Refugees, migrants, neither, both?

Categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe's 'migration crisis'

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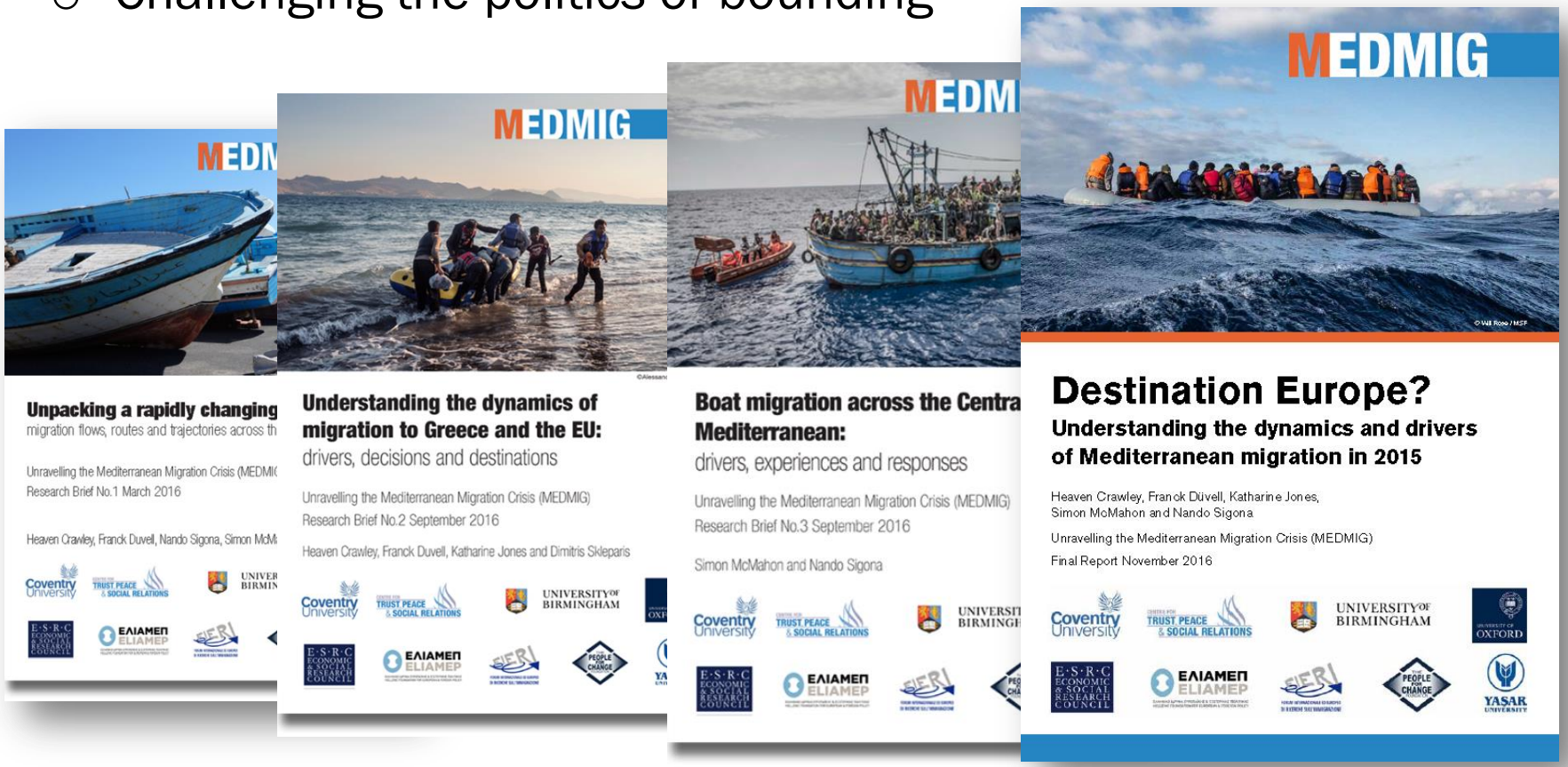
Overview

