an end. However, the UK government expects to see reciprocal guarantees put in place for UK residents who reside in the EU, to ensure that retired migrants can maintain settled status in the countries in which they reside and continue to access benefits and services, such as healthcare and social housing.

UK state pensions can be paid to any retiree who is eligible, with no restrictions based on the country where they live in. However, pensioners can only have annual increases to their state pension, known as ‘uprating’, if the UK has an agreement with their country of residence. For retired British migrants in Spain, this agreement is with the EU. Therefore, when the UK leaves the EU there is a risk that the migrants will have their pensions frozen and they will be continue to be paid at the level of when they were first entitled, or when they migrated from the UK. As current members of the EU, UK pensioners’ health costs are reimbursed by the British government to their resident country. Although the UK government has pledged to ensure that this benefit remains in place post-March 2019, if the EU does not agree, British retirees will have to purchase expensive healthcare insurance, pay to be treated privately, or will have to return to the UK to use the NHS.
Migration from developing countries

The other dominant migration flow in the Mediterranean region is movement from developing countries, both within and outside the region. The ‘European Migrant Crisis’ refers to a period of time in 2015, when a rapid influx of migrants arrived in the developed Mediterranean region, mainly in Spain, Italy, France, Greece and Cyprus. They constituted a mix of economic migrants in search of better employment opportunities, and refugees and asylum-seekers who were fleeing conflict and persecution from North Africa and the Middle East, via the Mediterranean Sea (Figure 4). Although 2015 saw the peak number of migrants, the flow has been steadily increasing over the past decade and still remains significant, with 134,364 migrants successfully crossing the Mediterranean Sea in the first eight months of 2017. The rapid growth of this Mediterranean migrant flow has been caused by:

- Increased fighting and violence in the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, causing the forced displacement of millions of civilians. The net migration rate for Syria was estimated at -2.1 migrant(s) per 1,000 of the population (CIA, 2017). Over half of the migrants arriving in Europe in 2015 were from Syria.
- Increased movement away from African countries such as Nigeria, Senegal and Gambia, usually by young males in search of better job opportunities in order to send remittances back to their families in their origin countries.
- Refugee movements from ongoing conflicts in African countries, such as the War in Somalia and the War in the Darfur region of Sudan.
- Refugee movements from persecution in Eritrea, where human rights violations are occurring through military conscription, forced labour, arbitrary killings and lack of personal freedoms.
- Deteriorating conditions in refugee-hosting countries. Syrian refugees often initially flee to bordering countries such as Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, but as the new host countries struggle to cope with the influx of migrants, conditions in temporary accommodation and the provision of services deteriorate, and so many are forced to migrate further afield.

Impacts on the Mediterranean

The rapid nature of the migration has had negative consequences in the Mediterranean receiving countries. In 2015, 1,014,973 people crossed the Mediterranean Sea, particularly through the Eastern Mediterranean route, in order to reach the developed countries in the region, mainly Greece, Italy and Spain (UNCHR, 2016). 3,771 were reported dead or missing during the same period. In April 2015, 800 people died in the largest recorded refugee shipwreck. The high death rate over this period was caused by unsafe and unsavoury boats. They were often over capacity and captained by smuggling gangs and traffickers with no sailing experience. There was also an increasing amount of vulnerable children making the crossing.

Once migrants have successfully crossed the Mediterranean, many attempt to journey further into Europe. The area around the port of Calais and the Eurotunnel terminus has attracted migrants attempting to seek asylum or enter the UK by stowing themselves in cargo vehicles crossing the English Channel. By 2015, an extensive ‘jungle’ camp had developed in the area, before it was demolished in October 2016 by French authorities. There was a reported migrant population of over 8,000 at its peak, including a large number of unaccompanied minors. Reported conditions in the ‘Calais Jungle’ were poor, with temporary shelters and no running water or sanitary facilities (Figure 5). The presence of the jungle camp led to violence and unrest among protesters, French authorities and migrants. At times there was also a backlog of vehicles in the UK attempting to transport goods to France and beyond.
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reports of people smugglers illegally trying to carry migrants across the Channel, and disruption for British tourists attempting to use the Channel crossing to go on holiday.

Response from the EU
Due to concerns over migrant welfare and the sea-crossing death toll, Operation Triton, conducted by Frontex (the EU’s border management agency), was put in place to conduct maritime controls, surveillance and search-and-rescue missions. This operation took over from the Italian Navy which had initially responded to the crisis in the Mediterranean Sea, at a cost of approximately €9 million per month. The EU proposed a quota system for relocating the migrants from the ‘frontline countries’ which were receiving the majority of the migrants who had made the sea crossing successfully. A country’s migrant quota would be based on the size of economy, its current population and the average number of asylum applications. Although there was disagreement between EU member states over the quota system, and the proposal did not materialise, an emergency relocation scheme was adopted by the EU Council in September 2015, which, as of 2017, had relocated 20,869 migrants from Greece and Italy. In addition to this, in an attempt to reduce the amount of migrants using smugglers and traffickers to enter Europe, a European Resettlement Scheme was adopted in July 2015 which attempted to provide legal and safer migrations, mainly from Turkey. Traffickers and those who illegally took charge of migrant boats also faced charges of manslaughter and human trafficking.

However, it was argued that Frontex did not effectively address and remedy the migrant crisis. In December 2015, the EU put a new border agency in place, the European Border and Coast Guard, aimed at strengthening border protection and providing an effective response to future crises in the Schengen area (26 countries within the EU where there is no border control). It aims to address some of the limitations of Frontex, such as its inability to operate without the request of EU member states and its lack of resources. It includes a reserve pool of border guards, who can be deployed at short notice, and a more efficient system for returning illegal migrants to their origin countries.

Conclusion
Whilst the origins and motivations of the migrants may differ, the Mediterranean is a region which experiences dynamic and complex migration flows. The future of these flows is unclear, with political changes within the EU and the uncertain future of the Middle East. More effective responses to the influx of refugees and asylum-seekers are now being made, although in 2017, there were 3,139 migrant deaths in the Mediterranean region, and in the first two months of 2018, 414 deaths were recorded (Figure 6). Intervention in Middle Eastern conflicts, and development in low-income countries, would address the motivations of migrants to attempt to reach the Mediterranean and potentially reduce the likelihood of a future migrant crisis.

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<th>Arrivals</th>
<th>Deaths</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>5,247</td>
<td>316 (Central Mediterranean route)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>2,536 (as of 24/02)</td>
<td>0 (Eastern Mediterranean route)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>2,306</td>
<td>98 (Western Mediterranean route)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated total</td>
<td>10,114</td>
<td>414</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Figure 6 Total arrivals by sea and deaths in the Mediterranean 1 January–25 February 2018
Source of data: IOM’s Global Migration Data Analysis Centre – all numbers are minimum estimates. Arrivals are based on data from respective governments and IOM field offices.
Focus questions

1. Referring to examples, evaluate the impacts of migration on the Mediterranean region.
2. Assess the extent to which social causes are the most influential for international migration.
4. Evaluate the impact of political changes on the future of Mediterranean migrant flows.

Learning checkpoint

When reading through this unit you should consider the following questions:

1. What are the dominant migration flows to the Mediterranean?

2. What are the causes of these migration flows?

3. What are the impacts of these migration flows on the Mediterranean?

4. What are the responses to the influx of migrants in the Mediterranean?

5. What may happen in the future to these migration flows?