PATHWAYS INTO THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS AND SOME ESCAPE ROUTES OUT

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In this paper, we construct a timeline to the arrival of 25,000 Syrian refugees in Canada in February 2016. We first provide some background information on the conflict in Syria. Correlating UNHCR data and major political interventions, we then draw a rough portrait of the refugee flows from Syria into the neighboring countries and Europe. Finally, we sketch out the situation that led to the acceptance of Syrian refugees in Canada and offer a preliminary portrait of those who arrived.

BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT[1]

In March 2011, three months after the Arab Spring began in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya (Henry & Jang, 2012: 16), fifteen Syrian schoolchildren were arrested and tortured for writing on a wall the anti-regime slogan: "The people want the overthrow of the regime" (Danahar, 2013). This event sparked massive outrage across the country, notably in Homs and Damascus, protests and uprisings against President Bashar al-Assad began (CBC News, 2014; Danahar, 2013; Henry & Jang, 2012: 214), eventually leading to a civil war that has been called by some as "the worst humanitarian crisis of our time" (Amnesty International, 2015; Ban, 2015). In the years leading to the uprising, Assad's opposition was fragmented and struggled to form a united front. The opposition was made up of Islamist, liberal, leftist and nationalist figures and factions that initially had difficulties maintaining a conspicuous profile and was largely disconnected by their varying grievances (Hokayem, 2013: 74). At the same time, President Assad assembled a strong, militarized front comprised mainly of the Syrian Armed Forces (Syria's national army), the National Defence Force (a unit made up exclusively of Alawites), a

1 We thank Chelsea McManus and Charlotte Murret-Labarthe for their research assistance. Chelsea has helped putting together the timeline of refugee flows; Charlotte has helped gathering facts related to the arrival of Syrian refugees in Canada.

pro-government militia led by members of Assad's extended family, the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian Revolutionary Guards (Malantowicz, 2013: 57). In response to this military build up, rebel forces rallied together to form the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in July 2011 to support the protesting civilians. The government responded to regime critics with high levels of brutality in hopes of subjugating those who protested The President's rule (Adams, 2015, p.6). The FSA gradually seized control of various towns and villages and surprised the government with their military capacity and resilience.

THE REFUGEE CRISIS

In June 2011, the civil war reached a military impasse while Syrians started to flee their country to neighboring states in light of the escalation of violence and worsening living conditions. In 2016, an estimated 13.5 million Syrians were in need of humanitarian assistance and 4.8 million Syrians sought refuge in other countries, with another 6.5 million internally displaced (World Vision, 2016; MercyCorps, 2016; Barnard, 2016). The majority of Syrian refugees have fled to neighbouring countries like Jordan and Lebanon, as well as the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq. In addition, more than two million Syrians have attempted to travel across the Mediterranean Sea to seek refuge in Europe.

In 2013, most notably Germany and Sweden agreed to re-settle Syrian refugees (roughly 5,000 each, temporarily in the case of the former, permanently in the case of the latter). At the same time, there appeared first reports in December 2013 that fighters seized parts of Ramadi, not far from the capital Baghdad in Iraq. A month later (Jan. 2014) Syrian rebels and the Islamic Front launched an offensive against ISIS. In mid 2014, ISIS intensified its military campaigns in both Syria and Iraq announcing a Caliphate stretching from Aleppo in northwest Syria to eastern Iraq. As a result, 500,000 people fled the city of Mosul, and the United States commenced an air-campaign to contain ISIS. Disregard strike through here, the stream of refugees started to take a significant burden on the refugee camps. In December, the World Food Program (WFP) announced a suspension of food vouchers in refugee camps due to a lack of funding, which aggravated the humanitarian crisis. Six months later (June 2015), the UN was forced to announce a funding shortage for its agencies as well as NGOs providing immediate assistance on the ground, with only 23% of funding requirements met at that point. Against this backdrop, and in light of suffering refugees being televised on TV, the German government announced in August 2015 that it would temporarily accept roughly 800,000 refugees, which came on the so-called Balkan route (see map) passing through countries like Macedonia, Serbia, Austria, etc. Months of what seem somewhat uncontrolled flows of refugees arrived in European countries, resulting in temporary border closures among the EU member states. For example, Hungary closed its border with Serbia and subsequently Croatia. Sweden also started border controls in November 2015 after roughly 10,000 migrants arrived per week. Part of the challenge was that among this large number of refugees were not only Syrians but also refugees from Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh Morocco, Pakistan, Tunisia (see table for details). While the European Union had significant difficulties in finding a solution to the refugee challenge, it was finally able in March 2016 to reach a complex agreement with Turkey that would host those refugees in Turkey rather than in the EU. Furthermore, it is obvious that as the crisis in Syria dragged on and as European countries were restricting their family reunification programs, the percentage of women and children among the refugees increased (see graphic). In fact, 75% of those fleeing Syria are women and children (*Lifeline Syria*).

