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'Mixed migration' or forced migration? Evidence from four transit countries

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Abstract

The term 'mixed migration' was introduced to encompass more than just the traditional refugee situation. It usually leads to the idea of decomposing mixed flows into groups that do and do not merit international protection. This text argues that the social reality commonly referred to as 'mixed migration' is actually a cumulative process of forced migration. Based on survey and autobiographical data, it is demonstrated that violence in various forms and degrees is a constant feature of 'mixed movements' of people who are forced to leave their homes. 'Forced migration' more accurately characterizes the long-lasting disruption to individuals' or groups' residential lives driven by a significant degree of perceived life-threatening coercion caused by ethno-racial, religious, ethnic, political, gender-based harassment or natural disasters. While violence and persecution may not be the sole or unique initial cause of leaving one's home, a certain degree of coercion and threat to life is always present throughout the migration process. After discussing the ambiguity of the concept of 'mixed migration', the mechanisms of forced migration are demonstrated using data from a mixed-methods research project comparing four relevant transit countries: Colombia, Jordan, Mexico and Turkey. Finally, the conclusions and policy recommendations are presented.

Keywords Mixed migration, Forced migration, Life course approach, Colombia, Jordan, Mexico, Turkey

'Mixed migration' or 'forced migration'?

Since the beginning of the 21st century, migratory movements have become more complex in terms of both volume and type. From 1990 to 2025, international migration grew faster than the world's population, and the number of refugees and people in need of protection increasing even further. From the 1990s until 2012, the number of people forcibly displaced and requiring the attention of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) remained at around 40 million. Since then, this figure has tripled to some 125 million in 2024. The total number of international migrants was estimated at 300 million in 2024. This means that for every two to three registered international migrants, there is one forcibly displaced person.¹

¹ See UNHCR (2025: 2ff), UNHCR (2024: 6), Council of Europe (2025: 9, 11).

Against this background, politicians and scientists use the concept of ‘mixed migration’ in different ways. It can be used to highlight the specific contexts, motives and vulnerabilities experienced by people who leave their homes. It is inclusive in that it considers a wider range of migrants than just those who are formally registered refugees and asylum seekers. However, it may also be used to emphasize the frequently unclear residence status of forced migrants, to question or delegate responsibility for protection in general, and to legitimize restrictive policies against all ‘irregular’ movements. In regions of arrival such as the USA or EU, the term ‘mixed migration’ is increasingly used to distinguish between ‘good migrants’ (needed for the labor market) and ‘problematic migrants’ (seeking only their own advantage). The aim is to restrict rather than extend protection to migrants in need. Regardless of whether the term ‘mixed migration’ is used inclusively or exclusively, a crucial question is whether it adequately captures the social reality it aims to address.

Drawing on survey and autobiographical data collected in Jordan, Türkiye, Colombia and Mexico we contend that, from a social science standpoint, the social phenomenon commonly referred to as ‘mixed migration’ is essentially a process of cumulative *forced migration*. We define *forced migration* as a long-lasting sequence of changes in individuals’ or groups’ residence driven by a significant degree of perceived life-threatening coercion. This is typically prompted by persecution based on race, religion, ethnicity, political opinion, nationality or gender, or by sudden or slow-onset disasters.² While violence and persecution may not be the sole or unique cause of leaving one’s home, a certain degree and extent of coercion and threat to life is always present throughout the migration journey. Taking these factors into account, we understand *forced migration* as the accumulation of elements of coercion throughout an individual’s or group’s extended sequential migration trajectory.

First, based on selected studies, we first discuss the ambiguities of the concept of ‘mixed migration’. We then present quantitative and qualitative data gathered from migrants who were on a long journey and considered these countries to be transit locations. Even when individuals did not begin their migration journey as refugees or asylum seekers in the strict legal sense, we demonstrate that they all experienced some form of abuse, violence or exploitation. Finally, we conclude by addressing scientific use of the concepts of ‘mixed migration’ and ‘forced migration’, as well as the politics surrounding forced migrants.

Ambiguities of the concept of ‘mixed migration’

International migrants are defined as people who have crossed an international border and are residing in a country other than that of their origin for at least 12 months. According to the reasons for migration and the relevant documentation, international migrants may be workers, expatriates, students, family members reuniting, or victims of humanitarian crises and refugees. They may have ‘regular’ travel and residence documents, or they may lack adequate credentials for crossing borders or staying in a certain country. As the reasons and motives, as well as the expected duration and destinations of journeys, can be diverse, almost all migration could be considered ‘mixed’. Nevertheless,

²For the nexus between classic interstate wars and displacement see e.g. Bartram (2015), Behnassi et al., (2022).

the term 'mixed migration' is not used in science or public debate when dealing with labor or educational migration, but is referred to in specific contexts.

Three decades ago, the then United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) drew attention to the fact that a "complex mix of economic, demographic, social, religious, ethnic and political processes occurring simultaneously at the local, national and international levels are forcing people to move away from their homes and countries" (Ogata, 1995: 30). At its 2002 General Assembly, the UN insisted on a clear distinction between refugees and migrants within the remit of the UNHCR, while also acknowledging the mixed nature of social reality and criticizing the lack of legal migration opportunities: "UNHCR's clearly defined responsibilities for refugees and other persons of concern do not extend to migrants generally. It is, at the same time, a fact that refugees often move within broader mixed migratory flows" (UN, 2002: 10). Having promoted the concept of the 'asylum-migration-nexus' for many years, from 2007 onwards the UNHCR shifted towards the concept of 'mixed migration', proposing a *10-Point Plan of Action on Refugee Protection and Mixed Movements*.³ In the same year, the UNHCR began to organize a *Mixed Migration Task Force*, the *Regional Committee on Mixed Migration* and the *Regional Mixed Migration Program in the Horn of Africa*, together with the International Organization for Migration (IOM). For the *International Dialogue on Migration* in 2008, the IOM (2008) prepared the discussion note "Challenges of Irregular Migration: Addressing Mixed Migration Flows". While the concept of 'mixed migration' is used in the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2018, it is not mentioned in the *Global Compact on Refugees*, which was also affirmed in the same UN General Assembly (UN, 2018, 2019).

