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Middle East's Migrant Population More Than Doubles Since 2005

Regional conflict and economic opportunity boost number of migrants from 25 million to 54 million

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Terminology

The “Middle East” in this report includes 16 countries and territories: Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, the Palestinian territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

“Migrants” includes people moving across international borders for whatever reason (including refugees and asylum seekers and other international migrants), as well as people forcibly displaced from their homes but remaining inside their country of birth (internally displaced persons). This definition of migrants differs from previous Pew Research Center reports, in which “migrants” refers to international migrants and not include people internally displaced within their countries due to conflict.

“Displaced migrants” are those who have been forcibly displaced from their homes mainly due to conflict or natural disaster. Most displaced migrants in this report have moved due to conflict. Displaced persons can remain in their birth countries (see “internally displaced persons” below) or cross international borders (see “refugees and asylum seekers” below).

“Internally displaced persons” (IDPs), as defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), are people who have been “forced to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of, or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or man-made disasters,” yet remain inside their countries of birth, not crossing any international borders.

“Refugees” and “asylum seekers” are people who have crossed international borders to receive protection from persecution, war or violence. These populations remain refugees or asylum seekers until they are permanently resettled outside of their birth countries or return to their homelands. This report also includes Palestinian refugees living outside of the Palestinian territories (in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria), but not Palestinian refugees living within the Palestinian territories (see “Palestinian refugees” text box for more information).

“Non-displaced, international migrants” are those who have not crossed international borders due to conflict. Non-displaced, international migrants are the remaining population after displaced migrants are removed from the total foreign-born population provided by the United Nations. Most non-displaced, international migrants entered the Middle East for economic opportunity, but some may have moved for other reasons including to join family or to study.

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Middle East's Migrant Population More Than Doubles Since 2005

Regional conflict and economic opportunity boost number of migrants from 25 million to 54 million

Between 2005 and 2015, the number of migrants living in the Middle East more than doubled, from about 25 million to around 54 million, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of data from United Nations agencies. Some of this growth was due to individuals and families seeking economic opportunities. But the majority of the migration surge, especially after 2011, was a consequence of armed conflict and the forced displacement of millions of people from their homes, many of whom have left their countries of birth.

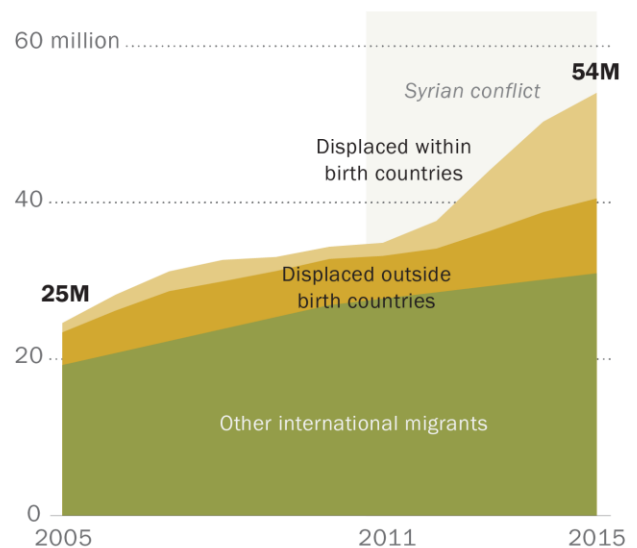
The rapid rise in the number of people looking for safe havens and new livelihoods has over the past decade transformed the Middle East into the world region with the fastest growing international migrant and forcibly displaced population, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of data from United Nations agencies.

All told, the Middle East's migrant population increased by about 120% between 2005 and 2015. This far exceeds increases in the combined international migrant and forcibly displaced populations over the same period in continental Africa (91% growth), Latin America and the Caribbean (77%) and the Asia-Pacific region (26%).

Europe's and North America's migrant populations also grew more slowly over the 2005-2015 period (about 20% in each region), even though Europe received a [record 1.3 million asylum seekers in 2015](#) – many from the Middle East.

Number of migrants in Middle East more than doubles between 2005 and 2015

In millions



Note: See terminology section for a list of included countries. Data for some years are estimated. See methodology for details.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of UN data.

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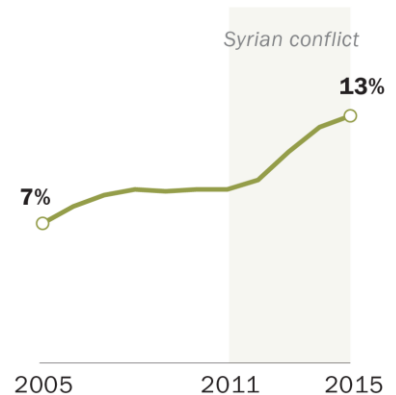
Within the Middle East, the migrant share of the region's population grew from 7% in 2005 to approximately 13% in 2015. Put another way, about one-in-ten people living in the Middle East today are international migrants or were forcibly displaced.

This growth in the Middle East's migrant population is largely the result of two factors – conflict and economic opportunity. Armed conflict in countries such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen has [displaced millions of people](#) since 2005. This increase in the number of displaced people, including those displaced within their own birth countries, accounts for the majority (60%) of the growth in the Middle East's migrant population between 2005 and 2015.