ARRIVAL OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN CANADA

In Canada, by the end of 2014, only 1,285 Syrians had been approved for Canadian refugee status, and just under 1,100 had travelled to Canada (Mas, 2015). At the beginning of 2015, Stephen Harper's Conservative government made a pledge to accept 10,000 Syrian refugees over the next three years. 60% of them would be privately sponsored, and 40% would be sponsored by the government (Mas, 2015). Priority would also be given to individuals who belong to an ethnic, religious or sexual minority (Mas, 2015). Between 2011 and 2015, public interest in the refugee crisis had been modest to say the least. However, things changed dramatically on 3 September 2015, when the body of Alan Kurdi, 3, was washed up on the Turkish shore and it became known that he and his drowned family had been trying to come to Canada. By then Canada had accepted 2,500 refugees from Syria[2], and some 20,000 from Iraq. Because of Alan Kurdi's tragic death Canadians came to realize that the "refugee crisis" was not merely a European problem, but rather that there is a direct relationship between the lack of options that refugees have and their willingness to take desperate measures. Elected in October of 2015, Justin Trudeau's Liberal government promised to bring in an additional 25,000 refugees with a budget of up to 678 million dollars. 15,000 of the refugees were to be sponsored by the government, while the other 10,000 were to be privately sponsored (Wherry, 2014; Government of Canada, 2016). Originally, all refugees were to arrive by the end of 2015; that goal was finally attained on February 27th 2016 (*CBC News*, 2016b). Currently, 32,700 Syrian refugees have been resettled into Canada under the Liberal government (Government of Canada, 2016).

1 Under the Conservatives, a total 3,089 Syrian refugees have been resettled into Canada (*The Canadian Press*, 2016).

In order to bring Syrian refugees to Canada, with the help of the United Nations Refugee Agency, the government first identified those who desire migrating to Canada. Potential individuals are carefully screened, and the selected cases are then processed. Currently, there are three different programs by which Syrian refugees can come to Canada: *Government-Assisted Refugee Resettlement Program, Privately Sponsored Refugee Resettlement Program and Blended Visa Office-Referred Refugee Resettlement Program*. At the time of writing, there are 15,355 Government-Assisted Refugees, 9,494 Privately Sponsored Refugees and 2,341 Blended Visa-Office Referred Refugees (Government of Canada, 2016). In either case, resettlement into Canada can take six months or more, a medical examination, background check and security check are necessary, travel costs and medical examination costs are covered by a loan to the refugees and loan payments must begin within 30 days of arrival in Canada (Government of Canada, 2016[3]). Once in Canada, refugees are being hosted and/or introduced to their sponsors if they have any. After that the long journey to settlement and integration begins (Government of Canada, 2016).