In the social sciences, some scholars use the concept of mixed migration, while others question its often dichotomous application. These discussions arose, in particular, when the classic international refugee protection regime and its main agency, the UNHCR, began providing assistance to victims of climate disasters. Initially, the UNHCR began to attend internally displaced persons (IDPs) offering "assistance to IDPs in the Asian tsunami (2004), the Pakistan earthquake (2005), Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis (2008), the Philippines floods (2009), the Pakistan floods (2010), and the Haitian earthquake (2010). However, this assistance was on an ad-hoc basis" (96f). Since 2007, debates in politics and science about adequate terms to describe the relationship between climate disasters, displacements and refuge, as well as the corresponding norms to deal with these changes, have grown more intense (ibid: 97f).

Crisp (2008: 8) argued that the UNHCR must balance its international mission to protect refugees with the fact that other stakeholders, particularly states, increasingly view the movement of refugees, asylum seekers and irregular migrants as a single (and often unwanted) phenomenon. In an UNHCR research paper Betts (2008: 16) underlined that "UNHCR cannot and should not aspire to go beyond its mandate of providing protection and solutions for refugees and IDPs" but, given the fact of "mixed migration situations such as Lampedusa, Malta and Yemen" (ibid), could help to negotiate a soft law framework. Maintaining the wording of 'mixed migration', he later proposed survival migration as a 'new protection framework' in between refugee and international

³See UNHCR (2007), further UNHCR (2011), UNHCR (2017).

migration addressing “persons outside their country of origin because of an existential threat to which they have no access” (Betts, 2010: 362).

to a domestic remedy or resolution. Angenendt et al. (2017: 18) propose a two-dimensional concept, arguing that “most migration flows are in fact a mixed form, which can be located along a continuum structured by two axes (voluntary/involuntary and regulated/unregulated).” Like many others, they focus on the motives and degree of regulation of migration, emphasizing that different situations may change during the migration process.

Whatever the definition of ‘mixed migration’ may be, the term implies the idea that ‘what comes as mixed later on has to be de-mixed’. Dominant national and international governance structures and practices still reproduce a legal and political dichotomy of regimes for ‘refugees’ and ‘migrants’. In “complex individual asylum procedures, previously mixed migration flows must be separated into those in need of protection and migrants without a claim to protection” (Angenendt et al., 2017: 20). The concept of ‘mixed migration’, involving the movement of refugees and labor migrants together, leads to the idea that ultimately refugees and migrants have to be dealt with separately. Betts and Collier (2016: 235) argue that for “refugees— as refugees— the need is for rescue and autonomy, not migration”. They advocate concentrating refugees in countries bordering those of their origin, stating: “At the heart of our approach is the creation of safe havens in the countries in the developing world that neighbour conflict and crisis” (ibid: 234).

We will not discuss the political-practical and the normative consequences of such mixed migration approaches but ask if they are based on an adequate view on the empirical social reality. Here we can differentiate two concepts of ‘mixed migration’. According to the original idea of ‘mixed migration’ and ‘mixed movements’, some individuals move as refugees and others as economic migrants. Consequently, the UNHCR and states must separate the mixed flows into streams of refugees and migrants who do not require protection. Figure 1 illustrates this classic understanding of ‘mixed migration’. The qualification ‘mixed’ relates to the composition of a movement of individuals who are either (involuntary) refugees or (voluntary) migrants based on stable and substantial characteristics. They move from one place A to another place B.⁴ UNHCR, (2017: 8) reaffirms its understanding of ‘mixed movements’ as such “in which persons with different objectives move alongside each other using the same routes and means of transport or engaging the services of the same smugglers”.

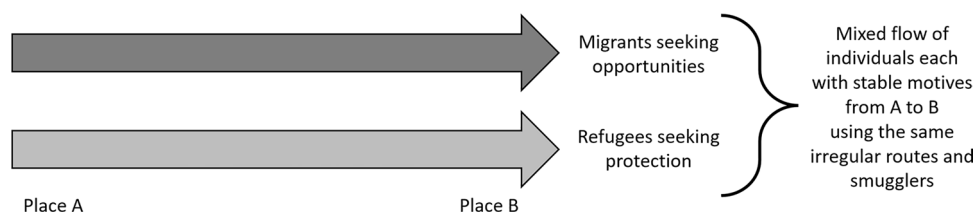


Fig. 1 Simple concept of ‘mixed migration’. Source: Author’s compilation

⁴Koser and Martin (2011: 5f) define mixed flows as “migrants with different motivations utilizing the same routes to enter transit and destination countries, such as those people who board boats and risk their lives at sea in an attempt to flee from harm or to seek economic opportunity”; see also Martin et al., (2014: 9), Cimino and Degani (2024) refer to EU’s understanding of “mixed migration flows where migrants with different profiles travel together sharing the same routes, smugglers and means, and can more frequently fall into criminal networks of traffickers of human beings”; for a broader discussion of concepts see Pries, Bohlen (2024).