- The view from Europe
- The problem of categories
- The political economy of forced migration
- (Re)conceptualising the ‘in-between’
- Challenging the politics of bounding



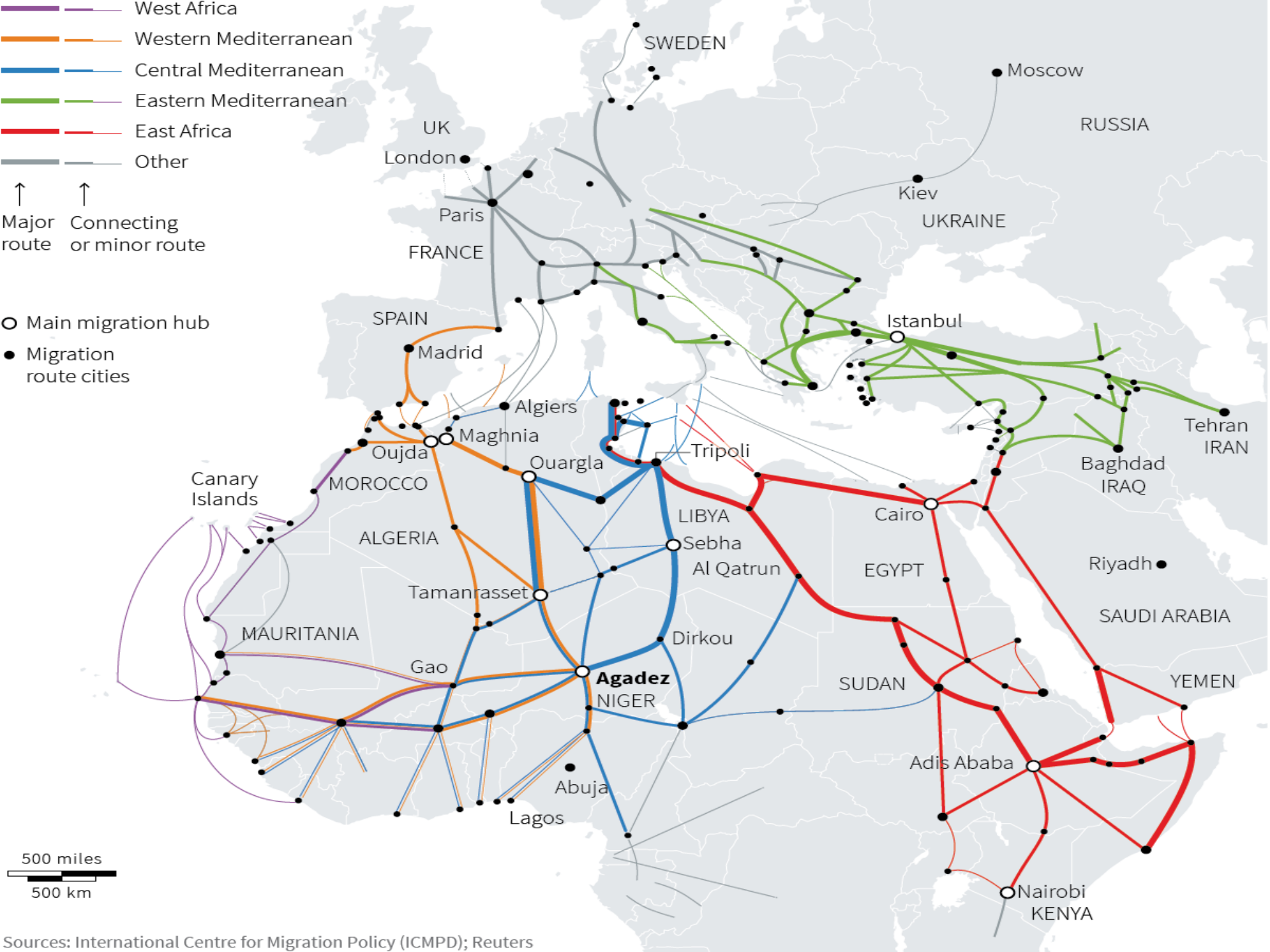
About the MEDMIG study

- Funded by the ESRC and DfID, our research aims to better understand the **dynamics of migration in the Mediterranean region**
- International multi-disciplinary team led by Coventry University, in **collaboration** with the Universities of Oxford and Birmingham in the UK and Birmingham) in partnership with FIERI (Italy), PfC (Malta), ELIAMEP (Greece) and Yasar University (Turkey)
- First **large-scale, systematic and comparative analysis** of the backgrounds, experiences, aspirations and routes of refugees and migrants who crossed the Mediterranean in 2015
- Interviews undertaken with **500 refugees / migrants** and **111 stakeholders** in nine sites across the four countries between Sept 2015 and Jan 2016
- **Purposive sampling strategy** to ensure that backgrounds and demographic characteristics of respondents were broadly reflective of wider trends
- **Outputs** → Three Research Briefs, numerous op-eds, final report, forthcoming Policy Press book
- **Policy engagement** → Emerging findings discussed in UK, across Europe, in US, Russia, at UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants in New York and during Global Compact thematic discussions in Geneva