Second, economic opportunity, much of it concentrated in oil-rich Persian Gulf countries, has attracted millions of non-displaced international migrants seeking jobs, mostly from countries outside the Middle East. Some 40% of the growth in the Middle East's migrant population between 2005 and 2015 can be explained by such economically motivated migration.¹

Middle East's migrant share nearly doubles between 2005 and 2015

% of total population that are migrants



Note: See terminology section for a list of included countries. Migrants include those who have crossed international borders for any reason as well as people forcibly displaced within their birth countries due to conflict. Data for some years are estimated. See methodology for details.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of UN data.

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¹ Economic opportunity is the main motivation for most international migration in the Middle East when refugees and asylum seekers are not included. However, some international migrants also move across international borders to join family, pursue higher education or for other reasons.

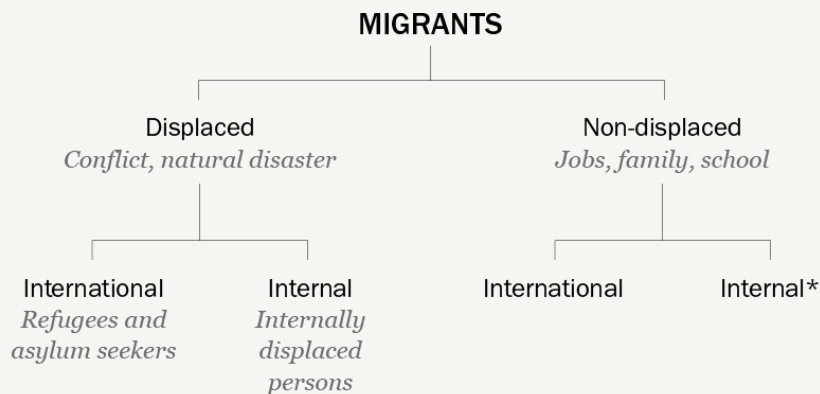
Migrants in the Middle East defined

What is a migrant? The simplest definition is a person who moves, either to another country or within their own. This report combines international migrants and people forcibly displaced from their homes but remaining in their country of birth to estimate the size of the total migrant population in the Middle East. (Internal migrants moving within their countries for reasons other than conflict – jobs, family and education – are not included in this report’s estimates because reliable data for this group in the region do not exist.) This approach provides a comprehensive view of the intensity of movement occurring in the region.

Often, people cross international borders when migrating. Many of these *international* migrants move for job opportunities, to join family or to study. They are not forcibly displaced from their homelands, but voluntarily leave one country to live in another.

But some international migrants move to another country to escape violence or persecution. These forcibly displaced persons (refugees and asylum seekers) also cross international borders. They are considered both displaced and international migrants.

People also move inside their country’s borders when fleeing conflict. This report relies on data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees that estimate the number of people who are *internally* displaced within their countries due to armed conflict, persecution, violations of human rights or natural disasters. This is an important group to include in the analysis of Middle East migrant populations since conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen have displaced millions of people within their countries in recent years.



*not included in this report’s analysis

The migrant share of national populations is not uniform across the Middle East. In 2015, among some of the Persian Gulf states, migrants make up an overwhelming majority of national populations in United Arab Emirates (88%), Qatar (75%) and Kuwait (74%). Most of these migrants are non-displaced, international migrants.

The migrant share of the population is smaller but still substantial in countries like Jordan (41%), Syria (40%) and Lebanon (34%), with most being displaced migrants, of whom some were born in these countries and others have crossed international borders as refugees or asylum seekers.

In some countries, migrants made up a much smaller share of national populations in 2015. Countries like Turkey (4%) and Iran (3%) have low shares of their populations that are either internally displaced persons due to conflict or international migrants, even though millions of migrants live inside their borders.

Palestinian refugees

Ever since the movement of Palestinians following the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 and establishment of the state of Israel, Palestinian refugees have lived in neighboring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Syria as well as within the Palestinian territories themselves. The total Palestinian refugee population, including descendants born outside of the Palestinian territories, was estimated to be [around 5.2 million in 2015](#).

Palestinian refugees are registered with the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency](#) (UNRWA), which assists with education, health care and other services for Palestinian refugees. As of Jan. 1, 2015, nearly 3 million Palestinian refugees were registered with UNRWA outside of the Palestinian territories. The figures in this report include these 3 million Palestinian refugees as displaced outside of their countries of birth, even though several generations of Palestinian refugees living in these countries were not born in the Palestinian territories.

Palestinian refugees living within the Palestinian territories are not included in the estimates of this report. These refugees have not crossed international boundaries. For example, neither the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR) nor UN migration statistics classify them as refugees or migrants. UNHCR also does not consider Palestinian refugees living within the Palestinian territories to be internally displaced persons.

Conflict displaces millions from their homes, driving growth of Middle East migrant population

By the end of 2015, the Middle East was home to about 23 million displaced migrants – or about four-in-ten of all [displaced people worldwide](#).

Many of those displaced have fled armed conflict and are living either within their birth countries or in neighboring countries.