Such a simple concept fails to capture the social reality of migration processes. Snel et al. (2021: 3221) argued that “the current notion of ‘mixed migration’ does not simply mean that forced and voluntary migrants follow the same migration routes, but that the difference between the two ‘categories’ is often blurred”. Crawley and Skleparis (2018: 59) stressed that there is “a substantial body of academic literature that has demonstrated a disjuncture between conceptual and policy categories and the lived experiences of those on the move”. People may leave their country with the correct documentation and some financial resources, but these could be lost or stolen during the journey. Consequently, migrants may feel compelled to work without the correct authorization, for example in the informal sector. Police, officials, employers and criminal gangs may exploit their irregular status of such a person by asking for bribes or extorting them. The intended destination of such a person may change, and they may consider other destinations.

Conversely, someone fleeing an armed conflict that directly threatens their life may be considered a refugee under the 1951 Refugee Convention. However, they may migrate to places where they cannot seek asylum, instead settling temporarily in a safer location. If a refugee sees no chance of returning home or settling in the transit country, they may seek to reach another country in search of a safe life. Having fled without official papers, their status may change from temporary protection to that of a person who is tolerated, or to an irregular or fabricated legal status. People who emigrate for various reasons, generally to find a better life, may experience robbery, organized violence, extortion or rape during their journey (MMC-UE, 2022). As a result, they may transition from ‘voluntary labor migrants’ to ‘persecuted forced migrants’. Additionally, forced migration is usually not a single movement from one place to another, but rather a complex sequence of many unsatisfactory residences.

Figure 2 illustrates the complex sequence of reasons and status changes across an extended series of destinations (A to F). Current international legal frameworks mainly recognize two concepts: ‘migrants’ and ‘refugees’. These frameworks are inadequate for addressing the growing social reality of *forced migration*, as evidenced by recent studies (see, for example, Collyer, 2010, Hagen-Zanker et al., 2024, IOM et al., 2024. Carling et al. (2015), Crawley et al. (2016), and Kumin (2014) analyzed ‘mixed migration’ at sea, for example in the Mediterranean, where the activities of different national and international agencies and legal frameworks, as well as multiple countries (of origin, transit, and arrival), and non-governmental and governmental organizations, intermingle. Therefore, the term ‘mixed’ should relate not only to motives and statuses, but also to dynamic conglomerates of responsibilities and agencies.

Triandafyllidou (2022: 22) highlights that there is a “fundamental disconnect between what research on migrants and migration has shown to be the very nature of the phenomenon and which lie behind what policy makers label as migration pressures,

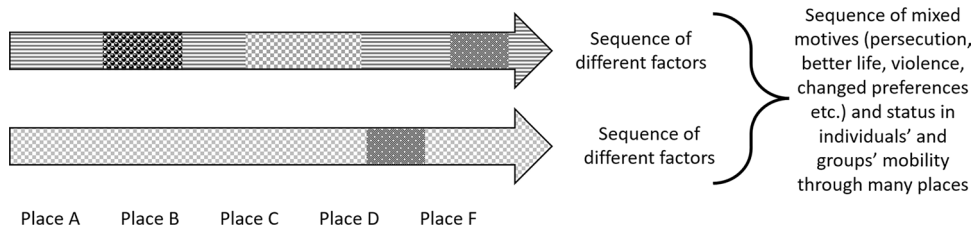


Fig. 2 ‘Mixed migration’ as *forced migration*. Source: Author’s compilation

migration flows or indeed risk scenarios". She advocates acknowledging the complexity and uncertainty of migration movements that cannot be categorized as voluntary or involuntary, refuge or labor migration, economic or forced migration, and pleads for 'messy' migration governance. Kortendiek (2021) found that, in the EU, different types of international organizations (IOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are looking for new ways of handling forced migration, as there is a discrepancy between legal-normative frameworks and the everyday practice of handling 'mixed migration movements'. Rather than seeking to contribute to formal decision-making, experts in these networks focus on the implementation stage of global governance and determine the necessary know-how for managing 'mixed migration' in practice (ibid: 335). Ghosh (2018: 228) found that, if neither the asylum-seeking channel nor any other legal channel appears promising, potential migrants may attempt to enter irregularly.

The typical extended trajectories of movements and stays have a *cumulative* character, partly due to border-crossing nature as the distinction between internal and international migration is often blurred, and migrants maintain social contacts and communication through transnational networks. Family members and old friends may remain in the country of origin (COO), and new friends may be made during the journey. Many studies emphasize the importance and scope of such *transnational social spaces* through which forced migrants move.⁵ Jacobs et al. (2022) argue that for forced migrants, translocality is a partial, rather than a durable solution to protracted displacement. The authors explain that translocality "not only refers to the mobility of people between different places but[...]the connections that exist between people at different places" (ibid: 4317). According to the authors, translocality can "enable displaced people to overcome at least some of the challenges related to protracted displacement" (ibid: 4324). In line with the transnationalization of forced migration, human traffickers are increasingly operating in complex transnational networks. In the Mediterranean, many of these criminal groups send forced migrants from the Turkish or Libyan coasts with overloaded rubber boats that are not fit for such a journey. They are usually left alone at sea (Reitano & Peter, 2015). Even worse, some criminal groups specialize in exploiting the vulnerability of forced migrants kidnapping them and forcing them to pay ransoms and/or to work in prostitution, robbery or drug trafficking as 'mulas' (David et al., 2019; Zülfiqar Savcı et al., 2024).