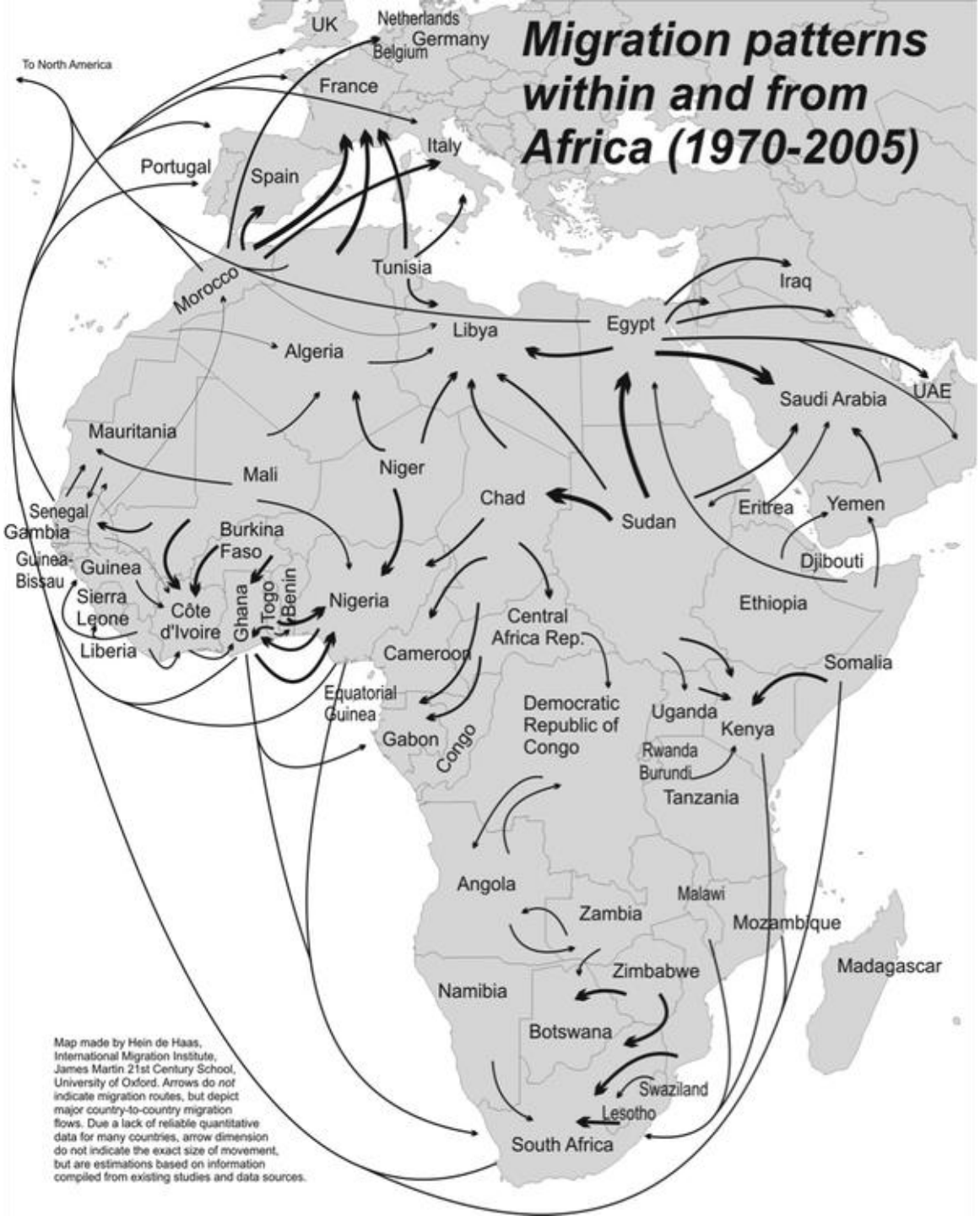
The view from Europe

- The ‘migration crisis’ dominated political and media debate during 2015
- Focus was largely on the **drama of the perilous journeys** across the Mediterranean**, smugglers** facilitating irregular crossings, **hardships endured by refugees and migrants** during the journey / arrival, and the **political, economic, social and cultural implications** of increased migration
- **The view from Europe tells us only a small part of a much bigger story**
- By the end of 2015 more than 65 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, a quarter of whom (21.3 million) were refugees
- Scale of displacement **accelerated during the course of 2015** with an estimated 12.4 million people newly displaced due to conflict /persecution
- Vast majority of the world’s refugees (86%) live in low- and middle-income countries (Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Jordan)
- Discussion of the ‘crisis’ gave the impression of a **linear, uninterrupted flow of people heading towards Europe**, most commonly represented by straight arrows on a map linking two distinct areas
- Reflected in the tendency to focus almost exclusively on the beginning and the end of peoples journeys to the neglect of everything in-between

Destination Europe