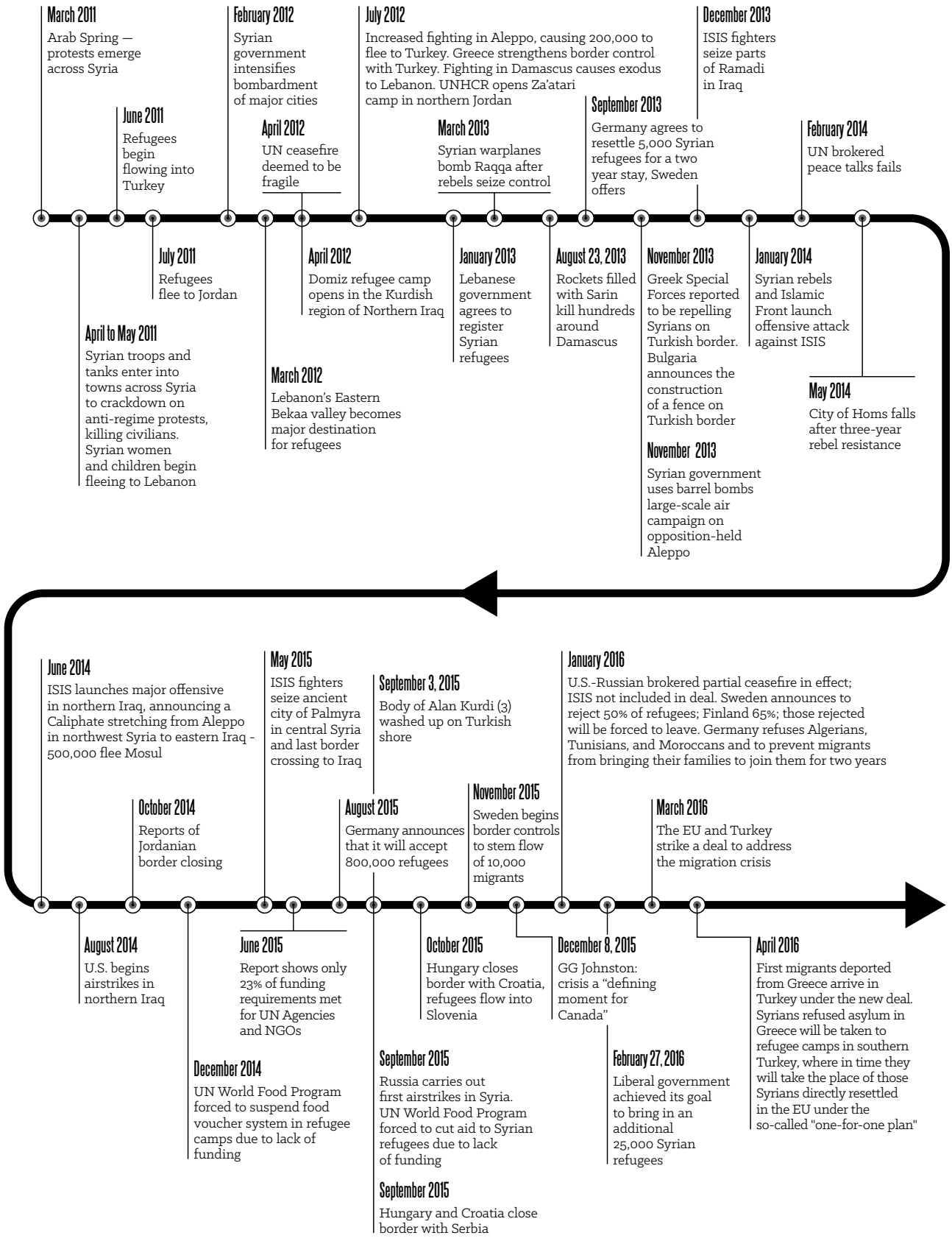
A PRELIMINARY PORTRAIT

At the time of writing, almost 75% of the Syrian refugees are located in three provinces: Ontario (42%), Québec (18%) and Alberta (13%) (Immigration and Citizenship Canada, 2016), and have been spread out within 285 "welcoming communities" (Government of Canada, 2016). 49% of these refugees are women and 51% of them are men. 44% of them are aged between 20 and 59 and 53% are under 20 (Immigration and Citizenship Canada, 2016). Only 46% of the refugees have self-reported that they knew one of Canada' official languages (Immigration and Citizenship Canada, 2016). Among those who are older than 18, 69% have secondary education or less, 21% have some university or more, and 10% have a formal trade certification or an apprenticeship certificate (Immigration and Citizenship Canada, 2016). Information regarding the education levels of children is not given by the government, but, given the fact that Syrian infrastructures and social services have collapsed (World Vision, 2016; Omer, 2015) and that the current civil war that began in 2011 has "reversed 10 years of progress in education for Syrian children" (World Vision, 2016), it seems safe to assume that the education levels of those under 18 would be low, if not lower than that of the older refugees. The Government of Canada also does not offer information regarding the religion of the Syrian refugees. However, we do know that 87% of the Syrian population is Muslim: 74% of them Sunni Muslim and 13% Shia Muslim. 10% of the population is Christian and 3% is Druze (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2015; Danahar, 2013, p. 374).