Hamlin (2021) criticized the binary distinction between refugees and migrants within the context of imbalanced power relations between the Global North and Global South, where the so-called global refugee protection regime is frequently employed merely to externalize responsibilities. She argues that this regime does not actually protect all vulnerable groups inside or outside their countries of origin, and that despite its (co-)responsibility for refuge and displacement, the Global North aims to keep forced migrants out of its sovereignty. Savatic et al. (2025) expand the definition of those who merit protection, assistance and solidarity, and critically analyze data from the EU- agency Frontex on border crossings by people categorized as 'illegal' or 'irregular' migrants from 2009 to 2021. They found that, during this period, a quarter to half of all 'irregular/illegal border crossings' (CBCs) into the EU were likely to be refugee mobilities. "Our empirical findings demonstrate that data on IBCs in fact contain include large

⁵For transnationalism see Pries (2018), Etzold et al., (2019), Etzold and Fechter (2022).

(!) shares of individuals who would likely obtain refugee status in Europe, contrary to Frontex's incentives to depict previously unauthorized border crossings as a problem which requires a securitised response" (ibid: 1461).

Due to the ambiguities and shortcomings of the 'mixed migration' approach, we prefer the term *forced migration* to describe long-term sequences of residential shifts by individuals or groups driven by a significant degree of perceived life-threatening coercion caused by ethno-racial, religious, ethnic, political or gender-based harassment, or by natural disasters.⁶ This definition (1) encompasses a broader range of *motives and causes* than are currently defined for refugees and asylum seekers; (2) is based on the assumption of a continuum of (considerable) degrees of *life-threatening* force, where thresholds may be difficult to define; (3) integrates the notion that the definition of life-threatening coercion depends not only on 'objective conditions' but also on 'subjective' *perceptions*; (4) acknowledges that *changes in residence of individuals or groups*, despite severe restrictions, always presuppose a minimum of individual and collective agency; and (5) appreciates that forced migration is usually a *long-lasting process* involving a protracted sequence of socio-spatial stays and places, rather than a one-time event. The following section presents empirical evidence for the adequacy of such a comprehensive concept of *forced migration* based on field work in Jordan, Türkiye, Colombia and Mexico.

Forced migration in four transit countries

In order to capture the cumulative nature of forced migration, a longitudinal approach is required that considers not only migrants' situations when they leave home, but also their subsequent experiences. Panel studies are not feasible for populations as dynamic and changeable as unregistered migrants, since attrition rates between two waves of interviews are very high.⁷ Retrospective interviews are therefore more appropriate. In a comparative study involving an international team and local research groups, longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data (1,213 surveys and 65 autobiographical narratives) were collected in Jordan, Turkey, Colombia and Mexico as transit countries. Many of the 110 questions and statements of the questionnaire included multiple response options and covered sociodemographic data, the migration trajectory from leaving home to the situation at the time of the interview, biographical plans and projects for the future (with a focus on options to return to the country of origin, move on to another country or stay in the current country), and the dimensions of the interviewee's Vernacularization/social entanglements, Experiences, Socialization, Preferences, Expectations and Resources (VESPER).⁸ Data gathering focused on places where forced migrants and unregistered persons in transit were concentrated. Data gathering focused on places where forced migrants and unregistered persons in transit were concentrated. According to expert and gatekeeper information, such places were transportation hubs (especially railway and bus stations in the case of Mexico) or neighborhoods with high proportions of forced migrants from the selected COOs in cities such as Istanbul and Gaziantep in

⁶For the widening of the classic definitions see e.g. Bartram (2015), Behnassi et al., (2022).

⁷According to personal information, in a panel survey of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Turkey, between two waves of interviews in 2020 and 2022, dropout rates of interviewees were very high for Turkey (75%) and Lebanon (40%); see also <https://www.projekte.hu-berlin.de/en/transmit/data/transmit-data-explorer>.

⁸We captured stays during the journey of minimum one month by the question "To which place did you move from home and later from other places for minimum one month?" For the case of Mexico, due to the highly dynamic migration towards and through that country, the corresponding question related to stays of a minimum of one week. This led to a more differentiated picture of the migration trajectory for Mexico.

Turkey, Amman and Mafraq in Jordan, Pasto, Medellín and Necoclí in Colombia, and Tapachula and the Federal District in Mexico. In these places, we contacted individuals based on gatekeepers' contacts, by chance, and through snowballing. However, the collected data are not representative, not least because they relate to a 'hidden population', which makes follow-up studies and sampling methods challenging. All four countries are highly relevant in terms of receiving refugees and the complex movements of forced migrants in transit. In each of these countries, interviewees from two countries of origin were selected (Table 1).⁹

What follows demonstrates that the understanding of 'mixed migration' as *forced migration* best captures the actual migration dynamics of the interviewed populations. Jordan and Turkey are located within the Middle Eastern migration corridor and are renowned for receiving millions of Syrian refugees since the uprisings, civil war and Assad dictatorship. At the start of the 2020s, Turkey was hosting around 3.7 million Syrians under temporary protection. In 2019, Jordan hosted the second-highest number of refugees per capita worldwide. It has a long history of providing refuge to various groups of forced migrants, including Armenians, Palestinians, Iraqis and Syrians. Including the 2.4 million Palestinian refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Jordan, nearly half of the population were foreign nationals (ILO, 2022: 3). During the Syrian armed conflicts in the 2010s, Jordan immediately opened its borders to Syrian refugees (Hudson, 2018), but later implemented more restrictive policies, such as limiting the entry of certain Syrian groups (Chatty, 2017). The history of forced migration across the Middle East as a whole goes back much further (Adamson & Greenhill, 2025).