Arrivals by sea
2015 1,015,078
2016 80,754
Dead/missing
2015 3,771
2016 403
ITALY
153,842
6,029
SPAIN
3,845
GREECE
856,723
74,725
TURKEY
MALTA
106
MOROCCO
ALGERIA
LIBYA
EGYPT
EU countries
Source: UNHCR
BBC



Sources: International Centre for Migration Policy (ICMPD); Reuters


Migration patterns within and from Africa (1970-2005)
UK
Netherlands
Germany
Belgium
To North America
France
Portugal
Spain
Italy
Tunisia
Morocco
Libya
Egypt
Iraq
Algeria
Saudi Arabia
UAE
Mauritania
Mali
Niger
Chad
Sudan
Eritrea
Yemen
Djibouti
Senegal
Gambia
Guinea-Bissau
Guinea
Burkina Faso
Sierra Leone
Côte d'Ivoire
Ghana
Togo
Benin
Nigeria
Ethiopia
Liberia
Central Africa Rep.
Cameroon
Somalia
Equatorial Guinea
Democratic Republic of Congo
Uganda
Kenya
Gabon
Congo
Rwanda
Burundi
Tanzania
Angola
Malawi
Zambia
Mozambique
Zimbabwe
Madagascar
Namibia
Botswana
Swaziland
Lesotho
South Africa
Map made by Hein de Haas, International Migration Institute, James Martin 21st Century School, University of Oxford. Arrows do not indicate migration routes, but depict major country-to-country migration flows. Due a lack of reliable quantitative data for many countries, arrow dimension do not indicate the exact size of movement, but are estimations based on information compiled from existing studies and data sources.