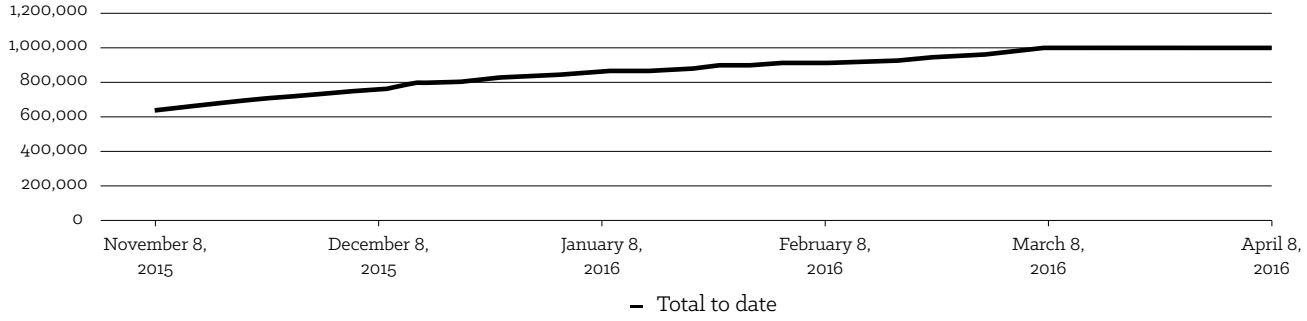
In February 2016, Immigration Minister John McCallum acknowledged that "the federal government alone is really bad at long-term integration of groups such as these" (Furey, 2016). Rather, local providers were those who knew best what to do to help refugees and meet their needs (Furey, 2016). The challenges ahead are abundant: the accepted refugees have fled war, many have lived in refugee camps, they had limited or interrupted education, and many have lost family members. Exacerbating the problem, we know that refugees in Canada tend to be chronically under-employed (Krahn, Derwing, Mulder, & Wilkinson, 2000) and that many refugee youth experience racial discrimination and bullying (Baker, Price & Walsh, 2016)[4]. The arrival of the Syrian refugees may thus indeed be a "defining moment" for Canada, as underlined by Governor General David Johnston. On the one hand, their integration tests the country's commitment to diversity, inclusiveness and tolerance. On the other, it speaks to the refugees' courage, resilience, and adaptive capabilities. As such, the arrival of more than 25,000 Syrian refugees is also a good opportunity to remember that this nation's success was built on welcoming of others, from helping the first European settlers to survive to accommodating ethnically diverse migrants from all four corners of the world. From this perspective, lending a hand seems just a "normal" thing to do.

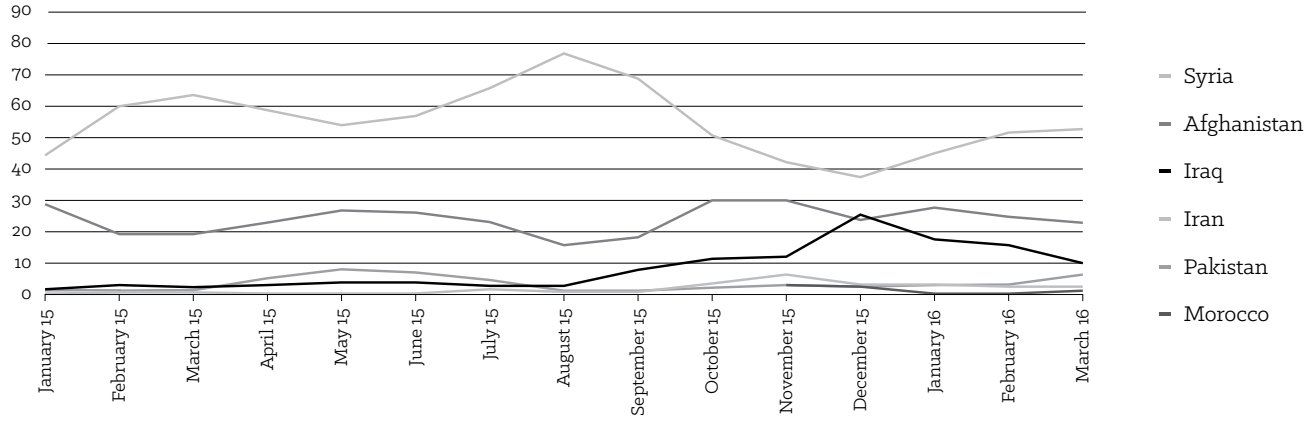
3 The main differences of these programs are the amount of time financial support will be given, as well as by whom it is given. Although government-assisted refugees benefit from services delivered by the communities they are placed in, they are the sole responsibility of the federal government. They are provided with 12 months of financial support to cover the cost of food, rent and some medical services. Privately sponsored refugees receive support from a private group of Canadians for one year, or until they become financially independent. This group is responsible for the integration of the refugees as well. The Blended Visa-Office Referred program is a mix of the previous two programs, in which both the government and private groups work together in order to support and integrate refugees. They can receive up to six months of financial support from the government, followed by six months of support from a private group of individuals who have decided to sponsor them.