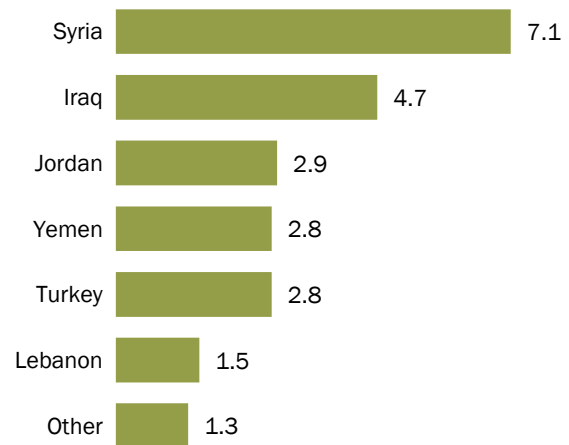
In 2015, Syria (7.1 million) and Iraq (4.7 million) were home to the largest displaced migrant populations in the Middle East. Large numbers of displaced migrants were also living in Jordan (2.9 million), Yemen (2.8 million) and Turkey (2.8 million) in 2015.

A majority (59%) of the Middle East’s growing population of displaced migrants never crossed international borders. In 2015, more than [6 million](#) of the total 7.1 million displaced migrants in Syria were Syrian born. Similarly, more than 4 million of Iraq’s 4.7 million displaced migrants were Iraqi citizens who were forcibly relocated within their home country.

In 2015, about four-in-ten (41%) displaced migrants in the Middle East lived in a foreign country,² amounting to nearly 9.6 million people. Fully 85% of this group in 2015 was located in just four countries: Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iran. About half (47%) of these international migrants were Syrian citizens (4.6 million) and about a third (34%) were Palestinian refugees as of 2015. But more than a million refugees from Afghanistan also live in the Middle East, mostly in neighboring Iran.

About half of Middle East’s 23 million displaced migrants lived in Syria or Iraq in 2015

Displaced migrants, in millions



Note: Displaced migrants include internally displaced persons within their birth countries, refugees and asylum seekers who have crossed an international border and Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Palestinian refugee figures for 2015 were extrapolated from 2013 and 2014 estimates and may not reflect final estimates. See methodology for details. See terminology section for a list of included countries.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of UN data.

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² This includes Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA living in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria who may not have actually crossed international boundaries. See the “Palestinian refugees” box for more details.

Millions of migrants are drawn to the Middle East for economic reasons

In addition to displaced persons, a substantial portion of the Middle East's surging migrant population is made up of manual laborers and professionals relocating to the oil-rich countries of the Persian Gulf from other countries, many in pursuit of economic opportunity.

Between 2005 and 2015, the number of non-displaced, international migrants in the Middle East increased from roughly 20 million to about 31 million.

Even as the absolute number of non-displaced, international migrants in the Middle East climbed between 2005 and 2015, their share of all migrants in the region declined due to the surge of displaced persons. Over the 10-year span, the portion of all migrants living in the Middle East who were non-displaced, international migrants fell from 78% to 57%.

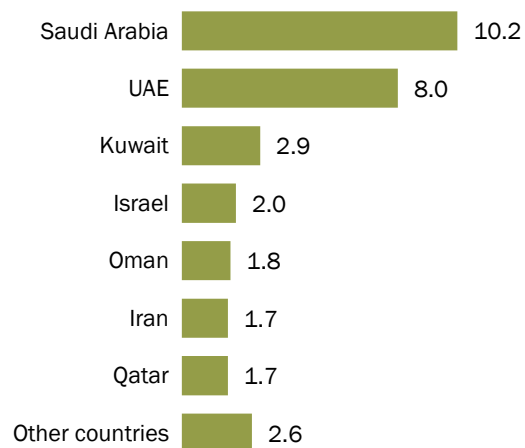
As of 2015, the countries with the largest number of non-displaced, international migrants in the Middle East were Saudi Arabia (10.2 million), United Arab Emirates (8.0 million), Kuwait (2.9 million) and Oman (1.8 million).

Notably, there are indications that [job growth is slowing](#) in Persian Gulf countries as oil prices remain below recent highs. Thousands of [migrant workers in the region are unemployed](#), leading to a decline in migrant remittances from the Gulf. Indeed, the situation in the Gulf helps to explain why the total value of [remittances across the globe fell in 2015](#) for the first time since the end of the Great Recession.

Israel is another top destination for non-displaced, international migrants in the Middle East. It has a long history of international migrants entering its borders, not only because of job opportunities there but also to repatriate Jews to the world's only Jewish state. The growth of its foreign-born population between 2005 and 2015, however, is far behind the region as a whole, up

About six-in-ten of the Middle East's non-displaced, international migrants lived in Saudi Arabia and UAE in 2015

Non-displaced, international migrants, in millions



Note: Non-displaced, international migrants are those who have not crossed international borders due to conflict. See methodology for details. See terminology section for a list of included countries. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of UN data.

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just 4% over the period. About 2.0 million migrants live in Israel, making up about a quarter (24%) of the country's overall population.

1. Conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen lead to millions of displaced migrants in the Middle East since 2005

Between 2005 and 2015, the number of displaced migrants³ in the Middle East grew fourfold, from about 5 million to about 23 million. Much of this rise was the result of recent conflict in three countries – Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

Nearly all of the Middle East's displaced migrants lived in six countries in 2015: Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, Turkey or Lebanon

Displaced migrants, in thousands

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Syria	460	1,150	1,961	1,570	1,530	1,504	1,244	2,994	7,190	8,313	7,130
Iraq	1,252	1,881	2,431	2,689	1,591	1,381	1,372	1,236	1,206	3,876	4,688
Jordan	1,845	2,378	2,404	2,453	2,435	2,453	2,436	2,340	2,717	2,790	2,854
Yemen	83	97	195	241	422	414	568	629	556	600	2,809
Turkey	7	9	12	18	16	17	25	291	662	1,694	2,754
Lebanon	407	631	535	473	477	465	447	577	1,306	1,614	1,541
Iran	974	969	965	982	1,072	1,075	887	868	857	982	979
Egypt	100	104	112	113	108	109	114	127	253	262	251
Israel	2	2	7	14	22	31	48	54	53	45	45
Kuwait	2	<1	39	41	3	3	1	2	2	2	2
UAE	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	1
Bahrain	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Oman	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Palest. ter.	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Qatar	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Saudi Arabia	241	241	241	241	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Total	5,373	7,463	8,902	8,834	7,678	7,454	7,144	9,120	14,806	20,180	23,055

Note: Rounded to nearest thousands, except for estimates below 1,000 which are shown as <1. Rank ordered by the number of displaced migrants as of 2015. Displaced migrants include internally displaced persons within their birth countries, refugees and asylum seekers who have crossed an international border and Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Palestinian refugee figures for 2015 were extrapolated from 2013 and 2014 estimates and may not reflect final estimates. See methodology for details.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of UN data.

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³ Displaced migrants are persons who have been forcibly displaced from their homes due to conflict or natural disaster. Displaced migrants can include internal migrants (internally displaced persons) or international migrants (refugees and asylum seekers).

In 2015, Syria had by far the largest number (7.1 million) of displaced migrants living within its borders. Nearly all of them (92%) have been internally displaced by the country's ongoing civil war. Iraq had the second largest displaced population in the Middle East, at 4.7 million. Like Syria's situation, most (94%) are internally displaced Iraqis.

Meanwhile, Jordan's displaced migrant population, at 2.9 million people, is a combination of Syrian refugees (628,000, or 22% of all displaced people in Jordan as of 2015) and a long-established population of Palestinian refugees (about 2.2 million, or 76% of all displaced people in Jordan as of 2015). Similarly, Lebanon's 1.5 million displaced migrants are a combination of about 1 million Syrian and almost 500,000 Palestinian refugees.⁴

Turkey and Yemen had about 2.8 million displaced migrants as of the end of 2015. The origins of their respective displaced populations are quite different, however. Turkey's displaced migrants are largely Syrian refugees, of which the number has grown significantly since the beginning of the civil war in Syria. In Yemen, nine-in-ten displaced migrants are internally displaced persons.

Absolute numbers tell only part of the story of the Middle East's displaced population. As a share of the total population, displaced persons constitute a substantial minority in Jordan (38%), Syria (39%) and Lebanon (26%).

In 2015, Syria's displaced population was almost entirely made up of internally displaced Syrians. Between 2006 and 2011, by contrast, Iraqi refugees were the largest displaced group within Syria. Yet even at the height of sectarian violence in Iraq in 2007, displaced migrants made up only 10% of Syria's population. (Since the Syrian conflict began in 2011, fewer Iraqi refugees now live in Syria.)

Today, about one-in-ten people living in Iraq (13%) as well as Yemen (10%) are displaced migrants. Most displaced migrants in Iraq are Iraqi nationals who have been forced from their homes but are still living in that country. In Yemen, most displaced migrants are internally displaced persons as well, but a substantial number (about a quarter million or about 10%) are refugees from other countries, mostly from Somalia.

⁴ Estimates for Palestinian refugees in Jordan as of 2015 are extrapolated from the growth rate between 2013 and 2014. These figures may not reflect final data.

Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq have had the highest share of displaced migrants among their national populations for many years

% of national resident populations that are displaced migrants

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Syria	3	6	10	8	7	7	6	15	37	44	39
Jordan	35	43	42	41	39	38	36	33	38	38	38
Lebanon	10	16	13	12	11	11	10	12	25	29	26
Iraq	5	7	9	9	5	4	4	4	4	11	13
Yemen	<1	<1	1	1	2	2	2	3	2	2	10
Turkey	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	1	2	4
Iran	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Israel	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Egypt	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Kuwait	<1	<1	2	2	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Bahrain	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
UAE	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Qatar	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Oman	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Saudi Arabia	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Palest. ter.	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Total	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	4	5	6

Note: Rank ordered by the percentage displaced migrants among national resident populations as of 2015. Displaced migrants include internally displaced persons within their birth countries, refugees and asylum seekers who have crossed an international border and Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Palestinian refugee figures for 2015 were extrapolated from 2013 and 2014 estimates and may not reflect final estimates. See methodology for details.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of UN data.

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Migrants displaced within their home countries: Rapid rise in Syria, Iraq and Yemen in recent years

The number of internally displaced persons in the Middle East has grown rapidly over the past decade. In 2005, slightly more than a million people living in the Middle East had been displaced from their homes and were living in their countries of birth. By 2015, the number had climbed to about 13 million. As of 2015, nearly all internally displaced migrants in the Middle East lived in just three countries: Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

The conflict in Syria that followed 2011's Arab Spring protests left about 2 million Syrians internally displaced by the end of 2012. As the insurgency opposed to President Bashar al-Assad's regime intensified and the caliphate declared by the militant group ISIS continued to expand across Syria, this number of internally displaced persons grew to 6.6 million by the end of 2015.