Both Colombia and Mexico lie within a major migration corridor stretching from south to north across the Americas. Every year, hundreds of thousands of migrants from Latin America travel north, fleeing violence, persecution, and other existential threats. As a consequence of internal armed conflicts, Colombia has hosted millions of internally displaced persons for decades. Since the beginning of the 21st century, refugees and asylum seekers from Venezuela and other countries, such as Ecuador, have sought protection in Colombia. By 2025, the country was hosting around seven million internally displaced people and 2.8 million Venezuelans in need of international protection (ACNUR, 2025). Due to precarious living conditions, the violence of drug cartels and other armed groups such as the Venezuelan 'Tren de Aragua', and the fact that protection is only temporary, thousands of migrants make their way on foot through the dangerous Darien jungle each year, passing through Central America towards Mexico, in the hope of finding a way to enter the USA. Historically one of the countries with the highest emigration rates, Mexico has increasingly become a country of transit and destination over the last two decades (Feldmann et al., 2023: 3–5).

When asked why they left their home country, the vast majority of interviewees cited coercion and force as the reason. Table 2 shows the multiple responses to the question of why people moved from their usual place of residence to somewhere they stayed for at least one month. Interviewees could indicate up to three answers. Despite some variations between the six COOs, the numbers in the columns show that most motives are related to coercion and violence (war/organized violence, individual violence and

⁹For hidden population estimates Kim et al., (2023), Aljadeeah et al., (2024).

Table 1 Research design and data collection

Country of origin COO	Colombia		Mexico		Jordan		Turkey		Total
	Ecuador	Venezuela	Venezuela	Honduras	Iraq	Syria	Syria	Afgha-nistan	
Surveys	51	261	142	176	94	192	200	97	1,213
Autobiographic narratives	6	15	9	3	5	11	9	7	65
Survey analysis									
Narrative analysis									

Frequencies, bivariate crosstabulations, factor and cluster analysis focused on the three biographical plans to return, move on or stay (REMOST) and its associated/influencing variables (social entanglements, experiences, socialization, preferences, expectations and resources = VESPER dimensions)

Analysis of experienced and narrated migration history, analysis of migration journey based on VESPER dimensions, analysis of degree and type of agency, especially at critical junctures and turning points in life projects, reconstructing of shifting REMOST plans in individual life courses

Source: own elaboration

discrimination/persecution). Leaving for educational reasons was mentioned in only 4% of responses. Together, the causes of bad living conditions and family unification sum up to 45%. For Ecuador as a COO for migrants in Colombia only, reasons not directly related to violence dominate. A closer look at the other countries reveals that many respondents from Afghanistan, Honduras, Iraq and Syria marked the reason of 'bad living conditions,' as these countries are known for their armed conflicts, persecution for ethnic or political reasons, and violent gangs controlling neighborhoods. The reason of family unification also has to be interpreted in the context of forced migration and family separation imposed from outside.

Almost all of those surveyed experienced violence and coercion at the start of their migration journeys through all four transit countries. Questions relating to experiences of violence were repeated for each stay of more than one month during the respondents' journeys. Table 3 below shows only the first four of these stays (some respondents indicated more than ten stays after leaving home). However, as can be seen in the 'Totals' column, the number of reported stays decreases from 1,086 to 102 as the location where the survey was conducted is approached. This means that only 102 respondents reported that their migration journey had involved four or more stops (10 interviewees reported eight stops and three reported ten stops). Of the total numbers of the first-four-stop journeys, 522 cases of violence were reported, accounting for almost a quarter of the total 1,989 responses. This figure could include interviewees who reported multiple violent experiences.

The total number of reported cases of violent experiences (VE) in the Current Country of Stay (CCS) varies significantly between Colombia and Jordan, which have low numbers (67 and 63 respectively), and Mexico and Turkey, which have high numbers (226 and 166 respectively). This is somewhat surprising given that these two Middle Eastern countries received similar groups of forced migrants: two-thirds from Syria in the case of Jordan and one-third each from Syria and Afghanistan in the case of Turkey. The difference between Jordan and Turkey can be partly explained by the fact that the route to Turkey for Afghans is longer and more dangerous than the route to Jordan for Iraqis. Another possible explanation is that different social groups fled Syria, mainly to Turkey in the north or Jordan in the south. Forced migration from northern Syria was mainly urban and multi-ethnic, while refugees from southern Syria were predominantly rural, Arab and Muslim. The high number of reported experiences of violence during the first four months of migrants' stays in Mexico is surprising. With 226 responses, this figure is more than three times higher than those for Colombia and Jordan. Turkey also has a remarkably high number of reports ($n = 166$).

Table 3 shows the proportion of respondents who reported having experienced violence on their first, second, third and fourth stay of minimum one month during their journey, as a percentage of the total number of responses for the corresponding stay. For instance, 23% of the respondents for Colombia indicated that they had experienced violence during their first stay of at least one month. This figure rises to 33% for the fourth stay. In Jordan, the proportion of people who experienced violence also increased from the first to the fourth stay. In Mexico and Turkey, the proportional values remained high throughout (between a fifth and more than a third of all related responses). Naturally, the total number of responses declines sharply from the first to the fourth stay (from 1,086 to 102), but these figures suggest that a significant proportion of forced migrants

Table 2 Reasons for leaving the habitual residence by home country (multiple response)

Country of origin (COO) Reasons for leaving	Afgha-nistan	Ecuador	Honduras	Iraq	Syria	Venezuela	Total of re- spons- es and share
War/Organized violence	80	1	24	80	348	11	544 (36%)
Individual violence	6	1	19	8	60	12	106 (7%)
Living conditions	63	21	37	19	259	125	524 (35%)
Discrimination/persecution	45	0	6	23	33	11	118 (8%)
Family unification	13	1	2	4	89	36	145 (10%)
Education	17	0	4	4	34	2	61 (4%)
Total	224	24	92	138	823	197	1,498

Source: own elaboration based on Formove-II data, up to 3 multiple responses possible