4 See Ramos' and Unger's contribution to this volume.

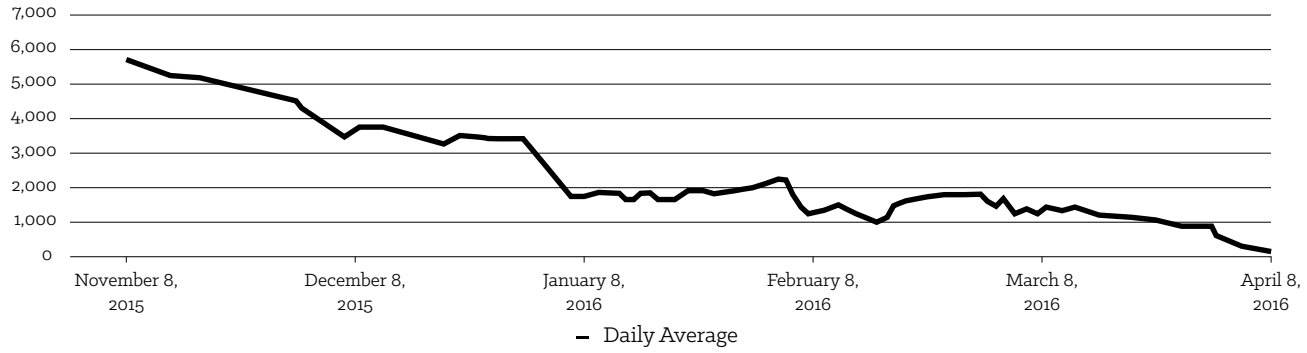

March 2011
Arab Spring — protests emerge across Syria
June 2011
Refugees begin flowing into Turkey
July 2011
Refugees flee to Jordan
April to May 2011
Syrian troops and tanks enter into towns across Syria to crackdown on anti-regime protests, killing civilians. Syrian women and children begin fleeing to Lebanon
February 2012
Syrian government intensifies bombardment of major cities
April 2012
UN ceasefire deemed to be fragile
April 2012
Domiz refugee camp opens in the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq
March 2012
Lebanon's Eastern Bekaa valley becomes major destination for refugees
July 2012
Increased fighting in Aleppo, causing 200,000 to flee to Turkey. Greece strengthens border control with Turkey. Fighting in Damascus causes exodus to Lebanon. UNHCR opens Za'atari camp in northern Jordan
March 2013
Syrian warplanes bomb Raqqa after rebels seize control
January 2013
Lebanese government agrees to register Syrian refugees
August 23, 2013
Rockets filled with Sarin kill hundreds around Damascus
September 2013
Germany agrees to resettle 5,000 Syrian refugees for a two year stay, Sweden offers
November 2013
Greek Special Forces reported to be repelling Syrians on Turkish border. Bulgaria announces the construction of a fence on Turkish border
November 2013
Syrian government uses barrel bombs large-scale air campaign on opposition-held Aleppo
December 2013
ISIS fighters seize parts of Ramadi in Iraq
January 2014
Syrian rebels and Islamic Front launch offensive attack against ISIS
February 2014
UN brokered peace talks fails
May 2014
City of Homs falls after three-year rebel resistance
June 2014
ISIS launches major offensive in northern Iraq, announcing a Caliphate stretching from Aleppo in northwest Syria to eastern Iraq - 500,000 flee Mosul
August 2014
U.S. begins airstrikes in northern Iraq
October 2014
Reports of Jordanian border closing
December 2014
UN World Food Program forced to suspend food voucher system in refugee camps due to lack of funding
May 2015
ISIS fighters seize ancient city of Palmyra in central Syria and last border crossing to Iraq
June 2015
Report shows only 23% of funding requirements met for UN Agencies and NGOs
August 2015
Germany announces that it will accept 800,000 refugees
September 3, 2015
Body of Alan Kurdi (3) washed up on Turkish shore
September 2015
Russia carries out first airstrikes in Syria. UN World Food Program forced to cut aid to Syrian refugees due to lack of funding
September 2015
Hungary and Croatia close border with Serbia
October 2015
Hungary closes border with Croatia, refugees flow into Slovenia
November 2015
Sweden begins border controls to stem flow of 10,000 migrants
December 8, 2015
GG Johnston: crisis a "defining moment for Canada"
January 2016
U.S.-Russian brokered partial ceasefire in effect; ISIS not included in deal. Sweden announces to reject 50% of refugees; Finland 65%; those rejected will be forced to leave. Germany refuses Algerians, Tunisians, and Moroccans and to prevent migrants from bringing their families to join them for two years
February 27, 2016
Liberal government achieved its goal to bring in an additional 25,000 Syrian refugees
March 2016
The EU and Turkey strike a deal to address the migration crisis
April 2016
First migrants deported from Greece arrive in Turkey under the new deal. Syrians refused asylum in Greece will be taken to refugee camps in southern Turkey, where in time they will take the place of those Syrians directly resettled in the EU under the so-called "one-for-one plan"