"The tragic but brutal truth: They are not REAL refugees! Despite drowning tragedy thousands of economic migrants are still trying to reach Europe" (*Daily Mail*, May 28, 2016)

"To help real refugees, be firm with economic migrants…By blurring the distinction between genuine refugees and economic migrants, liberals let their governments off the hook" (*Guardian*, February 6, 2016)

- Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban → the 'overwhelming majority' of migrants in Europe are not refugees but are merely seeking a better life
- Robert Fico, Slovak Prime Minister → declared that up to 95% of those arriving in Europe were economic migrants even though 90% of those arriving in Greece during 2015 came from just three countries, Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq (IOM 2016)
- Strong political and media narrative that people should remain in the first countries in which arrive rather than crossing the Mediterranean to Europe
- Efforts by UNHCR and others to educate public on difference between 'refugees' on the one hand and 'migrants' on the other
- Media debate about the importance of terminology (Al Jazeera, BBC) which privileges 'refugees' over 'migrants'
- Paper (with Skleparis) published in JEMS (July 2017) engages with, and challenges, what Apostolova (2015) describes as 'categorical fetishism' which has been such an important feature of Europe's 'migration crisis'

The problem of categories

- Long-standing critique of the creation of simplistic dichotomies of forced vs. voluntary, refugee vs. economic migrant etc.
- Some (e.g. Richmond 1993; Maalki 1995; Koser and Martin 2011) have argued that the distinction between 'refugees' on the one hand and 'migrants' on the other does not reflect the way migratory processes work and take place in the 'real world'
- Development of **new and emergent concepts** to make sense of the complexities of migration ('mixed flows', 'mixed motivations', 'transit migration') and new categories: 'people in distress' (Goodwin-Gill 1986), 'distress migration' (Collinson 1999), 'survival migration' (Betts 2010)
- Others including Zetter (2007), Scherschel (2011), Long (2013) and Becker (2014) point to the wider processes by which categories are constructed and the purpose(s) that this serves
- Categories are not simply containers with which to organise lived experienced but rather are the **outcome of social and political negotiations** reflecting the relative power of different groups (Moncrieffe and Eyben 2007; Reece 2009)

The political economy of forced migration

- Whilst conflict in Syria accounted for a large part of flow in 2015, the **drivers of migration to Europe are complex and multi-faceted**
- Involuntary or forced population movements are always part of much larger assemblages of socio-political and cultural processes and practices
- **The vast majority (91%) of those interviewed in Greece** mentioned factors that could be described as 'forced migration' including conflict, persecution, violence, death threats and human rights abuse
- **66% of those interviewed in Italy and Malta** described threats of violence, particularly during elections, by confraternities and militias, by local police and even neighbours or family members (in the case of persecution due to religion or sexuality)
- Most respondents who were living in Libya initially moved there for work but found themselves in deteriorating security situation
- **75% experienced physical violence** including kidnapping, arbitrary detention, forced labour; more than a quarter witnessed death
- **34% of Syrians moved on for economic reasons** → limited rights, lack of access to labour market, exploitation, no access to healthcare, education

- Conflict has also **devastated the economic infrastructure** of countries such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen, increasing the prices of basic goods and commodities including food and oil → Syrian respondents described dramatic increases in the price of rice (for example, it cost 7,000 liras for a kilo of rice in Homs which was the equivalent of a third of their monthly salary)
- Price increases have been **exacerbated by internal displacement** and the movement of large numbers of people to some of the safer cities, such as Afrin and Suwayda
- In other cases, individuals and families in Syria and Iraq were unable to work and support their families because of rules that were imposed on them (most notably by IS) which curtailed certain kinds of professions and careers (hairdresser, gynaecologist, doctor)
- Pre-war economies in Syria have all but collapsed and given way to extortive siege economies with devastating impact for civilians (UN Human Rights Council 2016) → can be seen in terms of kidnapping but also demands for cash in order to be protected / left alone

‘Three years ago they bombed my house in Aleppo and I lost my father then. My mother and brother have been living in Izmir for the past five months. My mother has lost her mind due to her sadness. After they bombed our house, we moved to another house again in Aleppo. But war started there too. My father was a civil servant and he had a salary. After he died we had nothing’ (Syrian Kurdish man aged 22)

‘We were living in Damascus. We left Damascus because we were feeling that we could die at any moment. The regime bombed our house 15 days before we left the country. My husband, who was an electrician, had to quit his job when we lost our house’ (Syrian woman aged 23)