Table 3 Violence experiences (VE) and planned time to stay (PTS) by CCS

	Colombia		Jordan		Mexico		Turkey		Total	
	VE	PTS	VE	PTS	VE	PTS	VE	PTS	VE	PTS
1 st stay	23%	20%	16%	12%	38%	6%	29%	22%	27% of 1,086	15% of 1,088
2 nd stay	25%	19%	8%	19%	28%	4%	36%	24%	26% of 561	14% of 562
3 rd stay	25%	25%	12%	41%	20%	2%	30%	19%	21% of 240	19% of 238
4 th stay	33%	66%	31%	8%	31%	4%	25%	25%	29% of 102	12% of 101
Total	67	57	63	73	226	31	166	132	522/1,989	293/1,989

Source: own elaboration based on Formove-II data, percentages of all responses in the box

are unable to find a safe place to live. Of the 1,086 respondents, 295 (27%) indicated that they had experienced violence during their first stay. This proportion increased to 30 out of 102 responses, or 29%, for the fourth stay.

For each stay of the migration journey, the survey included the question, 'How long did you initially plan to stay?' The possible responses were 'days or weeks', 'months', 'years', 'no specific plan' and 'all my life'. Taking the two options of 'years' and 'all my life' as indicators of a long-term intention to reside voluntarily at the corresponding place in the first, second, third and fourth stay of the migration journey, the percentages in the PTS column show the proportion of respondents who indicated that they had planned to stay for a number of years or 'all my life' at the corresponding place. Of the interviewees in Colombia, 20% indicated that they had planned to stay for years or for the rest of their lives during their first stay. For Jordan and Mexico, the values are significantly lower at 12 and 6% respectively, while in Turkey, 22% of respondents indicated such an aspiration. While the projected time to stay increased from the first to the third stay in Colombia and Jordan, the already low share in Mexico (6%) decreased to 2% for the third stay. Overall, only a small proportion of responses (15%, or 293 out of 1,989) indicated an aspiration to reside in one of the first four destinations on their migration route. Together with the responses related to experienced violence, this illustrates the complex, iterative and threatening nature of the journeys of all the forced migrants surveyed.

Related to their CCS, interviewees were asked 'Have you experienced any of the following violent situations here?' (RV420_MR), while demonstrating a card showing different

forms of violence. Respondents were asked how often they had experienced such situations, ranging from 'never' to 'very often.' Table 4 shows the responses relating to different forms of violence, where the answer 'rarely' was given a value of 1, 'sometimes' a value of 2, 'often' a value of 3, and 'very often' a value of 4. According to the index, Mexico and Turkey appear to be the most hostile countries for the interviewees. Table 3 shows that, when the multiple responses are weighed according to their frequency, there are significant differences in the types of violence recorded in the four transit countries. The most frequent weighted answers are detention and abuse by state authorities, robbery, financial fraud and exploitation, and verbal violent threats. Interestingly, state authorities are mentioned more frequently than criminal gangs or organized crime as abusing migrants' situation; the weighted index for state authorities is more than three times higher than that for gangs/organized crime. While the robbery index is high in all four transit countries, the financial fraud and exploitation index is higher for Jordan and Turkey. One possible explanation could be that interviewees in Jordan and Turkey had spent more time in Mexico than those in Colombia, and therefore had to work in the informal sector, where financial fraud and exploitation are more common. Despite variations in the type of violence, almost all respondents reported experiences of violence and mistreatment in their CCS.

The average time that respondents had spent since leaving their COO differs substantially between all four countries. For Colombia, the average is three years; for Jordan, 12 years; for Turkey, eight years; and for Mexico, just six months. The overall average for almost a thousand respondents is 6.1 years. This reflects the different situations of the interviewees in the four countries. Afghan and Syrian refugees in Turkey, as well as Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Jordan, have spent almost a decade outside their home countries. Forced migrants from Iraq arrived in Jordan following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Similarly, forced migrants from Afghanistan came to Turkey during the civil war and armed conflicts of the 1990s, and again when the Taliban took power in 2021. Syrian refugees have migrated to neighboring countries such as Jordan and Turkey, especially since the civil protests and armed conflicts of 2011 onwards. A greater number of people have fled Venezuela since the Maduro regime intensified political persecution in the second half of the 2010s. Since the 2020s, increasing 'narco-driven violence and political instability' (USCRI, 2024) has caused an exodus of forced migrants from Ecuador. It is not possible to discuss the situation of all the countries of origin of the surveyed forced migrants in detail.

Table 4 Index of experiences of violence in CCS (multiple response)

	Colombia	Jordan	Mexico	Turkey	Total
Detention/abuses by state authorities	58	38	177	138	411
Detention by gangs/organized crime	43	4	75	5	127
Violent/armed attacks by groups	16	1	69	11	97
Imprisonment	16	17	9	32	74
Robbery	114	75	121	157	467
Financial fraud or exploitation	45	134	70	228	477
Physical attacks without weapons	31	27	24	60	142
Household violence, hits, enclosure	21	17	4	8	50
Sexual harassment, abuse or rape	21	17	7	2	47
Verbal violent threats	75	90	57	481	703
Total	440	420	613	1,122	2,595

Source: own elaboration based on Formove-II data

Table 5 Legal document for current stay (multiple response, $n = 1,213$)

	Colombia	Jordan	Mexico	Turkey	Total
Passport COO	55	189	111	123	478
Other ID COO	162	151	248	85	646
Temporary ID CCS	39	169	17	196	421
Temporary ID UNHCR	43	232	8	28	311
Unlimited ID CCS	19	8	2	48	77
Nothing of the above	41	4	26	20	91
Total	359	753	412	500	1,213

Source: own elaboration based on Formove-II data

The average time that respondents spend outside their home country is shaped by many factors. Returning to the differences observed for the item of ‘financial fraud or exploitation’ between Colombia, Jordan, Mexico and Turkey, these may be partly explained by the length of time interviewees lived in each of these transit countries. Nevertheless, the detailed patterns of the index values for experienced violence are complex and require further analysis. For example, while some types of violence, such as ‘financial fraud and exploitation’ and ‘verbal violent threats,’ are common in Jordan and Turkey, others, such as ‘detention/abuse by state authorities’ and ‘detention by gangs/organized crime,’ are widespread in Mexico. Whatever the specific reasons and contexts, violence is a constant presence for surveyed migrants in all four countries. Most of the violence experienced is collective and organized – the items ‘household violence, hits, enclosure’ and ‘sexual harassment, abuse or rape’ display the lowest index values.

