

Victim or Threat?

Shipwrecks, Terrorist Attacks and Asylum Decisions in France

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Humanitarian-Security trade-off in Asylum System

How to provide shelter to those fleeing persecution without jeopardizing national security?

E.U. Court Rules 3 Countries Violated Deal on Refugee Quotas

Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic failed to live up to their end of an agreement to distribute 160,000 asylum seekers who had arrived in Greece and Italy, the court said.

By [Matina Stevis-Gridneff](#) and [Monika Pronczuk](#)

April 2, 2020

(...)

The Polish government said in a statement: “The refusal to comply with the relocation mechanism was dictated by the need to protect Poland’s internal security and defend it against uncontrolled migration. The most important goal of government policy is to ensure the safety of our citizens.”

(...)

The nationalist governments of the three countries previously cited national security reasons in refusing to take in any of the refugees and migrants. [Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary](#), for example, vowed to block the [European Union program](#) to resettle migrants from Africa and the Middle East, saying that it was important to secure his nation’s borders from the mainly Muslim migrants [“to keep Europe Christian.”](#)

(...)

Germany, in contrast, [took in nearly one million asylum seekers](#), while other major European countries complied with the policy.

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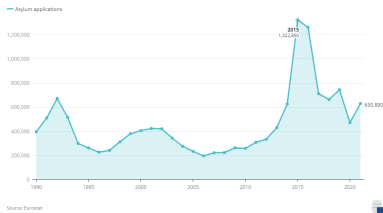
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Relationship between terrorism activities and asylum decisions

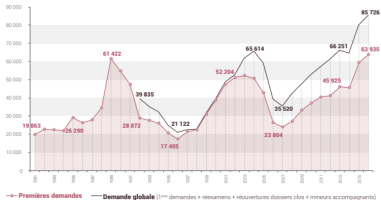
Avdan, 2014; Holmes and Keith, 2010; Rottman et al., 2009; Brodeur and Wright (2019)

The refugee crisis of 2015–2016

Asylum applications in the EU



Asylum applications in France



Dead and Missing in the Mediterranean

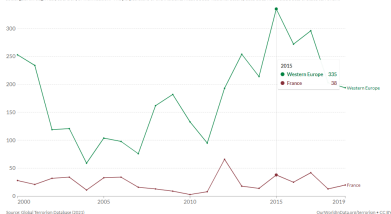
Previous years	Arrivals *	Dead and missing
2021	123,318	3,231
2020	95,774	1,881
2019	123,663	1,510
2018	141,472	2,277
2017	185,139	3,139
2016	373,652	5,096
2015	1,032,408	3,771
2014	225,455	3,538

* Include sea arrivals to Italy, Cyprus, and Malta, and both sea and land arrivals to Greece and Spain (including the Canary Islands). Data are as of 31 December 2021 for all countries.

Terrorist attacks in Western Europe

Number of terrorist attacks, 2000 to 2019

The source defines a terrorist attack as: "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to obtain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation." The perpetrators of the incidents must be sub-national actors; data does not include acts of state terrorism.



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Findings:

Asylum officers are more generous following a shipwreck.

They are also less generous following a terrorist attack but only for asylum seekers from Syria and Iraq.

Effects are very short-lived lasting only a day.

Suggestive evidence that tragic events affect the extent to which asylum officers value security versus humanitarian concerns when making their decisions.

Contributions

Do terrorist attacks also affect immigration policy?

Bove et al., (2021), Choi (2021), Helbling and Meierrieks (2020a)

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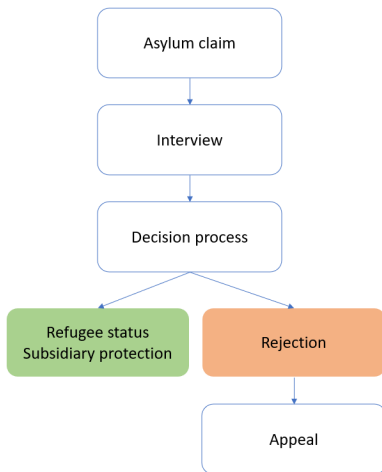
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Why? Top of the mind? Emotions? Racial bias? Cognitive bias?