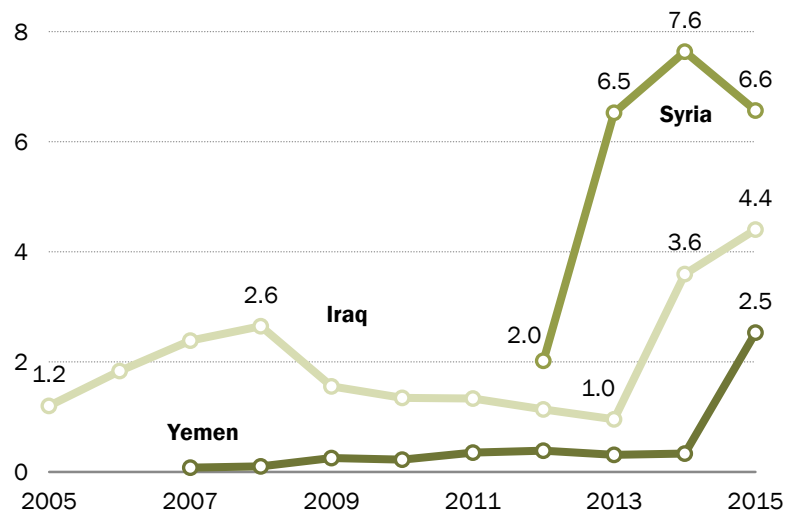
Sectarian violence in Iraq led to a total of 2.6 million internally displaced people within Iraq by the end of 2008. The number of Iraqis

displaced within their country then declined, as the intensity of civil strife subsided. However, armed campaigns by ISIS soon drove more people from their homes. The number of internally displaced Iraqis rose from slightly less than a million in 2013 to more than 4.4 million by 2015.

In Yemen, conflict also grew the number of internally displaced people. While this population numbered in the hundreds of thousands through 2014, a subsequent surge in violence increased the number of internally displaced Yemenis to more than 2.5 million by the end of that year.

Syria, Iraq and Yemen see rapid rise in displaced populations within their countries in recent years

Internally displaced persons, in millions



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of UN data. See methodology for details.
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Migrants displaced across borders: Most refugees are in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iran

Millions of people, while remaining in the Middle East region, have crossed international borders as refugees or asylum seekers. A total of 9.6 million refugees or asylum seekers lived in the Middle East as of the end of 2015, up from 4.2 million in 2005 – a nearly 130% increase.⁵

The number of refugees in a given country is based on the number who are registered for assistance from the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (for non-Palestinian refugees), the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency](#) (for Palestinian refugees) and other aid groups. Not all refugees register with such groups, however, and estimates of refugee populations in Middle Eastern countries based on these sources should be interpreted as minimum population estimates.

Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iran have hosted most of Middle East's refugees for several years

Refugees and asylum seekers, by destination country, in thousands

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Jordan	1,845	2,378	2,404	2,453	2,435	2,453	2,436	2,340	2,717	2,790	2,854*
Turkey	7	9	12	18	16	17	25	291	662	1,694	2,754
Lebanon	407	431	465	473	477	465	447	577	1,306	1,614	1,541*
Iran	974	969	965	982	1,072	1,075	887	868	857	982	979
Iraq	52	47	45	42	39	38	39	104	252	280	285
Yemen	83	97	118	141	172	193	221	244	249	266	277
Syria	460	1,150	1,961	1,570	1,530	1,504	1,244	978	669	680	567*
Egypt	100	104	112	113	108	109	114	127	253	262	251
Israel	2	2	7	14	22	31	48	54	53	45	45
Kuwait	2	1	39	41	3	3	1	2	2	2	2
Saudi Arabia	241	241	241	241	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Other countries	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	1	1	1	1	1	2
Total	4,173	5,428	6,370	6,087	5,876	5,889	5,464	5,587	7,024	8,617	9,556

* Palestinian refugee figures for 2015 were extrapolated from 2013 and 2014 estimates and may not reflect final estimates. See methodology for details.

Note: Rounded to nearest thousands except for estimates below 1,000, which are listed as <1. Countries with less than 1,000 refugees and asylum seekers each year included as part of the "other countries" category. Rank ordered by number of refugees and asylum seekers in 2015. Includes Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. See terminology section for a list of included countries.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of UN data.

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⁵ Most Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria have not crossed international borders as they are descendants of Palestinian refugees who left Palestine following the establishment of Israel in 1948.

In 2015, fully 85% of refugees and asylum seekers in the Middle East lived in just four countries: Jordan (nearly 2.9 million), Turkey (about 2.8 million), Lebanon (about 1.5 million) and Iran (about 1 million). The number of refugees living in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon grew rapidly after the onset of the Syrian conflict. Meanwhile, the number of refugees in Iran has been somewhat stable at roughly 1 million for the entire decade, with most of this refugee population displaced from neighboring Afghanistan.