Further questions aimed at evaluating whether respondents’ journeys were voluntary or forced refer to reasons for considering returning to their home country. Almost half of the respondents stated that they had never considered returning, while around 30% said that they would return for family reunification. However, only 29 respondents (2% of the total) said that they planned to return due to violence or discrimination in the CCS. Despite their precarious living conditions and experiences of violence during their journey, very few forced migrants could imagine returning to their home country for security reasons. Conversely, 30% believed that there was less violence and more security in their CCS, which was the second most popular reason to stay in their current country after employment and living conditions (cited by 44% of the 1,213 respondents). At the same time, 49% of respondents cited limited employment and living conditions as reasons not to stay in the CCS, 29% cited limited rights, and 24% cited violence-related conditions. These figures reflect the limbo of forced migrants, who are unable or unwilling to return to their home country and do not feel integrated or accepted in their CCS. When asked where various aspects of their living conditions were better—in their home country, their current country, or a desired destination country—the desired destination country was mentioned for all aspects (economic conditions/employment, violence/insecurity, educational opportunities, attitudes towards minorities, and prospects for children).

Finally, the interviewees’ precarious legal status at the time of the survey is underlined by their valid legal documents. Table 5 summarizes the responses to the question, ‘What legal documents do you have for your current stay?’ In all four countries, passports or ID cards issued by the COO are sufficient for tourist stays of up to 90 days, but not for longer periods of residence. Of the 1,213 respondents, 478 declared to have a passport and 646 stated to have another ID card from their country of origin (COO). A total of

421 interviewees indicated that they had a temporary ID card extended by the CCS and 311 stated that they possessed a UNHCR ID card. The high number of UNHCR ID cards in Jordan reflects the state policy of delegating much of the administration of refugees to that international organization. $N=91$ respondents said they did not have any of the aforementioned legal documents. Only 77 respondents, or 6%, said they had an unlimited ID for their CCS.

Out of the total responses ($n=2,024$), 811 interviewees reported having at least two different ID cards. There are significant differences between the four CCS: the total number of responses for Colombia ($n=359$) is less than half that for Jordan, even though Colombia has the highest number of 'nothing of the above' responses ($n=41$). This reflects the high level of state control in Jordan, a small but heavily armed country in a permanent conflict zone, compared to Colombia, which has relatively lax internal controls and open borders with neighboring countries. In contrast to Jordan, Turkey controls the legal residence documents of refugees and asylum seekers. Although migrants from many Latin American countries require a visa to transit through or reside in Mexico, and at the time of the survey the government was offering a special visa to asylum seekers to travel to and apply for entry to the USA, only 17 respondents reported having a temporary Mexican ID card, eight mentioned having a temporary ID card issued by the UNHCR, and only two said they had an unlimited ID card for Mexico.

In summary, only a very small proportion of the 1,213 migrants surveyed have an unlimited legal right to reside in their CCS. While most respondents have legal documents for their COO, the vast majority of these are only temporary resident permits, which typically have to be renewed yearly. The qualitative data from the study, particularly the autobiographical narratives, but also the expert interviews and field observations, fully corroborate these findings. The biographical narratives revealed that experiences of violence are often understated rather than overstated. This tendency may also apply to the survey data. Some forced migrants may be reluctant or ashamed to openly report their suffering, while for others, violence is such a normal part of everyday life that they only occasionally, if ever, mention relevant episodes. This particularly applies to cases where individuals have been socialized in violence-intensive social spaces, as is the case for many migrants from Afghanistan and Honduras (Pries et al. 2026, chapter 5). Despite the variations between COOs and CCs, analyzing the extended journeys of migrants show common features: the experience of violence and coercion before and during their migration course, a sequence of precarious legal conditions in transit countries, the frequent exploitation of these conditions by local state authorities and criminal gangs, the need to work informally during migration because money has run out, and the abuse of unsafe situations by employers who pay very low or no salary or engage in economic or even sexual abuse in exchange for transportation. These findings have some relevant scientific and policy implications.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

This article argues that the 'mixed migration' concept ultimately focuses on binaries of how to deal with what we define as cumulative forced migration. While different causes may combine at the start of the migration process, journeys are then full of further challenging and often life-threatening situations, prolonged involuntary stays, significant experiences of severe violence en route and a highly perilous status upon arrival.

Without the necessary formal documents and rights, most forced migrants find themselves in limbo, uncertain whether to return, move on or stay. Of the 1,200 interviewees in the study presented, almost all had experienced severe violence of various kinds, ranging from organized physical violence perpetrated by armies, states, gangs or other criminal organizations, to sexual harassment, domestic violence, robbery, fraud and brutal intimidation. This was despite the sample not being based on specific criteria such as formal refugee status or visible outcomes of physical violence. Even interviewees who said they had left their country of origin to improve their living conditions usually reported incidents of violence during their journey.