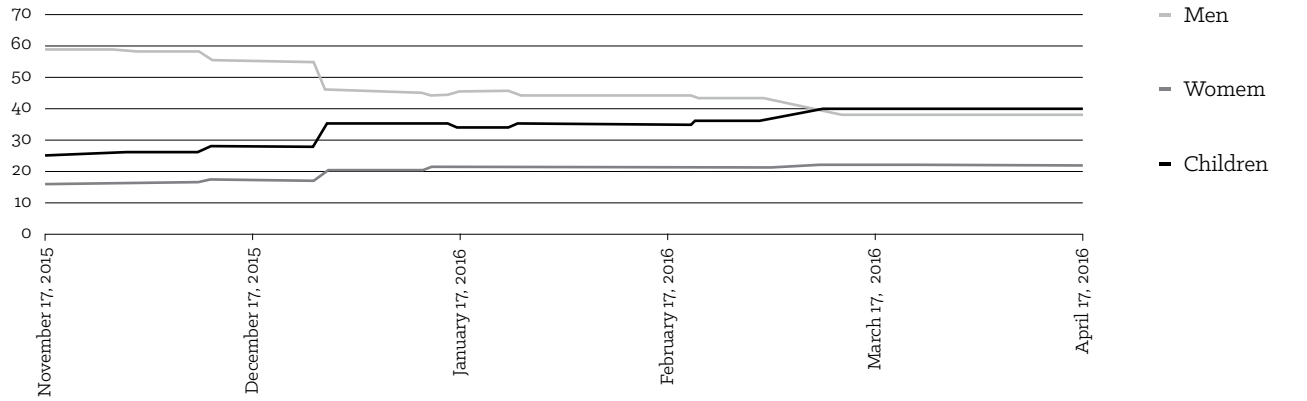
NUMBER OF MIGRANT ARRIVALS IN GREECE



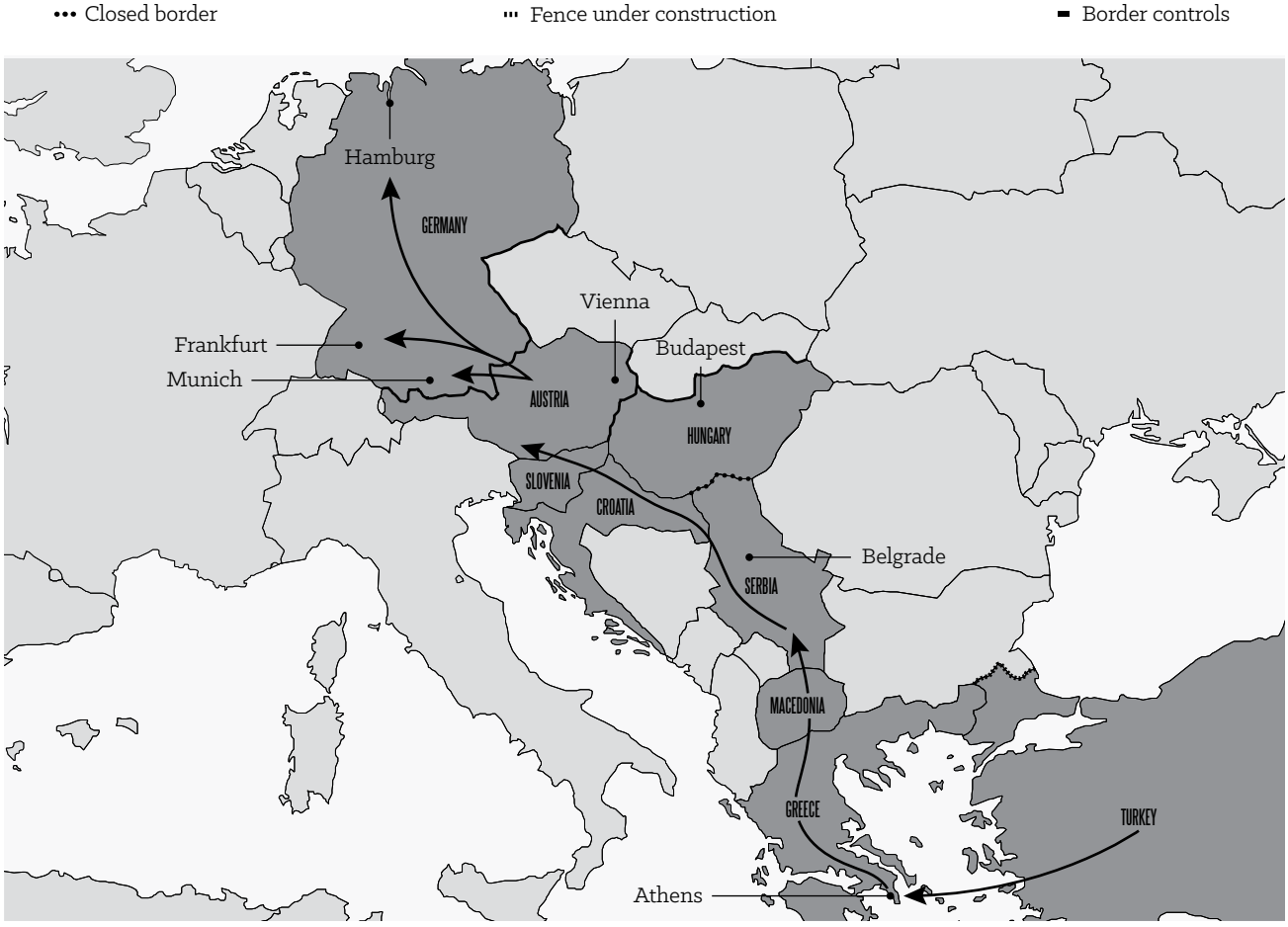


DAILY AVERAGE OF MIGRANT ARRIVALS IN GREECE






Schengen countries
EU but non-Schengen
Non-EU, non-Schengen
Border controls
Fence
Fence under construction
Fence under construction
Section of river Drava
POLAND
GERMANY
CZECH REPUBLIC
SLOVAKIA
AUSTRIA
SWITZERLAND*
HUNGARY
SLOVENIA
CROATIA
ROUMANIA
BOSNIA
SERBIA
ITALY
MONTENEGRO
KOSOVO
BULGARIA
MACEDONIA
ALBANIA
TURKEY
GREECE
*Switzerland is Schengen but not EU


Closed border
Fence under construction
Border controls
Hamburg
GERMANY
Vienna
Frankfurt
Budapest
Munich
AUSTRIA
HUNGARY
SLOVENIA
CROATIA
Belgrade
SERBIA
MACEDONIA
GREECE
TURKEY
Athens

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