Iraq (285,000 refugees and asylum seekers in 2015) has seen a rapid rise in persons displaced from neighboring countries after 2011 as well, mainly Syria. Yemen (277,000 refugees in 2015) and Egypt (251,000 refugees in 2015) have also seen their refugee populations swell, due in large part to conflicts in Somalia, Ethiopia and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Nearly all of the Middle East's refugees have come from Syria, the Palestinian territories and Afghanistan the past several years

Refugees and asylum seekers, by origin country, in thousands

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Syria	2	2	2	2	2	2	6	693	2,370	3,706	4,561
Palest. ter.	2,664	2,709	2,769	2,836	2,881	2,951	2,903	2,975	3,035	3,099	3,163*
Afghanistan	921	916	909	943	1,030	1,037	848	844	842	989	1,047
Somalia	85	101	125	146	173	191	217	240	244	257	267
Iraq	103	1,304	2,158	1,749	1,617	1,525	1,282	614	299	320	252
Sudan	25	27	28	29	29	33	36	36	43	40	45
Eritrea	<1	1	4	7	15	20	35	42	40	38	39
Iran	18	18	17	16	19	15	16	18	21	31	37
Ethiopia	3	3	3	4	6	8	12	13	15	18	22
Turkey	14	17	16	16	12	16	16	16	17	18	18
Other countries	3	4	6	7	7	8	11	12	15	20	24
Total	4,173	5,428	6,370	6,087	5,876	5,889	5,464	5,587	7,024	8,617	9,556

* Palestinian refugee figures for 2015 were extrapolated from 2013 and 2014 estimates and may not reflect final estimates. See methodology for details.

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Source: Pew Research Center analysis of UN data.

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The majority of refugees and asylum seekers in the Middle East in 2015 can be traced to three points of origin: Syria (4.6 million), the Palestinian territories (3.2 million) and Afghanistan (1.0 million).

As of the end of 2015, nearly all of Syrian refugees in the Middle East lived in just three countries: Turkey (2.5 million), Lebanon (1.1 million) and Jordan (628,000). Outside of the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria host Palestinian refugees. Meanwhile, Afghan refugees living in the Middle East are mainly located in Iran.

2. Economic growth attracts migrants to Persian Gulf

Despite a recent drop in oil prices and the financial crisis of 2008 and 2009, the economies of Persian Gulf countries [expanded between 2005 and 2015](#). This economic expansion in countries like Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain has encouraged millions of migrants to move to the Middle East in search of economic opportunity.

Overall, the number of non-displaced, international migrants living in the Middle East grew by 61% between 2005 and 2015, from 19.2 to 31.0 million. (Non-displaced, international migrants are the remaining migrant population after displaced migrants are removed from the total foreign-born population provided by the United Nations. Most non-displaced, international migrants have moved for economic opportunity, but some may have also moved for other reasons including to join family or to study.)

At the country level, UAE saw the largest absolute increase in the number of non-displaced, international migrants – up by an estimated 4.8 million over the decade, as the population of this group increased from 3.3 million in 2005 to 8.1 million in 2015. Saudi Arabia had the second largest increase in its non-displaced, international migrant population, up an estimated 3.9 million over the same period, rising from 6.3 million in 2005 to 10.2 million in 2015.

By contrast, Qatar and Oman saw the largest percentage increase in their non-displaced, international migrant populations, each rising more than 150% during the decade.

Number of economic migrants in the Middle East grows by about 50% between 2005 and 2015

Non-displaced, international migrants, in thousands

	2005	2010	2015
Saudi Arabia	6,261	8,429	10,186
UAE	3,281	7,316	8,094
Kuwait	1,332	1,868	2,865
Israel	1,888	1,920	1,967
Oman	666	816	1,845
Iran	1,594	1,686	1,747
Qatar	646	1,456	1,687
Bahrain	404	658	704
Lebanon	350	356	457
Syria	416	158	309
Jordan	480	270	258
Palest. ter.	267	258	256
Egypt	174	186	241
Turkey	1,312	1,350	211
Iraq	81	80	69
Yemen	88	93	67
Total	19,240	26,901	30,961

Note: Rounded to nearest thousands. Non-displaced, international migrants are the remaining migrant population after displaced migrants are removed from the total foreign-born population. See methodology for details.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of UN data.

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Many migrants come to Persian Gulf countries as manual laborers on one- to two-year work visas. Most come from South Asia (India, Bangladesh and Pakistan) and elsewhere in East Asia (Indonesia and Philippines). Some renew their work visas and live in the Middle East for years. The Gulf nations also attract a sizable number of business, educational and medical professionals from Europe, North America and elsewhere. And increasingly, international students from around the world are studying at newly established and expanded universities and colleges in the Persian Gulf region.

A less pronounced increase in non-displaced, international migrants occurred in Israel. There, the total number of international migrants increased by 79,000 between 2005 and 2015. Some people moved to Israel for economic opportunity, while others have moved for religious or family reasons.

Today, several Persian Gulf states have majority foreign-born populations, mostly due to their high number of economic migrants. In fact, all [Gulf Cooperation Council](#) countries saw an increase in their share of foreign born between 2005 and 2015. About three-quarters or more of UAE (88%), Qatar (75%) and Kuwait (74%) populations in 2015 are non-displaced, international migrants. Meanwhile, about half (51%) of Bahrain's population were foreign-born workers in 2015. Oman (41%) and Saudi Arabia (32%) have relatively smaller shares that are foreign born, but that are still significantly higher than the share found in many European countries or the United States.