Taking a longitudinal approach helped us to understand that force and coercion do not end when migrants reach an area that they consider relatively safe. This area may be safer than the place they fled from. Nevertheless, most migrants reported incidents of 'light violence', such as robbery, sexual harassment, severe ethnic or racial discrimination and fraud. This is usually related to their precarious legal status as unregistered migrants. Abusive individuals and criminal gangs exploit such situations leaving affected migrants feeling unable to make claims. The survey data and analysis of autobiographical narratives presented here emphasize that the social reality referred to as 'mixed migration' is actually a process of accumulated *forced migration* (see Pries et al. 2026 for detailed discussion). The data analysis shows that the voluntary-involuntary, refugee-migration and regular-irregular categories are not useful for capturing the reality of forced migration, as the motives for mobility, degree of violence and legal status change during the journey. Migrants' journeys are not simply 'fragmented', and the categories used to describe their situation are not simply 'blurred'. These trajectories accumulate specific forms of violence, motives, experiences and legal situations that migrants must handle and integrate into their plans for the future.

In light of the dramatic changes in international migration and the ambiguities surrounding the discourse and politics of 'mixed migration', our study highlights that a longitudinal approach to *forced migration* more accurately reflects the social reality experienced by over one hundred million people worldwide. In this respect, the research presented has certain limitations, which lead to suggestions for further activities. A life-course perspective on forced migration requires a closer accompanying than we were able to achieve. While retrospective surveys and autobiographical narratives are a good starting point, stronger panel elements in data collection, participatory observation alongside migration journeys and the better integration of forced migrants themselves in data collection and analysis can further strengthen life-course-oriented research. Our scientific findings have implications for both the study of and practical management of forced migration.

Firstly, in order to understand forced migration, related studies should adopt a longitudinal perspective, rather than focusing on a single point in time. Implementing a life course approach to forced migration provides the context for events such as leaving home, crossing a border, arriving in a certain place, and travelling to another. Taking this seriously will not abandon the necessary qualifying of certain situations as life-threatening, harassing, discriminating or relatively safe. Certain stations and movements in the life course can be characterized as life-saving refuge, others as leaving hardship and discrimination or as voluntary mobility to improve one's life. In any case, the relevant unit of analysis is not the single event, but the sequence of experienced life as a whole. Such a

scientific approach has direct consequences for applying norms and criteria when evaluating refuge and asylum in countries of arrival. Until now, national protection regimes have focused on the situation of international migrants when leaving their country of origin. The gathering and documentation of data on mixed and forced migration has improved over the last decade, as demonstrated e.g. by the work of the *Mixed Migration Centre* (MMC), the *Refugee Data Finder* and the *Migration Data Portal*. This makes it easier to view the journeys of forced migrants more holistically.

Secondly, and related to this, it is important to consider all relevant aspects of the participation and integration of forced migrants during their journey and at their (preliminary) place of residence, in both scientific research and migration management. This includes aspects such as legal status, employment, health, education and how to escape vulnerable situations. Forced migrants should not be viewed as passive victims or as fully sovereign actors. Despite severe restrictions, they do possess agency, and the focus in science and practical migration management should be on developing and assisting the development of their self-confidence and resilience. For instance, practical initiatives have been established to develop sustainable resettlement and complementary pathways to integration for forced migrants (UNHCR, 2022).

Better analysis and documentation of the empirical sequences of forced migrants' participation and integration could help to bridge the gap between migration and refuge. This objective is set out in both the *Global Compact for Refugees* (UN, 2018) and the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration* (UN, 2019), soft law.¹⁰ Cimino and Degani (2024) argue that national and international bodies should develop gender-specific and intersectional instruments and perspectives to identify the complex situations of forced migrants in cases of the trafficking women. The simple category of 'trafficking women for sexual exploitation' is inadequate because "not only labour exploitation but criminal activities, begging, forced marriages and still others are emerging. These 'new' forms of exploitation call for updated strategies to identify them too" (ibid: 1320). In a far-reaching and optimistic proposal, Ghosh (2018: 232) argued for multilateral interstate cooperation: "Based on the principle of regulated openness, the proposed new architecture will be sustained by three essential pillars: commonality of objectives, a set of harmonised normative guidelines and coordinated institutional arrangements." However, the ongoing destruction of the international rule-based order challenges such soft law proposals.

Thirdly, states and right-wing political groups around the world often exploit the concept of 'mixed migration' to justify restrictive policies against all 'irregular' or 'illegal' movements. In relevant countries of arrival, such as the USA and EU member states, the term 'mixed migration' is increasingly being used not to extend protection to forced migrants, but to label most forced migration as 'irregular' or 'illegal'. Systematically screening and documenting legal access to, and denial of, protection for forced migrants could help to objectify such debates. There are also many examples of migrants being regularized despite lacking the adequate legal documents for their current stay (IDP, 2025; Ahrens et al., 2025). Without relieving governments of their responsibility for refugee protection, NGOs can play an important complementary role.¹¹ Forced migration will be a key challenge in the future. The international refugee protection regime

¹⁰For critical appraisals e.g. (Arnold-Fernández, (2023), Kainz et al. (2020). Vitiello, (2022).

¹¹See e.g. Reynolds and Clark-Kazak (2019: 6), Korteweg et al., (2023) evaluate private initiatives of refugee hosting.

is not adapted to this situation. The concept of ‘mixed migration’ does not capture the complexity and dynamics of forced migration. We must therefore develop more comprehensive approaches to scientifically capture and politically manage *forced migration*, in which states and civil society must find new ways to address its complexity.

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Ludger Pries prepared the text and all tables.

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Data availability

Data can be made available on reasonable request in consent with project Directors.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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