‘Some are uplifting, others are not.’

What’s Behind the Latest Mass Migrations



Mass migration is front and center worldwide, and has been for a while. But human beings have migrated for as long as we have existed. At times, we’ve had to. For instance, at the end of the Ice Age, sea levels rose dramatically, making previous homesteads uninhabitable and creating a need for new settlements in safer locations. Of course, the end of the Ice Age is only one reason people fled home. And today, migration continues, fed by a multitude of triggers, some making large waves, others small ones. Likewise, some are uplifting, and others are not.

First, the sad news. Much of the migration has been caused by wars between nations or civil wars. Notably, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 has resulted in 5.7 million people seeking refuge, largely in Europe, according to data from the UN Refugee Agency. Likewise, on a smaller scale, an estimated 650,000 Russians have fled their home country, according to *The Bell*, an independent news magazine. Most Russian refugees are believed to have gone to countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, such as Armenia.

Another example is Syria’s civil war, which has resulted in more than five million Syrians seeking refuge in other countries. However, some refugees have since returned home, reducing the total to 3.9 million. This largely coincided with the 2024 ouster of the dictator Bashar al-Assad, who is alleged to have ordered the deaths of hundreds of thousands, including combatants, and to have indirectly caused many additional deaths due to shortages of food, medicine, and clean water. “War-driven migration is different because the decision is much less voluntary,” says Pete Earle, senior director of research at the American Institute for Economic Research.

Still, to move internationally, people need to be both pushed out of their current location and also drawn to a new one, says business and economic historian and author Robert E. Wright. “It’s the push-and-pull idea,” he says. “Common pushes are wars; common pulls are peace and prosperity.”

The US hasn’t had to deal with war at home for a long time. But it has nonetheless seen a recent drop in immigration. In January 2025, 53.3 million immigrants lived in the US. But by June of that year, more than one million foreign-born residents had left, the largest drop since the 1960s, according to Pew Research Center. The decline came after changes enacted by the government to slow migration by people who are undocumented and deport others.

Here’s the more uplifting news. People migrate for a variety of reasons: higher income, a better life, and, in some cases, more political freedom. A classic example of this is the Indian diaspora, which in 2026 stood at 37 million people, including both non-resident Indians and those of Indian origin, according to India’s government. More live in the US than anywhere else in the world, followed by the United Arab Emirates and Malaysia. Britain, with its history in India, has the sixth-largest population of Indian descent.

In many ways, it’s normal for people to seek a better life, especially those with skills that are highly in demand. “Going towards capitalism rather than socialism is a natural tendency,” says Daniel Lacalle, chief economist at Tressis.

Of course, moving from one country to another for any reason is difficult, expensive, and stressful, to some degree or another. That’s why migrants tend to clump together, says Neil Howe, coauthor of *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy* and portfolio manager at Hedgeye Asset Management. “People go to places where there are family relatives,” he says. “Groups of new migrants grow like a snowball through familial contacts that encourage more to join them; family helps integration into a new culture.”



Penpak S, serkanmutan/Getty Images

Constable, a former TV anchor at The Wall Street Journal, is a fellow at the Johns Hopkins Institute for Applied Economics, Global Health, and the Study of Business Enterprise.

Portrait by **ROB DOBI**