Philippe and Ouss (2018), Brodeur and Wright (2019)

Asylum decision process in France



Data (2015-2016)

34,678 asylum applicants interviewed in 2015 and 2016
(French asylum office)

214 migrant shipwrecks in Europe (IOM's Missing Migrant
project)

63 terrorist attacks in France (Global Terrorism Database)

1,460 synopses of daily prime time news broadcasts (TF1
and France 2) (National Audiovisual Institute)

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Using multiple events

Proxy for compliance using news coverage of events

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Asylum Officer_j are asylum officer fixed effects

Results

	Events		News reports	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	All	Reported	Not reported	All
Shipwreck t-1				
Observations				
N of treated units				
Mean of DV				
Difference (3) - (2)				
Standard error				
Attack t-1				
Observations				
N of treated units				
Mean of DV				
Difference (3) - (2)				
Standard error				

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Results

	Events			News reports
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	All	Reported	Not reported	All
Shipwreck t-1	0.008 (0.009)			
Observations	32,044			
N of treated units	1,557			
Mean of DV	0.214			
Difference (3) - (2)				
Standard error				
Attack t-1	-0.013 (0.009)			
Observations	31,809			
N of treated units	1,777			
Mean of DV	0.213			
Difference (3) - (2)				
Standard error				

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Results

	Events			News reports
	(1)	(2)	(3) Not reported	(4)
	All	Reported	Not reported	All
Shipwreck t-1	0.008 (0.009)	0.044** (0.021)		
Observations	32,044	33,286		
N of treated units	1,557	411		
Mean of DV	0.214	0.214		
Difference (3) - (2)				
Standard error				
Attack t-1	-0.013 (0.009)	-0.026* (0.014)		
Observations	31,809	32,814		
N of treated units	1,777	884		
Mean of DV	0.213	0.213		
Difference (3) - (2)				
Standard error				

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Results

	Events			News reports
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	All	Reported	Not reported	All
Shipwreck t-1	0.008 (0.009)	0.044** (0.021)	-0.005 (0.009)	
Observations	32,044	33,286	32,461	
N of treated units	1,557	411	1,226	
Mean of DV	0.214	0.214	0.214	
Difference (3) - (2)			-0.050	
Standard error			0.023	
Attack t-1	-0.013 (0.009)	-0.026* (0.014)	-0.005 (0.012)	
Observations	31,809	32,814	32,698	
N of treated units	1,777	884	1,034	
Mean of DV	0.213	0.213	0.213	
Difference (3) - (2)			0.021	
Standard error			0.019	

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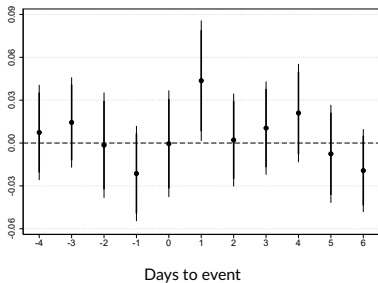
Results

	Events			News reports
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	All	Reported	Not reported	All
Shipwreck t-1	0.008 (0.009)	0.044** (0.021)	-0.005 (0.009)	-0.000 (0.007)
Observations	32,044	33,286	32,461	30,276
N of treated units	1,557	411	1,226	3,096
Mean of DV	0.214	0.214	0.214	0.214
Difference (3) - (2)			-0.050	
Standard error			0.023	
Attack t-1	-0.013 (0.009)	-0.026* (0.014)	-0.005 (0.012)	-0.009 (0.006)
Observations	31,809	32,814	32,698	24,184
N of treated units	1,777	884	1,034	4,731
Mean of DV	0.213	0.213	0.213	0.212
Difference (3) - (2)			0.021	
Standard error			0.019	

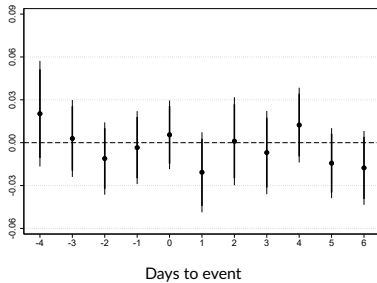
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Effects are short-lived

(a) Shipwrecks



(b) Terrorist attacks



Mechanisms

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- ▶ **Racial bias:** Terrorist attacks could affect asylum decision-making by exacerbating asylum officers' in-group bias
- ▶ **Emotions:** Shipwrecks and terrorist attacks may therefore influence asylum decisions via the negative emotional shock they trigger
- ▶ **Top-of-the-mind:** Events like attacks and shipwrecks could momentarily shift the weight asylum officers attach to each consideration in their evaluation by changing what they perceive to matter most.

Racial bias?

Observable implication: We would expect terrorist attacks to have a stronger effect for applicants from Muslim-majority countries.