‘People started flowing into Afrin from across Syria because there was peace…The cost of living increased incredibly. Afrin is a very expensive city now’ (Syrian man aged 33)

‘I was living in Mosul. There were no jobs available…Since IS came, all rich people took their money and left the city. There are no jobs available anymore’ (Iraqi man aged 19)

(Re)conceptualising the 'in between'

- Many of those who crossed the Mediterranean in 2015 left their home countries months or even years beforehand
- Important to differentiate between the **initial drivers** of migration from countries of origin and **factors which propel people onwards**
- **Complexity of routes and the factors that shape the journey to Europe** → rarely a single decision but multiple, often separate decisions made in response to different situations
- **People move between categories over space and time** → For many the primary objective is reaching a place of safety but they also need to find a place to live where they can rebuild a life / livelihood
- Concept of 'transit migration' based on the assumption of a linear journey from Point A to Point B, places 'in between' regarded as temporary 'stop overs'. In reality many respondents did not intend to travel to Europe but moved on due to secondary factors
- **Political instability and conflict as well as kidnapping, and personal experiences of violence** were frequently mentioned as specific factors influencing the **decision to move on**, particularly from Libya, Iran, Sudan

Examples include:

- **Syrians** living in Lebanon who felt too close to the ongoing conflict or that they might be located by Assad government officials and persecuted because of their political activities or affiliations
- **Eritreans** who had left due to indefinite military conscription but were unable to rebuild their lives in South Sudan due to civil war or North Sudan for fear of being deported back to Eritrea
- **Afghans in Iran**, particularly those from the ethnic Hazara minority, for whom experiences of severe discrimination, the absence of citizenship rights and a lack of education for children combined with anxieties about forced return to Afghanistan and information from others that they might be able to secure protection in Europe, were associated with the decision to move on

‘Life had been hard in Lebanon the past four years. I was living with 6 more people in the house. The rent was expensive. My mother was living in a different area. There were no jobs there. I was living in the centre of Beirut, because there were more jobs there. My life didn’t improve all these years there. You cannot build a life there’ (Syrian man aged 33)

‘I could have been naturalised in Iran in the past, but I was expecting that the situation in Afghanistan will get better, so I decided not to. In Iran I was afraid to go out. They are treating Afghans as if they are dogs (Afghan Sayyid man aged 32)

Refugees in Iran are in big trouble. They live a dark life. We wanted to go back to Afghanistan. But we talked to our parents in Afghanistan and they told us that IS has increased its presence there. IS are persecuting Hazaras. They are beheading Hazaras. So we decided to go to Germany (Afghan Hazara woman aged 28)

Challenging the politics of bounding

- Research challenges the construction of policy categories based on binary, static and linear understandings of migration processes and experiences → distinction between 'refugees' and 'migrants' out of sync with reality
- Politicians, policy makers and decision makers have largely failed to engage with the **relationship between economic, political and social drivers of migration** and how these come together, and change, over time
- There has been **very little interest in, or consideration of, the in-between.** The assumption that people move directly from Point A, the country of origin, to Point B the country of asylum (or Europe in general)
- Failure to understand the **ways in which people move into, and out of, politically and socially constructed categories** which define their migration situations over time and space
- **Categories are not simply a descriptive mechanism,** rather they serve political and policy purposes
- **Categories have consequences** → they entitle some to protection, rights and resources whilst simultaneously disentitling others

1. Categories are inevitable but we can, and should, approach them more critically and challenge them where appropriate, including through legal processes e.g. gender related persecution, Afghans in Iran
2. Need to be more careful about working with categories constructed by politicians and policy makers or co-opted by them for particular purposes (Bakewell 2008) e.g. 'transit migration'
3. Need to avoid falling into the trap of suggesting that those placed in one category rather than another are somehow 'more deserving' → privileging the term 'refugee' over 'migrant' does nothing to contest the faulty distinction between the two categories but simply perpetuates the logic
4. Need to look beyond the use (and abuse) of categories and focus more explicitly on the politics and relations of power that underpin the bounding process (Jones 2009)

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