UAE, Qatar and Kuwait have had majority foreign-born populations for several years

% of national resident populations that are non-displaced, international migrants

	2005	2010	2015
UAE	73	88	88
Qatar	77	82	75
Kuwait	59	61	74
Bahrain	47	52	51
Oman	27	28	41
Saudi Arabia	25	30	32
Israel	29	26	24
Lebanon	9	8	8
Palest. ter.	7	6	5
Jordan	9	4	3
Iran	2	2	2
Syria	2	1	2
Turkey	2	2	<1
Egypt	<1	<1	<1
Yemen	<1	<1	<1
Iraq	<1	<1	<1
Total	6	7	8

Note: Rank ordered by share in 2015. Non-displaced, international migrants are those who have not crossed international borders due to conflict. Most non-displaced migrants enter the Middle East for economic opportunity but some may have moved for other reasons including to join family or to study. See methodology for details. See terminology section for a list of included countries.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of UN data.

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Methodology

The data used in this report are based on four primary data sources from United Nations agencies: 1) estimates for the number of displaced persons (international migrants such as refugees and asylum seekers as well as internal migrants such as internally displaced persons) from the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR), 2) estimates for the number of international migrants from the [United Nations Population Division](#) (UNPD), 3) estimates of Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria registered with the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency](#) (UNRWA) and 4) total country population estimates from the [World Population Prospects](#), 2015 revision from UNPD.

Defining displaced migrants

Displaced migrants in this report are a combination of [internally displaced people](#), [refugees](#) and [asylum seekers](#) from the UNHCR database. Additionally, Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria who are registered with UNRWA are also included. Data on displaced migrants are available for every year between 2005 and 2015, except for Palestinian refugees in 2015.

Estimates for Palestinian refugees rely on data from UNRWA for years 2005 through 2014. The 2015 estimate for Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria is an extrapolation of Palestinian refugee population growth between 2013 and 2014 and may not reflect final estimates. Additionally, the number of Palestinian refugees living in Syria is constantly changing given the events occurring in that country. Palestinian refugees living in the Palestinian territories are not included in the estimates of this report. These refugees have not crossed international boundaries. For example, neither the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) nor United Nations migration statistics classify them as refugees or migrants. Neither does UNHCR consider Palestinian refugees living within the Palestinian territories to be internally displaced persons.

Defining non-displaced migrants

The number of non-displaced, international migrants in each Middle Eastern country was estimated by removing refugees and asylum seekers (including Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA) from country totals of all international migrants found in the UNPD data. This remainder group of non-displaced migrants is assumed to be mostly economic migrants. This is a safe assumption given that the bulk of international migrants, once refugees and asylum seekers are removed, live in the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates) known for employing millions of international migrants for various jobs. Figures for non-displaced international migrants in years 2006-2009 and 2011-2014 are estimates interpolated from UN estimates for 2005, 2010 and 2015.

All data sources are “stock” data. This means the data references total population at a certain point in time and does not measure flows. The UNHCR displaced migrant data includes the total stock of internally displaced persons, refugees and asylum seekers and those in refugee like situations as of the end of 2015. The UNPD data, both of international migrants and total populations, are mid-year estimates. Because of the different time frames, it is possible that estimates of the total number of migrants (displaced and non-displaced) and shares of total populations may not reflect actual population sizes in 2015.

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Appendix B: Additional tables

Total number of migrants living in Middle Eastern countries, 2005-2015

In thousands

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Bahrain	404	455	505	556	607	658	667	676	686	695	704
Egypt	274	281	291	294	292	296	311	335	472	492	492
Iran	2,569	2,582	2,596	2,631	2,740	2,762	2,585	2,579	2,580	2,717	2,726
Iraq	1,333	1,962	2,511	2,769	1,671	1,461	1,449	1,311	1,280	3,947	4,757
Israel	1,890	1,896	1,908	1,921	1,935	1,951	1,977	1,993	2,001	2,003	2,012
Jordan	2,325	2,816	2,800	2,807	2,747	2,723	2,704	2,606	2,980	3,051	3,112
Kuwait	1,333	1,439	1,585	1,694	1,764	1,872	2,069	2,268	2,468	2,667	2,866
Lebanon	757	982	887	827	831	821	823	974	1,723	2,051	1,998
Oman	666	696	726	756	786	816	1,022	1,228	1,433	1,639	1,845
Palest. ter.	267	265	263	261	260	258	258	257	257	256	256
Qatar	646	808	970	1,132	1,294	1,456	1,503	1,549	1,595	1,641	1,688
Saudi Arabia	6,502	6,936	7,369	7,803	7,996	8,430	8,781	9,133	9,484	9,835	10,186
Syria	876	1,514	2,274	1,831	1,739	1,662	1,432	3,213	7,438	8,591	7,439
Turkey	1,319	1,328	1,339	1,353	1,359	1,367	1,148	1,186	1,329	2,133	2,965
UAE	3,281	4,088	4,895	5,702	6,509	7,317	7,472	7,628	7,784	7,939	8,095
Yemen	171	186	285	332	514	507	656	712	634	673	2,876
Total	24,613	28,235	31,207	32,671	33,047	34,355	34,857	37,646	44,143	50,329	54,016

Note: Figures include displaced (internally displaced persons within their birth countries, refugees and asylum seekers who have crossed an international border and Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria) and non-displaced, international migrants. Figures for Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria for 2015 were extrapolated from 2013 and 2014 estimates and may not reflect final estimates. See methodology for details. Rounded to thousands. Interpolation based on trends was used for some years (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). See terminology section for a list of included countries.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of United Nations data.