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	Attacks in the news		Islamist Attacks in the news	
	(1) Muslim- majority countries	(2) Excl. Muslim- majority countries	(3) Muslim- majority countries	(4) Excl. Muslim- majority countries
Event $t-1$	-0.040** (0.019)	-0.018 (0.019)	-0.022 (0.030)	-0.030 (0.032)
Observations	19,216	13,598	19,435	13,826
N of treated units	459	421	210	161
Mean of DV	0.244	0.171	0.243	0.172
Difference		0.022		-0.008
Standard error		0.026		0.043

Emotions?

Observable implication: We should observe that events besides attacks and shipwrecks that have the potential to trigger an emotional shock should also affect asylum decisions.

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	Full sample		June 2016 - July 2016	
	(1) Difference in means	(2) Main specification	(3) Difference in means	(4) Main specification
France lost $t-1$	0.012 (0.074)	-0.052 (0.079)	-0.011 (0.077)	0.023 (0.087)
Observations	34,133	33,703	1,586	1,577
N of treated units	32	32	32	32
Mean of DV	0.214	0.214	0.236	0.236
	Full sample		June 2016 - July 2016	
	(1) Difference in means	(2) Main specification	(3) Difference in means	(4) Main specification
France won $t-1$	-0.011 (0.032)	-0.002 (0.026)	-0.038 (0.035)	0.027 (0.032)
Observations	34,133	33,703	1,586	1,577
N of treated units	174	174	174	174
Mean of DV	0.214	0.214	0.236	0.236

Top-of-the-mind?

Observable implication: Applicant characteristics that signal vulnerability (or threat) will weigh more heavily in their decisions after a shipwreck (or an attack).

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Observable implication: Applicant characteristics that signal vulnerability (or threat) will weigh more heavily in their decisions after a shipwreck (or an attack).

- ▶ I expect a stronger effect of shipwrecks among single women than among married women
- ▶ I expect a stronger effect of attacks among Syrians and Iraqis than among others

Top-of-the-mind?

	All attacks		Attacks in the news		All shipwrecks		Shipwrecks in the news	
	(1) Among Syrians and Iraqis	(2) Excluding Syrians and Iraqis	(3) Among Syrians and Iraqis	(4) Excluding Syrians and Iraqis	(5) Among Syrians and Iraqis	(6) Excluding Syrians and Iraqis	(7) Among Syrians and Iraqis	(8) Excluding Syrians and Iraqis
Event $t-1$	-0.091** (0.042)	-0.011 (0.009)	-0.132* (0.068)	-0.022 (0.014)	0.001 (0.024)	0.010 (0.010)	0.067** (0.030)	0.044** (0.022)
Observations	1,385	30,424	1,436	31,378	1,420	30,624	1,463	31,823
N of treated units	77	1,700	42	842	68	1,489	13	398
Mean of DV	0.934	0.181	0.934	0.181	0.934	0.180	0.935	0.181
R^2	0.185	0.271	0.184	0.270	0.178	0.269	0.177	0.269
Difference	0.080		0.111		0.009		-0.022	
Standard error	0.041		0.066		0.025		0.035	
	All attacks		Attacks in the news		All shipwrecks		Shipwrecks in the news	
	(1) Among single women	(2) Among married women	(3) Among single women	(4) Among married women	(5) Among single women	(6) Among married women	(7) Among single women	(8) Among married women
Event $t-1$	-0.016 (0.020)	-0.042* (0.023)	0.001 (0.026)	-0.042 (0.032)	0.058** (0.028)	-0.009 (0.025)	0.118* (0.062)	0.011 (0.046)
Observations	5,358	5,342	5,511	5,516	5,403	5,366	5,606	5,588
N of treated units	308	264	140	141	236	262	61	75
Mean of DV	0.179	0.249	0.179	0.249	0.177	0.248	0.178	0.248
R^2	0.380	0.460	0.381	0.458	0.381	0.454	0.382	0.455
Difference	-0.025		-0.043		-0.066		-0.107	
Standard error	0.029		0.038		0.033		0.072	

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Summary

I analyze the effect of migrant shipwrecks and terrorist attacks on asylum decisions during the refugee crisis of 2015 in France.

I leverage non-publicly available data from the French asylum office on a representative sample of 34,678 asylum applications to analyze the effect of these “irrelevant” events using an Unexpected Event Study Design.

I find that asylum officers are more generous following a shipwreck, but also less generous following a terrorist attack though only for asylum seekers from Syria and Iraq.

Contributions

Bring new evidence to a long standing political science question.

Straightforward policy implications as low cost intervention could go a long way in mitigating the influence of these events on decisions they should have no bearing on.

Contribute more largely to the study of fairness in judicial decision-making.