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Migrant share of total population in Middle East, by country, 2005-2015

% of national resident population that is a migrant

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Bahrain	47	48	49	50	51	52	51	51	51	51	51
Egypt	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	1	1	1
Iran	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	3
Iraq	5	7	9	9	6	5	5	4	4	11	13
Israel	29	28	28	27	27	26	26	26	26	25	25
Jordan	44	51	49	47	44	42	40	37	41	41	41
Kuwait	59	60	62	63	61	61	64	66	69	71	74
Lebanon	19	24	22	20	20	19	18	20	33	37	34
Oman	27	27	28	29	28	28	32	35	37	39	41
Palest. ter.	7	7	7	7	7	6	6	6	6	6	5
Qatar	77	82	82	82	81	82	79	77	76	76	75
Saudi Arabia	26	27	28	29	29	30	31	31	31	32	32
Syria	5	8	12	9	8	8	7	16	39	46	40
Turkey	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	4
UAE	73	79	81	83	84	88	86	85	86	87	88
Yemen	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	3	2	3	11
Total	7	8	9	9	9	9	9	10	11	13	13

Note: See terminology section for a list of included countries. Migrants include those who have crossed international borders for any reason as well as people forcibly displaced within their birth countries due to conflict. Data for some years estimated, see methodology for details.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of United Nations data.

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Appendix C: Countries by regional classification

Africa

Algeria
Angola
Benin
Botswana
Burkina Faso
Burundi
Cameroon
Cape Verde
Central African Republic
Chad
Comoros
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Djibouti
Equatorial Guinea
Eritrea
Ethiopia
Gabon
Gambia
Ghana
Guinea
Guinea Bissau
Ivory Coast
Kenya
Lesotho
Liberia
Libya
Madagascar
Malawi
Mali
Mauritania
Mauritius
Mayotte
Morocco
Mozambique
Namibia
Niger
Nigeria
Republic of the Congo
Reunion
Rwanda
Sao Tome and Principe
Senegal
Seychelles
Sierra Leone

Somalia
South Africa
South Sudan
St. Helena
Sudan
Swaziland
Tanzania
Togo
Tunisia
Uganda
Western Sahara
Zambia
Zimbabwe

Asia-Pacific

Afghanistan
American Samoa
Australia
Azerbaijan
Bangladesh
Bhutan
Brunei
Burma (Myanmar)
Cambodia
China
Cook Islands
Federated States of Micronesia
Fiji
French Polynesia
Guam
Hong Kong
India
Indonesia
Japan
Kazakhstan
Kiribati
Kyrgyzstan
Laos
Macau
Malaysia
Maldives
Marshall Islands
Mongolia
Nauru
Nepal
New Caledonia
New Zealand
Niue

North Korea
Northern Mariana Islands
Pakistan
Palau
Papua New Guinea
Philippines
Samoa
Singapore
Solomon Islands
South Korea
Sri Lanka
Tajikistan
Thailand
Timor-Leste
Tokelau
Tonga
Turkmenistan
Tuvalu
Uzbekistan
Vanuatu
Vietnam
Wallis and Futun

Europe

Albania
Andorra
Armenia
Austria
Belarus
Belgium
Bosnia-Herzegovina
Bulgaria
Channel Islands
Croatia
Cyprus
Czech Republic
Denmark
Estonia
Faeroe Islands
Finland
France
Georgia
Germany
Gibraltar
Greece
Hungary
Iceland

Ireland
Isle of Man
Italy
Latvia
Liechtenstein
Lithuania
Luxembourg
Malta
Moldova
Monaco
Montenegro
Netherlands
Norway
Poland
Portugal
Republic of Macedonia
Romania
Russia
San Marino
Serbia
Slovakia
Slovenia
Spain
Sweden
Switzerland
Ukraine
United Kingdom
Vatican City

Latin America-Caribbean

Anguilla
Antigua and Barbuda
Argentina
Aruba
Bahamas
Barbados
Belize
Bolivia
Brazil
British Virgin Islands
Caribbean Netherlands
Cayman Islands
Chile
Colombia
Costa Rica
Cuba
Curaco
Dominica

Dominican Republic
Ecuador
El Salvador
Falkland Islands (Malvinas)
French Guiana
Grenada
Guadeloupe
Guatemala
Guyana
Haiti
Honduras
Jamaica
Martinique
Mexico
Montserrat
Nicaragua
Panama
Paraguay
Peru
Puerto Rico
Sint Maarten
St. Kitts and Nevis
St. Lucia
St. Vincent and the Grenadines
Suriname
Trinidad and Tobago
Turks and Caicos Islands
U.S. Virgin Islands
Uruguay
Venezuela

Middle East

Bahrain
Egypt
Iran
Iraq
Israel
Jordan
Kuwait
Lebanon
Oman
Palestinian territories
Qatar
Saudi Arabia
Syria
Turkey
United Arab Emirates
Yemen

North America

Bermuda

Canada

Greenland

St. Pierre and Miquelon

United States